

The Trinity: A General Introduction

A New Testament Reflection

Introduction: Is God the Ultimate Narcissist?

A couple of years ago, I was very honored to meet a student at Tufts University who hailed from Afghanistan. He was in his late 20's, and was a sophomore at Tufts. He is a fascinating young man. He had been employed by the United Nations as a translator to bring Afghan warlords to the negotiating table. He was fairly successful at that. He got to know several of the Christians in the fellowship, including my staff colleague Alex and me. One of the highlights of our friendship with him was playing chess and drinking tea and talking. I really valued hearing his perspective on and criticism of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. I also valued hearing his spiritual journey. He had become disenchanted with the Muslim faith he had grown up with. He had a number of questions about it, but one of the most poignant ones that he talked about was, 'Why does Allah command us to worship Him? It seems selfish on His part. Like He wants to be the center of the universe for His own sake.' I was struck by the insightfulness of that question. Christians too wonder that about the Christian God. So what did I say? Is God the ultimate narcissist? Do we just have to live with that?

Scripture:

So it depends on which 'god' you're talking about. The Christian understanding of 'god' is that our God revealed Himself fully in the person of Jesus. And Jesus said that the one true God has a name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here is one place he says that: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:20) This gives rise to the Christian concept of the Trinity. But what significance does that have? And is it helpful in understanding whether this Christian God is narcissistic? How is the Father-Son-Spirit (FSSp) God different from Allah and other ideas of 'god'?

Contrast:

It makes a big difference. As an active exercise, let's draw two columns. What can we say about these 'gods' before each 'god' creates anything?

- God as singularity: Can we say that this 'god' is loving before he creates anything? No. Can we say that this 'god' is relational? Or good? No. We can only say that this 'god' exists. That's it.
- God as trinity: Can we say that this FSSp God is loving before He creates anything. Yes! We can. This God is loving in Himself. He is also family, friendship, unity, community, and goodness.

<p>Father Spirit ← God as Trinity Son</p>	<p>• ← God as Singularity</p>
<p>Implications: The Trinity is loving, relational, family, friendship, unity, community, goodness.</p> <p>The Trinity has a nature of love that the Trinity will not violate. God is love. God loves at all times.</p>	<p>Implications: The Singularity exists. That's all we can say.</p> <p>The Singularity has no nature. The Singularity does not have to love anything or anyone. The Singularity can treat everyone arbitrarily.</p>

What are the implications of this? I'm going to highlight a few. First, God is relational. Second, God is love. Third, God is other-centered. Fourth, to be rightly related to this God is far more overwhelming than we first thought.

First: God is Relational, Fundamentally

First, it means that God is relational, at the core. The one Name of God is FSSp

Names of the Persons

- Father is to be the Father of who? The Son

- Son is to be the Son of who? The Father
- Spirit is to be the Spirit of who? The Father and the Son

They are interdependent on each other.

Second: God is Love, Fundamentally

Not that the FSSp *wants* love, like Allah does. He wants to provide *love to humanity*. He is the source of love.

Illus: There's a recent book called *The Shack* that tries to help us understand what the relationship between Jesus and his Father is like, as well as the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son. There's a guy named Mack who is a husband and father of five children. He loses his youngest daughter in a tragic kidnapping and murder in a shack in an Oregon forest. Years later, though the great sadness is still there, one day he gets a letter from God asking him to meet him in that shack. So he goes. And God the Father appears at first like a large black woman. Surprising, but what do you expect? An old white man with a beard? Is that any more true? It was because Mack needed to receive the Father in a particular way. Jesus is a Middle Eastern man. And the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman with blurry edges. What Mack is struck by immediately is how the three of them relate to each other, talking and laughing. No one dominates the conversation. They affirm each other. They listen to each other as if they were old friends and yet as if each word was new, appreciating each other as if they were seeing each other truly for the first time. There is a joy within God, between the Father, Son, and Spirit and in the three relationships there. And the fact that God is fundamentally a Trinity and not a Singularity means that the Christian God is love, in Himself.

Third: God is Other-Centered, Fundamentally

Third, God is completely other-centered. In fact, He is other-centeredness in Himself. God cannot be self-centered. So this understanding of the Trinity is what I shared with the student at Tufts. The God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wants to be at the center of our lives because He provides us with other-centeredness.

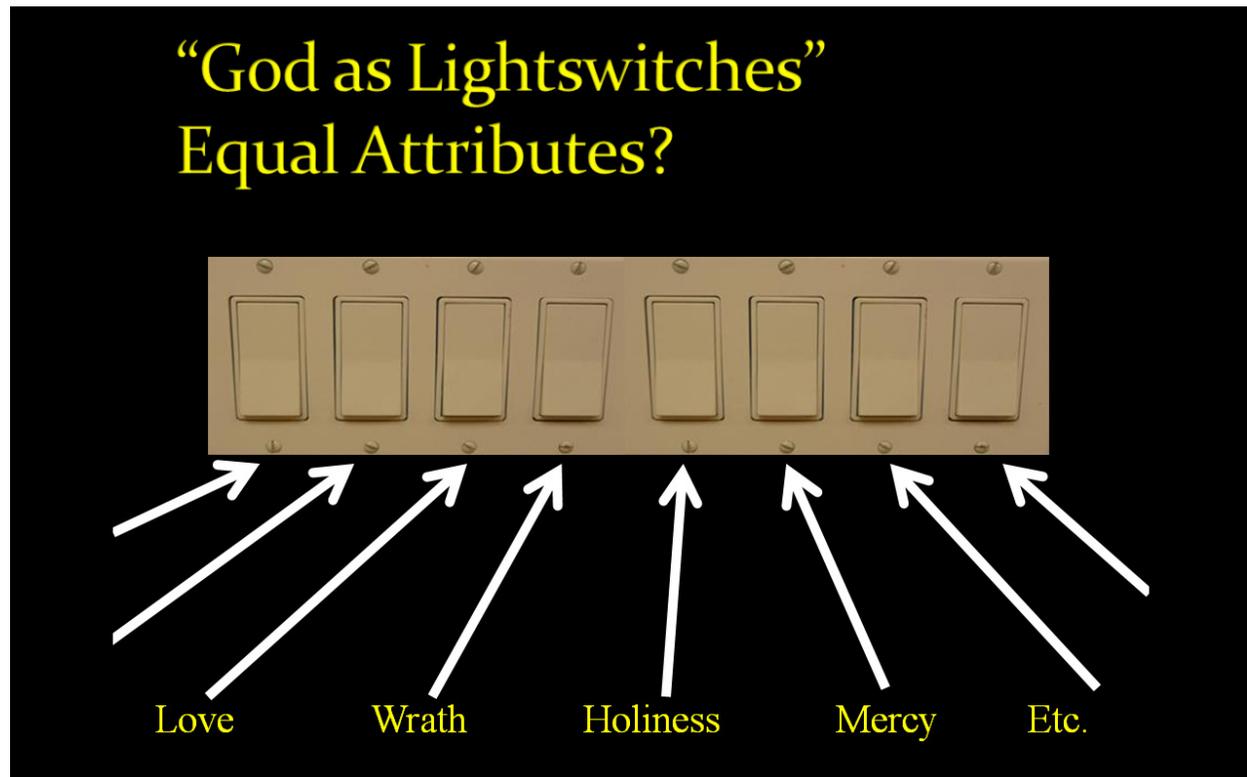
Muslims insist that Allah is a Singularity, so it is impossible to say that Allah is relational or that Allah is loving or that Allah is other-centered. But the Christian God is a community of love in God's self. The love that God has within Himself flows out of relationship with Him. So when the FSSp God says that He wants to be in the center of our lives, it's because He wants to empower us to love others with His own love. It's to make us other-centered. Without Him, our love curves back on ourselves and we love ourselves first. Our love for others becomes tainted with self-centeredness. This is a mockery and a farce of the love-that-is-in-God. Human love, what we can muster of it on our own, is just a pale shadow of the reality of the love-that-is-in-God.

In fact, God cannot be other than relational, loving, and other-centered. Why? Because He cannot act in a way that is contrary to His nature. God cannot do evil. For example, God cannot lie (Heb.6:18) to Himself or others. He is always working for the good, in fact, the best for others (Rom.8:28 – 30). We fallen human beings think that to be all-powerful, we must be able to do evil. We must be free to choose between good and evil. But that's a fallen human way of experiencing choice.

Illus: When I was driving at BC one day, some guy cut me off right as I was making a turn. What rushed into my mind was vengeance, anger, and a few choice words. I thought to myself, 'If only I wasn't a Christian. If only the Spirit of God didn't live in me. Then I would speed up, flip the guy off, and hurl a few good words at him.' I experience goodness as a constraint on myself. I think of goodness as limiting my choices. But does God experience choice that way? Does God ever say to Himself, 'I wish I weren't so darn good. Then I would flip them off and swear and destroy them!' No!!! God doesn't experience His own goodness as a limitation. He doesn't stop loving anyone.

That means that all God's secondary characteristics must flow out of His love. What are His secondary characteristics? All the characteristics by which God relates to the creation, including us. You see, it is possible to read the Bible and get very confused about who God really is. That's because you read about God blessing the Israelites, for example, and you think, 'They're getting God's love and mercy.' Then you read about God taking the lives of the Canaanites and you think, 'They're getting God's justice and wrath.' And then you see how God gives strength to Samson and you think, 'He's getting God's empowerment.' Then you see how God claims to make things happen and you think, 'That's God's own power and wisdom.' And then you're left with a long list of

character traits that you don't know how to integrate. And that becomes your theology. But is God a bunch of light switches? That is: Is God a bunch of characteristics that He turns on and off at different times?



'Oh, Moses is getting God's mercy. But there, Isaiah in Isaiah 6 is getting God's holiness.' And so on. Is God a flat array of character qualities that don't exist in any particular order?

Or is there integration in God of all these characteristics? If God is a Trinity, then there must be integration. Because God's primary characteristic is love. Everything else must be understood in relation to His love. So, God is holy, but before creation, there was nothing common to contrast with holiness, so holiness is only a secondary characteristic, and is shaped by His love, which is primary. In fact, perhaps it is because God is so unusually loving that He is holy. God is just, but before creation, there was nothing on which to exercise justice, so justice is only a secondary characteristic, and is shaped by His love. God is powerful and sovereign, but before creation, there was nothing on which to exercise power, so power and sovereignty are secondary characteristics that are defined by His love and express His love. God does not express power arbitrarily. Every act of power comes from His love and supports His love, ultimately. Even God's wrath (yes, His wrath!) comes from His love and supports His love! You will be surprised to hear that I and many other theologians believe that even hell is the love of God, because everything God does is love. It has to be understood in a very clear way.

The Singularity, however, does not need to integrate all these characteristics. So we can compare the two models this way:

Secondary Characteristics?

God as Singularity	God as Trinity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ??	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is Love<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just• Wrathful• Merciful• Holy• Sovereign• Powerful• Wise• Etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be arbitrary• Can do and be anything• No need to integrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must be integrated<ul style="list-style-type: none">• E.g. How does God's love shape His justice?

This means that the way God reaches out to us in Jesus must be like this, on the right:

Systematic Theology

- Which model of God is Triune?

God is arbitrary	God is loving
<pre>graph TD; A[God is arbitrary] --> B[God saves some (mercy)]; A --> C[God damns others (justice)];</pre>	<pre>graph TD; A[God is loving] --> B[God in Jesus offers new humanity to ALL, opposes all human evil down to its source in us];</pre>

For many, who think God is like the arbitrary deity on the left, they have a hard time with coordinating and integrating God's mercy and justice together, or His love and wrath. I have no problem. God's wrath is directed at the corruption in our human nature. God's love is directed at our personhood, in a personal and loving manner. Hence, His wrath is like the wrath of a surgeon that burns against the cancer in the bodies of those He loves. And so God took that corrupted human nature to Himself in Jesus. He shared in our diseased human nature so that we might share in His healed human nature. And He shares the new humanity of Jesus with us by His Spirit, so that we could slowly be healed and restored to who God always meant for us to be. God's wrath serves His love, because it is directed at the thing in us that resists His love! That is why hell will also be the love of God. Yes, hell is the wrath of God because it is the persistent rejection from God of the corruption in our nature. But fundamentally, hell is the love of God because it is the call to the person to turn away from the corruption in themselves to which they are now addicted and attached. God's love seems like wrath to that person.

Fourth: Our Participation in God

Finally, the Trinity means that we are drawn into a relationship of love to participate in it.

Illus: The summer after my freshman year, I went home for the summer. My friend Erica and I wanted to record a song that we had written. I wrote the poem; she added the music. Because her family was a very musical family, she had some basic recording equipment at her house. During one of the times that we were there, her parents ordered pizza and I sat down with the whole family. It was Erica's mom and dad and two sisters. Now they are a Chinese American family. One of the things I noticed was that her mom and dad held hands. I had never seen Asian parents who held hands! I had to stop myself from staring. Then the conversation was really fun. They made jokes about each other. They shared about their day, and their lives. They invited me to share about myself. They asked me more questions. It was the best family conversation I had ever seen. It fed my soul. And the whole time, out of the corner of my eye, I was just amazed that the mom and dad held hands. After dinner, when everyone did their own thing, the mom and dad went over to the couch, and talked, and they still held hands! My own parents' marriage had never looked like that, and they were arguing about getting a divorce. So I was inspired. I wanted to ask, 'Can you adopt me?' Don't we all want to be part of a family like that? Where love is directed at you, yes – of course we want to be loved. But also, where love is not directed just at you. You're not at the center. Instead the love overflows from a relationship that exists before you, which is larger than you, and sets the tone for you. So when you encounter that love, it's like a river flowing from a huge spring. It has a shape and direction that calls you to drink from it and go with its flow. *The love within the Trinity is the love God is transforming us into.*

Application: We celebrate and encourage each other to pour out the love of God. Everything else is inadequate.

Marriage is meant to be a place where that love is shown.

Friendship is meant to be a place where that love is shown.

Reconciliation and forgiveness are ways that that love is shown in a broken world.

Compassionate and non-judgmental ways of doing social justice are ways of showing that love.