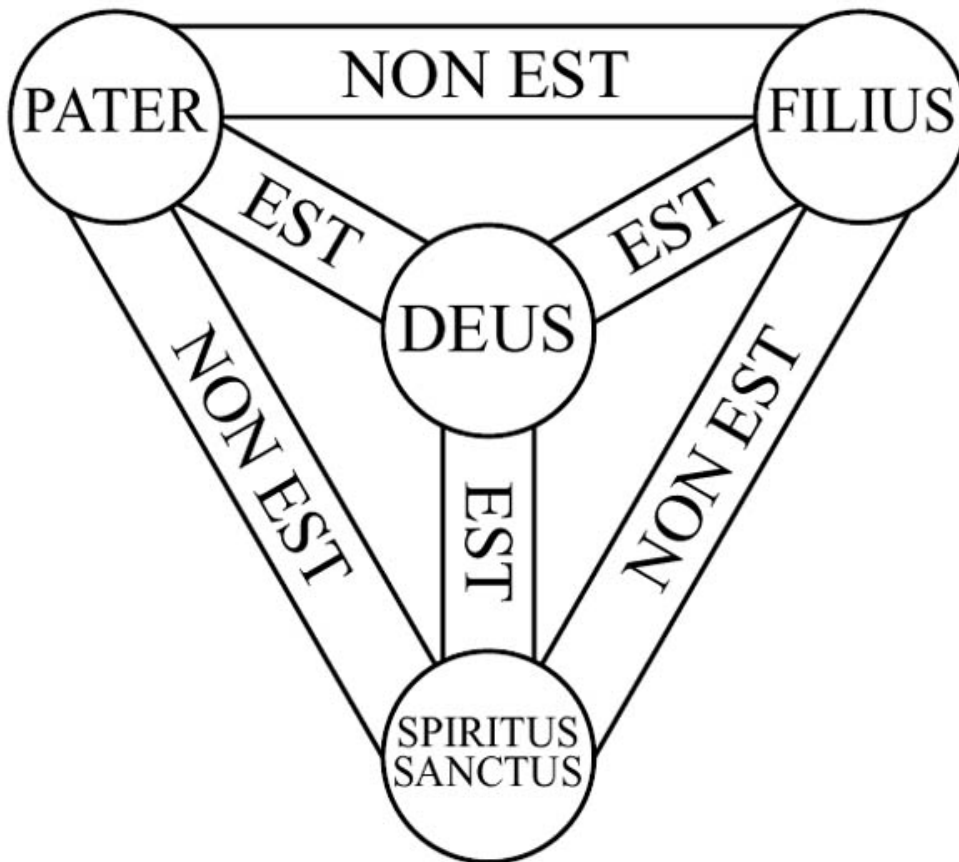


Social Trinitarianism and the Catholic Faith

Sep 22nd, 2009 | By [Bryan Cross](#) | Category: [Blog Posts](#)

In his chapter titled “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in the book *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), [Cornelius Plantinga Jr.](#), the current president of Calvin Theological Seminary, argues in support of what is known as ‘social trinitarianism.’ This position is not compatible with the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, so here I want to show the difference between the two positions, and why they are incompatible.



The Shield of the Trinity, informed by the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed.

Plantinga describes his own position in the following three excerpts:

[E]ach of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses the whole generic divine essence and also a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two. Both kinds of essences unify. The generic essence assures that each person is fully and equally divine. The personal essences, meanwhile, relate each person to the other two in unbreakable love and loyalty.¹

[T]here are three divine persons, but only one generic divinity Of course, social trinitarians will regard the divine essence as abstract, not concrete On this view, the generic divine essence is a set of excellent properties severally necessary and jointly sufficient for their possessor to be divine: Father, Son, and Spirit each has this essence, though none is it.²

[E]ach of these kind instances is a person possessing his own distinguishing personal essence as well as the kind essence he instantiates. ... [T]here are two sorts of essences in God, personal and generic³

According to Plantinga, each divine person possesses both the whole generic divine essence, and in addition, a personal essence unique to that person. None of the persons *is* the generic divine essence; rather, each person *has* the generic divine essence, and is an instantiation of it. The generic divine essence is not itself a being or substance; it is “abstract,”

much as three human beings each share human nature, and yet human nature is not a fourth being or substance. The generic divine essence, according to Plantinga, is a set of properties. Whoever has this set of properties is *ipso facto* divine.

There are at least six ways in which this position is incompatible with the Catholic faith, as I explain below.

It Makes Each Divine Person Differ in Species

When two beings each have the same nature, something else must differentiate them, because otherwise they would be one being, instead of two beings. For Aquinas, what differentiates one human being from another, is matter. Each human being has a distinct material principle which differentiates his instantiation of human nature from every other instantiation of human nature. Since angels are immaterial, there cannot be two or more angels of the same species; otherwise nothing would differentiate them. That is, nothing would make them two instead of one. Hence, according to Aquinas, each angel must differ in species from every other angel.⁴

The notion of sharing part of the same essence with some other being is equivalent to being members of the same genus, while differing in species. Take, for example, Aristotle's claim that the human is a rational animal. The genus, in that case, is 'animal.' The *differentia* [i.e. that which differentiates the species from every other species in that genus] is rationality, because rationality differentiates humans from everything else in the genus 'animal.' Every other animal species shares this genus with humans, but has something other than rationality as that which differentiates it from every other species in this genus. For example, saying that both humans and prairie dogs share part of the same nature or essence translates into humans and prairie dogs sharing the same genus, but differing in species. Being one in partial-essence is equivalent to being one in genus but distinct in species.

So Plantinga's claim that each divine person has a two-part essence: a part that is shared with the other two divine persons, and a part that is unique to that person, is equivalent to each of the three persons being members of the same genus, but each differing from the other two persons in species. In other words, it places all three persons in the genus 'deity,' but places each of the three persons in a different species from that of the other two persons. In Catholic doctrine, by contrast, the Son is the offspring of the Father, God from God. And since like begets like, the Son is the perfect image of the Father, the very same numerical essence (not part of an essence) and being as the Father. And the Spirit likewise, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is the very same numerical essence and being with the Father and the Son, not sharing only a partial essence with the Father and the Son, but sharing the full and numerically same essence. For this reason, the implication that each of the three persons is a different species is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.

It Reduces God to a Creature

Any being whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. Aquinas explains this when he shows why God's essence is His existence:

God is not only His own essence, as shown in the preceding article, but also His own existence. This may be shown in several ways.

First, whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent principles of that essence (like a property that necessarily accompanies the species—as the faculty of laughing is proper to a man—and is caused by the constituent principles of the species), or by some exterior agent—as heat is caused in water by fire. Therefore, if the existence of a thing differs from its essence, this existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles. Now it is impossible for a thing's existence to be caused by its essential constituent principles, for nothing can be the sufficient cause of its own existence, if its existence is caused. Therefore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.

Secondly, existence is that which makes every form or nature actual; for goodness and humanity are spoken of as actual, only because they are spoken of as existing. Therefore existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality. Therefore, since in God there is no potentiality, as shown above (Article 1), it follows that in Him essence does not differ from existence. Therefore His essence is His existence.

Thirdly, because, just as that which has fire, but is not itself fire, is on fire by participation; so that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation. But God is His own essence, as shown above (Article 3) if, therefore, He is not His own existence He will be not essential, but participated being. He will not therefore be the first being—which is absurd. Therefore God is His own existence, and not merely His own essence.⁵

For Plantinga, the divine essence is a set (i.e. a set of properties), something that is "abstract", "not concrete." This generic divine essence is not existence, because if it were existence, it would not be abstract; it would itself be actual. So this generic divine essence cannot give existence to the three persons, because it cannot give what it does not itself have. Hence existence is given to this generic divine essence, in each of its three instantiations in the three persons. Moreover, in Plantinga's model, none of the three "personal essences" is existence. Therefore, none of the three persons is existence, nor is the generic divine essence existence. But the three persons exist, and yet they do not have existence from their

personal essences or from the generic divine nature in which they participate. Hence it follows that they have existence from another, since they do not have it from themselves. Therefore, it follows that God is a creature, for a creature is that which has its being from another.⁶

It Rejects the Fourth Lateran Council (1215)

The Fourth Lateran Council (Twelfth Ecumenical) declared:

We, however, with the approval of this sacred and universal council, believe and confess with Peter Lombard that there exists a certain supreme reality, incomprehensible and ineffable, which truly is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three persons together and each one of them separately. Therefore in God there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity, since each of the three persons is that reality — that is to say substance, essence or divine nature-which alone is the principle of all things, besides which no other principle can be found. This reality neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds; the Father begets, the Son is begotten and the holy Spirit proceeds. Thus there is a distinction of persons but a unity of nature. Although therefore the Father is one person, the Son another person and the holy Spirit another person, they are not different realities, but rather that which is the Father is the Son and the holy Spirit, altogether the same; thus according to the orthodox and catholic faith they are believed to be consubstantial. For the Father, in begetting the Son from eternity, gave him his substance, as he himself testifies : What the Father gave me is greater than all. It cannot be said that the Father gave him part of his substance and kept part for himself since the Father's substance is indivisible, inasmuch as it is altogether simple. Nor can it be said that the Father transferred his substance to the Son, in the act of begetting, as if he gave it to the Son in such a way that he did not retain it for himself; for otherwise he would have ceased to be substance. It is therefore clear that in being begotten the Son received the Father's substance without it being diminished in any way, and thus the Father and the Son have the same substance. Thus the Father and the Son and also the holy Spirit proceeding from both are the same reality. ... If anyone therefore ventures to defend or approve the opinion or doctrine of the aforesaid Joachim on this matter, let him be refuted by all as a heretic.⁷

The Fourth Lateran Council teaches that in God there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity consisting of Father, Son, Spirit, and divine essence. But the divine essence is not an abstraction. The divine essence is neither a fourth thing in God, nor an abstraction, nor something participated in by the persons or something *had* by the persons. The divine essence is the very being or substance of God. The divine essence truly is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The divine essence is not the sum of the three persons; it is what each of the persons is, and what all three are. That which is the Father is the Son and the Holy Spirit; the persons are not three realities. The persons are consubstantial, i.e. the same reality, the same substance, and same essence.

Plantinga recognizes that his position is contrary to that taught by the Fourth Lateran Council, but he writes:

"[According to the Fourth Lateran Council], tritheism might plausibly be said to be any trinitarian view that distinguishes the persons from each other while refusing to affirm their simultaneous identity with the one divine essence But is this standard itself plausible? And are we simply obliged to accept it, plausible or not? ... Are we obliged to accept such a version of simplicity, and then struggle with the "mystery" or sheer incoherence it introduces into the doctrine? Surely not. For one thing, [the Council's teaching] cannot claim much by way of biblical support. ... Simplicity doctrine finds its way into Christian theology via Neoplatonism, and ought therefore to be viewed with the same cool and dispassionate eye as any other potentially helpful or harmful philosophical contribution to theological elaborations of biblical truth."⁸

Plantinga rejects the standard of doctrine taught by the Twelfth Ecumenical Council because he finds it implausible, and because he finds in it the influence of Neoplatonism. He also questions its coherence, writing:

Third, the Lateran standard for trinitarian orthodoxy is of very doubtful coherence. For it claims that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons, but also each identical with the one divine thing or reality. And, of course it would not take a student of logic very long to show from the latter statement that they are therefore identical with each other. If so, on the Lateran version of trinitarian simplicity the three trinitarian persons are not really and ontologically distinct, but only logically or notionally or nominally. The incoherence of a statement that has distinct persons each identical with the same thing comes out in the generation statements: the divine thing does not generate, get generated, or proceed, despite the fact that Father, Son, and Spirit, identical with it, do. How are we to imagine this?⁹

The answer to Plantinga's question, from the Catholic perspective is this. The persons are identical to each other in nature (they are each and all the same nature) and being (they are each and all the same being), and in every other respect save one. They differ only in that one begets, one is begotten, and one is spirated. Regarding his casual dismissal of the teaching of the Twelfth Ecumenical Council, if Ecumenical Councils could justifiably be rejected because their teaching

seems implausible to the individual, or because we can find in them the influence of some philosophy, then no Ecumenical Councils would have authority, including the first four Ecumenical Councils.

It Entails a Tritheism which Reduces to Atheism or Unitarianism

Plantinga denies that each of the three divine persons is that reality (i.e. substance, essence or divine nature) which is God. Rather, according to Plantinga, each of the persons participates in the divine nature, which is abstract. For Plantinga, each person is God by participation in the generic divine nature, but that generic divine nature in which they each participate is not a being. Three non-beings, however, cannot together compose or constitute one whole being. Therefore, Plantinga's model entails that the one communal being formed by the loving union of the three persons, is formed by the loving union of three beings. The three persons are three beings, which by their loving union compose a social unity. That raises the problem of tritheism, but that problem reduces to another.

Because they are three immaterial beings, they cannot have the same essence, for the same reason explained above regarding the angels. And that sets up the following dilemma: either none of the three persons has existence as his essence, or only one of them, at most, has existence as His essence. If none of them has existence as his essence, then all three are created, and hence none of them is God; each is an angel. Any position in which something that is treated as the entirety of God is actually a creature, is an idolatrous form of atheism.

But, if only one of the three persons has existence as his essence, then since, according to Plantinga, each of the three persons is a distinct being, the being of the one whose essence is existence is not the being of the other two persons. Therefore, since the other two persons have being, and since their essence is not existence, and since their being is not the being of the one whose essence is existence, it follows that they have their being from another *ex nihilo*. Hence, if only one of the three persons has existence as his essence, it follows that the other two persons were created *ex nihilo*, and are thus creatures. Tritheism in this way entails either atheism or unitarianism.

It Makes God into a Quaternity

Since according to Plantinga the generic divine essence is not a being, but an abstraction, therefore each of the three persons is a distinct being, and these three through mutual love unite to form a communal unity. Plantinga writes, "[T]here are three divine persons, but only one divine family or monarchy or community, namely, the Holy Trinity itself."¹⁰ This community is, for Plantinga the unified entity that is the one God. But the three persons do not lose their individual being in loving each other, because love is only possible so long as a distinction between the loving persons remains. Hence there are therefore four beings in God: Father, Son, Spirit, and the one divine family formed by the mutual love of the three. Since Plantinga's position denies the being of the divine nature, then without the one divine family formed by the love of the three persons for each other, there could be no affirmation of believing in "one God." Hence, since the three persons do not lose their individual being in loving each other, and since the one divine family is essential to affirm belief in "one God," it follows that Plantinga's position makes God a quaternity of three beings which, by their loving union form a fourth being. This too, is incompatible with the Fourth Lateran Council, which explicitly denied that there is a quaternity in God: "Therefore in God there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity, since each of the three persons is that reality — that is to say substance, essence or divine nature" Moreover, in Plantinga's theory the one God formed by the union of the three persons is either himself a person or not. If he is a person, then the quaternity is of four persons. But if the fourth is not a person, then the one God is an impersonal whole, composed of three persons as parts.

It gives God Three Intellects and Three Wills

Plantinga writes:

In what follows I want to state a strong or social theory of the Trinity and defend it against the usual objections that theories of this kind are tritheistic. By strong or social trinitarianism, I mean a theory that meets at least the following three conditions: (1) The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and actions. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that, on this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as persons in some full sense of the term.¹¹

The claim that there are three centers of knowledge in the Trinity, and three centers of will in the Trinity, amounts to the claim that there are three intellects and three wills in God. But that is incompatible with Catholic theology, because in Catholic theology, the Son is the same being that the Father is, and thus has numerically the very same intellect and will. And likewise with the Spirit. Plantinga treats what is accidental to three persons knowing and loving, though essential to three humans knowing and loving, to conclude mistakenly that the three divine persons must each have their own intellect and will in order truly to be persons. In this respect, he uses a false philosophical assumption upon which to build a theological position contrary to an Ecumenical Council he rejects in part on account of philosophy's influence upon it.

My hope and prayer is that by examining why and how Plantinga's position is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, we may find ways forward by which to recover shared common ground regarding such an important doctrine as that of the Holy Trinity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. In *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, edited by Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 29 [🔗]
2. *Ibid*, p. 31 [🔗]
3. *Ibid*, p. 42 [🔗]
4. *Summa Theologica* I Q.50 a.4 [🔗]
5. *Summa Theologica* I Q.3 a.4 [🔗]
6. Another possible conclusion is that the three persons are not God, precisely because God *cannot* be a creature. [🔗]
7. Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 2 [🔗]
8. *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, p. 39 [🔗]
9. *Ibid*, p. 40 [🔗]
10. *Ibid*, p. 31 [🔗]
11. *Ibid*, p. 22 [🔗]

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15 comments

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1. [Ben Mann September 22nd, 2009 5:07 am](#) :

CP: "And, of course it would not take a student of logic very long to show from the latter statement that they are therefore identical with each other."

That's seriously one of the most impious things I've ever read, on so many levels.



2. [Bryan Cross September 22nd, 2009 3:19 pm](#) :

I have noticed in the biblical arguments put forward by the social trinitarians an implicit monothelism (Christ had only one will) as a presupposition. On account of this presupposition, they tend to mistake NT passages having to do with Christ's human will as teaching that Christ has a divine will numerically distinct from the Father's will. In that respect, their rejection of the Fourth Lateran Council seems to be partly caused by their not accepting/recognizing the **Sixth Ecumenical Council** (680). The Sixth Ecumenical Council teaches that Christ has two "natural wills." That entails that Christ's divine will is a will of His divine nature. But there is only one divine nature, the very divine nature which each divine Person is. Hence, it follows from what this Council teaches that there is numerically only one divine will. So when social trinitarians speak of Christ submitting in His divine will to God the Father, they are already going against the Sixth Ecumenical Council.

*If anyone does not confess properly and truly in accord with the holy Fathers that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit are a Trinity in unity, and a unity in Trinity, that is, one God in three subsistences, consubstantial and of equal glory, one and the same Godhead, nature, substance, virtue, power, kingdom, authority, **will**, operation of the three, uncreated, without beginning, incomprehensible, immutable, creator and protector of all things, let him be condemned. (Lateran Council of 649, canon 1)*

*Thus, it follows that as we truly confess that He [Christ] has two natures or substances, that is the Godhead and the humanity, unfusedly, indivisibly, incommutably, so also He has both **two natural wills** and two natural operations, since the rule of piety instructs us that perfect God and perfect man is one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, because it is shown that the apostolic and evangelical tradition and the teaching of the holy Fathers, whom the holy, apostolic, and Catholic Church and the venerable Synods accept, have taught this. (Roman Council of 680, under Pope St. Agatho)*

*And briefly we shall intimate to your divinely instructed Piety, what the strength of our Apostolic faith contains, which we have received through Apostolic tradition and through the tradition of the Apostolic pontiffs, and that of the five holy general synods, through which the foundations of Christ's Catholic Church have been strengthened and established; this then is the status and the regular tradition of our Evangelical and Apostolic faith, to wit, that as we confess the holy and inseparable Trinity, that is, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, to be of one deity, of one nature and substance or essence, so we will profess also that it has **one natural will**, power, operation, domination, majesty, potency, and glory. ...*

*For when we confess two natures and **two natural wills**, and two natural operations in our one Lord Jesus Christ, we do not assert that they are contrary or opposed one to the other (as those who err from the path of truth and accuse the apostolic tradition of doing. Far be this impiety from the hearts of the faithful!), nor as though separated (per se separated) in two*

persons or subsistences, but we say that as the same our Lord Jesus Christ has two natures so also he has two natural wills and operations, to wit, the divine and the human: **the divine will and operation he has in common with the coessential Father from all eternity**: the human, he has received from us, taken with our nature in time. This is the apostolic and evangelic tradition, which the spiritual mother of your most felicitous empire, the Apostolic Church of Christ, holds. This is the pure expression of piety. This is the true and immaculate profession of the Christian religion, not invented by human cunning, but which was taught by the Holy Ghost through the princes of the Apostles. ...

Moreover, the Apostolic Church of Christ, the spiritual mother of your God-founded empire, confesses one Jesus Christ our Lord existing of and in two natures, and she maintains that his two natures, to wit, the divine and the human, exist in him unconfused even after their inseparable union, and she acknowledges that each of these natures of Christ is perfect in the proprieties of its nature, and she confesses that all things belonging to the proprieties of the natures are double, because the same our Lord Jesus Christ himself is both perfect God and perfect man, of two and in two natures: and after his wonderful Incarnation, his deity cannot be thought of without his humanity, nor his humanity without his deity. Consequently, therefore, according to the rule of the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, she also confesses and preaches that there are in him two natural wills and two natural operations. **For if anybody should mean a personal will, when in the holy Trinity there are said to be three Persons, it would be necessary that there should be asserted three personal wills, and three personal operations (which is absurd and truly profane). Since, as the truth of the Christian faith holds, the will is natural, where the one nature of the holy and inseparable Trinity is spoken of, it must be consistently understood that there is one natural will, and one natural operation.** But when in truth we confess that in the one person of our Lord Jesus Christ the mediator between God and men, there are two natures (that is to say the divine and the human), even after his admirable union, just as we canonically confess the two natures of one and the same person, so too we confess his two natural wills and two natural operations.

But that the understanding of this truthful confession may become clear to your Piety's mind from the God-inspired doctrine of the Old and the New Testament, (for your Clemency is incomparably more able to penetrate the meaning of the sacred Scriptures, than our littleness to set it forth in flowing words), our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who is true and perfect God, and true and perfect man, in his holy Gospels shews forth in some instances human things, in others, divine, and still in others both together, making a manifestation concerning himself in order that he might instruct his faithful to believe and preach that he is both true God and true man. Thus as man he prays to the Father to take away the cup of suffering, because in him our human nature was complete, sin only excepted, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." And in another passage: "Not my will, but thine be done."

If we wish to know the meaning of which testimony as explained by the holy and approved Fathers, and truly to understand what "my will," what "thine" signify, the blessed Ambrose in his second book to the Emperor Gratian, of blessed memory, teaches us the meaning of this passage in these words, saying: "He then, receives my will, he takes my sorrow, I confidently call it sorrow as I am speaking of the cross, mine is the will, which he calls his, because he bears my sorrow as man, he spoke as a man, and therefore he says: 'Not as I will but as thou wilt.'" Mine is the sadness which he has received according to my affection. See, most pious of princes, how clearly here this holy Father sets forth that the words our Lord used in his prayer, "Not my will," pertain to his humanity; through which also he is said, according to the teaching of Blessed Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles, to have "become obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross." Wherefore also it is taught us that he was obedient to his parents, which must piously be understood to refer to his voluntary obedience, not according to his divinity (by which he governs all things), but according to his humanity, by which he spontaneously submitted himself to his parents.

St. Luke the Evangelist likewise bears witness to the same thing, telling how the same our Lord Jesus Christ prayed according to his humanity to his Father, and said, "Father, if it be possible let the cup pass from me; nevertheless not my will but thine be done,"—which passage Athanasius, the Confessor of Christ, and Archbishop of the Church of Alexandria, in his book against Apollinaris the heretic, concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation, also understanding the wills to be two, thus explains: And when he says, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done," and again, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak;" he shews that there are two wills, the one human which is the will of the flesh, but the other divine. For his human will, out of the weakness of the flesh was fleeing away from the passion, but his divine will was ready for it. What truer explanation could be found? For how is it possible not to acknowledge in him two wills, to wit, a human and a divine, when in him, even after the inseparable union, there are two natures according to the definitions of the synods?

For John also, who leaned upon the Lord's breast, his beloved disciple, shews forth the same self-restraint in these words: "I came down from heaven not to do mine own will but the will of the Father that sent me." And again: "This is the will of him that sent me, that of all that he gave me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day." Again he introduces the Lord as disputing with the Jews, and saying among other things: "I seek not mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." On the meaning of which divine words blessed Augustine, a most illustrious doctor, thus writes in his book against Maximinus the Arian. He says, "When the Son says to the Father 'Not what I will, but what thou wilt,' what doth it profit thee, that thou broughtest thy words into subjection and sayest, It shews truly that his will was subject to his Father, as though we would deny that the will of man should be subject to the will of God? For that the Lord said this in his human nature, anyone will quickly see who studies attentively this place of the Gospel. For therein he says, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death.' Can this possibly be said of the nature of the One Word? But, O man, who thinkest to make the nature of the Holy Ghost to groan, why do you say that the nature of the Only-begotten Word of God cannot be sad? But to prevent anyone arguing in this way, he does not say 'I am sad;' (and even if he had so said, it could properly only have been understood of his human nature) but he says 'My soul is sad,' which soul he has as man; however in this also which he said, 'Not what I will' he shewed that he willed something different from what the Father did, which he could not have done except in his human nature, since he did not introduce our infirmity into his divine nature, but would transfigure human affection. For had he not been made man, the Only Word could in no way have said to the Father, 'Not what I will.' For it could never be possible for that immutable nature to will anything different from what the Father willed. If you would but make this distinction, O ye Arians, ye would not be heretics." ...

From these truthful testimonies it is also demonstrated that these venerable fathers predicated in the one and the same Lord Jesus Christ two natural wills, viz.: a divine and a human, for when St. Gregory Nazianzen says, "The willing of that man who is

*understood to be the Saviour,” he shows that the human will of the Saviour was deified through its union with the Word, and therefore it is not contrary to God. So likewise he proves that he had a human, although deified will, and this same he had (as he teaches in what follows) as well as **his divine will, which was one and the same with that of the Father**. If therefore he had a divine and a deified will, he had also two wills. For what is divine by nature has no need of being deified; and what is deified is not truly divine by nature. (Letter of Pope St. Agatho to the Sixth Ecumenical Council)*

Following the five holy and universal synods and the holy and accepted fathers, and defining in unison, it professes our lord Jesus Christ our true God, one of the holy Trinity, which is of one same being and is the source of life, to be perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity, like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, who is properly and truly called mother of God, as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no separation, no division; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single subsistent being [in unam personam et in unam subsistentiam concurrente]; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, Word of God, lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about him, and as Jesus the Christ himself instructed us, and as the creed of the holy fathers handed it down to us.

*And we proclaim equally **two natural volitions or wills in him** and two natural principles of action which undergo no division, no change, no partition, no confusion, in accordance with the teaching of the holy fathers. (Sixth Ecumenical Council, 680)*

3. roma victor September 22nd, 2009 6:04 pm :

So Plantinga's claim that each divine person has a two-part essence: a part that is shared with the other two divine persons, and a part that is unique to that person, is equivalent to each of the three persons being members of the same genus, but each differing from the other two persons in species. In other words, it places all three persons in the genus 'deity,' but places each of the three persons in a different species from that of the other two persons.

So Plantinga is a Tritheist; what's ironic is that Nicaea was supposed to have settled this as well as the many other heresies roaming rampant then but, as Ecclesiastes attests, nothing new under the sun.

In Catholic doctrine, by contrast, the Son is the offspring of the Father, God from God. And since like begets like, the Son is the perfect image of the Father, the very same numerical essence (not part of an essence) and being as the Father. And the Spirit likewise, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is the very same numerical essence and being with the Father and the Son, not sharing only a partial essence with the Father and the Son, but sharing the full and numerically same essence. For this reason, the implication that each of the three persons is a different species is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.

No, no, no!

More accurately put, the mystery of the Trinity is the mystery of one God in three Persons, the mystery of one identical nature existing in three *hypostases* which are really distinct.

All one needs to do is read up on Nicaea and what actually took place amongst all the Catholic bishops at that time.

4. David Waltz September 24th, 2009 3:43 pm :

Hi Bryan,

A very interesting, if not controversial, post; when you get the opportunity, could you respond to the following questions:

1. Do you believe that Social Trinitarianism (ST) is a close sister/cousin to Cappadocian/Economic Trinitarianism (if not, why)?
2. Have you read Tom McCall's informative essay ("Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism Again") in the *Philosophia*

Christi issue (5.2 – 2003) dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity?

3. Have you read Catherine Mowry LaCugna's, *God For Us* ([HERE](#))?

4. Have you read the numerous criticisms of Aquinas' opinion that each individual angel is a different "species", while all humans are the same "species"?

5. Do you believe ST denies that the "generic divine essence" is not spirit and infinite?

6. Do you embrace Boethius' definition of "person" (*naturae rationalis individua substantia* – in *Contra Eutychem*, 3.4,5)?

Looking forward to your comments...

Grace and peace,

David



5. [Kjetil Kringlebotten](#) [September 29th, 2009 3:17 pm](#) :

Bryan;

The Sixth Ecumenical Council teaches that Christ has two "natural wills." That entails that Christ's divine will is a will of His divine nature. But there is only one divine nature, the very divine nature which each person is. Hence, it follows from what this Council teaches that there is numerically only one divine will.

I think I agree with you, but I have some thoughts on this. I may be wrong, so I would appreciate some feedback.

We say that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is three persons. I don't think that they are united in exactly the same way as three human persons – for instance Peter, James and John – is united. Because three human persons doesn't just share an abstract property making them human. We also acknowledge that each of these persons has a concrete body and a concrete soul and that they have three concrete wills and operations. (To not acknowledge that the body is an inherent part of human nature is just not right, IMHO.)

They all have the abstract ability to will, but AFAIK, this is concretized in every human person, partly because of the individual preconditions inherent in each individual body. But AFAIK, the divine persons are a bit different. We say that three human persons are three 'human beings.' But we would never say that the three divine persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – are three 'divine beings.'

Now, let's use 'soul' as a metaphor. We can say that when we speak of three human persons, we are talking about three beings with three concrete wills and operations. But when we speak of three divine persons, we are talking about one being with one concrete will and operation in three hypostases. We can thus (metaphorically) say that God is one 'soul' with three persons. And I believe St. Athanasius agrees with me:

[We do not] imagine three Subsistences separated from each other, as results from their bodily nature in the case of men, lest we hold a plurality of gods like the heathen. But just as a river, produced from a well, is not separate, and yet there are in fact two visible objects and two names. For neither is the Father the Son, nor the Son the Father. For the Father is Father of the Son, and the Son, Son of the Father. For like as the well is not a river, nor the river a well, but both are one and the same water which is conveyed in a channel from the well to the river, so the Father's deity passes into the Son without flow and without division. For the Lord says, 'I came out from the Father and am come' (Joh. xvi. 28). But He is ever with the Father, for He is in the bosom of the Father, nor was ever the bosom of the Father void of the deity of the Son. For He says, 'I was by Him as one setting in order' (Prov. viii. 30). But we do not regard God the Creator of all, the Son of God, as a creature, or thing made, or as made out of nothing, for He is truly existent from Him who exists, alone existing from Him who alone exists, in as much as the like glory and power was eternally and conjointly begotten of the Father.

St. Athanasius, "Statement of Faith" in: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters. Edited by Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, p. 296 (324). Emphasis added.

We can therefore say that these three persons are really distinct, but that doesn't mean that they each has one has "a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two." To me, this sure sounds like tritheism.

Any thoughts on this?



6. [Bryan Cross September 29th, 2009 4:10 pm](#) :

Kjetil,

I agree completely. Three human persons are united by unity of type and/or by functional unity (e.g. team), or organic unity (e.g. a lineage), or by hierarchical unity (e.g. a family), or in an even greater way in the Mystical Body (which includes all the unities I just mentioned). But the three divine persons are numerically the same being and essence. This is a unity that we cannot even comprehend. It is not only a unity than which none greater can be conceived; this unity itself cannot even be conceived. We grasp things intellectually by dividing them (into genus and species). So a Being that cannot be divided even formally is unintelligible to us. Before we seek to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, we first have to recognize the incomprehensible unity within which the Son and Spirit process.

Plantinga's position comes from a kind of 'practical Marcionism' in which the revelation of Christ is treated as resting on a blank-slate starting point, abstracted from what is already known from the Old Testament, rather than as a further unfolding of what was already known. He also, methodologically presupposes ecclesial deism, in that he tries to understand the revelation of Christ, again abstracted from what the Holy Spirit has taught the Church about the Trinity since the time of Christ, particularly in the ecumenically councils, and especially after the fourth century.

So Plantinga is starting from three persons (understood as we understand the threeness of three human persons) and then trying to explain divine unity in terms of union of those three. But the early Christians (who were Jews) were starting from God-as-one (Hear O Israel ...), and then trying to explain plurality, i.e. how Christ's deity fit with God's unity. And that's how the early Church explained the Trinity in the Creed. You can't start from three **beings**, and get only one **being**, without eliminating two of the beings. Social unity is personal unity, not necessarily identity of being. Otherwise love would destroy itself, because two persons who loved each other would reduce to one person. So the individuals must each retain their own existence in order to form a social unity. And that means that even if there were a social being formed by the joining together of the three persons, it would be a fourth being, differing in kind from the three persons. And if there is only one God, then this result would make each person a part of God, not fully God, as the Creeds state. So these are serious problems, and Plantinga's starting point, including the philosophical and theological assumptions built into his methodology) are a large part of the problem, in my opinion. This problem would be avoided, if he simply followed the Creed, and its elaboration in the later ecumenical councils (especially the sixth).

He thinks that each divine person has a two-part essence: one part is the generic divine essence that all three persons share, and one part is a unique personal essence that is different for each person. He does not seem to recognize that the three person all are the exact same essence; they differ not in essence but in relation to each other by two processions (of the Son from the Father, and of the Spirit from the Father and the Son). That is the orthodox way of understanding the Trinity. According to Nicea, the ontological unity logically [though not temporally] *precedes* the social unity, whereas for Plantinga, the ontological unity (of the society formed by the union of the three persons) logically *follows* ontological plurality. And that entails tri-theism or a quaternity of beings, as I explained in the previous paragraph.

We should note that tri-theism is not Christianity. Islam is closer to Christianity than is tri-theism. The fact that some Reformed Protestants are now being drawn toward social trinitarianism shows how Scripture can be badly misinterpreted through a *sola scriptura* approach, apart from the Holy Spirit's guidance of the Church and her councils.

In the peace of Christ,

– Bryan



7. [Kjetil Kringlebotten September 29th, 2009 5:24 pm](#) :

I have heard some theologians say that three human persons each has one shared property, denoting them as 'human,' and individual human 'tropes,' while the divine persons has one nature and one divine 'trope.' (I have yet to find a good norwegian translation of 'trope'.)

8. [David Waltz September 30th, 2009 3:53 pm](#) :

Hello Bryan and Kjetil,

The exchange between the two of you yesterday has renewed my interest in this thread. I had hoped by now that Bryan would have answered the questions I posed to him back on the 24th; but alas, still no response. As such, I fear that my post may not be as cogent and constructive as I would like.

Kjetil posted:

>>We say that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is three persons. I don't think that they are united in exactly the same way as three human persons – for instance Peter, James and John – is united. Because three human persons doesn't just share an abstract property making them human. We also acknowledge that each of these persons has a concrete body and a concrete soul and that they have three concrete wills and operations.>>

Agreed; but with that said, some important Church Fathers still felt that important comparisons could be made. Note the following:

==For we say that gold, even though it be cut into many figures, is one, and is so spoken of, but we speak of many coins or many staters, without finding any multiplication of the nature of gold by the number of staters; and for this reason we speak of gold, when it is contemplated in greater bulk, either in plate or in coin, as “much,” but we do not speak of it as “many golds” on account of the multitude of the material, — except when one says there are “many gold pieces” (Daries, for instance, or staters), in which case it is not the material, but the pieces of money to which the significance of number applies: indeed, properly, we should not call them “gold” but “golden.”

As, then, the golden staters are many, but the gold is one, so too those who are exhibited to us severally in the nature of man, as Peter, James, and John, are many, yet the man in them is one..

Indeed, it would be a lengthy task to set out in detail from the Scriptures those constructions which are inexactly expressed, in order to prove the statement I have made; where, however, there is a risk of injury to any part of the truth, we no longer find in Scriptural phrases any indiscriminate or indifferent use of words. For this reason Scripture admits the naming of “men” in the plural, because no one is by such a figure of speech led astray in his conceptions to imagine a multitude of humanities or supposes that many human natures are indicated by the fact that the name expressive of that nature is used in the plural. But the word “God” it employs studiously in the singular form only, guarding against introducing the idea of different natures in the Divine essence by the plural signification of “Gods.” This is the cause why it says, “the Lord our God is one Lord, and also proclaims the Only-begotten God by the name of Godhead, without dividing the Unity into a dual signification, so as to call the Father and the Son two Gods, although each is proclaimed by the holy writers as God. The Father is God: the Son is God: and yet by the same proclamation God is One, because no difference either of nature or of operation is contemplated in the Godhead. For if (according to the idea of those who have been led astray) the nature of the Holy Trinity were diverse, the number would by consequence be extended to a plurality of Gods, being divided according to the diversity of essence in the subjects. But since the Divine, single, and unchanging nature, that it may be one, rejects all diversity in essence, it does not admit in its own case the signification of multitude; but as it is called one nature, so it is called in the singular by all its other names, “God,” “Good,” “Holy,” “Savior,” “Just,” “Judge,” and every other Divine name conceivable: whether one says that the names refer to nature or to operation, we shall not dispute the point. (Gregory of Nyssa, *On “Not Three Gods”* – NPNF, 2nd series, Vol. V, pp. 335, 336.)==

And:

==Many persons, in their study of the sacred dogmas, failing to distinguish between what is common in the essence or substance, and the meaning of the hypostases, arrive at the same notions, and think that it makes no difference whether *ousia* or hypostasis be spoken of...

Of all nouns the sense of some, which are predicated of subjects plural and numerically various, is more general; as for instance man. When we so say, we employ the noun to indicate the common nature, and do not confine our meaning to any one man in particular who is known by that name. Peter, for instance is no more than, than Andrew, John, or James. The predicate therefore being common, and extending to all the individuals ranked under the same name, requires some note of distinction whereby we may understand not man in general, but Peter or John in particular...

Suppose then that two or more are set together, as, for instance, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, and that an enquiry is made into the essence or substance of humanity; no one will give one definition of essence or substance in the case of Paul, a second in that of Silvanus, and a third in that of Timothy; but the same words which have been employed in setting forth the essence or substance of Paul will apply to the others also. Those who are described by the same definition of essence or substance are of the same essence or substance when the enquirer has learned what is common, and turns his attention to the differentiating properties whereby one is distinguished from another, the definition by which each is known will no longer tally in all particulars with the definition of another, even though in some points it be found to agree. (Basil, Letter XXXVIII – NPNF, 2nd series, Vol. VIII, p. 137.)==

And:

==Everyone is to be warned to approach the questions of the “sacred page” most cautiously; but particularly those dialecticians of our own time (or, rather, the heretics of dialectic), who think that universal substances are the only “breath of the voice,” and cannot understand that color is something different from body, or wisdom from the soul, are to be blown right out of the discussion of spiritual questions...For instance, how can someone who does not yet understand how several men are one man in species comprehend how in that most mysterious and lofty nature several persons, each one of whom is perfect God, are one God? (St. Anselm, “Letter on the Incarnation of the

Word", *A Scholastic Miscellany – Anselm to Ockham*, pp. 98, 99.)==

And more important than the CFs is the language of the Chalcedonian Definition/Symbol of 451:

==We, then following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead (*theotēti*) and also perfect in manhood (*anthrōpotēti*); truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial (*homoousiov*) with the Father according to the Godhead (*theotēta*), and consubstantial (*homoousiov*) with us according to the Manhood (*anthrōpotēta*). (See Philip Schaff's, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, p. 62.)==

Grace and peace,

David



9. **Bryan Cross September 30th, 2009 4:58 pm :**

David,

I'm trying to understand what you are getting at. Could you put your concern/objection in your own words? (I didn't mean to ignore your previous questions, but some of them are rather open-ended, and would require a post of their own, to answer.) It would be easier for me, if you laid out your concern/objection/argument.

In the peace of Christ,

– Bryan

10. **David Waltz September 30th, 2009 6:24 pm :**

Hi Bryan,

Thanks for getting back to me; you posted:

>>I'm trying to understand what you are getting at. Could you put your concern/objection in your own words? (I didn't mean to ignore your previous questions, but some of them are rather open-ended, and would require a post of their own, to answer.) It would be easier for me, if you laid out your concern/objection/argument.>>

I have two "concerns": first, I believe that ST shares much in common with many EO theologians—so, in condemning ST you are condemning the EO (and, of course, some important CFs); second, the need to carefully define terms (IMHO pretty much all the 'camps' Latin/Western, Greek/Eastern, and ST are guilty here).

At present (this can change very quickly [grin]), I maintain all (L/W, G/E, and ST) affirm one **WHAT** (essence, nature, substance, *ousia*</i>) and three **WHO's** (*persons, hypostases, subsistences*), and that this construct is consistent with the early creeds/symbols.

Grace and peace,

David



11. **Bryan Cross September 30th, 2009 6:44 pm :**

David,

Thanks for clarifying. My focus in this post is exclusively on Plantinga's version of ST. In my post I've given six reasons/arguments why Plantinga's version of ST is incompatible with Catholic doctrine. So, if you want to show that Plantinga's version is compatible with Catholic doctrine, you would need to refute all six arguments. Plantinga's version of ST is not the only kind of ST, but it is the one I focus on in this post. I'm not intending here to address any Eastern conceptions of the Trinity.

In the peace of Christ,

– Bryan

12. **David Waltz October 1st, 2009 7:17 pm :**

Hello Bryan,

Thanks much for your patience. Yesterday you posted:

>>Thanks for clarifying. My focus in this post is exclusively on Plantinga's version of ST.>>

I misunderstood your intent. The opening of your post read as follows:

>>In his chapter titled "Social Trinity and Tritheism," Cornelius Plantinga Jr., the current president of Calvin Theological Seminary, argues in support of what is known as 'social trinitarianism.' This position is not compatible with the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, so here I want to show the difference between the two positions, and why they are incompatible.>>

Though you used Plantinga's "argument" as the basis for your comparison/critique, the way I understood the opening statement was that the "two positions" being represented were "social trinitarianism" and "the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity." I did not at that time perceive that you did/do not consider Plantinga's position to be representative of ST as a whole. Thanks much for the clarification.

>>In my post I've given six reasons/arguments why Plantinga's version of ST is incompatible with Catholic doctrine. So, if you want to show that Plantinga's version is compatible with Catholic doctrine, you would need to refute all six arguments. Plantinga's version of ST is not the only kind of ST, but it is the one I focus on in this post. I'm not intending here to address any Eastern conceptions of the Trinity.>>

My intent was/is to suggest that ST (as espoused by many of its representatives) is compatible with "the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity" as represented in the Ecumenical Creeds/Symbols/Decrees.

Now, with that said, I am certainly no expert on Dr. Plantinga's position, but I have read (and own) all three of his published essays on the topic. IMO, from what I HAVE read, I humbly submit that you may have been a bit too harsh in your critique/comparison. If you think it would be productive, I could delineate some of the reasons why I lean towards this view (though it would probably have to wait until Monday).

Grace and peace,

David

13. [roma victor October 1st, 2009 7:44 pm](#) :

David:

...in condemning ST you are condemning the EO (and, of course, some important CFs); second, the need to carefully define terms (IMHO pretty much all the 'camps' Latin/Western, Greek/Eastern, and ST are guilty here).

You chided Bryan for virtually condemning the Eastern Orthodox by supposedly going against ST.

Yet, now you feel compelled to advocate Platinga's position when, clearly, by doing so, you yourself are condemning the Eastern Orthodox, especially since their Trinitarian theology derives principally from Divine Simplicity (e.g., the fiercely popular *filioque* dispute), which Platinga is himself opposed?

In Platinga's own words:

*"Are we obliged to accept such a version of simplicity, and then struggle with the "mystery" or sheer incoherence it introduces into the doctrine? Surely not. For one thing, [the Council's teaching] cannot claim much by way of biblical support. ... **Simplicity doctrine finds its way into Christian theology via Neoplatonism**, and ought therefore to be viewed with the same cool and dispassionate eye as any other potentially helpful or harmful philosophical contribution to theological elaborations of biblical truth."*

14. [David Waltz October 2nd, 2009 1:42 pm](#) :

Hello rv,

Thanks for responding. You posted:

>>You chided Bryan for virtually condemning the Eastern Orthodox by supposedly going against ST.>>

IMHO I was not chiding Bryan, but rather, responding to one of his requests. You need to keep in mind that this portion of my post...

==I have two "concerns": first, I believe that ST shares much in common with many EO theologians—so, in condemning ST you are condemning the EO (and, of course, some important CFs); second, the need to carefully define terms (IMHO pretty much all the 'camps' Latin/Western, Greek/Eastern, and ST are guilty here).==

...follows the lack of a response from Bryan concerning this specific question...

==1. Do you believe that Social Trinitarianism (ST) is a close sister/cousin to Cappadocian/Economic Trinitarianism (if not, why)?==

...and is prior to Bryan's later clarification.

>>Yet, now you feel compelled to advocate Platinga's position when, clearly, by doing so, you yourself are condemning the Eastern Orthodox, especially since their Trinitarian theology derives principally from Divine Simplicity (e.g., the fiercely popular filioque dispute), which Platinga is himself opposed?>>

Where have I advocated Platinga's position?

As for Plantiga and Eastern Orthodoxy, I think you need to read his "Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity" (*The Thomist*, 50.3, pp. 325-352) before making such an assessment.

Grace and peace,

David



15. Lucian September 14th, 2010 8:01 pm :

St Basil the Great on the difference between *essence and personhood*.

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