

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

Talking about God: Trinity and human destiny

1. The Problem

1. Early Christians were Jews, therefore believed and practised the worship of God alone. Absolute monotheism of Judaism.

2. Jesus' words and actions reveal him as something more than just a messianic reforming rabbi or prophet:

- When he prays to God the characteristic means of address is the unique "abba", implying a particular intimacy (51 times plus parr.), e.g. Mark 14:36 "He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'" Thus he reveals new truth about God.
- He changes the Mosaic Law, e.g. food, Sabbath.
- He forgives sin.
- He speaks of a unique, mutual relationship with God, e.g. Matthew 11:27 "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Thus Jesus is the vehicle through whom others derive "sonship".
- He is the agent of the Rule of God on earth through obedience in every way unto death.
- This results in the charge of blasphemy in Mark 14:61-64 "Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' ⁶²Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven."' ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?' All of them condemned him as deserving death."

3. Jesus speaks of the "spirit of God" at work in his life, e.g. Matthew 12:28 "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you."

2. Back to the Hebrew Bible for help

1. The Hebrew Bible makes the absolute oneness of God abundantly clear. There is no plurality in God and God is unlike anything else: one, indivisible, unique.

2. Hebrew Bible speaks of God as "Father"

- God is totally transcendent and exercises no sexuality, therefore is cannot be a biological or literal term.

- All images of God are forbidden stressing the total otherness and ineffability of God.
- Feminine images of God are used, thus emphasising that this is not a sexual description but a literary comparison, e.g. Isaiah 42:14 “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant.” See also Psalm 22:9-10 (God compared to midwife), Isaiah 49:15 (God compared to a nursing mother), Isaiah 66:13 (God compared to a comforting mother), Sirach 4:10, Numbers 11:12, Deuteronomy 32:18.
- God spoken of in metaphorical terms, e.g. (most frequently) God is King, also sometimes: God is lover/husband e.g. Jeremiah 3, Ezekiel 16, Hosea 2, and God is a father, e.g. Deuteronomy 32:6 “Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” Isaiah 63:16 “For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.”, Jeremiah 3:19 “I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.” (About 20 times in total).
- “Father of orphans and protector of widows” Psalm 68: 4-6

3. “Son of God” used in Hebrew Bible

- The whole of the Hebrew People are spoken of as God’s first-born son, e.g. Exodus 4:21-23: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²²Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” (see also Hosea 11:1, Wisdom 18:13, Deuteronomy 14:1, Isaiah 45:11). Therefore we can speak of a “collective sonship” (Jeremiah 3:22, Deuteronomy 32:19 and Isaiah 30:1). Key is obedience and living according to divine guidance.
- Angels are called sons of God, e.g. Genesis 6:2-4, Deuteronomy 32:8. They are the obedient messengers of God.
- Kings of Israel are called son of God, e.g. Psalm 2:7 “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” (see also Psalm 89: 26-29, 2 Samuel 7:14) 1 Chronicles 28:6-7 “He [God] said to me [David], “It is your son Solomon who shall build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be a son to me, and I will be a father to him. ⁷I will establish his kingdom for ever if he continues resolute in keeping my commandments and my ordinances, as he is today.”

- King as “son” means, by divine choice and election, by adoption not by birth, through the power of God, in obedience to and in fulfilment of God’s purposes.
- Day of installation is “today I have begotten you”.
- King is the instrument of God’s will and stands between God and the people.
- Part of the unconditional covenant relationship with God: God remains the faithful father of the king and people.
- Righteous Israelites are called sons of God, e.g. Sirach 4:10 “Be a father to orphans and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother”, (see also Wisdom 2:13, 18 and 5:5).
- Job description:
 - Perfect obedience to the Father
 - Representation
 - Manifestation
 - Standing between God and people
 - Total dependence on Father
 - Election, adoption not procreation
 - Instrument of God’s will
 - In Jewish law, a son can uniquely represent a father as a legal person in a way that no servant, slave or agent can

4. “Spirit of God” in the Hebrew Bible

- For a semi-nomad people, the desert wind was:
 - The most unpredictable thing: invisible, no warning
 - The most powerful thing: rearranged the desert
 - The most uncontrollable thing
 - The most irresistible thing: nothing stands in its path
 - The most undeniable thing
- Called the *ruah Yahweh*: wind, breath and spirit
- Therefore used to describe the power of God at work in human lives, hence “Spirit of God”.

3. Gospel attempts to talk about a relationship

- Luke 10: 21-22 “At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”
- Acts 5: 30-32 “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and

forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

- The problem of “identification” and “distinction” attempted by John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

4. Over to the philosophers

1. Working towards a code of practice when speaking of God:
 - The presence of Jesus mediates the presence of God
 - The actions of Jesus express the love of God
 - Jesus brings God close
 - Jesus is vindicated by God in the resurrection
 - The humanity of Jesus expressed and mediated the divine life itself
 - Cannot say simply “Jesus is God incarnate” because he prays to God (e.g. Gethsemane Luke 22:42) and dies (but God cannot die)
 - Identification: e.g. John 14:10 “The Father lives in the Son and the Son lives in the Father”
 - Distinction: John 1:1 “the Word was with God”
 - The Word/Son becomes flesh and dies; the Father remains
 - Spirit as life-giver, who shapes humans in the image of the Word
 - Spirit as power to sustain, support and unite in God
2. Terms:
 - *Ousia*: substance, a thing
 - *Prosopon* (Gk), *persona*: mask worn by actor
 - *Hypostases*: mode of being, self-subsistent reality
3. Social Trinitarian model (prominent in eastern thought)
 - One substance three hypostases (hypostasis seen as rational agent possessing consciousness and will), therefore three centres of consciousness and will, one kind of thing = God
 - Three hypostases linked in such a way that they can never be separated, therefore they always act together and are all always involved in every divine act
 - “Father creates through the Word/Son in the power of the Spirit”
 - “Father liberates humanity through the self-giving action of the Son by the life-giving power of the Spirit”
 - “Father draws all to himself through the Word/Son by the reconciling and unifying power of the Spirit”
 - God is a social reality consisting of three cosmic minds, always acting together as each is mutually indwelling the other; therefore a community of hypostases.
 - God is the unity of the love of the three in community. Three hypostases bound together in mutual love, therefore “God is love”

- God is love, therefore inherently eternally self-giving, therefore God is a community of love eternally pouring out love on one another.
4. Three ways of being God (prominent in western thought)
- Only one centre of consciousness and will in God
 - Hypostasis seen more as an aspect or mode of being
 - Father: creator, source of all being, sustainer, transcendent
 - Son: eternal Word, Wisdom, incarnates to liberate
 - Spirit: mode of God's action within lives and consciousness of humans, source of union