

Trinity, Filioque and Semantic Ascent¹

Christians believe that the Persons of the Trinity are distinct but in every respect equal. We believe also that the Son and Holy Spirit proceed from the Father.

It is difficult to reconcile claims about the Father's role as the progenitor of Trinitarian Persons with commitment to the equality of the persons, a problem that is especially acute for Social Trinitarians. I propose a metatheological account of the doctrine of the Trinity that facilitates the reconciliation of these two claims.

On the proposed account, "Father" is systematically ambiguous. Within *economic* contexts, those which characterize God's relation to the world, "Father" refers to the First Person of the Trinity; within *theological* contexts, which purport to describe intra-Trinitarian relations, it refers to the Trinity in toto-- thus in holding that the Son and Holy Spirit proceed from the Father we affirm that the Trinity is the source and unifying principle of Trinitarian Persons.

While this account solves a nagging problem for Social Trinitarians it is theologically minimalist to the extent that it is compatible with both Social Trinitarianism and Latin Trinitarianism, and with heterodox Modalist and Tri-theist doctrines as well. Its only theological cost is incompatibility with the Filioque Clause, the doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son—and arguably that may be a benefit.

1. Problem: the equality of Persons and asymmetry of processions

In addition to the usual logical worries about apparent violations of transitivity of identity, the doctrine of the Trinity poses theological problems because it commits us to holding that there are asymmetrical quasi-causal relations amongst the Persons: the Father "begets" the Son and "spirates" the Holy Spirit. The quasi-causal character of Trinitarian processions makes it difficult to understand how they can occur atemporally—"before all worlds." Moreover, the doctrine of Trinitarian processions is hard to square with the claim that the Trinitarian Persons are in every respect equal. Throughout the literature on the doctrine of the Trinity there is the nagging worry that even if all the Persons of the Trinity are fully divine, and equal in rank, dignity, power, wisdom and goodness, some of the Persons, specifically the First Person, are more equal than others.

One theological source of this worry arises from the concern that because individuals who are equal in power and authority might deadlock in pursuing their ends, the notion of distinct omnipotent beings is logically incoherent. The argument is old and familiar. Suppose x and y , where $x \neq y$, are both omnipotent. Since they are distinct they may disagree and will different, incompatible states of affairs. If however x and y decide to bring about incompatible states of affairs then there are just three possible

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outcomes: x gets what he wants but y does not, in which case y is not omnipotent; y gets his way but x is frustrated which implies that x is not omnipotent; or x and y deadlock so that neither gets what he wants and, consequently, neither can be understood as omnipotent. Athanagoras, as a Christian apologist speaking to pagans, cited this argument in support of monotheism but it was deflected back on Christians as Trinitarian doctrine developed. If the Persons of the Trinity are understood as distinct centers of consciousness and will, it appears that there must be a tie-breaking mechanism.

As Swinburne notes:

Clearly nothing less than God could act as the tiebreaker. But if we assign the role of tiebreaker to any Trinitarian Person, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that that Person is in some respect superior to the others. Only if one lays down what the rules are, and his decision is accepted because he has the authority to lay down the rules, will the collision necessarily be avoided. *But a difference in authority would have to arise from some other difference of status between the divine individuals; in some way one would have to be the source of being...* The eternal (active and then permissive) bringing about of G2 by G1, would be an act of essence by G1...a mechanism by which to ensure that there was no conflict of action between them. For G1 would prescribe what the mechanism was.² [emphasis added]

Assuming that it makes sense to talk about value apart from human interests, it is hard to see how we can evade the intuitive conclusion that G1, the Father, or whichever Person of the Trinity is responsible for choosing the conflict-resolving mechanism, is not superior in power and authority to the other Persons. Perhaps there is no contradiction in holding that the sort of properties ascribed to the Father—being the Source of other Trinitarian Persons or, as Swinburne suggests, being the *active* as well as permissive cause of other Trinitarian Persons—do not confer superior rank, status, or excellence on the Father.³ Swinburne and most other orthodox theologians, however, hold that activity is superior to passivity: when, for example, intra-Trinitarian relations are not at issue, they note that the Creator is more excellent than his creatures in virtue of his role as their source. Given this assumption, the asymmetry of relations within the Trinity is at least worrisome. If the Father is the active as well as permissive cause of other Persons this cannot be understood to mean that the other Persons are in some sense merely passive partners in the relationship since that would render the other Persons inferior. If however we take the Father to be the maker of conflict-resolution rules, which are accepted by the other Trinitarian Persons in recognition of “a difference in authority” it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they are, at least in this respect, passive recipients of his dicta and, to that extent, inferior. Assigning the role of tiebreaker to the Father in virtue of

² Richard Swinburne. *The Christian God* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1994) p.p 172-73

³ vide Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 173: “If G1, inevitably in virtue of his properties throughout some first (beginningless) period of time actively causes G2 to exist, and thereafter permissively causes (i.e. permits) the continued existence of G2; while G2 is such that G1 only exists at each period of time which has a beginning because G2 permits G1 to exist, then both would be metaphysically necessary...The eternal (active and then permissive) bringing about of G2 by G1 would be an act of essence by G1, just as the (permissive) bringing about of G1 by G2 would be an act of essence by G2; and the former would provide a mechanism by which to ensure that there was no conflict of action between them.”

his character as the source or progenitor of Trinitarian Persons thus threatens claims about the equality of Persons in the Trinity.

Whether being the Source of Trinitarian Persons makes the Father the Decider or renders him an active as well as permissive cause of the other Persons, it is hard to evade the conclusion that being the Source of Trinitarian Persons confers a superior status on the Father. Now there may not be anything objectionable about this. There is nothing in Scripture that commits us in any obvious way to the strict equality of Trinitarian Persons. Historically, however, the Church has repudiated accounts suggesting that the Trinitarian Persons are hierarchically organized and documents central to the tradition, such as the Athanasian Creed, vigorously affirm the equality of Persons. *If* we are interested in maintaining the equality of Persons, the doctrine of Trinitarian Processions and, in particular, the claim that the Father is uniquely the Source of Trinitarian Persons, poses a threat.

Even apart from worries about the equality of Persons, the notion that the Father is in some sense the source of other Persons is in and of itself problematic. The Father's generative role within the Trinity cannot involve ordinary event causation because the Trinitarian processions are atemporal. In addition, it cannot imply dependence in the way that created beings at every time depend upon God as their first Cause because dependence would seem to imply inferiority. Theologians therefore avoid characterizing the relation of the Father to the other Trinitarian Persons as one of “creation” to avoid the implication of dependence and inequality resulting from a free action in time, preferring instead to talk about the “begetting” of the Son and the “spiration” of the Spirit, or simply about Trinitarian “processions.”

This characterization of relations within the Trinity however is not so much a positive theological claim about the character of the relations among Trinitarian Persons, as an expression of agnosticism about their character: *whatever* is going on goes on “before all worlds,” is not temporal like ordinary causation, and *whatever* the Father's being the Source comes to, it does not imply the dependence or inferiority of the other Persons. Whatever is going on is *sui generis* and, indeed “incomprehensible.”

God is, of course, *sui generis*, so introducing *sui generis* causal notions like begetting and spiration to explain the relation between Trinitarian Persons may not be objectionably *ad hoc*. Nevertheless, construing the doctrine of Trinitarian processions as defining the character of relations between Trinitarian Persons is problematic. If there is an account of the Trinitarian processions that avoids concerns about the equality of Persons and worries about *sui generis* causation without violating the constraints imposed by theological orthodoxy it is worth serious consideration.

That is what the current account is intended to do. The theological language of councils and creeds, affirmed by orthodox Christians, imposes constraints. We want an account of this language that makes orthodox claims come out true. Logic also imposes constraints, in particular it rules out any account that is inconsistent with the character of identity as an equivalence relation. So, the Trinity puzzle is like other identity puzzles where the trick is to square ordinary talk—in the case of the Trinity doctrine, ordinary religious talk—with the formal features of identity, and strategies for doing the job are similar.

When it comes to the persistence of material objects one way of coping with worries about the identity of objects through change, including exotic cases of fission and fusion, is by taking the line that expressions which refer to persisting objects are temporally flexible and systematically ambiguous. So, for example, in “Can the Self-Divide,” John Perry proposes three solutions to what appears to be a case of one-many identity each of which turns on the suggestion that names of persons pick out different objects at different times or in different contexts. More recently, Ted Sider and others have developed one of these accounts, the Stage Language, to make the case that in most contexts when we refer to spatio-temporal objects, we refer to “stages” rather than “worms,” and that the referring expressions we use are systematically ambiguous.

I suggest that this is the kind of strategy we ought to adopt in dealing with the Trinity puzzle and, in particular, that “Father” and “God” are ambiguous between the First Person of the Trinity and the Trinity in toto. This strategy accommodates both theological and logical commitments: it makes ordinary religious claims come out true without violating transitivity of identity or other logical constraints. It is also metaphysically innocent and does not commit us to any speculative account of the character of Trinitarian Persons or the relations amongst them. It simply takes these claims as given and provides a way of making them come out true without incurring logical costs.

It is controversial whether this is a virtue or a vice. Whichever it is, arguably, this kind of account is all that philosophers are qualified to provide. We are not in any position to tease doctrine out of Biblical texts or to address the question of whether Biblical texts establish doctrine and we cannot, at least qua philosophers, penetrate the mysteries of the Godhead. What we have is a body of literature produced by the Church and distilled in the Creeds that poses logical problems because it uses the language of identity. Our modest job is just to see how far we can go in making these claims come out true without getting into logical trouble.

2. Church talk: the constraints

Orthodox theology imposes the following constraints on any account of the Trinitarian Persons and processions:

- (1) Distinctiveness.** The Persons of the Trinity are distinct.
- (2) Equality.** The Persons of the Trinity are equal—in power, wisdom, goodness, and divinity.
- (3) Personality.** The Persons of the Trinity are personal—centers of consciousness and will, the subjects of psychological states
- (4) Atemporal Origin.** The Processions of Trinitarian Persons are atemporal. Whether God’s inner life is timeless or in some sense temporal, the Son is begotten of the Father “before all worlds” and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (or from the Father and the Son) atemporally.
- (5) Asymmetry of Processions.** The relations between the Father and the Son, and between the Father and Holy Spirit are asymmetric: whatever procession comes to, the Son and Spirit proceed from the Father but

not vice versa. In particular, the Father's relation to both Son and Spirit is such that the Father is, in some sense, their source.

The chief difficulty, I have suggested, in any account of the Trinity, is that of squaring (2) and (5). To render them compatible, I propose the following account, which, I argue, is compatible with all five conditions:

The relata of the Trinitarian processions mentioned in the Creed are not the Persons of the Trinity, but God the Trinity, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "Father" is ambiguous and when it occurs in "theological" contexts, where the internal relations of Trinitarian Persons are under consideration, it refers to the Trinity in toto. When we affirm that the Son and Holy Spirit are "begotten" and "proceed" from the Father we are saying that the Son and Holy Spirit bear certain relations to God, the Trinity, or perhaps to the divine nature, which they share. In any case, we are not talking about any relations they bear to yet another Trinitarian Person, viz. the First Person.

By contrast, in "economic" contexts, when we talk about the "missions" or roles of Trinitarian Persons in the world and in particular in the history of salvation, "Father" refers to the First Person of the Trinity. On this account, when the Creed says that "God the Father Almighty" is the Maker of Heaven and Earth, or Jesus addresses his "Father" in heaven or the Litany invokes "God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth," "Father" refers to the First Person of the Trinity. Similarly when we affirm the divinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, assigning them properties they have in virtue of their common divine nature, which set them off from the created world, "Father" refers to the First Person of the Trinity. So, when affirming, "the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible," "Father" again refers to the First Person of the Trinity.⁴

3. The Linguistic Turn

The idea that there is some ambiguity in reference to God and to Trinitarian Persons is not a new one. Some writers suggest that "God" is ambiguous between the First Person of the Trinity and the Trinity in toto. Moreover the distinction between Trinitarian processions and missions, and between "theological" and "economic" talk, about the Trinity is also standard. Photios and other writers in the Eastern tradition indeed argue that Filioque is motivated by a confusion between economic talk, such as Jesus' assurance that the Holy Spirit will come after he ascends to be with the Father, and theological talk about processions within the Trinity. Economically speaking, the argument runs: the Spirit was sent into the world by the Father and Son; but, theologically, he proceeds before all worlds from the Father alone. Proponents of the

⁴ There is no clear criterion for distinguishing "theological" and "economic" contexts. Moreover there appear to be controversial cases. So, for example, the Son's being "seated at the right hand of the Father" is prima facie a theological context since it appears to ascribe an intra-Trinitarian relation to Father and Son. Given the analysis to be proposed this would have unpalatable results: we should be committed to holding that the Son is seated at the right hand of the Trinity in toto, which includes the Son, who would be, presumably, seated at the right hand of himself. Without worrying this metaphor however it should be apparent from the context in the Nicene Creed that this doctrine is best understood as an *economic* context since it occurs within a description of Christ's saving work in the world: "He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried, he ascended into heaven *and siteth at the right hand of the Father*, and he shall come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead."

Filioque, they argue, confuse the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world by the Father and Son with his eternal, atemporal procession within the Trinity.

On the account proposed here, none of the Persons of the Trinity is a source or progenitor of any of the others and so we do not need to worry about asymmetric relations of dependency amongst the Persons. Rather it is God the Trinity that is the Source of all divine Persons. "Father," is systematically ambiguous and in theological contexts refers to the Trinity *in toto*, which can be understood as the Source of the Persons to the extent that, depending on one's views on these matters, they are either parts, modes or members of it, or instances of its divine nature. The asymmetric relations we characterize as Trinitarian "processions" hold between the Trinity and each of the divine Persons.

On this account, Christians may affirm the following:

(6) The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, in every respect, equally God.

(7) The Son is begotten of the Father.

(8) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.

In (6), "Father" refers to the First Person of the Trinity. In (7) and (8) "Father" refers to God the Trinity. "Begetting" and "procession" designate the asymmetric relations in which the Persons stand to the Trinity *in toto*, whatever it is--whether the Trinity is to be understood as their ground or source, the community in which they participate or their shared nature. The asymmetry does not impugn the equality of Persons asserted in (6) because the relations noted in (7) and (8) do not hold between the Persons designated in (6). So we can, without special pleading meet both the conditions set in (2) and (5): the relations are asymmetric but the Persons are equal because the Persons are not the relata.

Moreover the relations of the Persons to the Trinity asserted in (7) and (8) are not causal so we do not have to worry about temporality or dependence. There may be a sense in which the Persons depend on the Trinity, if we read (7) and (8) to say that the Trinity in some sense grounds the Persons, is the whole of which they are parts or the Being of which they are modes. If by contrast we understand (7) and (8) to say that the Son and Holy Spirit are members of the Society of the Trinity, then there is perhaps a sense in which the Trinity depends upon the Persons. Latin Trinitarians, Social Trinitarians and heretical Sabellians will construe (7) and (8) differently. Given the proposed account, however, regardless of which reading we adopt, neither (7) nor (8) imply that the Second or Third Persons of the Trinity depend in any way on the First Person, because they do not say anything about the First Person, since they are theological contexts in which "Father" refers to the Trinity rather than the First Person of the Trinity.

The account I have suggested does not confuse the Persons, indeed it does not assign any hypostatic property to more than one of the persons. It does not suggest that that any Person of the Trinity is a mere relation between persons, though it is compatible both with the view that the Trinity *in toto* is a Society or mereological sum of persons as well as the heterodox view that the Persons of the Trinity are not themselves persons but rather parts, aspects or modes of a Person. The proposed account is compatible with Latin Trinitarianism and Social Trinitarianism, and with both heterodox Modalist and Tri-Theist accounts

because it is not a theological account of the relations between Trinitarian Persons but a meta-theological account of the language of Trinitarian theology.

On this account, theological discourse about Trinitarian processions is about the relations that Trinitarian persons bear to the Trinity, call it the P-relation, which is not reflexive, symmetric or transitive. The account does not however commit us to any claims about the substantive character of that relation: (7) and (8) say that the Son and the Holy Spirit are P-related to the Trinity—whatever that comes to.

It seems that we should also want to say that the First Person is P-related to the Trinity. However on this account we will not say that

(9) The Father proceeds from (or is begotten by) the Father.

The claim made in (9) is *theological* talk about Trinitarian processions so both occurrences of “Father” in (9) refer to Trinity in toto. Since the Trinity cannot be P-related to itself (9) is false. Similarly, (10) – (13) also come out false:

(10) The Son begets the Son.

(11) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

(12) The Son begets the Holy Spirit.

(13) The Son proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

In every context, “Son” and “Holy Spirit” refer to Persons of the Trinity and no Trinitarian Person is P-related either to itself or to any other Trinitarian Person.

Christians, stepping behind the language so to speak, may object that this evades the logical problem of the Trinity rather than solving it: the Trinity *is* God, each of the Persons *is* God, and since the “is” in both cases is supposed to be the “is” of identity, we are stuck with (9) and with (10) – (13) as well. This however, is to reject the fundamental purpose of the current metatheological program, that of making Church-talk come out true without commitment to logically incoherent doctrines: the current account is metaphysically non-committal and, to that extent, evasive. If Christian metaphysicians, for whatever reason, wish to take on a logically problematic account of the nature of the Trinity that is their business. Given the proposed analysis they are not committed to logically incoherent doctrines and can operate within the constraints posed by (1) through (5) without getting into trouble.

The current account makes it possible for orthodox Christians to say everything they want to say with the exception of (14), the Filioque Clause, which is itself controversial:

(14) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son

Since each Person is P-related to the Trinity and to no other Being, the Filioque Clause has to be rejected. (14), like (9), is a theological context concerning intra-Trinitarian relations, so “Father” in (14) refers to the Trinity but “Son” and “Holy Spirit,” which are unambiguous, refer to the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity respectively. On this account, (14) can be understood as saying one of three things, none of which is true, namely:

(14A) The Holy Spirit is P-related to the Trinity and the Holy Spirit is P-related to the Son.

(14B) The Holy Spirit is P-related to an object that includes the Trinity and the Son as its constituents

(14C) The Holy Spirit, Trinity, and Son stand in the P-relation

(14A) is false because its second conjunct is: no Trinitarian Person is P-related to any other Trinitarian Person. (14B) is false because no Trinitarian Person is P-related to anything other than the Trinity. If the object that has the Trinity and the Son as its constituents (whatever kind of object that might be) is not the Trinity then the Holy Spirit cannot be P-related to it. (14C) is not true because the P-relation is a binary relation: if (14) is understood as (14C), it does not even make sense. If this is correct then the Filioque Clause is incompatible with the metatheological account of the Trinity I have proposed.

Nevertheless, those theologians who regard the loss of Filioque as too costly can be accommodated with a minor revision. We can hold that “Son,” is ambiguous and, like “Father,” refers in some contexts to the Trinity in toto. In particular, we may say that within the Filioque Clause, which asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, *both* “Father” and “Son” refer to the Trinity in toto. If so, then we can understand the Filioque Clause as:

(14D) The Holy Spirit is P-related to an object that includes the Father as Trinity in toto and the Son as Trinity in toto as its constituents.⁵

There is no logically compelling argument to reject this proposal and if there are independent reasons to retain the Filioque Clause this is exactly what we should say. However if there is no compelling reason to retain the Filioque clause, the earlier account suggested seems preferable. The proposed revision is questionable.

First, this proposed modification in the suggested account is ad hoc since “Son” cannot refer to the Trinity in all clearly theological contexts. If it did then we should have to understand

(7) The Son is begotten of the Father

as

(7A) The Trinity is P-related to the Trinity.

The P-relation is asymmetric, so (7A) must be false yet the Creed requires us to affirm (7). Hence, it appears that on this account we should have to say that “Son” means “Trinity” only within the context of the Filioque Clause and that result is suspect. If systematic ambiguity is to be preferred to unsystematic ambiguity then there is some reason to worry about an account that introduces ambiguity solely in the interests of defending one controversial doctrine.

Secondly, the Filioque Clause is in tension with theological intuition articulated by Photios, who launched the first philosophically interesting and sustained attack on the Filioque Clause. Photios argues that Filioque violates what might be called the Hypostatic Properties Principle, viz that “all that is not common to the whole, omnipotent, consubstantial, and supranatural Trinity must appertain to only one of

⁵ I am grateful to the referee for this suggestion.

the three.”⁶ Photios continues: “since the spiration of the Spirit is not common to the three, then it belongs to only one of the three.”⁷

Photios has no argument for the Hypostatic Properties Principle. Specuatively, the Hypostatic Properties Principle is motivated by brute intuition that it is repugnant to reason to have three gods, three centers of consciousness or three hypostases however understood unless they are doing different jobs, and that the different jobs they do must reflect differences in hypostatic character. That, together with the understanding of the Father as Creator and Source, the Arche, is behind the intuition that sourcehood is the Father’s defining hypostatic characteristic and so that the Son cannot be a source of the Holy Spirit. Sourcehood is the Father’s thing—and that is why it is perhaps natural that when we talk about the Trinity in terms of its sourcehood, its begetting and spiration, we call it “Father.”

According to the proposed metatheological account, we can make sense of religious language and accommodate our theological intuitions by recognizing the ambiguities in talk about Trinitarian Persons. The details of the account depend on the character of our theological intuitions and the religious language we speak. If we want Filioque, we can have it. Arguably, however, the account works more smoothly if we reject the Filioque Clause. Moreover, there are independent historical reasons for rejecting Filioque: it is a late addition to the Creed and has never been accepted by all orthodox Christians.⁸

5. Theology and mystery

The account of Trinitarian language sketched here has the virtue of theological minimalism: it represents an attempt to make the Church’s talk about the Trinity coherent with the fewest metaphysical commitments and ad hoc maneuvers. It is nevertheless compatible with what I have suggested are the 5

⁶ Photios. *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* (Astoria, NY: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 85

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ The history of the Filioque Clause as medieval political football is remarkable and disheartening.

Absent from the earliest versions of the Nicene Creed it first showed up in Visigothic Spain at the Third Council of Toledo in 589. Filioque was very much a Western thing. The barbarians who occupied northern and western Europe had been Arians until relatively late and Filioque was regarded as a prophylactic against Arianism.

Filioque spread from Spain to France and in the 9th century Charlemagne become its champion. Challenging the Pope and his Roman coterie, who did not then recognize Filioque, he assembled his own council of trained theologians, adopted it, and threw it in the Pope’s face. In 809, at a synod in Aachen, Charlemagne approved the addition of Filioque to the Nicene Creed. Pope Leo III retaliated by having the Nicene Creed sans Filioque inscribed in silver tablets so that the earlier version of the creed would be, as it were, set in stone.

Even though Filioque was not yet official in the West its use in Western liturgies was widespread. Later in the century, it became the theological bone of contention in the Photian Schism, the fallout of a dispute between Patriarch Photios of Constantinople and his predecessor Ignatius, who had been deposed by the Byzantine Emperor Michael III “The Drunkard” for refusing the sacrament to his uncle. Ignatius took his case to the Vatican, which ruled in his favor. So much the worse for the Vatican. Striking a blow against Western hegemony, Photios wrote an Encyclical to the Eastern Patriarchs denouncing the Filioque as heretical and, in 867, a synod under his direction condemned the Pope.

Filioque became official in the West when in 1014 it was used in the Mass at Rome for the first time and at the Great Schism in 1054 Eastern rejection of the Filioque Clause was one of the grievances cited in the bull of excommunication papal legate Humbertus delivered to Patriarch Michael Cerularius.

For references on the history of the Filioque Clause, see, e.g. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959.

pillars of Trinitarian orthodoxy: the distinctness, equality, personality and atemporal origin of Trinitarian Persons and the asymmetry of Trinitarian processions.

Because it is an account of Trinitarian language rather than an attempt to articulate doctrines about the nature of God, the Persons of the Trinity and their relations to one another, it is metaphysically innocent and, from the theological point of view, virtually cost-free. Indeed the only theological cost that attaches to it is the rejection of the Filioque Clause and even this cost is negotiable: the account can be tweaked to accommodate Filioque.

Most importantly, it makes sense of deep features of our religious experience and belief as Christians. First, we believe that the Trinity is, in the deepest sense, a mystery into which metaphysical speculation cannot reach. The current account acknowledges the mystery: it does not purport to illuminate the metaphysical nature of relations amongst Trinitarian persons. The Church's Creeds commit us to talk about Trinitarian processions. To the extent that we understand these processions as relations between Trinitarian Persons, such talk raises questions about the inner nature of God, and opens the door to metaphysical speculation—a game without rules. The current account avoids posing these questions.

Metaphysical speculation was rife in the intellectual milieu where the doctrine of the Trinity was hammered out. Platonists, assuming that matter and time were inherently defective, in the interests of formulating an account of the natural world, needed to explain how the existence of a supreme Being, immutable, immaterial and eternal, could be compatible with the existence of a mutable, material, temporal, and hence imperfect world. Metaphysical systems from Plato's own *Timaeus* to Plotinus *Enneads* and other speculative accounts of the structure of emanations mediating between the simple, immutable and perfect One and imperfect material ephemera represent attempts to bridge that gap by positing lesser gods or intermediate beings and speculating about the character of the relations amongst them.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not an alternative answer to the question that perplexed Plato and his immediate followers, Neoplatonists and members of innumerable Gnostic sects. It is not an answer to the quasi-scientific question about the structure and internal workings of the Great Chain of Being because Christians reject the assumptions that pose the question: we believe that an omnipotent God needs no intermediaries between himself and the material world that he created, which is inherently good. It is rather an explanation of how we may acknowledge that Christ is God, that the Spirit he sent to his Church is God, that Jews worshipped the true God even prior to the revelation of Christ in his Incarnation and the Holy Spirit in his Church--and that nevertheless we believe in just *one* God.

The doctrine of Trinitarian processions at its religious core, prescinding from metaphysical speculation, says just this: that the Persons of the Trinity are so intimately related that in recognizing their divinity individually we affirm the existence of just one God. The current account affirms this doctrine insofar as it construes the claims that the Father begets the Son and spirates the Holy Spirit to say that Son and Spirit "proceed" from God the Trinity, where the nature of that relation is left open. It does not

preclude speculation about the nature of intra-Trinitarian relations but rather suggests that no account of the character of these relations is part of core religious doctrine that all Christians are bound to believe.

The current account prohibits us from saying that the Father "proceeds" from God the Trinity: (9) is false and, indeed, the proposed conventions block all "theological" talk about the First Person of the Trinity. This too is consonant with Christian doctrine and, indeed, illuminating. The God whom the Jews worshiped and pagans, according to Paul, recognized as the "unknown god," was God the Creator, later revealed by Jesus as the Father, the First Person of the Trinity. Jews and pagans, innocent of Trinitarian "theology," knew the Father because the First Person of the Trinity fixes the reference of "God" and its cognates: apart from God's revelation of himself through Christ and his Church, when Jews and pagans succeeded in referring to God it was God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity that they picked out.

Consequently, while we could consistently, if falsely, hold that Christ or the Holy Spirit is not God, it is not so clear that we can coherently hold that the Father is not God. We can certainly deny that God exists, but it would be very odd indeed to suggest that the First Person of the Trinity, the Creator of heaven and earth, exists but is not God. The First Person of the Trinity sets the standard for divinity in much the way that the standard meter rod in Paris sets the metric standard. Even if we can doubt that there is a Creator of heaven and earth or a meter rod in Paris, if there are such items they set the standard for divinity and metric dimension respectively so that asserting that the Creator is divine or that the meter rod is one meter long is, in an important sense, empty. We do not need to affirm that the Father is God and we cannot coherently deny it.

The First Person of the Trinity is, in this sense, referentially prior to the other Persons and to the Trinity in toto on the current account. It does not however follow that he is in any sense ontologically prior to the other Trinitarian Persons or superior in power, authority or divinity. Language, including theological talk, is a human enterprise and the First Person of the Trinity fixes the reference of "God" because of the way in which God has chosen to reveal himself to us in history.

The current account is minimalist: it explains how to square the doctrine of Trinitarian processions with the equality of Trinitarian Persons without commitment to any metaphysical account of the relations amongst Trinitarian Persons or between each of the Persons and Trinity. Perhaps even more importantly it leaves the inner life of the Trinity in virtue of which we affirm that distinct divine Persons count as one God, a mystery—as it must be for us. Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.