

PAPER #3

Transcendent Monotheism as an Alternative to Orthodox Trinitarianism

Orthodox Trinitarianism

For Orthodox Trinitarianism the self-existent author of created reality is a triune being. He has always been and always will be a Trinity. Identifying God as a Trinity is to describe God as one and only one God, on the one hand; but it is simultaneously to describe God as existing is three "persons" on the other hand. So, before the creation even came into being, the one and only God existed as one being in three persons.

Understanding what the Trinitarian means by "person" in his description of the Trinity is a challenging matter. On the one hand, they don't mean "person" in the sense that we would typically use the word in everyday speech. In ordinary language, a person is a distinct individual being. If that were what Trinitarianism meant by person, then clearly they would be advocating tri-theism, the existence of three distinct gods. That is most emphatically not what Trinitarianism intends to espouse. (It must be admitted that the working understanding of the Trinity that is employed by many folk Christians in Christian culture is decidedly a form of tri-theism. But any serious Trinitarian theologian would criticize their working understanding on that front.) What then do they mean by person? It would seem to me that the decisive issue with respect to whether three "persons" constitutes three distinct, individual gods would be whether each "person" has his own independent "will" and "mind." Some Trinitarians I have read, however, insist that in order for there to be a distinction of persons, there must be distinct wills within each person. How is that not tri-theism then? I can't be sure. But the Trinitarians' denial is emphatic. They might be distinct persons; but they are not distinct individual beings. They are not three separate gods. So a "person" of the godhead is distinct and individual enough to have a discreet will (according to some Trinitarians at least), but this "person" is not so distinct and individual as to constitute a discreet individual being. That is the best I can do to understand the Trinitarian concept of person. (The philosopher in me wants to object at this point. If the concept of "person" cannot be defined with enough clarity and specificity that one can know what the three-person-ness of God implies, then is the Trinity even a meaningful concept? But I am not going to pursue this any further. For the sake of this paper, I will assume that the three-person-ness of God is a meaningful concept.)

Orthodox Trinitarianism has a very distinct understanding of the incarnation. According to Trinitarianism, one (and only one) of the persons of the Trinity—specifically, the

second person of the Trinity, God the Son (also known as the Logos)—united his divine nature with the human nature of a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, and became an individual human person. Jesus, then, has two natures. He has the divine nature of the Son of God (the second person of the Trinity) and he has a human nature. These two natures remain fully intact and unchanged by their mutual uniting in Jesus: the divine nature remains fully and truly divine; the human nature remains fully and truly human. Yet, Jesus is not two distinct persons, a human person and a divine person. He is but one distinct, individual person; yet he has two natures united together in that one person.

To understand Trinitarianism, it is important to understand its preoccupation with the nature of Jesus' being. It is preoccupied with the ontological makeup of Jesus. To put it crassly, it seeks to identify of what sort of stuff Jesus is made. Is he made of human stuff, or divine stuff? The Trinitarian's answer is: both. As to his divine nature, Jesus is made of divine stuff. As to his human nature, Jesus is made of human stuff. The divine stuff is uncorrupted by the human; and the human stuff is not made greater than human by the divine stuff. They remain separate and unaffected by one another. However, they combine in one individual person (through the mystery of what they call the "hypostatic union.")

After Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, he ascended to "the right hand of the Majesty on high." How are we to understand the state of Jesus described there? I don't know if there is a single, accepted answer by Trinitarians to that question. At the popular level, most folk Christians assume that the ascension is the second person of the Trinity taking up his original place of prestige within the divine godhead—the same state he had before the creation of the world. To coin a word, at the ascension, Jesus de-incarnated, at least for a time. Other Trinitarians may very well recognize that the incarnation was a permanent and irreversible act. In Jesus, God had become man to stay. Accordingly, they would probably understand that in terms of the second person of the Trinity everlastingly being united with the human nature of Jesus in the person of Jesus. Jesus' ascension therefore is not a de-incarnation of the Logos; rather, it is a glorification of the dual-natured incarnate Jesus into yet a more exalted person.

Finally, Trinitarianism sees the Spirit of God as a person of the Trinity in a manner analogous to how the Son is a person of the Trinity. Trinitarianism likes to go further and identify how the roles of each person of the Trinity is distinctive and partly defines the uniqueness of each person. For my purposes in this paper, that is not an important discussion.

Transcendent Monotheism

Transcendent Monotheism is a radically different paradigm, a completely different model. The Transcendent Monotheist believes that there is one and only one person who is God of the whole of reality. One and only one self-existent, transcendent person is the

author of all that is and all that occurs. Importantly, as it happens, he is a morally good person. He alone existed prior to the creation of the cosmos. He was the only personal being, the only person, who existed before the world.

When this one and only God made human beings, he created them in his image. What does that mean? Fundamentally, it means that he made human beings to be "persons" in a sense that reflected the personhood of his own being. He is a being with a mind, a will, and an ability to relate as a person to others. So, he created the human creature to have a mind, a will, and an ability to relate as a person to others. Every human being is made in the "image" of God in that sense.

In Jesus, God did an absolutely unique thing. The self-existent creator God created one particular human being to just be himself. Jesus is the unique translation into the form of a human being of the particular personal identity of that one pre-existent person who is God. Because he bears the particular personal identity of the transcendent God himself, certain things are true of Jesus that are unique to him. For example, Jesus, and Jesus alone among human beings, can legitimately be worshipped as one would worship God himself. Jesus is God. To worship Jesus is to worship God.

Transcendent Monotheism, unlike Trinitarianism, is not focused on ontology as the way to understand the deity of Jesus. While the Trinitarian wants to insist that Jesus' deity consists in the fact that he contains divine stuff within his person, Transcendent Monotheism defines Jesus' deity in terms of personal identity. Jesus is God, not because he is made of divine stuff, but because he is God's very identity mapped onto the medium of human stuff. Consider the conductor's musical score of a symphony. Now consider the performance of the symphony by an orchestra. Now consider the idea of the symphony in the mind of its composer as he was composing it. Can it not be said that it is the same symphony in each and every case. The symphony in the mind of the composer is the same symphony as that recorded in musical notation on paper and is the same symphony that the concertgoers are hearing and experiencing as spectacular sound. All three are the same symphony, and yet ontologically they are radically unlike each other. The first consists of ideas in the imagination of a man. The second consists of marks of ink on a page of paper. The third consists of the vibrations of various persons' eardrums interpreted by their brains as music. Analogously, Jesus is not God because he shares the same ontological state as the transcendent, uncreated God. How could he? He is a human being. But he is the same person as God in the way that the written score is the same symphony as the orchestral performance. The written score is the translation of that performance into printed musical notation. Similarly, Jesus is the translation of the particular person of God himself into the form of a human person. Jesus is not made of divine stuff; he is human stuff pure and simple. But the human stuff of Jesus is imprinted with the very identity of the eternal person of God. That is why the Bible describes him as the "image of the invisible God."

Jesus' resurrection and ascension, therefore, were those of a human being. He was probably raised to a different order of human existence than the one we inhabit. But it was a human existence nonetheless. Perhaps the same order of (or at least an anticipation of that) existence that we will have in the final age to come. Jesus will exist everlastingly as the unique manifestation of God to us. In Jesus, God will live among us and rule over us as our King for all eternity.

There remains the matter of the Holy Spirit. Transcendent Monotheism sees no distinction between the self-existent transcendent God and the Spirit of God. Describing the Spirit of God at work in the world is none other than to describe the transcendent God at work in the world. The only difference is in the phrases used to describe it. Describing God at work as his spirit at work is a way of emphasizing the intangible, invisible nature of those workings. God does not work through sweat, tears, and tangible force. His "spirit" works; that is, his invisible, secret, intangible power manifests itself in accomplishing what he wills. The Spirit is not some distinct "person" from the self-existent, transcendent person of the creator. They are one and the same individual being.

Transcendence and the Being of God

One thing remains to examine in order to understand Transcendent Monotheism. We must discuss the nature of transcendence as the Transcendent Monotheist understands it. There are two fundamentally different ways to understand transcendence in relation to God:

(1) God transcends the order of being that we inhabit.

This is the view that is held by most contemporary Christians. They may never have articulated their concept of transcendence to themselves; but, tacitly, this is the concept that is operative in their thinking about God. Accordingly, this is the concept of transcendence that is most prevalent in attempts by Trinitarians to understand the Trinity. God is transcendent to the extent that he transcends our order or level of existence and lives higher up the chain of being.

Most Trinitarians have a faintly Platonic concept of being. True Platonism espouses the view that what is real lies on a continuum. What is barely real at all is at the bottom of the continuum; and what is very real lies at the top. For a Platonist Christian (like most of the Church Fathers), God is at the top of the continuum of being. We humans are toward the bottom. It is helpful to keep in mind that Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine was hammered out by Platonists—men who shared the interests, questions, and assumptions that were endemic to a Platonic worldview.

Modern Christians are no longer Platonists in any true sense. But we do still think of God as existing within the same framework of being as the whole of creation. God's

being is not categorically different from created being; it is just different in quality. The uncreated being of God is qualitatively different from the created being of everything else; but both kinds share the same framework of "existence." God has being or reality that is of the same sort as we have. He just has superior attributes. Accordingly, modern Christians still think of reality as roughly like some sort of continuum. If we think of being or existence as a house, God is in the upstairs; angels are on the ground floor; we humans live in the basement. Under this conception, God's being transcendent means that he "transcends" life in the basement. He is not stuck down here with us. He transcends our lot. He lives up above, in the second story—with all the perks that go with it.

There are at least two obvious places where it becomes significant that Trinitarian doctrine is functioning within the framework of this first concept of being and transcendence:

First, their doctrine of the incarnation makes it quite manifest that Trinitarians are working within this first concept of transcendence. Notice how unproblematic it is for Trinitarians to conceive of the Logos (the second person of the Trinity) "coming down" to unite his divine essence with the human Jesus. How did he do that? Presumably, he simply descended a couple flights of stairs, divesting himself of the use of a number of his divine attributes as he did so, and lived in the basement with us humans for a while. Granted, he also mysteriously united his being (a being that was completely continuous with the being he had upstairs) with a human nature. Yes, there is a mysterious element to that. But the fact that he could bring his divine nature down to a level where it could unite with a human nature; that is not particularly hard to understand. Why not? Because he already dwells in the same house of being as we do in the first place. His being exists on the same ladder of being as ours does. He doesn't have to do anything other than climb down a few rungs on the ladder. There is nothing implausible nor hard to understand about that.

The second place where the concept of God and his relationship to being becomes significant is in one's doctrine of creation. If God exists within the same framework of being as the being he creates, then the act of creation has to be a matter of taking from what he is in order to give existence to what is not. If the creation is no less real than God is (if it is only inferior in attributes), then God cannot just will it or think it into existence; he must actually do the work of fashioning it and deriving it from the work and energy of his own being. Some Trinitarians, due to their reading of certain biblical passages, espouse the doctrine that while God created the world, he utilized the Logos as an intermediate agent in the act of creating of the world. It seems apparent in this doctrine that we are talking about a creator God who exists within the same framework of being as created reality does. Why else would it make sense, or be at all plausible, to think that God would or could possibly employ an intermediate agent in the act of creation?

(2) God transcends all of created reality.

This second view is the one espoused by Transcendent Monotheism. To maintain that God is transcendent is to maintain that he transcends all of reality itself. God is not within the same framework of being that we dwell in. God is above and beyond that framework of being. God is not real like we are. God is more than real. God does not exist like we do. God more than exists. The fundamental distinction for Transcendent Monotheism is the created / uncreated distinction. God is the one and only uncreated, self-existent being; and he is a person. Everything else that exists has been created by him. Nothing else that exists has *not* been created by him. Accordingly, everything else that exists is completely and utterly dependent upon God to even continue in existence.

For the Transcendent Monotheist, being does not exist on a continuum. There is created being; and then there is the uncreated, self-existent being of God. Those are the two categories. Perhaps created being exists in something like a continuum. But the crucial point is that God does not lie on that same continuum. God is above and beyond the framework of being that we inhabit. That is what it means to call him transcendent. He transcends contingent, created reality itself. Using the house analogy, God lives outside the house altogether, on a whole different planet!

One place to notice the difference would be in how the Transcendent Monotheist views angels versus how the Trinitarian is likely to view angels. For the Transcendent Monotheist, an angel is a fellow-creature to the human being. Hence, angels have much more in common with human beings than they do with God. Angels, like humans, are always vulnerable to going out of existence. To most Trinitarians, their view of God is such that angels are closer in their nature to God than they are to humans. God is spirit; angels are spirits. They share that much in common. Being "spirits" they both inhabit the higher levels on the chain of being. Hence, angels have something of the divine in their very nature. As is clear, there are two very different conceptions of God at work in these two different assessments of angels.

(A different conception of being and transcendence is why the "heretic" Arius could propose the doctrine that the Logos was "divine" and yet was a quasi-angelic first-born creature. The church judged his doctrine to be heresy. But the church never challenged the concept of being, existence, and divine transcendence out of which his doctrine arose. Orthodoxy shared Arius' Neo-Platonic concept of a hierarchy of being. Transcendent Monotheism rejects it.)

It is its very different conception of God's transcendence that makes Transcendent Monotheism non-plussed by the Trinitarian doctrine that the Logos was the intermediate agent in the act of creation. Transcendent Monotheism takes Genesis, where it tells us that "God said, 'Let there be X' and there was X," at face value. God couldn't have needed an intermediate agent in making the world. All he had to do to "make" the world

was to will or imagine it into existence. Where is there any room for intermediate agency in that?

For the same reason, Transcendent Monotheism has a difficult time making sense out of the Trinitarians claim that, with regard to the ontology of Jesus, Jesus had "divine stuff" within his person. That makes sense if "divine stuff" is just suped up human stuff that has had its "suped-up-ness" suppressed. But if "divine stuff" is the "stuff" of the transcendent, self-existent person who is the author and creator of all that is, how could a mere creation have any of that within his person? What would that even mean? Can God make his own divine self-existent being become no-longer-self-existent in order to unite with a contingent being? The uniting of divine nature with human nature is almost plausible in the context of a conception of being as a continuum. But it becomes utterly implausible and nonsensical in the context of the conception of being espoused by Transcendent Monotheism. God cannot make himself become a product of his own imagination! That would be nonsense. Accordingly, Transcendent Monotheism does not even begin to try to understand the truth that Jesus is God in terms of the kind of ontological "stuff" within his person. Rather, it understands it in terms of the personal identity of who Jesus is. Jesus is God because he has the personal identity of God, not because he is made of divine stuff.

Perhaps one last set of illustrations can help underline the difference in how Transcendent Monotheism and Trinitarianism will understand the incarnation:

A Trinitarian might tell this parable. A King had two identical twin sons. One night his servants took one son out and let him be found by a peasant and his wife. The peasant raised the infant son to adulthood. Now that infant boy, son of the King, had royal blood in him, on the one hand. But united in the same person was a peasant, the son raised by a peasant couple. While this is far from a perfect analogy, the Trinitarian might argue that the incarnation is something like this parable. Jesus, on the one hand, has royal blood (a divine nature) within him. But, on the other hand, he shares the same humanity as every other human being within that same person.

Now what makes this plausible? It is perfectly plausible that an infant son of the King could be allowed to condescend to have the status and role of a mere peasant. The King and the peasant live in the same framework of being, they differ only by status and privilege. To become divested of one's privilege and become someone without that privilege within that same framework of being is perfectly plausible.

A Transcendent Monotheist draws a very different analogy. Imagine the author of a novel who decides that he wants to be a character within his novel as well as its author. How would he do that? There is only one way that he could do that. He could create a character within the novel that simply WAS him, the author. That character would, on the one hand, have its own identity as a character in the story. On the other hand, it would at the same time have the identity of the author. For that is who the author created that

character to be. Now, ontologically speaking, nothing of the ontological nature of the author is within the character. It is not as if some part of that character could some day leap out of the world of the novel and join the author in his world. That is not what it means to say that the author made that character to be himself. He did not impart part of his being to him. Rather, he simply gave the character his identity. This is who Jesus is according to the Transcendent Monotheist. Jesus is that creature in God's creation that God created to BE HIM, Yahweh! God gave Jesus his (God's) identity.

Analysis of the Essential Differences

The first essential difference between Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism is that Orthodox Trinitarianism holds that the distinction between God the Father and God the Son is an eternal distinction. Transcendent Monotheism does not. It holds that the Son did not even begin to exist, as a distinct person from the Father, until Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Orthodox Trinitarianism maintains that there is a divine person (the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, the Son) who is eternally distinct from the divine person of the Father. It was he—this divine second person—who incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. Hence, according to Orthodox Trinitarianism, Jesus was not the Son of God, strictly speaking. Rather, he was the human incarnation of the Son of God.

In contrast, Transcendent Monotheism maintains that, before the incarnation, there was no divine person who was distinct from the person of the transcendent God himself. There was only the transcendent creator—God, the Father. At the incarnation, the person of this transcendent creator became a human being and took on a human identity—Jesus. Hence, he had a human identity at one and the same time as he had the identity of God, the transcendent creator. Hence, Jesus was simultaneously the human person Jesus and the divine person God. Not until the incarnation did this distinction between the divine person that Jesus was and the person of the transcendent creator God come to exist. Until Jesus came into being, there was no distinction between the divine person of Jesus (the Son) and the divine person of the creator (the Father).

The second essential difference has already been mentioned above. It is that Orthodox Trinitarianism holds that Jesus is the incarnation of a divine being (the Logos, the Son, the second person of the Trinity) who is eternally distinct from God the Father. Transcendent Monotheism holds that Jesus is the incarnation of God the Father himself.

The third essential difference is that Orthodox Trinitarianism understands the incarnation as the uniting of divine stuff with human stuff in one person. Transcendent Monotheism understands the incarnation as the translation or interpretation of the divine identity of Yahweh into the form of a human person, made of human stuff.

The most popular version of Orthodox Trinitarianism maintains that the ontological “stuff” that makes up the being of Jesus is dual: he is made of divine “stuff” on the one hand and human “stuff” on the other. Neither sort of “stuff” is diluted, compromised, or negated by the other in any way. Hence, Jesus is of both human and divine “stuff” at one and the same time—fully and truly human; yet also fully and truly divine.

Transcendent Monotheism maintains that the ontological “stuff” that makes up the being of Jesus is solely and merely human. Jesus is not made of divine “stuff” in any way. His deity does not consist in the “stuff” he is composed of; it consists in the personal identity that he shares with God. Jesus is the human incarnation—the human “image”—of the very person of the transcendent creator God himself. Jesus is the unique embodiment of the divine creator. No other human being shares his personal identity with God. No other human being IS God in this sense. While all human beings are in the image of God in the sense that they are moral beings, reflecting the personhood of God, yet only Jesus is the express and particular representation of the individual person of God himself.

This fact that Jesus uniquely has the very identity of God himself has a number of important implications:

- (1) *Jesus, and Jesus alone among human beings, can legitimately be worshipped as one would worship God himself.*
- (2) *Jesus, and Jesus alone among human beings, can legitimately be said to be the King and ruler over all of creation and over every other rule and authority on the earth.*
- (3) *Jesus, and Jesus alone among human beings, can legitimately presume to speak with the very authority of God himself.*
- (4) *Jesus, and Jesus alone, among human beings, can legitimately be said to be the one **for** whom and **because of** whom everything exists and has taken place.*

All of these things are true of Jesus, not on the basis of the sort of “stuff” he is made of (for he is merely a human being with respect to what “stuff” he is made of). Rather, they are true on the basis of the simple fact that Jesus is the human being that God created to BE him, to represent him within and to his creation, and to be the embodiment of his very person and identity within the created realm.

SUMMARY OF THE DIFFERENCE

First difference:

Orthodox Trinitarianism holds that the distinction between God the Father and God the Son is an eternal distinction. Transcendent Monotheism holds that the distinction between

God the Father and God the Son did not come into existence until Jesus came into existence.

Second difference:

Orthodox Trinitarianism holds that Jesus has a personal identity that is continuous with an eternal, divine person; and it holds that that eternal, divine person is eternally DISTINCT from the person of the transcendent creator God himself (the Father).

Transcendent Monotheism agrees that Jesus has a personal identity that is continuous with an eternal, divine person; but it holds that that eternal, divine person is the one and only God, the transcendent creator of all reality (the Father).

Third difference:

Orthodox Trinitarianism holds that Jesus, as the incarnation of God, was the uniting of two different ontological substances—divine stuff and human stuff—into one person. Transcendent Monotheism holds that Jesus, as the incarnation of God, was the imprinting of the identity of God onto human stuff.

Orthodox Trinitarianism:

Jesus = divine “stuff” + human “stuff”

Transcendent Monotheism:

Jesus = personal identity of God—> *in form of* —> human “stuff”

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARGUMENT

Having identified the essential differences between Transcendent Monotheism and Orthodox Trinitarianism, we now have some criteria that could allow us to choose between the two, with respect to which is true and biblical. I am making some assumptions here. It would be fallacious to make the argument that if Orthodox Trinitarianism is false then Transcendent Monotheism is true, and *vice versa*. This would commit the Fallacy of False Dilemma. That is not my argument.

For various reasons, I believe that Orthodox Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism are the two most likely options for what the Bible teaches. Hence, I am limiting my discussion, almost exclusively, to a comparison of the merits of these two options. To actually make a complete argument, I would have to show that other proposed options (like Arian theology) are false and unbiblical. It is beyond the scope of this set of papers to explicitly do that. However, it should become evident throughout the course of my arguments why I would prefer Transcendent Monotheism to any other option that one might propose.

So, with this proviso, here are the criteria to keep in mind throughout the following set of arguments:

(1) If any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily requires that there is a divine being who is eternally distinct from God himself, then Orthodox Trinitarianism is likely true and Transcendent Monotheism is clearly false.

(2) If any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily requires that Jesus, as a distinct person from God, existed prior to the creation of the world, then Orthodox Trinitarianism is likely true and Transcendent Monotheism is clearly false.

(3) If any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily requires that Jesus is NOT the incarnation of God the Father himself, but rather of some other divine person, then Orthodox Trinitarianism is likely true and Transcendent Monotheism is clearly false.

(4) To the extent that any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily suggests that Jesus is the incarnation of God (the Father) himself, to that extent it becomes unlikely that Orthodox Trinitarianism is biblical and likely that Transcendent Monotheism is biblical.

(5) To the extent that any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily suggests that Jesus contains divine "stuff" within himself, to that extent Orthodox Trinitarianism can be assumed to be true and biblical and Transcendent Monotheism can be assumed to be false.

(6) To the extent that any biblical passage or argument explicitly teaches or necessarily suggests that Jesus does not contain divine "stuff" within himself, to that extent Orthodox Trinitarianism can be assumed to be false and Transcendent Monotheism can be assumed to be true and biblical.

In Papers #4–8, and Paper #10, I will explore several passages that Trinitarians would allege, in the light of the above criteria, show Orthodox Trinitarianism to be true and biblical and Transcendent Monotheism to be false. I try to demonstrate that they do no such thing. Indeed, if anything, by the same criteria, they would tend to support Transcendent Monotheism over Orthodox Trinitarianism.