The Trinity & contradiction

Today we'll discuss one of the most distinctive, and philosophically most problematic, Christian doctrines: the doctrine of the Trinity.
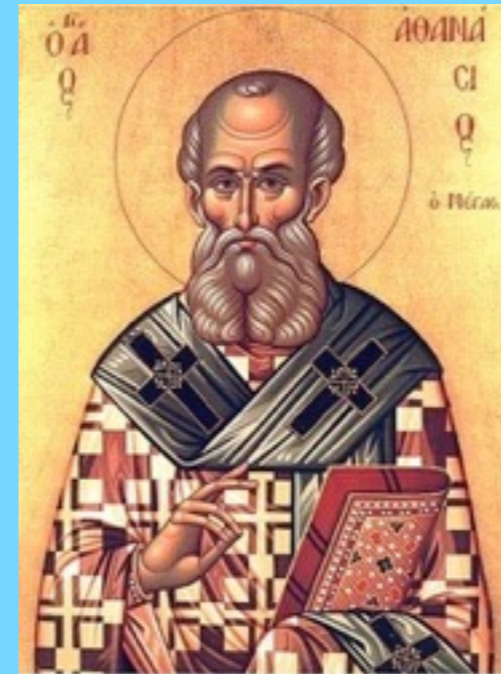
It is tempting to see the doctrine of the Trinity as something very abstract, and far removed from actual religious belief. But I think that this would be a mistake; one reason why is brought out in the following passage from Peter van Inwagen:

> Like Christians, Jews and Muslims believe that power and goodness and wisdom and glory are from everlasting to everlasting. But only Christians believe this of love, for the eternality of love is a fruit of the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is no arid theological speculation. It is not a thing that Christians can ignore when they are not thinking about philosophy or systematic theology. The doctrine of the Trinity ought to have as central a place in Christian worship and religious feeling as the doctrines of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

To see why this doctrine has seemed so problematic to many, it will be useful to begin with one of the historically most important statements of the doctrine: that from the Athanasian Creed, traditionally attributed to St. Athanasius.

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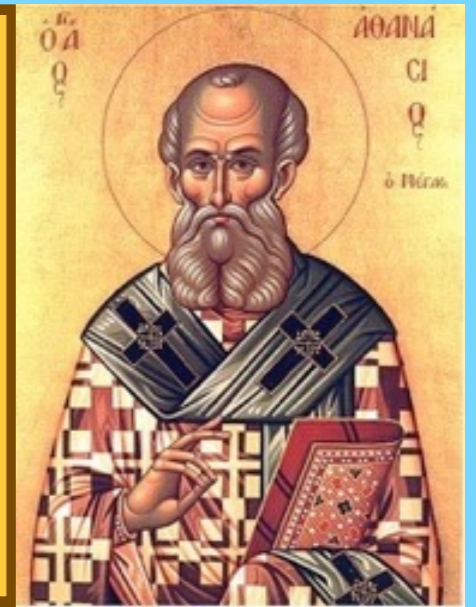
And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. …

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not Three Gods, but One God.

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And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. …

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The first three are stated explicitly in the last paragraph:

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

The next three seem to follow from the claim that we ought not to "confound the persons"

(4) The Father is not the Son.

(5) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.

(6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.

And the last is stated a few times:

(7) There is exactly one God.

It seems plausible that none of these 7 theses can be denied by anyone who endorses the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.

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(7) There is exactly one God.

But (1*)-(6*) are contradictory. This can be shown in many ways. But the simplest begins with the obvious fact that identity is transitive, so that if x=y and y=z, it follows that x=z.

To see why it has seemed hard to accept all seven of these theses, it will be useful to give one initially plausible interpretation of 1-6 on which they are contradictory.

But from the transitivity of identity plus (1*) and (2*), it follows that

　　　The Father = the Son

which contradicts (4*).

Let's suppose that "is" in each of 1-6 means "is identical to." Then we can restate 1-6 as follows.

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1*) The Father = God.

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(3*) The Holy Spirit = God.

(4) The Father is not the Son.

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So it looks like we need an interpretation of the "is" in some of (1)-(6) in which it does not express identity.

Here's an obvious candidate: perhaps we can take the "is" in (1)-(3) to express not identity, but predication — much like the "is" in "Bob is happy." We are not saying, absurdly, that Bob is identical to the property of happiness; rather, we're just saying that Bob has the property of being happy.

So suppose that we interpret (1)-(3) as (1P)-(3P) (the "P" stands for 'predication').

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

(2P) The Son has the property of being God.

(3P) The Holy Spirit has the property of being God.

(4) The Father is not the Son.

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This looks like progress, for now there is no contradiction between (1P-3P), on the one hand, and (4*)-(6*), on the other.

To see this, consider the following six claims:

i.   Fido has the property of being a dog.
ii. Jackson has the property of being a dog.
iii. Butch has the property of being a dog.
iv. Fido ≠ Jackson.
v.   Fido ≠ Butch.
vi. Jackson ≠ Butch.

There's plainly no contradiction in i-vi, which looks like good news.

But trouble lurks right around the corner. It looks like i-vi logically imply

   There are at least three dogs.

Just so, (1P)-(3P) and (4*)-(6*) together logically imply

   There are at least three Gods.

And that is the heresy of polytheism, which contradicts claim (7).

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

(2P) The Son has the property of being God.

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Here's one way of responding to this problem, which is characteristic of a family of views which is historically associated with the Eastern Church, and is often called 'social trinitarianism.' One might say that 'God' means something different in (1)-(3) than it means in (7).

Remember the formulation in the Athanasian Creed:

Focus especially on the claim that "the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all One".

And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. …

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Remember the formulation in the Athanasian Creed:

Focus especially on the claim that "the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all One".

The social trinitarian will say that (7) should be understood as

(7G) There is exactly one Godhead.

And it looks like (7G) is perfectly consistent with (1P)-(3P), and with (4*)-(6*).

What does it mean for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to make up one Godhead? Here the social trinitarian will often appeal to an analogy with a family. A family is genuinely one thing, but might well be made up of three genuinely distinct persons.

The unity of a family consists in the members of the family standing in certain biological or legal relations; just so, on this view, the unity of the Trinity consists in the three persons of the Trinity standing in certain relations. Which relations are they?

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

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Here's what Richard Swinburne, a contemporary defender of social trinitarianism, says:

The unity of a family consists in the members of the family standing in certain biological or legal relations; just so, on this view, the unity of the Trinity consists in the three persons of the Trinity standing in certain relations. Which relations are they?

…the three divine individuals taken together would form a collective source of the being of all other things; the members would be totally mutually dependent and necessarily jointly behind each other's acts. This collective ... would be indivisible in its being for logical reasons—that is, the kind of being that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others. The collective would also be indivisible in its causal action in the sense that each would back totally the causal action of the others. ... It is they, however, rather than it, who, to speak strictly, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.… Similarly this very strong unity of the collective would make it, as well as its individual members, an appropriate object of worship.

(1) The Father is God.

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This view of the Trinity has a number of merits. For one thing, it takes (4)-(6) — the distinctness claims — at face value, and clearly avoids contradiction.

The central question facing this view is whether it can escape the charge of polytheism. To many, the claim that the Godhead is a unity made up of three beings, each of which has the property of being God, just is the tritheist claim that there are three distinct gods, which stand in certain interesting relations to each other.

The understanding of the Trinity which has prevailed in the Western church does not accept (1P)-(3P) and (4*)-(6*) and avoid contradiction with (7) by reinterpreting it as something like (7G). So how does the Western understanding of the Trinity avoid contradiction?

Let's begin with Aquinas' statement of part of his doctrine of the Trinity:

"From premises already laid down it follows that there are several divine persons. For then it was shown above that 'person' used of God means relation as a subsisting thing in the divine nature. It was also held that in God there are several real relations. Hence it follows that there are several subsisting beings in the divine nature. This means that there are several persons in God." (*Summa Theologica*, 1a q. 30, article i)

In Aquinas' view, it seems that the persons of the Trinity — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — are different relations in which God stands to God.

What does this mean? Can you think of distinct relations in which you stand to yourself?

In some sense, Aquinas appears to be thinking of the persons of the Trinity as certain aspects of God.

In this he was following in a long tradition, one of whose most important members was Augustine. In the Confessions, Augustine wrote

"Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity? … I wish human disputants would reflect on a certain three things in their very own selves. These three things are very different from the Trinity, but I say that people could well exercise themselves and test and sense how far distant they are from it. I am talking about these three things: being, knowing, and willing. For I am and I know and I will. In that I know and will, I am. And I know myself to be and will. And I will to be and to know. Let him who can, see in these three things how inseparable a life is: one life, one mind, and one essence, how there is, finally, an inseparable distinct, and yet a distinction."

Augustine points out that each of us exemplifies being, knowing, and willing. Furthermore, these aren't simply distinct properties — like my being a teacher and my being from Ohio. Rather, each of these seems to be part of my essence — and each seems to be an aspect of me which is required for the other two. And yet they are genuinely distinct, and I am genuinely one thing.

Augustine seems to be saying that this provides something like a model for understanding the Trinity. But how does it help to resolve the contradiction between our theses (1)-(7)?

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

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(4) The Father is not the Son.

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One natural interpretation is that just as being, willing, and knowing are genuinely distinct aspects of me, so the persons of the Trinity are genuinely distinct aspects of God.

This suggests an alternative way to understand (1)-(3). Perhaps they don't predicate the property of being God of the persons of the Trinity; perhaps instead they predicate the property of instantiating the persons of the Trinity of God.

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(1M) God has the property of being the Father.

(2M) God has the property of being the Son.

(3M) God has the property of being the Holy Spirit.

(4*) The Father ≠ the Son.

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Now let's look at our seven theses — (1M)-(3M), (4*)-(6*), and (7) — and ask whether they are contradictory or not. And it seems that they are not. Consider the following seven claims:

My dog has the property of being a collie.
My dog has the property of being badly trained.
My dog has the property of being brown.
Being a collie ≠ being badly trained.
Being a collie ≠ being brown.
Being badly trained ≠ being brown.
I have exactly one dog.

These seem perfectly consistent; so if our interpretations above are otherwise acceptable, we have solved the logical problem of the Trinity.

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

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(1M) God has the property of being the Father.

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Unfortunately, they are not. To interpret (1)-(3) as (1M)-(3M) is to adopt the heretical view known as **modalism**, according to which the different persons of the Trinity are just different modes of God:

My dog has the property of being a collie.
My dog has the property of being badly trained.
My dog has the property of being brown.
Being a collie ≠ being badly trained.
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Being badly trained ≠ being brown.
I have exactly one dog.

"Father", "Son", "Holy Spirit" are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another. (§254)

Augustine and Aquinas were not intending to be modalists. The question is how we can understand their views in a way which avoids collapsing them into modalism.

These seem perfectly consistent; so if our interpretations above are otherwise acceptable, we have solved the logical problem of the Trinity.

One way in which one might try to provide such an interpretation begins in an unlikely place: with the ancient philosophical puzzle, which we've already discussed, of the statue and the clay.

Imagine a sculptor taking a lump of clay, and fashioning it into a statue. It seems as though the sculptor has brought something new into existence - namely, the statue. But it also seems as though the lump of clay, which pre-existed the sculptor's work, still exists. So it seems as though where there was formerly one thing, there are now two things. But this is very puzzling. After all, the two things are, for example, located in exactly the same location - and isn't it impossible for two material objects to be in exactly the same place? What's going on here?

Here are two things that sound plausible to say about this sort of case:

(A) The statue is the same material object as the lump of clay.
(B) The statue ≠ the lump of clay.

But can we consistently say both of these things? The first claim is what we might call a **relative identity claim** — it is a claim of the form

  x is the same F as y

whereas the latter is what we might call an **absolute identity claim** — a claim of the form

  x=y

or

  x≠y

How are these two sorts of claims related? It's natural, at first, to think that we can analyze claims of relative identity in terms of claims of absolute identity, so that

  x is the same F as y

just means the same as

  x is an F & y is an F & x=y

But then (A) just means the same as

  (A*) The statue is a material object & the lump of clay is a material object & the statue = the lump of clay.

But (A*) contradicts (B) — so if (A*) is what (A) really means, then (A) and (B) can't, as they seem to be, both be true.

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But (A*) contradicts (B) — so if (A*) is what (A) really means, then (A) and (B) can't, as they seem to be, both be true.

So if we want both (A) and (B) to come out true, we can't simply take relative identity claims to be thinly disguised absolute identity claims. So how can we understand relative identity claims like (A)?

One idea, which goes back at least to Aristotle, is that material objects can be thought of as compounds of matter and form. In the present case, the lump of clay and the statue share their matter, but differ in form; one bit of matter can have more than one form at a time. (So 'form' does not just mean 'shape.')

If this is right, then

    x is the same material object as y

means something like

    x and y are compounds of form and matter which are
    made of the same matter.

Whereas

    x is the same statue as y

means something like

    x and y are compounds of form and matter with the
    form of a statue which are made of the same matter.

But how does any of this help with the problem of resolving the contradiction between (1)-(7)?

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

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(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

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(7) There is exactly one God.

But how does any of this help with the problem of resolving the contradiction between (1)-(7)?

It helps by giving us an interpretation of (7) which makes it consistent with the other theses. The rough idea (developed in the optional reading from Rea & Brower) is that the divine essence stands to the persons of the Trinity in something like the same relation as the matter of the clay stands to the statue.

So we can understand (7) as the relative identity claim

(7R) There is some x which is God & if y is God, then y is the same God as x

What does it mean to say that x is the same God as y? We understand this in much the same way we understood 'x is the same material object as y':

x is the same God as y iff x and y are compounds of divine essence and form, and x and y have the same divine essence

Given this, we can say that the Father ≠ the Son ≠ the Holy Spirit, and that all three are God, and that all three are the same God — so that there is one God, not three.

Here's a comparison (borrowed from Rea): imagine that a certain quantity of marble is shaped into a statue, which is then moved to form the pillar of a building. We might want to say that the pillar ≠ the statue, and that both are material things, and that both are the same material thing — so that there is one material thing there, not two.

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(7) There is exactly one God.

(7R) There is some x which is God & if y is God, then y is the same God as x

In one sense, what we have here is just an analogy: we are extending the framework of form/matter to 'immaterial stuff' like the divine essence, and it might well seem less than clear what these notions mean when we leave the realm of material things.

But one might also think that, when it comes to the Trinity, that is all that we should expect.