

In the year 400 CE Aurelius Augustinus, Bishop of Hippo, whom we now know as Saint Augustine, sat down to begin his treatise, De Trinitate (On the Trinity). At the Council of Constantinople a few years before, in 381, the doctrine of the Triune God had been proclaimed as official dogma in the formulation now known as the Nicene Creed.¹ Augustine undertook his treatise, he said in the preface to Book Three of that work, because members of his flock were asking him to explain the new doctrine to them and because he needed himself to try to figure out what it might mean. The images of Father, Son, and Spirit had been familiar for centuries from the Hebrew Bible and early Christian literature, but the exact meaning of these symbols, the relation of each to the others, and especially the status of the latter two as divine or creaturely had been in dispute throughout the early centuries of the Christian religion. Although there had been some discussion of the topic in Latin literature before Augustine began his work on it,² most of it had been in Greek in the eastern part of the empire, as were the discussions and the original formulation of the defined doctrine at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.

Augustine was frank in acknowledging that his effort was going to be exploratory, not a definitive statement about something he could speak about with special authority. Addressing his readers directly, he wrote, “Let them also bear in mind, that the writings which we have read on these subjects have not been sufficiently explained in the Latin tongue, or they are not available, or at least it was difficult for us to find them; nor are we so familiar with Greek, as to be in any way capable of reading and understanding such books on these subjects in that language.”³ He hoped that writing about the new doctrine

¹ It is known as the “Nicene Creed” because its formulation was begun at the Council of Nicaea in 325, although the crucial third clause, about the Holy Spirit, was not added until 381. I should perhaps note that the traditional dates Augustine himself is supposed to have given for the time of writing of De Trinitate (400-416) share in the uncertainty of many dates of events in the ancient world (some think it was probably 399 CE). The dates of the ecumenical councils, however, have never been in dispute.

² Especially by Hilary of Poitiers and Marius Victorinus. I will take these up along with a more detailed discussion of Augustine’s thought in Chapter 4.

³ The Trinity, trans. Stephen McKenna, 95. “Quod se ea quae legamus de his rebus sufficienter edita in latino sermone aut non sunt aut non inveniuntur aut certe difficile a

would help him to understand it, since, as he said, he had learned much in the past by writing about matters with which he was not yet familiar.⁴

One can understand and sympathize with Augustine in this, and what he accomplished in the weighty product of his explorations (running over five hundred pages in many editions) could be said to have been a great achievement, since it turned out to be one of the most influential works of theology ever produced in the Western Christian world. But it was also a fateful first step toward the split between that world and both the Eastern one and the one that preceded him even in the West.

I do not intend in the present work to reiterate what Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently referred to as “a curious ‘received wisdom’ about Augustine as the source of all the theological ills of Western Christendom or even Western society.”⁵ (“He appears,” says Williams,” to have been responsible for everything but the common cold.”) People on both sides of the divide that subsequently developed from it will continue to make different assessments regarding whether Augustine’s theological heritage consists of “ills” or theological advances. I think myself that whatever the problems of Augustine’s speculative method as such, in the way he connected the Trinity with the Christian belief that God is love (1 John 4:8) he developed more explicitly than anyone had before the important implication that love must involve a relation to otherness and that that relation must be grounded in some manner in God’s own reality, not in an accidental relation to something else. Also, his conception of the contrast between the *civitas Dei* (city of God) and the *civitas terrena* (worldly city) with the correlative distinction between the *amor Dei* (love of God) and *libido dominandi* (desire for domination, lust for power) as their respective motivations has had great influence as an analytic principle, and I will be making use of it myself in this book. One must also recognize that whatever divisions may later have resulted from Augustine’s speculations, far from imposing his particular approach to the doctrine of the Trinity dogmatically, he was offering it tentatively as material for ongoing reflection—even if

nobis inueniri queunt, graecae autem linguae non sit nobis tantus habitus ut talium rerum libris legendis et intellegendis ullo modo reperiamur idonei...” (*De Trinitate*, 3.1.1).

⁴ “Egoque ipse multa quae nesciebam scribendo me didicisse confitear” (*ibid.*).

⁵ Williams, Archbishop Rowan, “The Theological Epistemology of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* by Luigi Gioia,” *Reviews in Religion and Theology*. 17 (2010), 2: 187.

later generations in his heritage ended up taking as fixed and settled the particular conclusions he drew from it.

Whether one agrees with Augustine’s approach to the trinitarian doctrine or not, however, there is no escaping the fact that some of its innovations involved radical departures that had immense consequences—no escaping it, that is, unless one does not realize what those departures were and what they contrasted with so radically. One of the purposes of this book will be to bring these differences to light so that they can be reflected on explicitly and consciously decided, whatever decision they might come to, by the participants in the theological dialogue of the Christian tradition.

In speaking of Augustine’s innovative interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity as a fateful first step toward the separation of the Eastern and Western Christian worlds, I also do not mean to imply that Augustine was solely responsible, or even principally responsible, for the subsequent rupture of Christendom; his was only the first step of many. The story of the divergence of the two religious worlds is a much longer, and I think a much more interesting one, that it will take most of this book to unfold. Other figures, especially Charlemagne and his court, played an even larger role, but one that seems comparatively little known among people who focus more on theological ideas than on their historical, cultural, and political context. The story I will be tracing from the time of ancient Israel through the rise of Christianity and its development along different lines in East and West will have to be not just a history of ideas but what Eric Voegelin called a history of “experiences and their symbolizations”⁶ in the communities that used those symbols to interpret their situation in the cosmos and define the direction of their lives. And, human beings being as they tend to be, it will also be a story of competition for power and eminence.

Such competition was not at all what Augustine had in mind when he began his speculations about what the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople might have intended in their formulation of the original doctrine. He was only trying to find a way to make sense of what he had heard reported of the efforts of thinkers in the eastern

⁶ See the Introduction to Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 1: *Israel and Revelation*, 39-53. See also Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 68, and Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 53-54, 75, 91, 101-2, 213-14, 216.

Mediterranean to interpret in a Christian light some symbols the Christian religion had inherited from its Jewish forebears. I will go into the efforts of those thinkers in Chapters 2 and 3 of this work and into Augustine’s thought on this and related subjects in greater detail in Chapter 4. For now I only want to give the reader an idea of some of the implications of his speculative starting point for the difference between ways the Eastern and Western Christian traditions have tended to interpret the relation between symbol and experience. This is where the really deep difference between these traditions lies, although it is rarely mentioned or even noticed at all in accounts that focus mainly on the more superficial level of religious ideas.

What was Augustine’s starting point, and what did it diverge from? To put it in the simplest terms, his starting point was the assumption that the doctrine of the Trinity grew out of speculation about what there might be three of in the one God. This is putting it very simply, of course, and Chapter 4 will elaborate the real complexity of Augustine’s thinking, but to understand the radical difference between his point of departure and that of those whose thought he was trying to interpret, one needs to distill its essence, which was that if the Church speaks of God in trinitarian terms, the reality those terms reach toward is something that can be known only indirectly, so that their meaning must be worked out by thinking analogically.

The analogy Augustine famously used for this was that of “man created in the image and likeness of God” in Genesis.⁷ As we will see in Chapters 4 through 6, he and those who followed his pattern of analysis in the West eventually developed that analogy by identifying memory (*memoria*), reason or understanding (*intellegentia*), and will (*voluntas*) in human beings as the most significant analogues of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit respectively, and then drew from that the logical conclusion that since a will that proceeded only from memory and not also from reason would be an irrational will and therefore defective, and since nothing in God can be defective, the Spirit (God’s will) must proceed from the Son (reason) as well as from the Father (memory)—the principle now known as the “double procession” of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The official formulation of the full Nicene Creed at the Council of Constantinople stated only

⁷ *De Trinitate*, 1:8, 18; 12:6, 6-7. Genesis 1:26.

that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father” (ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον)—the “single procession” still upheld by the Eastern Church.

To post-Augustinian ears the difference between double and single procession tends to sound like a quibble; since if we can only speculate about what the trinitarian formula is supposed to mean, the difference between them is only that between two speculations, both of which are ultimately imponderable since they have to do with “the inner life of God,” which is assumed to be distant and inscrutable. Because of the obvious problems that were posed by working analogically from the idea of three essential parts of a human consciousness to three divine equivalents, which could then hardly be conceived except as “parts” of a God who is also supposed to be absolutely simple and therefore without parts, later Western theologians, most prominently Saint Thomas Aquinas, worked out their own, increasingly abstract, variations on this theme, but still with the Augustinian assumption that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Over time this assumption became sacrosanct and unquestionable in the West in a way that probably would have surprised the questioning Augustine himself, as pleased as he might have been to find his tentative guesses so widely adopted by his Western posterity.

The result of this historical process of speculation, abstract elaboration, and dogmatic declaration, combined with the assumption of inherent inscrutability has resulted, among the great majority of Christians in the West, in belief that if the doctrine of the Trinity has a humanly intelligible meaning at all, it is an intellectually complicated one, accessible only to specialists, and essentially irrelevant to concrete religious life. A small minority even among theologians in the West continue to study and write about the doctrine of the Trinity, but I think it is not an exaggeration to say that most Western Christians, both lay and clerical, think of the doctrine as difficult, abstract, and hardly worth the effort to try to understand. A story that epitomizes this situation comes from the biography of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., a theologian who was among that minority who have actually written on the doctrine.⁸ His biographer tells us that when Lonergan was a boy in a Catholic school in Quebec, “Bernard remembered being taught that they were

⁸ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*; *The Triune God: Doctrines*; and *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*.

not going to understand the Trinity.”⁹ Some three decades later, when Lonergan grew up and wrote about it himself, he tried to clarify and render more intelligible the analysis of the doctrine that Aquinas had erected on Augustine’s base, but it never seems to have occurred to him to question their underlying assumptions about it.¹⁰

Karl Rahner, Lonergan’s fellow Jesuit and exact contemporary (both were born in 1904) was one who did raise such questions, in his book The Trinity. Speaking of the role of that doctrine in the Western Christian tradition, Rahner said that it had become so abstract and abstruse that “despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’” and that “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”¹¹ As an example of the abstractness the doctrine had taken on he said,

Today’s average textbook doctrine of the incarnation uses practically only the abstract concept of a divine hypostasis, despite this concept’s merely analogical and precarious unity. It makes no use of the precise concept of the second divine hypostasis as such.... [S]tarting from Augustine, and as opposed to the older tradition, it has been among theologians a more or less foregone conclusion that each of the divine persons (if God freely so decided) could have become man, so

⁹ William A. Mathews, Lonergan's Quest: A Study of Desire in the Authoring of Insight, 21.

¹⁰ If he had, it might have been professionally risky for him at that comparatively early point in his career. The Verbum volume referred to in note 8 [*check] above, though published in book form in 1967, consisted of essays that were published earlier in the journal Theological Studies from 1946 to 1947 and were among Lonergan’s very first writings. I should also note that although Lonergan’s book deals with Aquinas’s interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, his main purpose in it was not to discuss that doctrine as such but to work out the implicit cognitional theory Aquinas brought to his discussion of it. To question the premises of the doctrine itself would have been irrelevant to this purpose.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, The Trinity, 10-11. On the other hand, it is perhaps worth mentioning that there are others to whom the doctrine of the Triune God has devolved not into “mere monotheism” but into a virtual tritheism: the historian of religion, E. R. Goodenough, describing his own early religious development, said, “I was brought up in practice a tritheist, for whom the three Persons of the Trinity were united only vaguely in monotheism,” Toward a Mature Faith, p. 80. It may be that the tendency Goodenough refers to is common in both Christian worlds, since to hypostatize (as Eric Voegelin would say) a hypostasis would seem a pretty natural thing to do.

that the incarnation of precisely this person can tell us nothing about the peculiar features of this person within the divinity.¹²

The contrast with the Eastern Christian way of thinking about the Son, as such, as God’s incarnation and the relation of the Spirit to the Son in that role is clear if one compares the Western tendency Rahner describes with the words of Saint John of Damascus, one of the most prominent representatives of the Eastern tradition, in his exposition of the third clause of the Nicene Creed:

“Likewise we believe also in one Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life: Who proceedeth from the Father and resteth in the Son: the object of equal adoration and glorification with the Father and Son, since He is co-essential and co-eternal: the Spirit of God, direct, authoritative, the fountain of wisdom, and life, and holiness: God existing and addressed along with Father and Son: uncreated, full, creative, all-ruling, all-effecting, all-powerful, of infinite power, Lord of all creation and not under any lord: deifying, not deified: filling, not filled: shared in, not sharing in: sanctifying, not sanctified: the intercessor, receiving the supplications of all: in all things like to the Father and Son: proceeding from the Father and communicated through the Son, and participated in by all creation, through Himself creating, and investing with essence and sanctifying, and maintaining the universe: having subsistence, existing in its own proper and peculiar subsistence, inseparable and indivisible from Father and Son, and possessing all the qualities that the Father and Son possess, save that of not being begotten or born.”¹³

Although the entire passage expresses ideas that are important for understanding the distinctive features of Eastern Christian thinking, the pertinent phrases for the focus of the study I will undertake are those I have underlined: “proceedeth from the Father and resteth in the Son” (or in the more modern phrasing of Thomas Hopko, “proceeds from the Father, and abides in the Son”) and “proceeding from the Father and communicated through the Son, and participated in by all creation.”¹⁴ That the Spirit is defined here primarily in terms of his indwelling the Son, or one might say “inspiring” or “animating” him from within, makes it clear that there could be no question of

¹² Ibid., 11. (For places Augustine raises the question of the possibility of hypostases other than the Son becoming incarnate, see his Epistle 11 to Nebridius and his Sermon 52.)

¹³ Book 1, ch. 8, trans. S. D. F. Salmond in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, 9:9b. My italics.

¹⁴ Hopko, The Spirit of God, i. The Greek original for “resteth” or “abides” is ἀναπαύομενον. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca, 94:822, 137B. In future references this will be abbreviated as PG.

identifying the incarnate one with any of the three trinitarian hypostases other than the Son.

Rahner and John of Damascus here raise a number of issues that will be further explored in the body of this work, but our purpose for now is only to set the scene for the larger inquiry by indicating the problematic character of the Western doctrine’s development that Rahner points to and its divergence from the earlier tradition it originated in and the later Eastern tradition that continued to develop in continuity with that.

When I asked the question earlier, “What was Augustine’s starting point, and what did it diverge from?” it might have seemed that I basically answered it when I contrasted Augustine’s theory of a double procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son with the original creed’s (and the continuing Eastern Church’s) affirmation of a single procession of the Spirit from the Father, but that would be a misleading impression. It is true that the double procession is the issue that has always been identified by Western theologians as the central point of dispute between East and West (besides the papal supremacy), and this interpretation of the divergence is not exactly false, since the question of procession is a point that has been explicitly disputed ever since the time of Photius in the ninth century, who as Patriarch of Constantinople objected to the Western change in the creed to “proceeds from the Father and the Son [filioque]”¹⁵ and called a Council in Constantinople in 879, attended and endorsed by papal representatives, that rejected it. But it is superficial—because to see the divergence between East and West primarily as a question of double or single procession is to look at it through Western spectacles. In fact, it is only in response to the Western assertion of a double procession that Eastern Christian theologians have ever even used the term “single procession.” To frame the difference between East and West simply in terms of the question of procession would be implicitly to slip into the West’s habitual assumption

¹⁵ “...ex Patre filioque procedentem.” The phrase “filioque” means “and the Son.” The story of how this phrase’s addition to the Nicene creed in the West became official Western dogma is more complex than is generally realized; it will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

that the doctrine of the Trinity is a speculation about the contents of a remote and inscrutable inner life of God.

To understand on a deeper level the nature of the divergence that has given rise to fundamentally different theological worldviews in East and West, we need also to consider another, closely related, new element of Augustine’s thought: his denial of “theophany.”¹⁶ The term “theophany,” or manifestation of God, refers to a conscious experience of divine presence. That the divine could make itself genuinely manifest, that is, experientially present, was a fundamental belief of the traditions of ancient Israel, of the Jews, and of early Christians in both East and West before Augustine. It was a belief Augustine, too, shared in his early career, when he believed in the theophanic experiences of Plato and some Neo-Platonists, and of Saint Paul, but in his later writings, including the *De Trinitate*, he shifted decisively to the position that the *visio Dei*—direct experience of the presence of God—could not happen in this life but was something that could be expected only in the life to come: theophany was a strictly eschatological affair.¹⁷ Divine revelation of some sort was possible in this life, but it took place only through created intermediary phenomena, especially angels. In *De Trinitate* 2.13-17, for example, discussing the passage in Exodus 3 that describes what had always been taken by earlier interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, as God’s manifestation of himself to Moses at the burning bush, Augustine insists that the manifestation was actually the work of an angel: “But those visions were wrought through a changeable creature subject to an unchangeable God. They do not reveal God as He properly is, but signify his presence by such signs as the circumstances of the time and place require.”¹⁸

The contrast with earlier Christian tradition regarding theophany, and the pertinence of this issue for reflection on the Trinity, is all the more marked when one considers that, in the words of Bogdan G. Bucur, “What all authors before Augustine

¹⁶ See Bogdan G. Bucur, “Theophanies and Vision Of God In Augustine’s *De Trinitate*: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008): 67-93.

¹⁷ Regarding Augustine’s earlier belief in theophanic experiences, see the references to Roland J. Teske, “Saint Augustine and the Vision of God,” in *Augustine Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. F. van Fleteren et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 287-308, in Bucur, “Theophanies and Vision Of God In Augustine’s *De Trinitate*,” 85, n. 56.

¹⁸ *The Trinity*, 90.

share, throughout Syriac, Greek, and pre-Augustinian Latin Christianity, is a tradition of interpreting the theophanies as ‘Christophanies.’”¹⁹ The early Christians, that is, believed that every manifestation of divine presence spoken of in the Biblical tradition was a token and anticipation, a “type” in the language of typology, of the full manifestation that came when the living Word of God dwelt among them and conversed with them in human words and with a human voice. “For pre-Augustinian authors,” as Bucur says, whether the theophany took the visual form of an angelic figure, a burning bush, or a divine backside, “the visible manifestation is the Son Himself directly present and directly active in the lineaments of the visible form of an angel, human being, and so forth.”²⁰ They also believed that Christ continued to be manifest among them in the communion of their fellowship and by the experienced presence in their own new lives of the same Spirit that had filled, moved, and formed him in his earthly life.

If human beings, as Augustine later came to believe, could have no actual experience of divine presence in this life, it had to follow that there could be no experiential basis for trinitarian thinking and that this could never, therefore, be more than speculation about something at a distance. Earlier Christian thinkers, including the Council Fathers about whose thought Augustine tried to speculate, believed they had not just a memory but an actual, present experience of Christ which could serve as an experiential point of purchase for thinking about the Triune God.

Reflection on this concrete experience, the experience of “life in Christ” (Rom. 8:2), the life of the Son as known from within, is where the Eastern Christian tradition has believed the doctrine of the Trinity to have originated, beginning with the earliest Christian voices, such as that of Saint Paul, who speaks constantly of being “in Christ,” through those of the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. This view is stated explicitly in the words of a contemporary Eastern Orthodox archbishop, Chrysostomos of Etna:

The Synods were not concerned to define the Faith or codify it... but to protect the integrity of the Faith as it was experienced by the catholic (i.e., universal) Church.... The authority of the Synods rests... in their ability to pass on the reality of Holy Tradition. As such, they transcend Patriarchs, administrative

¹⁹ Bucur, 77.

²⁰ Ibid.

authorities, and all externals of the Church.... In the end, then, the Oecumenical Synods express in words and doctrine what the Church has experienced; in them, those who were deified by the Holy Spirit formulated and gave form... to what takes its authority from the common life of the “general conscience” (“he genike syneidesis”) of the Church, from the People of God, and from the seal of holiness that marks the consensio Patrum (the consensus of the Fathers and the Saints).²¹

The “Holy Tradition” which Archbishop Chrysostomos says grounds the authority of the ecumenical councils is not—to make clear what could otherwise sound like a misleading implication in some ears—simply a body of inherited teaching. What he is talking about is the sharing from generation to generation of a life, a lived experience known by mutual participation. This is a way of thinking that is generally shared in the Eastern tradition; in the words of another prominent Eastern Orthodox thinker of the last century, Georges Florovsky, “Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present.... The Church bears witness to the truth not by reminiscence or from the words of others, but from its own living, unceasing experience.... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words.”²²

One may ask, of course, what kind of experience this might be, and whether it is something peculiar only to those who are Christians or, even more particularly, to those who are institutional members of the Church on behalf of which these thinkers speak? Is the experience referred to unique, or is it in some sense universal? These are questions of the first importance, and I will be considering them both here and in the body of this work, but for the moment, and in preparation for that, I would like to note the difference between the ideas of religious tradition and of theology as such that are indicated by these

²¹ Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, “The Nature of the Authority of the Oecumenical Synods,” *Orthodox Tradition*, 26 (2009), 3:30. Emphasis in original. Cf. Voegelin, *OH*, 4:43-44 [*needs new pages], on how doctrine and dogma have “the civilizational purpose of protecting an historically achieved state of insight against the disintegrative pressures to which the differentiated truth of existence is exposed in the spiritual and intellectual turmoil of the ecumenic situation.” I should explain also that the word “conscience” in the Archbishop’s statement here means “consciousness.” “Conscience” tends to have moralistic connotations in Western ears, but the Greek “syneidesis” (συνείδεισις) has the literal meaning of “seeing together, seeing in one view, seeing plainly, sharing in the knowledge of” something.”

²² Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, 47. My emphasis.

Eastern conceptions of the role of experience in theology and those that have tended to prevail in the Western tradition, and to consider some of their implications.

One example of the Western pattern of thinking that indicates the depth of this difference can be seen by comparing the Eastern statements above with one from the Anglican theologian, E. L. Mascall. Mascall shared with his Eastern colleagues the belief that the Triune God can really be known only from within, but for him this had a very different implication. In his book, *The Triune God*, Mascall said, “It is only by our overhearing of the prayer of Jesus in the Gospels that we acquire some faint idea of the relation that unites and contrasts the Father and the Son.”²³ The indicative words here are “overhearing” and “some faint idea.” Someone thinking in the traditional Eastern manner that Chrysostomos and Florovsky represent might well agree that the way to understand the relation between the Father and the Son in the life of the Triune God is by way of the Son’s act of praying, but for Mascall and his tradition, this could only be an “overhearing”—hearing the words of Jesus’s prayer and then thinking about the Son’s act of praying while standing oneself on the outside of it. It would be quite a different matter to think one could actually join Jesus across the centuries in a shared experience of prayer that one participates in with him through the deifying power and presence of the same Spirit that moved him in his praying. The difference would be between knowledge of the relationship and knowledge about it. As Karl Rahner put this point, referring to the kind of theology of which Mascall’s statement is one representative example, “In final analysis, all these statements say explicitly in cold print that we ourselves have nothing to do with the mystery of the Holy Trinity except to know something ‘about’ it through revelation.”²⁴ The difference is between thinking about the Trinity and living in it, speculating about it from without and reflecting on it from within.

The differences indicated here are clearly fundamental, but there is also a further dimension to them with important historical implications. This has to do with different ways in which symbols can bear meaning, depending on the assumptions one has about their relation to experience. To think about this, it will help to note some distinctions between different modes of symbolization and different kinds of experience.

²³ Mascall, *The Triune God*, 74.

²⁴ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 14.

To begin with the former, Eric Voegelin made a helpful distinction between what he called primary and secondary symbolism.²⁵ In Voegelin’s use, a “primary symbolism” arises out of some original, engendering philosophical and spiritual experience, and correct interpretation of it requires a parallel experience on the part of the interpreter. “Secondary symbolism” replaces primary when the original symbol is separated from the experience it gave expression to and becomes associated with some other kind of experience. For our own historical purpose, it will also be useful to make a further distinction within the category of secondary symbolisms between the type Voegelin had in mind, which shifts the meaning from an original experience to a different one, and another type of secondary symbolism in which the connection with any experience at all becomes lost and the symbol is left to refer only to an abstract idea. This is the difference between what I will be referring to as an experiential symbolism and a speculative symbolism.

It is this separation of symbol from experience that Rahner, in the quote above, was suggesting happened to the Western doctrine of the Trinity. “To know something ‘about’ it through revelation,” means to hear words that communicate an idea, as compared with the kind of revelation that would communicate an experiential insight into the actual, immediate reality of what is revealed. As Rahner went on to comment in a footnote to that statement, “real ‘knowledge’ in its deepest metaphysical sense implies the most real conceivable relation to what is known.... This very axiom, if thoroughly applied in our present case, would show clearly that the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity implies and presupposes ultimately a real-ontological communication to man of the revealed reality as such. Hence it cannot be interpreted in the way which the opposed position adopts, namely, as a merely verbal communication....”²⁶

It seems evident that for many of those who live and think within the Western Christian mainstream, the doctrine of the Trinity has become a secondary, speculative

²⁵ See the Introduction to Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (*Order and History*, 4) in *Collected Works*, 17, esp. 83-107. This volume will be referred to subsequently as *OH*, 4. See also Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 181-84, 193-94, 259, and the definition of “Symbolism (primary and secondary)” in Voegelin, *Collected Works*, 34: 180.

²⁶ Rahner, 14 n. 10.

symbolism having to do with ideas rather than experience, which is probably why the doctrine has come to be so widely thought of, as I said above, as intellectually complicated, accessible only to specialists, and essentially irrelevant to concrete religious life. But that, I think and I hope to show in the body of this work, has been the end result of a long historical process which took many centuries to develop and did so as what might be called an intellectual appendage to a tradition of symbolism that did have real experiential content, even if it was a different kind of experience than the primary symbolism originally articulated, with a different meaning and different implications. I think, in fact, that without the energy that comes from a real relation between symbol and experience, the process of intellectual abstraction that has led to the doctrine’s present state in the West could not have taken place; the abstraction has been parasitic, one might say, on a body that once had life and still to some extent does, even if that may not be the same life that gave birth to the primary symbolism.

This means, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity in the West has become a secondary symbolism in both senses of that term—not only that in which experience as such becomes replaced by abstract ideas, but also in the precise sense in which Eric Voegelin coined the term, that in which the symbol finds a new experience to attach itself to. Symbols have no real vitality except in the life of concrete societies, and societies in turn draw their energy from the life of the symbols with which they interpret themselves. As a philosopher of history and political theorist, Voegelin insisted that actual societies are energized by a dialectic of experience and symbolization and that to understand them in their concrete life, as he eloquently stated in the opening paragraph of his New Science of Politics, it is that dialectic that one must attend to:

For man does not wait for science to have his life explained to him, and when the theorist approaches social reality he finds the field pre-empted by what may be called the self-interpretation of society. Human society is not merely a fact, or an event, in the external world to be studied by an observer like a natural phenomenon. Though it has externality as one of its important components, it is as a whole a little world, a cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization. It is illuminated through an elaborate symbolism, in various degrees of compactness and differentiation—from rite, through myth, to theory—and this symbolism illuminates it with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmion, the relations between its members and

groups of members, as well as its existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human existence. The self-illumination of society through symbols is an integral part of social reality, and one may even say its essential part, for through such symbolization the members of a society experience it as more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as of their human essence.²⁷

Without association with at least some kind of experience, a symbol would have little imaginative force and could play no effective role in shaping a society. But that trinitarian symbolism has played a major role in shaping Western culture in its various incarnations, at least until recently, could scarcely escape the attention of even a determinedly secular-minded historian. What form that alternative experiential substance has taken in the history of Western society—or better societies, since the worlds of Augustine’s decaying western Roman empire, Charlemagne’s new western Roman empire, the world of feudal European kingdoms and the medieval papacy, and the early modern societies that took shape around the thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin involved deep differences as well as continuities—is too large a question to be discussed in this introduction, but it will be explored at length in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

The other question about the relation of symbols to experience has to do with the kinds of experience these symbolisms may serve to express and communicate, and in particular the kind of experience at issue in connection with the doctrine of the Triune God. One can distinguish, for example, between what are sometimes called subjective and objective types of experience—that is, the lived experience of human existence as known from within (what is often called “existential” experience) and the experience we have of objects of one sort or another, whether sensory or imaginative. The kind of experience Chrysostomos and Florovsky have in mind as the substance of Holy Tradition and the source of the insights to which the Council Fathers gave voice is clearly subjective or existential experience.

The terms “subjective” and “objective,” however, could be misleading if interpreted, as often happens in popular usage, to mean simply “inner” vs. “outer,” or even “imaginary” vs. “real.” There is a pronounced tendency in the popular mind to

²⁷ Voegelin, Eric. *The New Science of Politics*, 27.

lump “objective” together with “reality” and “subjective” with “fancy,”²⁸ and since the eighteenth century, even intellectuals have tended to use the term “empirical” primarily to refer to external objects known through the senses

It was to counter the narrowness of this conception of experience that William James coined his expression, “radical empiricism,” because he thought that human reality consists essentially of “the experience of activity,” which is something that can be known only from within.²⁹ James contrasted this with “knowledge about things,” which he said “touches only the outer surface of reality,” “as distinguished from living or sympathetic acquaintance with them.”³⁰ “The only way in which to apprehend reality’s thickness,” James said, “is either to experience it directly by being a part of reality one’s self, or to evoke it in imagination by sympathetically divining someone else’s inner life.”³¹ What he thought gives us the ability to enter sympathetically into the inner life of another is our shared experience of tendency and tension in the energy of activity. As James put it, “One thought in every developed activity-series is a desire or thought of purpose, and all the other thoughts acquire a feeling tone from their relation of harmony or oppugnancy to this.”³²

Eric Voegelin often referred to himself as a “radical empiricist” in James’s sense. He agreed with James that human consciousness is pervaded by the experience of tendency and tension that Voegelin called “existential tension” or “the tension of existence.”³³ Central to Voegelin’s own thought is the universality of this experience and his analysis of its bipolar structure as a tending or reaching, a “seeking,” or to reverse the image, a “being drawn,” toward something beyond oneself—whether one might think of

²⁸ In his essay, “Reality in America,” Lionel Trilling said, “In the American metaphysic, reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant.” Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, 10-11.

²⁹ William James, “Essays in Radical Empiricism,” 155-89, in *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe*.

³⁰ “A Pluralistic Universe,” 249-50, in *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 250-51.

³² “Essays in Radical Empiricism,” 184.

³³ The terms are pervasive in Voegelin’s writings. For a brief discussion, see Webb, *Eric Voegelin*, 36-46, 50-51.

that “Beyond” as some superhuman quality of reality or excellence, or whether one might think of it simply as something as ordinary as the answer to a question.³⁴

Human existence, viewed in this manner, is experienced as inherently relational and therefore self-transcending. One may experience this condition of tensional relationality without realizing it, but to experience it consciously is to discover oneself living in that tension of reaching and being pulled between the poles of self and what is beyond self.

Writing in the “Autobiographical Reflections” that he put together for Ellis Sandoz about his own discovery of this experiential vantage point, Voegelin said,

The center of consciousness I found to be the experience of participation, meaning thereby the reality of being in contact with reality outside myself. . . . Among the philosophers I found important confirmation from the radical empiricism of William James.... In developing his concept of pure experience, James put his finger on the reality of the consciousness of participation, inasmuch as what he calls pure experience is the something that can be put into the context either of the subject’s stream of consciousness or of objects in the external world. This fundamental insight of James identifies the something that lies between the subject and object of participation as the experience. Later I found that the same type of analysis had been conducted on a much vaster scale by Plato, resulting in his concept of the metaxy—the In-Between. The experience is neither in the subject nor in the world of objects but In-Between, and that means In-Between the poles of man and the reality he experiences.... A good number of problems which plague the history of philosophy now become clear, as hypostases of the poles of a pure experience in the sense of William James, or of the metaxy experiences of Plato. By hypostases I mean the fallacious assumption that the poles of the participatory experience are self-contained entities that form a mysterious contact on occasion of an experience.³⁵

Even though he does not cast his discussion in Christian language here, Voegelin’s analysis of the structure of this universal experience may prove helpful, at least as a starting point, in thinking about the question of the character of the experience we saw Chrysostomos and Florovsky referring to as the basis for the trinitarian formulations of the ecumenical councils, because the language Voegelin does use draws on some of the same ancient philosophical sources as did the Council Fathers of Chalcedon when they were trying to work out a more explicit, theoretical account—

³⁴ See Webb, Eric Voegelin, 188-21, 247-48.

³⁵ Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, 34: 98-99.

which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3—of what was meant in the more mythic language used at Nicaea and Constantinople. Voegelin’s analysis is also helpful for this purpose because it is not reductionistic but acknowledges an irreducible dimension of mystery.³⁶ As Voegelin goes on to say,

A mystery, to be sure, is there, but even a mystery can be clearly expressed by stressing the participatory reality of the experience as the site of consciousness and understanding the poles of the experience as its poles and not as self-contained entities. The problem of reality experienced thus becomes the problem of a flow of participatory reality in which reality becomes luminous to itself in the case of human consciousness. The term consciousness, therefore, could no longer mean to me a human consciousness that is conscious of a reality outside man’s consciousness, but had to mean the In-Between reality of the participatory pure experience that then analytically can be characterized through such terms as the poles of the experiential tension, and the reality of the experiential tension in the metaxy...as against the immanentizing language of a human consciousness, which as a subject, is opposed to an object of experience.³⁷

When I spoke above about a distinction between subjective and objective experience, I said those terms could be misleading if not used carefully. James and Voegelin help to clarify what such carefulness must involve. It is easy and all too common to slip into thinking of “subjective experience” as something that takes place “inside” an entitative “subject,” but these thinkers make it clear that the subjectivity we actually experience as human beings has to be understood a great deal more subtly and with attention to its multi-dimensionality.

How, then, might Voegelin’s analysis of the universal dimension of human experience help us to understand what it is the Eastern voices in this dialogue are referring to when they speak, in Archbishop Chrysostomos’s phrase, of “what the Church has experienced”? Could the existential tension Voegelin identifies as universal be considered at least one form in which all human beings experience the inward presence of the Holy Spirit that John of Damascus spoke of as “participated in by all creation”—even if they do not all have the language with which what Chrysostomos calls “the Church”

³⁶ For a place where Voegelin does cast it in Christian language, see “The Gospel and Culture,” in Voegelin, Published Essays 1966-1985. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, 12: 172-212.

³⁷ Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections, 99. Emphasis in original.

interprets it and renders it explicitly conscious?³⁸ The kind of experience Eastern Christian thinkers like Chrysostomos and Florovsky have in mind, as the substance of Holy Tradition and the source of the conciliar doctrines about the Trinity and the Incarnation, is clearly existential experience, and in its original formulation and intention the doctrine of the Triune God with which the Church interpreted this experience has all the appearance of a primary symbolism in Voegelin’s sense of that term.

This, of course, invites the question of how a primary symbolism can communicate the experience it articulates? Should one think of that communication as a process in which the symbolism somehow puts the experience into the hearer, or stimulates an experience that was not already implicitly present to erupt within or inject itself into the hearer? Or should one think of it as providing simply an occasion on which God might arbitrarily decide to inject the experience into some but not others—since clearly there will always be those who hear the words but not the message. There have probably been many thinkers in the Christian traditions of both East and West who have leaned toward such conceptions of this issue, but these have the problem of bringing with them a host of implications that would themselves need explaining and that might lead either to impassable conundrums or else to a disturbingly arbitrary image of the Christian God.

I mentioned earlier the question of whether the experience Chrysostomos and Florovsky refer to is something peculiar only to Christians, and perhaps even only to some of those, or whether it is universal—universal, that is, at least in some implicit form that would require an appropriate language of symbols to articulate it so as to raise it into explicit consciousness. If the experience underlying the doctrine of the Triune God is absolutely unique and closed to outsiders, then there can be no possibility of discussing the meaning of the doctrine as a primary symbolism. Scholarly discussion would necessarily have to stand outside the experience claimed by these Eastern Christians and

³⁸ With regard to a term like “the Church” there are also differences between the Eastern and Western ways of speaking: the West’s emphasis tends to be on formal institutional organization; the East’s tends to be less formal and more communal. In this case, I think what the term “Church” refers to is the community of interpreters who have learned to use the Christian language and have formed an inner commitment to the meanings that language has enabled them to discover and live in.

“Communicating Mystical Experience: The Problem of Secondary Symbolism”

(*The Triune God in East and West*, Introduction, draft of 8/6/11)

© 2011 by Eugene Webb

simply speculate about what its symbolism might refer to. This is a problem that scholarship is not faced with, of course, in the case of the doctrine that eventually developed in the West, because that makes no claim to experiential content; rather its content, especially since Abelard as we will see in Chapter 6, is essentially verbal, and the words of its speculations are there in black and white to be read and understood by anyone with sufficient knowledge of its technical vocabulary. If, however, there is something universal in the experience underlying the primary symbolism of the original doctrine, then at least some elements of it can be investigated by scholarship. To explore that possibility, it will be worth considering further the universal dimension Voegelin thought could be found in all human experience.

I said above that in Voegelin’s use, a primary symbolism arises out of some original, engendering philosophical and spiritual experience and that correct interpretation of it requires a parallel experience on the part of the interpreter. William James was saying virtually the same thing when he said that “the only way in which to apprehend reality’s thickness is either to experience it directly by being a part of reality one’s self, or to evoke it in imagination by sympathetically divining someone else’s inner life.” For Voegelin, a primary symbolism is born as the language with which people articulate in consciousness the inward “thickness” of multi-dimensional reality that they know by participation.

What does it mean, however, to understand such a language when one hears it used by someone else? How can one “sympathetically divine someone else’s inner life” so as to grasp what the other’s symbols mean to him or her? Hans-Georg Gadamer offers some helpful suggestions in Truth and Method, where he says, “We can say that we understand only when we understand the question to which something is the answer, and it is true that what is understood in this way does not remain detached in its meaning from our own meaning. Rather, the reconstruction of the question, [for] which the meaning of the text is to be understood as an answer, passes into our own questioning.

For the text must be understood as an answer to a real question.”³⁹ The bottom line, says Gadamer, is that “to understand a question means to ask it.”⁴⁰

To understand the meaning of a primary symbolism, therefore, is to enter into the reality it symbolizes by discovering in one’s own life the force of the existential question contained in the original experience. Voegelin spoke about this in very similar terms. In *The Ecumenic Age*, in the section “Question and Mystery” of his chapter on “Universal Humanity,” he speaks of “the Question as a symbolism *sui generis*” that encompasses the entire experience of existence in the *metaxy* in tension toward the Beyond.⁴¹ “The Question capitalized,” he says, “is not a question concerning the nature of this or that object in the external world, but a structure inherent to the experience of reality.”⁴² The Question is universal as a structural principle underlying all human experience, even though it gets asked in many ways. “It does not appear in the same form at all times,” says Voegelin, “but shares by its varying modes the advance of experience from compactness to differentiation.” It incarnates itself, one might say, in the particular forms and intentions of questioning of which particular cultures and people are capable, depending on the level of rational and spiritual differentiation of consciousness to which they have developed.

In the passage from *The New Science of Politics* quoted earlier, we saw Voegelin speaking of “the self-interpretation of society” as “illuminated through ... symbolism, in various degrees of compactness and differentiation—from rite, through myth, to theory.” The differentiations that Voegelin considered historically epochal developments were the ones he called “noetic” and “pneumatic,” drawing on Greek roots (many English speakers might be more comfortable with their Latin-rooted equivalents: “rational” and “spiritual”).

To describe these simply, what Voegelin meant by “noetic differentiation of consciousness” was the awareness one gradually develops in the exercise of inquiry of the structure of the inquiring consciousness itself as involving interrelated operations of

³⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 337.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁴¹ *OH*, 4:316. [*needs new pages]

⁴² *Ibid.*, 317. [*needs new pages]

interpretation and critical reflection that reach beyond what one knows toward the unknown and ultimately toward truth as such and the good as such.⁴³ This he thought first developed historically among the ancient Greeks. What he meant by “pneumatic” or spiritual differentiation is more challenging to describe. One way Voegelin liked to talk about it was in terms of understanding the experienced tension of existence as a pull not simply toward this or that particular object but toward a pole of transcendent perfection; the pneumatic differentiation itself he thought of as the emergent realization of the absolutely transcendent character of the pole that represents the ultimate goal of our seeking and being drawn. Historically, he traced the way this took form as a realization among the ancient Israelites and early Jews of the absolute distinction between God and the created realm, between infinite and finite, between radical and merely relative transcendence.⁴⁴ As Voegelin discussed it in his Israel and Revelation, this spiritual differentiation, as reflected in the various layers of the Biblical books, took place as a gradual process in the historical journey of Israel from its earliest period, in which Israel’s God was only one god among others even if the most powerful of the gods, through the writings in the prophetic books, in which Israel’s God gradually takes shape as both universal and radically, not just relatively, transcendent.

Speaking in this manner of the two differentiations as distinct historical streams that arose in consciousness separately in ancient Greece and Israel might make them sound as if there is no substantial relation between them, but that would be misleading. Their relatedness becomes clear if one reads Voegelin in the light of Bernard Lonergan’s cognitional theory, as I did when I was writing my Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History. I know, from my many conversations with Voegelin and the encouragement he gave me when I was writing that book, that this way of reading and explaining his meaning was

⁴³ This is itself a large topic. For discussions of what it involves see Webb, Worldview and Mind: Religious Thought and Psychological Development, 110-19.

⁴⁴ See Webb, Eric Voegelin, 119-22, 164-65. I am distinguishing between ancient Israelites and early Jews in the manner that has become fairly standard among historians of religion: the Jews become distinguishable from the more comprehensive Israel around the time of the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria and that of the southern kingdom to Babylon. In the time of Jesus, the Samaritans and the Jews both considered themselves Israelites, but with different conceptions of what constituted the authentic heritage of Israel.

satisfying to him, and I also know from letters Lonergan wrote me after reading that book—telling me how it helped him to understand Voegelin—that it was satisfying to him as well. I have written about Lonergan’s cognitional theory at considerable length in my Philosophers of Consciousness and Worldview and Mind, and I will not try to repeat all of that here. I hope it will help simply to cite a brief passage from the latter book:

When Lonergan discussed the psychic energy of the operations that constitute subjectivity, he spoke of them as moved by “active potencies . . . revealed in questions for intelligence, questions for reflection, questions for deliberation.” These can be best understood, I think, as dynamic anticipations of what it would be like actually to perform the operations of understanding, critically reflective judgment, and ethical decision and in that performance to attain their objects.... In Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Lonergan himself spoke of them as moved by an “Eros of [the] mind” that expresses itself in the form of appetites for operation that he called “transcendental notions.” Defining these in Method in Theology he said, “The transcendental notions are the dynamism of conscious intentionality. They promote the subject from lower to higher levels of consciousness, from the experiential to the intellectual, from the intellectual to the rational, from the rational to the existential.” They “promote the subject to full consciousness and direct him to his goals” and “provide the criteria that reveal whether the goals are being reached.” The drive to understand (that is, the “transcendental notion of the intelligible”), for example, is satisfied when the act of understanding is successfully performed, whereas incompleteness of understanding leaves a residue of tension impelling one to further questions. Similarly, the transcendental notions of the true and the good find satisfaction only when the conditions for reasonable assent or deliberated choice are fulfilled. All of these expressions of existential appetite move the subject in a process that is his or her coming to be, on the successive levels of conscious operation, as an actual rather than merely a potential subject. But their enactment is not automatic. They can be resisted, and whether we resist them or give ourselves to them is the fundamental existential decision of our lives.⁴⁵

The key concept here for our present purpose is “transcendental notion.”

Objectively, the transcendental notions (of the experiential, the intelligible, the true, the good) aim not simply at some particular object of inquiry, a particular answer to a particular question. They become embodied in particular questions reaching toward answers, but in their essential being their aim is universal; this is why they can take on the objective form of any particular question. Subjectively, they aim at the existential fulfillment of which the act of inquiring as such is the beginning, and in their movement

⁴⁵ Worldview and Mind, 27-28, quoting Lonergan, Method in Theology, 120; Lonergan, Insight, 474; Lonergan, Method in Theology, 34-35.

toward that goal they constitute the very existence of the inquirer as inquirer. Saint Thomas Aquinas formulated the existential aspect of this in theological language when he said that what all desire is “to be” and that what God is is precisely that: Esse, “to be.” All things, says Aquinas, seek full actuality, and since God is being itself (“*ipsum esse per se subsistens*”) and being itself is the actuality of all things (“*ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum*”), God is what all ultimately long for in every love that moves them.⁴⁶

The connection of both Lonergan’s and Aquinas’s ways of talking about this with Voegelin’s symbol of the Question with a capital “Q” as discussed above is evident. What all three are talking about is our mutual participation in a dynamic movement in which all of us are existentially caught up, whether we realize it clearly or not. Gadamer said that “to understand a question means to ask it.” In the case of the existential Question, we are not simply asking a question as individuals who might or might not inquire into something particular; we find ourselves living in the question that being itself is asking of us from within us. The historical lines of noetic and pneumatic differentiation may be distinguishable, but the underlying existential reality that becomes conscious of itself and of the dynamism that moves it from within is one and universal. That this can also have a theological meaning is indicated by what John of Damascus said in the quote above when he spoke of the Holy Spirit as “proceeding from the Father and communicated through the Son, and participated in by all creation, through Himself creating, and investing with essence and sanctifying.” What Lonergan, Aquinas, and the Damascene are all saying is that the dynamism of consciousness is energized by the “breath” of the Creator and that it reaches toward an ultimately transcendent fulfillment.⁴⁷

If that is the case, then it follows that Jesus too experienced the In-Between existence that lives in the dynamism of the existential Question—that he really shared, that is, the condition of our humanity, as the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith stated when it said that he was “like us in every way except for sin” (κατὰ πάντα ὅμοιον ἡμῖν χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας). If so, then we share in the same humanity he experienced, and since

⁴⁶ *Summa Theologica*, pt. 1, question 4, article 2, and question 3, article 4; question 4, article 1, “Reply to Objection 3.”

⁴⁷ “Breath” is the literal meaning of *spiritus* in Latin, *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) in Greek, and *ruach* in Hebrew. The significance of this image will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

his prayer was the prayer of a genuine human being who experienced, like us, the force of the universal existential Question, it is not a stretch to say that those who come after him have a real possibility of experiencing what he experienced in his life of prayer as moved from within by the Spirit, the breath of life from the Father that is “participated in by all creation.” And if, as the Chalcedonian Definition also said, in his likeness to us he was “of a rational soul [ἐκ ψυχῆς λογικῆς] and a body,” then the Question that moves us all must have moved him, too, to ask questions about where he came from, what he was moving toward, what was the force he experienced moving him from within, and who, as one who asks these questions, he could know himself to be. And in answering them, he could be expected, as a first century Jew, to draw on images from his tradition: God, Spirit, Son of God. These are, of course, the very questions and images that three centuries later gave rise to the symbolism and doctrine of the Triune God. As human brothers and sisters of Jesus, we do not just overhear his prayer, we live in it, seeking to understand him and ourselves by asking the questions he asked before us—questions that from the Christian point of view, he was the first to be able to ask from the existential standpoint of one to whom the answers could apply in all the fullness of their possible meaning.

I realize that there may be Christians of both the Eastern and Western traditions who would object to the idea that Jesus could ask himself these or any other questions—on the assumption that he was simply born with a superhuman knowledge of every answer ready to hand—but although that is one possible interpretation of the Incarnation, it is not the orthodoxy of the Chalcedonian Definition. Rather it is the Apollinarian position (a divine mind in a human body) that the Chalcedonian phrase “of a rational soul” was put in to counter.

Some may also object to the Damascene’s idea of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, which I am suggesting can be interpreted as the moving energy underlying the universal, even if not always consciously realized force of the existential Question. There are some Christians who seem to assume that the Holy Spirit was not present in anyone until Jesus and not present in anyone besides Jesus until the Christian Pentecost described in Acts 2:1-4, but the Hebrew Bible is filled with references to the Spirit’s presence, and there are many passages that even speak of that presence as universal (I

will discuss examples of this in Chapter 1 along with discussion of the images of God and the Son of God in the Hebrew Bible).

I recognize, however, that there is room in the tradition of Christian orthodoxy for differences on this point, even if not on that of Jesus’s fully human mind. In the last chapter of Worldview and Mind, on “Dialogical Faith,” I argued that a mature faith must necessarily be dialogical, because reason itself, as critical reflection on the relative adequacy of possible interpretations, is inherently dialogical: every reasonable judgment of truth must be based on careful interpretation, and for interpretation to be truly careful it must include listening to the voices of others who may notice further experiential data that should be taken into account or who can think of further interpretations that can better explain all the relevant data. I hope that both Christian readers, whatever their theological convictions, and non-Christian readers with a simply historical interest will allow me, for the sake of dialogue and scholarly inquiry, to explore as a working hypothesis the possibility that the underlying experiential substance of the original doctrine and primary symbolism of the Triune God involved elements of universality that Jesus and his subsequent tradition used the Biblical imagery of God, Son of God, and Spirit of God to interpret.

To those who might object to this approach, I freely acknowledge that I cannot claim certainty for my interpretations. I will, however, try to show their reasonableness as interpretations of the language the various voices of the Biblical and Patristic traditions used, in their own evolving interpretations, to bear witness to what they experienced and wondered about. “Certainty,” as Cardinal Newman said, “is a quality of propositions.”⁴⁸ With regard to concrete reality, on the other hand, the most we can hope for is a relatively adequate interpretation, which may at its best be “accompanied by [the] specific sense of intellectual satisfaction and repose” that Newman said characterizes the sense of rational

⁴⁸ John Henry Newman, An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent, 262 (this volume will subsequently be referred to as Grammar of Assent). Newman was referring especially to the kinds of deductive proposition one finds in the formal proofs of geometry. It was for its deductive certainty that Aristotle considered geometry the truest form of real knowledge (episteme). Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book 6; Posterior Analytics 71b10-15.

confidence he called “certitude” rather than “certainty.”⁴⁹ But however confident one may feel about one’s judgments of relative adequacy, inquiry must always remain open to further experience and insight if it is to retain its rational authenticity.

I should also state openly that although I think myself that the Western Christian tradition lost something important when it lost touch with the original primary symbolism of the Triune God and substituted a secondary, speculative symbolism of its own, the status of the symbolisms as primary or secondary is not in itself a necessary indication of their truth or falseness. There is a sense in which a primary symbolism necessarily possesses a certain kind of truth in that the congruence of its symbolism with the underlying experience that the symbolism articulates will give rise to the “sense of intellectual satisfaction and repose” Newman spoke of, but speculations can also lead toward what may really turn out to be the case. This latter possibility has been the claim of Western theologians for the change in the Western creed ever since they became aware that Christians of the East objected to it. Their stand has been that the original formulation by the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople was incomplete and that the Western creed simply made fully explicit what the councils had implicitly intended.⁵⁰ It is possible that their interpretation of the doctrine really does state a truth about God as Trinity, but I believe myself and hope to show in this book that what the councils intended and the original creed expressed was something quite different: that whatever may be the truth about the reality of the Triune God, the West’s claim that its doctrine expresses the true intent of the original doctrine of the councils is simply false.

If a genuine dialogue between the two Christian worlds is ever really to take place, what is fundamentally important to understand about the difference between the two approaches to interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity is that a speculation about a distant object and a meditative reflection on present experience in subjective existence do

⁴⁹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 196. For a discussion of this point in Newman’s thought, see Webb, *Worldview and Mind*, 192-94.

⁵⁰ For example: “The difficulty of the Greek view is not that it contradicts in any particular the Western doctrine, but that it is incomplete. It is good as far as it goes but it does not go far enough.” Thomas Richey, *The Nicene Creed and the Filioque*, 50. Saint Thomas Aquinas offered a formal argument for this position in *Summa Theologica*, 1.36.2 ad 2.

not simply lead to different conclusions; they constitute different realms of meaning.

They also imply different conceptions of the purpose and substance of revelation: did the Word of God dwell and teach and suffer among us in order to communicate theoretical information or in order to plant the seeds of an existential transformation? Dialogue requires that different sides in a dispute listen respectfully to each other’s positions, but it does not require a relativism that would preclude facing up to real differences and grappling seriously with questions of truth, falsehood, and essential meaning. What it does require above all is that different positions be stated with sufficient clarity and explicitness that if the dialogue must terminate in irreconcilable disagreement, at least all parties will understand what the disagreement is really about.

Until the relatively recent development of a historical consciousness, neither East nor West were well equipped to deal with the questions surrounding the meaning of the symbolism of the Triune God and the orthodox doctrine it became a language for, since these have to do with interpretations that developed over centuries and took the particular forms they did under changing historical conditions. There were even Western bishops at the reunion Council of Ferrara-Florence who tried, in all good conscience, to argue that it was the East that changed the creed, leaving out the supposedly original “filioque.”⁵¹ But even though such gross historical naïveté is no longer possible, there is still comparatively little historical awareness among Western thinkers, Christian and non-Christian alike, of the ways the symbolism of the Triune God developed and took on different meanings in particular times and places over the three millennia that its symbols have been evolving.

A symbol is an image with a meaning. Images can be handed down over centuries, even passed from one culture to another, taking on different meanings as they get taken up into new contexts and used in new ways. If they are passed on within a cultural stream that has sufficient continuity—such as that which led from ancient Israel into Christianity—then even though they take on new meanings, some of their new

⁵¹ The physical evidence they adduced for this was copies of the creed in Greek that had the Greek equivalent of the filioque scratched out; they didn’t realize that these dated from the period when the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople and forcibly imposed the filioquist creed on the people of the city.

meaning is likely to contain traces of meanings that may themselves have been largely forgotten but that can become meaningful again and can revitalize or contribute further force to the symbols in their new incarnations.

I hope that looking more closely at the history of these images and their interpretations may help to raise the doctrine of the Trinity from the condition in which it languishes at present in the West. I also hope that a closer look at the real differences that have developed between East and West, not only in their interpretations of this symbolism but also in the ways it bears meaning for them, may help to prepare the conditions for a dialogue that, I wish to suggest, has never yet effectively taken place. To say this may seem surprising, since there were large scale reunion councils in Constantinople in 879, in Lyon in 1274, and in Ferrara and Florence in 1438-39, but those councils had no effect whatsoever on actual reconciliation of the Eastern and Western churches.⁵² The reason I think such attempts at dialogue have been stillborn is that the two sides have been largely talking past each other, using words that meant different things to each to talk about a subject matter that was different for each. This is illuminated, I think, by seeing the difference between East and West not simply as a difference in theological opinions but as the difference between the two quite different types of symbolism that I sketched above. The tradition of experiential symbolism that continued from Patristic times in the East not only conveyed different ideas and implications from that of the speculative symbolism of the West, it had a different experiential content and communicated in a different way. I hope that the story of the historical life of these symbols that this book will try to unfold will help Christians of both East and West to understand and think through more clearly the issues that divide them and perhaps also enable those of the Western tradition to reclaim precious elements of their common heritage.

⁵² In the case of the last of these, a Decree of Union was proclaimed in the papal bull *Laetentur coeli* on July 6, 1439, after all but one of the Eastern representatives at the council agreed to accept the Western claims (in the hope that the West would send troops to help them defend against the Ottomans), but when they returned to Constantinople the Orthodox people rejected the agreement, and the one holdout, Archbishop Mark of Ephesus, subsequently became venerated and canonized as a saint.