

The Relationship between Literature and Theology in the English Department at Simpson University

We wish to offer two conceptual/theological models for the study of literature and explain ways that characteristics of God himself can inform it: (1) an incarnational or Christological model and (2) a Trinitarian model. Although they differ, they share the common characteristic of highlighting ways of thinking that are inherent in God himself, one focused on the two natures of Christ and the other focused on God as Trinity. Thus, God and qualities of God function as paradigms for thinking about reality in general and literature in particular.

I. Incarnational Approach: Christ as God and Man

Summary:

1. The church teaches that Christ was fully God and fully man.
2. The two natures of Christ offer a paradigm for interpreting reality.
3. The humanity of Christ implies that God affirms human existence (physical, social, etc.), which by extension, implies that we should affirm life on this earth.
4. The divinity of Christ implies that we should affirm reality that lies beyond our five senses.

Example: As English professors, we must attend to the subject matter of our profession, which is analogous to the humanity of Christ, and we must interpret our discipline with attention to the existence of God, which is analogous to the divinity of Christ.

Christian theology teaches that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human and rejects any notion that Jesus was simply a good man but not God (Arianism), that Jesus was really only God and seemed or appeared to be human (Docetism), or any notion that Jesus was simply a mixture of two natures who, whatever the percentages, added up to be one hundred percent of something that escapes definition. Rejecting these Christological heresies, the Christian creeds have affirmed the full deity and full humanity of Christ throughout the church's history.

But the very fact that these creeds take pains to affirm the deity of Christ suggests that this doctrine entails at least some difficulties of acceptance if not comprehension. After all, how can any being be fully two natures at one time? Critics of Christianity and heretics within Christianity point out the inherent absurdity of this doctrine. We do not intend to explain the mysteries of the incarnation; rather, we think we need to step away from this doctrine and see it anew in all of its profound and arresting strangeness so that we may more fully appreciate its conceptual power. Creeds and doctrinal statements, helpful as they are for clarifying and codifying the deity of Christ, to the degree that they make the doctrine overly familiar, dilute it. In the following discussion, we shall attempt to move us outside of the easy comfort of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in a way that might be compared to moving a housebound person outside of a house so that it can be seen from the fresh perspective of the exterior view.

The church affirms that Jesus of Nazareth, born in a stable and laid in a manger in Bethlehem in an obscure Roman province is simultaneously and fully the infinite creator of the universe—God himself. But even if affirmed by the church, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ entails difficulties of understanding and application, difficulties that can be traced in the canonical gospels themselves, specifically in the differences between the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) generally follow an inductive/narrative approach. They connect Jesus with genealogies, narrate his early life, ministry, miracles, teaching and so on, so that in the end the reader is invited to take in the evidence in its narrative context and conclude along with the centurion at the cross that “Surely this was the son of God.” Although the Synoptics certainly affirm the deity of Christ, they tend to focus more on Jesus’ earthly life, his teaching, and his ministry.

John, on the other hand, generally follows a deductive approach that begins with a prologue that sets “the word” in its cosmic context, emphasizing Jesus’ identity as human and, importantly, as God. By placing this information in the front of the book, John challenges the reader to use its transcendent, eternal perspective as the proper interpretative paradigm for reading the book and, by extension, for interpreting Jesus. Characters in the extended narratives in John, particularly Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and Pilate, struggle with the paradigm and understand Jesus only when they understand him in terms of the theological paradigm given in the prologue, a struggle that readers participate in and mirrors their struggle to understand Christ in all his divinity. Thus, for John, a view of Jesus based solely or even primarily on Jesus’ life, ministry, and teaching is inadequate. Whether or not John was the last gospel to be written, John certainly presents the last word on the interpretation of Jesus’ life: for John, an understanding of Jesus based on his earthly life alone is inadequate; he must be seen as God, and God must be seen as a Trinitarian God.

Following this line of interpretation, the Synoptics emphasize the humanity and earthly life of Jesus whereas John emphasizes the divinity of Jesus. This interpretation no doubt represents a simplification, but as a simplification it is nonetheless useful, particularly because it illustrates a tendency in the gospels themselves to emphasize either Christ’s humanity or his divinity, a tendency toward bifurcation that remains to this day. Indulging in another simplification to illustrate the point, I note that liberals tend to emphasize the humanity of Christ and highlight his ethical and social teaching whereas conservatives tend to emphasize theological truths about Christ. The former tend much more to deny the divinity of Christ while the latter are much more prone to find it a messy business to be kind to widows and orphans, who, in some theologies, might be viewed as predestined to fulfill those roles.

If we can look at Christ as simultaneously fully human and fully divine, we might turn our gaze to the rest of the world and see if it can be viewed in a similar fashion and look at the world—God’s creation—in two ways at once. Jesus as a human being who lived and taught in Palestine in space and time might be extended to mean that we, like Jesus, take the earth, the universe, and physical existence seriously, and that we take human life and human society seriously as well. In the same way, Jesus as God of the universe who existed before time might be extended to mean that we, like Jesus, affirm the

transcendent, unseen world that lies beyond the immediate world of our five senses. One without the other is incomplete.

This dual perspective is the heart of this essay. Christians should affirm physical and social existence in this world and engage with every aspect of the world; Christians should affirm that God exists and that his existence entails that the world has transcendent significance. But, like the two natures of Christ, we must insist on both equally and simultaneously.

Like understanding the incarnation itself, thinking on two levels at once is not easy to do; we suspect that we can only strive to do so and perhaps achieve success in a limited number of areas. But we must do our best because to think on two levels at once, rooted in the incarnation of Christ, is to exercise an imaginative faith that is demanded of Christians, especially those who see themselves as mature in the faith.

Let us illustrate the point by examining the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have abundant faith but little imagination. Their great theological error is Arianism, the belief that Jesus is a created being, God-like but not God himself. They defend this doctrine by resorting to Biblical interpretation, but their error is fundamentally one of perspective that arguing this or that interpretation of particular Biblical passages will do little to remedy. Whatever their admirable devotion, their perspective is flawed because it is fundamentally rationalistic; it cannot admit two simultaneous perspectives that are both equally true. G. K. Chesterton rightly called rationalism "the clean and well-lit prison of one idea." Several things follow from this perspective: sectarianism, authoritarianism, and a rejection of art and culture. Literature, like Christ, demands that it be understood on several levels at once. Indeed, we might illustrate the imaginative enlightenment flowing from the two natures of Christ by comparing the artistic richness of Christianity with the sterility and boredom of any local Kingdom Hall.

Unfortunately, many theologically orthodox Christians tend to share the limited, unimaginative perspective of the Jehovah's Witnesses because their thinking is not fully incarnational or Christological. They accept the divinity of Christ as a doctrine but do not extend its implications and view the world that way. Indeed, the Jehovah's Witnesses find many converts among fundamentalist Christians because they share a similar mindset and simply exchange one rationalistic religion for another. Mature Christian thinking is, like Christ—and the Bible—inherently multi-dimensional.

An error that is perhaps closer to home is the tendency to bifurcate the spiritual from other aspects of life. We might easily illustrate the point by considering the pious student whose Bible reading is more regular than is class attendance, or the believer who prays for direction but can't be troubled to ask for advice. We might note the tendency of some toward a spiritualized materialism where the fervently sought blessing of God looks very much like American consumerist culture. But a related tendency toward bifurcation is present within the Christian academy when any discipline is viewed as autonomous, a body of knowledge governed by its own concerns, one tenuously connected to the Christian faith primarily by the fact that the professor teaching it is a Christian. Conversely, the fact of a professor being a Christian does not substitute for a poor grasp of a subject matter.

Let us elaborate a bit by commenting on how an understanding of the incarnation—Jesus as fully human and fully God—informs our work as Christian academics. When we teach literature, we must fully attend to its details—its incarnation—formal elements like plot, character, setting point of view, and conceptual issues related to historical setting or interpretive paradigm (Marxist, feminist, psychological, etc.). We must engage with the literature itself as literature, and we must engage with the demands of our discipline. If we do not, then we are not serious about the raw material of our discipline or the tools with which it functions. But if we only attend to the literature and do not understand it in some larger theological context, following the analogy with the incarnation, we are only attending to its role as literature, disconnected from any theological understanding of it. Or, returning to the previous discussion of the Synoptics and John, a focus on only the literature would be to follow the Synoptics and ignore John. Avoiding this mistake, T. S. Eliot stated, “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” Note that he stated, “completed,” meaning that the literary critic must first engage with the literature itself and not prematurely or illegitimately move to theological evaluation.

The opposite error is to study literature primarily or exclusively through a theological paradigm without proper attention to the literature itself. Such an approach does not take literature seriously, seeing it only as an opportunity to apply this or that Christian principle or judge the heathen for any number of sins. This approach has its theological corollary in Docetism, the aforementioned Christological heresy where Christ only seemed to be a real human during his time on earth; it is the Christological and conceptual rigor of John without the teaching and history of the Synoptics. Ideally, as a Christian academic, we should affirm both: study the literature as literature, and we should attempt to formulate some larger understanding of it within a Christian worldview. Returning to an incarnational analogy, we must affirm the full incarnation of the literature as we affirm the full incarnation of Christ; and we must affirm its relationship to God as we affirm the full Deity of Jesus. This is not a 50/50 understanding: it is a 100/100 understanding. Likewise, Chesterton found Christianity so appealing not because it was a tepid compromise, but because it simultaneously embraced all extremes. The incarnation, like literature, forces us to think, to experience, to live on two levels at once.

The English department at Simpson University strongly believes in this approach to education in general and literature in particular. The strength of this approach to literature is that it offers a common point of reference—the incarnation—for what we are do; it provides a paradigm and goal for what we should try to do in the future; and it does so by looking at Christ himself to transform and unify our thinking. It is indeed a Christ-centered educational philosophy.

II. Trinitarian Approach: God as Three and God as One

Summary:

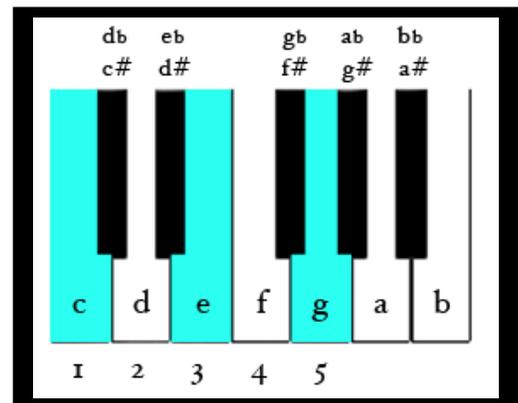
1. Rooted in the Bible, Christianity teaches that there is one God and only one God, and he exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are each equally and fully God.
2. The Trinitarian nature of God offers a paradigm for interpreting reality.
3. The persons of the Trinity may be understood as analogous to three parts of reality: God the Father as the ideological, God the Son as the historical or incarnational, and God the Holy Spirit as the aesthetic.

Example: Called by some the world's greatest lyric poem, Psalm 23 has a powerful idea (the protection of God); it is powerfully incarnated (the extended metaphor of the Shepherd); and it shows a fine aesthetic touch (it is beautiful).

A Trinitarian-approach to the study of literature shares the characteristic of the incarnational approach because it is focused on God himself. However, whereas the incarnational approach emphasizes the importance of viewing things from two perspectives at once, a Trinitarian approach emphasizes the unity and diversity of knowledge consequent on God being one God and three persons simultaneously. In this proposal, we shall rely heavily on Dorothy Sayers's book *The Mind of the Maker* in which she outlines a Trinitarian approach to the artistic act of creation, an approach that can be readily extended beyond the study of literature to other areas of concern. We should note that we have used this book as the conceptual and evaluative framework for ENGL 3200: Advanced Composition for the last ten years.

We might begin by restating the doctrine of the Trinity: there is one God and only one God, and he exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are each equally and fully God. An analogy might prove useful. But Trinitarian analogies are often misleading at best and heretical at worst: for example, the analogy of God being like the three forms of water, solid, liquid, and gas, fails because each molecule of water needs to be a solid, liquid, and a gas at the same time. This analogy commits the theological error of modalism, which holds that God appears in various modes (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) at different times and circumstances.

The analogy we propose relies on the sound qualities of a major chord in music. A major chord is made up of three notes known in music as a first, third, and a fifth. For example, a C chord is made up of three notes: C (first), E (third), and G (fifth). Played together, they interact to form a unified, harmonious sound that is greater than the individual notes, yet each individual note maintains its discrete identity. The three persons of the Trinity are analogous to the three notes of a major chord, and the unity of God is analogous to the unity of the chord as a whole. The chord analogy works



even if the order of the notes is altered, forming chords known in music as inversions; thus, C, E, and G in any order is a C chord. The particular qualities of sound—physical energy rather than physical mass—allow the sound of individual notes to blend rather than collide and thus allow the analogy to work.

This Trinitarian interpretation of the major chord can be extended by referring to the theological concept of *perichoresis*, a very helpful term that describes the Trinitarian, interpersonal relations of God himself. Literally, this word means to “dance around.” *Peri* comes from the Greek preposition *περι* (*peri*) and *choresis* is the word from which we get “choreography.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in a sense dancing around each other. Dancing requires free individuals engaging in coordinated, harmonious, and hopefully beautiful movement. But *perichoresis* means more than this: it means that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interpenetrate each other, profoundly sharing their lives in a dance of delight. Jesus said “I and the Father are one.” Furthermore, the persons of God indwell each other: “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11). Father, Son and Holy Spirit respond to each other selflessly, acting always in response to the other. Thus the actions of God are always active, personal, and relational. The wonder of salvation is that through Christ we are brought into the very inner life of God. Indeed, God is the complete and ideal dance partner: he is the music, the light show, and the dance itself.

The strength of this Trinitarian approach is that it provides a way, rooted in God himself, for the Christian University to account for its goal of seeing knowledge as unified in some way, and it also accounts for individual disciplines to preserve their identity within the larger whole in a way that, like the major chord and the Trinity, is harmonious and complete.

Sayers begins with the premise that Christianity is true and that the Christian creeds are authoritative statements of what the church believes. She notes that the creeds are “not idealistic fancies, not arbitrary codes, not abstractions irrelevant to human life and thought, but statements of fact about the universe as we know it” (17). Significantly, Sayers does not defend the creeds in general or the Trinity in particular; rather, she employs the Trinity as a paradigm for interpreting the world, a methodological move from theology to interpretation and application that in itself should be kept in mind for any educational model for a Christian university.

The next move Sayers makes in her argument is to establish a connection between what may be known about God with what we are familiar with on earth. She notes that we can learn something about God by thinking about a human father, specifically an idealized human father. Thus, certain things about God (love, protection, etc.) can be understood with reference to a human father; likewise, God himself is a reference for what a good human father might look like.

She takes this familiar analogy and extends it to the fact that humans are made in the image of God as creative beings. Thus, we can learn something about God as creator by considering a human creator or artist, and we can learn something about human creation and the human creator by considering God, specifically a Trinitarian God. Sayers relies heavily on the notion that the study of God and humans can be reciprocally enlightening,

something, we should note, that is not universally accepted among all Christian theological traditions.

Sayers then identifies specific qualities of creation with individual persons of the Trinity. She identifies God the Father as the creative idea, God the Son as the creative energy, and God the Holy Spirit as the creative power. Rather than use Sayers' terms, we have explained this to students by using these terms: God the Father is analogous to the idea, God the Son is analogous to the historical or incarnational (the manifestation of the idea in space and time), and God the Holy Spirit is analogous to the aesthetic. These identifications of a person of the Trinity with a quality certainly run the risk of being reductionistic and depersonalizing God, but, on the other hand, they also offer the possibility of taking our understanding of God and expanding it.

These categories can perhaps be best understood in application. A student paper, for example, might have excellent ideas, but the ideas are poorly explained or organized. Or, a paper may be extremely well organized in its historical incarnation, its sentence structures, paragraphs, paragraph transitions, etc.—it may even be printed on resume paper and bound in a plastic holder—but in spite all these attentions to form, it may lack powerful ideas and thereby fail to say anything. Finally, a paper, particularly one that requires some creative content, may fail aesthetically by having some sort of failure of taste; even an analytic paper requires some attention to style and aesthetics. If we read good ideas, but they are put into Dick and Jane sentences, that gets old fast.

Sayers helpfully divides her discussion into problems of over-emphasis and under-emphasis. Over-emphasis on the idea, or “Father driven” looks something like this example from philosopher Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*:

The practical rule is, therefore, unconditional, and hence it is conceived *a priori* as a categorically practical proposition by which the will is objectively determined absolutely and immediately (by the practical rule itself, which thus is in this case a law); for *pure reason practical of itself* is here directly legislative. (303)

This kind of hammering away at ideas renders the book difficult to comprehend for all but the most dedicated, brilliant, or masochistic readers. Conversely, lack of strong, unifying ideas renders something rambling, diffuse, and incoherent, perhaps enthusiastic, even spectacular, but ultimately a Winchester House of confusion and chaos.

“Son driven,” or over emphasis on the space/time form, manifests itself as over-emphasis on technique. We have all seen clever, even elegant, PowerPoint presentations that wow us with text that zips in from the side or pictures that emerge Phoenix-like from the disintegration of the previous slide, presentations whose content gets lost in the presentation itself. Likewise, movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean II* overpower their audiences with technical wizardry. Under-emphasis on technique shows up, for example, as dancers who can't dance and musicians who can't be bothered with practice. In fact, such people frequently show up on network talent shows where they astonish viewers and judges alike with their boundless capacity for self-delusion.

Over-emphasis on the Spirit tends to be displayed as over-emphasis on emotion. Dr. Larsen once saw a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* that had a serious problem with its emotional aesthetics. Although *The Crucible* is a serious play about McCarthy era intolerance portrayed through the setting of the Salem witchcraft trials, the actors over-acted so much, so agonizingly much, so excruciatingly much, that half-way through they were drenched in sweat and people in the back were laughing—and it's not a comedy. In this case, the emotional emphasis failed because it was not governed by a strong interpretation of the play (an idea) made real through proper acting techniques. In another example, Michael, the lead character in the sitcom *The Office*, makes viewers wince not because he is evil but because he lacks social aesthetics. To illustrate under-emphasis on emotion, we can all imagine a singer who sings every note perfectly but fails to connect with the audience, or the preacher who is a good exegete but communicates in a rather dry fashion. In summary, a great variety of intellectual and artistic failure, perhaps even educational failure, can be traced to having what Sayers calls "scalene trinities," unequal emphasis on the ideological, incarnational, or the aesthetic.

Let's turn our attention to three books, seminal in their fields, that demonstrate trinitarian strength: Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Whether or not we agree with their content, these books remain enormously influential in their fields and beyond because they demonstrate the Trinitarian structure posited by Sayers: they contain powerful ideas, they are well organized and well argued, and, importantly, they exemplify a certain elegance of presentation that has no doubt greatly enhanced their influence. These qualities work best because they are in harmony with the other qualities in a way that is analogous to the harmonious inner workings of the Christian Trinity.

The diversity of these books and the diversity of the examples cited above show that a Trinitarian model is widely applicable and offers a paradigm that yields useful interpretative insights into writing and literature beyond the scope of Christianity itself. In addition, these Trinitarian categories reflect other three part classifications. For example, the true, the good, and the beautiful parallel the Father/idea, Son/historical, and Holy Spirit/aesthetic. Likewise, they parallel Aristotle's categories of rhetoric: the logos (rational content), ethos (ethical content), and pathos (emotional content).

For Simpson University, this Trinitarian system allows us to account for the diversity of disciplines and see each discipline as part of a larger, harmonious whole. History, for example, is concerned with actual events and attendant ideas, but perhaps less concerned with aesthetics. Music will highlight aesthetics and form, or incarnation, but be less concerned with ideas. Science will be particularly concerned with reality in its space and time incarnation and with ideas, yet beauty, simplicity, and elegance usually characterize the best scientific theories, a relatively energetic and enlightening example being Einstein's $E=mc^2$. English tends to be strong in all three areas: it is a perichoretic education strong in ideas, the incarnation and human dimension of those ideas, and their aesthetics and beauty. A Trinitarian model highlights different areas of emphasis within a particular academic discipline and also offers a model for how various disciplines might work together to achieve something that we can never be achieved alone.

Rather than practicing Trinitarians, some in the Christian academy might be practicing modalists, operating in a system where God appears in different forms at different times in different departments. The English Department at Simpson strives to do better. Recall that the doctrine of the Trinity affirms the individual identity of each person and the unity of the whole and that the major chord in music relies on a similar structure that, like the Christian Trinity, is harmonious and beautiful. If knowledge is at present fractured, we can do no better than to find its unity in God himself.

Works Cited

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