

DOCTRINE AS GRAMMATICAL CONSTRAINT: NICHOLAS LASH ON THE TRINITY

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The work of Nicholas Lash, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, has gained notoriety in recent years. The purpose of this essay is to analyze and critique Lash's perspective on the doctrine of the Trinity. Delineating his views on this subject is important for three reasons: 1) Lash has become popular; 2) he is an ardent defender of the Trinity, a doctrine that has come under strong attack in modernity; and 3) Lash's conviction that doctrine functions grammatically, not descriptively deserves careful attention. I hope to demonstrate that Lash's views, right and wrong, better equip us to talk about the Christian doctrine of God.

Theism

Lash's discussion of the Trinity takes place against the backdrop of modern theism. He believes that the paramount influence of modern theism has caused the doctrine of the Trinity to cease to function as the Christian frame of reference for talking about God.¹

Lash notes that the term "theism" originated with Voltaire and denoted one who believed in a Supreme Being as the source of finite existence. It also referred to one who rejected revelation and the supernatural doctrines of Christianity. To put it simply, "theism" and "deism" were synonymous.² It was not until years later that the terms became separated and theism lost its pejorative connotations in Christian doctrine. Originally, however, "the 'God' of modern theism was born of a deliberate decision to break with the Jewish and Christian traditions of authorized usage."³

The consideration of God from a theistic approach quite often operates on the assumption that God is a person of some sort, and that there must be a consideration of what kind of person God might be.⁴ Lash quotes the British theist Richard Swinburne,

By a theist I understand a man who believes that there is a God. By a "God" he understands something like a "person without a body (i.e. spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe." Many theists also hold further beliefs about God, and in these Christians, Jews, and Muslims differ among themselves; and yet further beliefs, in which some members of each group differ from others.⁵

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After such an affirmation of God is made, the theist seeks to describe what God is like by considering God's attributes which are minimal descriptions of the God whom we (with the approach of a theistic argument "we" doesn't necessarily mean Christian) worship.

According to Lash the theist is an explorer. Much of his/her description is set forth with spatial images. The theist starts with the everyday "closed world of causes and effects, relationships and instruments." S/He argues from the familiar world in the hope that somewhere in the course of the discussion s/he may reach behind the world's "farthest frontiers" and discover the existence of "a being" to persuade us that things are not out of control. The theistic explorer searches for this divine creature with various devices that, while strongly suggesting the creature exists, it cannot be directly grasped.⁶

Lash believes that Christians must dispense with theism and avoid falling into the trap of some of its assumptions; for the God of classical theism is a "most unchristian entity." It is the entity that becomes known as "the God of the philosophers."⁷

There are several things about theism that Lash views as problematic: 1) Theism starts with the assumption that there is a "central core" of beliefs about God that makes Christians, Jews and Muslims all theists. The differing beliefs about God are further additions to one's theistic faith. These further beliefs are where Christians, Jews and Muslims no longer agree. Lash maintains, however, that any belief about God cannot be divided into any kind of "central core" without perverting fundamental Christian, Jewish and Muslim belief about God.⁸ Thus a theistic account of God is unacceptable. Lash writes,

The belief (for example) that God is his Word, eternally uttered and addressed to us in time; or the belief that God is his self-gift, his life, his joy, animating, transforming and reconciling all nature and history; these beliefs are not, . . . "further beliefs" which may be "added to" and, by addition, "complicate" a prior set of convictions concerning an entity with all the interesting characteristics listed by him.⁹

In a theistic framework the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an added belief about God as well. If this is true and the Trinity is nothing more than believing that God has "other essential properties" other than those in the "central core," then theism does not regard the doctrine of the Trinity as the Christian doctrine of God.¹⁰

2) The God of theism is abstract. Without the doctrine of the Trinity ("as it is employed in defining, determining or shaping Christian life, prayer, action and suffering") "spirit" is an "empty word." It becomes an abstraction situated in the "broad framework of Cartesian contractions."¹¹

3) In theism "godness" is the nature of "distant and enabling dignity." When the doctrines of incarnate Word and indwelling Spirit are construed as added beliefs to the doctrine of God the consideration of the nature of "godness" is muddled.¹²

4) Theism says too much about God and makes him an "object" for obser-

vation. He is to be “identified, described, compared and contrasted with other objects.”¹³ God is first of all discussed, then after nothing more can be said, the theist claims mystery. Yet Lash maintains that the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility requires us to confess God as mystery at the outset.¹⁴ Theism operates on a mistaken account of mystery. God does not offer himself for observation. “God is the creator of the world not its explanation; the world’s redeemer, not its solution.”¹⁵ The theist talks about God too easily. Talking about God is dangerous. God should be discussed not in terms of what he is, but what he is not.¹⁶

5) For the theist divine attributes are descriptions of God. Originally, however, they were discussions of grammar. They served as protocols against idolatry.¹⁷

Doctrine

While Lash insists that any discussion of God must at the outset start with God as mystery, this does not mean that we cannot say anything meaningful about God. He states,

Nevertheless, if God is not a figment of our imagination, if it is truly “in relation” to his incomprehensible mystery that we, and all things, exist and have their being, then, in our worship of God, our address to God, we may (and do) make mention of him. Except, therefore, on a purely expressivist account of our use of the term, such mention as we make of God in worship has cognitive implications: it entails the conviction that there is something that we can truly say “about” God.¹⁸

In making a distinction between reference and description, Lash proposes that the Christian doctrine of God is basically a matter of securing accurate reference rather than trying to offer true description. Theism makes the mistake of trying to describe God and runs the risk of idolatry since description of God invites one to set his/her heart on “something less than God,” for how can one describe the incomprehensible.¹⁹ Thus what is needed is to learn to use the word “God” appropriately, and this means that something must be said about the notion of doctrine.

According to Lash doctrine is an activity, and as an activity Christian doctrine is an aspect of Christian pedagogy, for Christianity is a school that produces persons in relation “to the unknown God through discipleship of the crucified.”²⁰ Doctrine, therefore, is not substantive. Instead Christian doctrine provides the necessary grammar for Christian pedagogy. This summary grammar account of doctrine functions primarily as regulative rather than descriptive. Lash offers the example of *homoousios* that was used at the Council of Nicea, not to make a first-order descriptive claim concerning the relationship of the Son to the Father, but a second-order referential claim stating “that whatever is to be said of the Father is to be said of the Son,” except “that the Father alone is the Son.”²¹ *Homoousios* does not tell us what to say about the Father or the Son. It merely lays down rules of discourse of how we can

Speak correctly about God in our telling of the story. Doctrine provides boundaries and a frame of reference.²² Lash notes,

I have been suggesting that the concept of the Christian doctrine of God to be taken to refer to the declaration, by the Christian community, of identity sustaining rules of discourse and behavior governing Christian use of the word "God." It is in modes of action and speech consonant with the pattern declared in the doctrine that we discover as Christians, how may we so to speak and act as to live in relation, or in truthful reference, to the mystery in which we live, and work, and speak, and hope, and die.²³

Christians use doctrine, their rules of discourse and behavior, not as "scientific instruments." They use it "as the regulative pattern of pedagogy of contemplative practice,"²⁴ Modern theism discusses divine attributes of what God is like, but this is idolatry because it proceeds on the illusion that the nature of God lies within our reach. Rather the discussion of God's "godness" must center around what God is not. This is the way Aquinas approached the discussion. This means that Church doctrines, in this case specifically, God's attributes, are protocols against idolatry. To state what God is not is to state that he is not like anything less than God.²⁵ Doctrine as a framework of how we can talk about God safeguards us then from turning our hearts to something less than God. Doctrine provides grammatical parameters that guide the discussion. For Lash, the doctrine of the Trinity provides just such a framework.

The Trinity

According to Lash the Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God. Any doctrine of God, therefore, that is not trinitarian in character is not Christian.²⁶ Lash prefers to call the doctrine of the Trinity the doctrine of God's Trinity because the Trinity in his theology is not some further teaching added on to the doctrine of God.²⁷ Indeed the word "God" in a Christian context should mean God's Trinity.

Whereas theism is a theology of exploration, trinitarianism is a theology of communication. Lash takes this from Aquinas who contended that the primary "purpose of revelation, preaching, catechesis and theology was to communicate acquaintance with God."²⁸ Theology as exploration seeks to find out what God is like. Theology as communion, however, functions to promote acquaintance "by checking our propensity to go whoring after false gods."²⁹

This is why the discussion of God must be in the negative. Talk about God to the modern theist is difficult because God is perceived to be far away. He is outside the world of human experience. For the trinitarian, however, talk about God is more than difficult; it is dangerous, because there are many things in this world that we can confuse with God, and thereby commit idolatry by worshipping something less than "Him who is known to us through the Son in the Holy Spirit."³⁰

An example of this is the modern description of God as a person. While

it is true that God is to be confessed as personal, he is not a person in the modern sense of the term, nor is he three persons.

To talk of God as "a" person would, of course take us back into the wastelands of "the heresy of theism," while talk of "three persons" immediately suggests to the unwary that we are offering a description of God as some kind of family or committee.³¹

In classical consideration of these matters, however, "person" was used grammatically, not descriptively. It was Augustine who maintained that "person" in reference to God was used so there might be something to say when someone asked what the three are. They are not three somewhats.³²

To say that God is Spirit is grammatical as well. It is not a description of the kind of thing God is. On the contrary, to say that God has no body is to state that there is no specific kind of thing God is.³³ Such a claim makes a sharp distinction between God and anything in nature. Since the modern notion of person will likely continue to be descriptive, it is best to find another expression to refer to the Godhead, such as "mode of subsisting."³⁴ It is important here to understand that Lash is not promoting a Sabellian understanding of the Trinity. He is simply making the point that the modern understanding of what a person is makes it unwise to use it in reference to the Godhead. Lash is indeed attempting to be faithful to the Council of Nicea.³⁵

Lash further maintains that the dialectics of experienced life best correspond to the number three and, therefore, is most adequate to symbolize the divine life. This is most often referred to as the *Vestigia Trinitatis*. It is certainly true that our language is saturated with dualisms: inner and outer, mental and physical, spirit and flesh, public and private. It is to this dualism that "the God of modern theism seems . . . tailor made."³⁶ Yet the triadic account of human experience that seeks "harmony between feeling, knowledge and desire: between tradition, explanation and choice" insists on the unity of human experience as well. Thus to pursue what has been misappropriately called "psychological" analogies of the experience of God's Trinity is, according to Lash, a legitimate way of working out the elements of the Christian doctrine of God;³⁷ for indeed God is subject.

This experience of the Trinity is extremely important, for what can anyone sensibly talk about in reference to anything except experience. Experience cannot be discussed apart from Scripture, tradition or revelation. Lash rejects any general account of human experience. When we speak of the doctrine of God's Trinity, therefore, we speak about our experience of God.³⁸ Karl Rahner's insistence that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa was his way of saying that in our experience of God it is really God that we experience, and not a copy or an analogy of God.³⁹

Summary

Lash's doctrine of the Trinity can be briefly stated with three affirmations: 1) the doctrine of God's Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God; 2) the doc-

trine of God's Trinity does not provide us with some direct description of the mystery of God (since God is confessed as mystery from the outset), rather it is grammatical, that is referential (the mystery of God also means that we talk about God negatively). The summary grammar account of the doctrine of the Trinity is recommended as the Christian account of the mystery of salvation and creation; 3) triadic accounts of the intrinsic dialectic of experienced life are most adequate to symbolize the divine life.⁴⁰ Nicholas Lash's doctrine of the Trinity not only allows us to work and think about God, but enables us to worship as well.⁴¹

ASSESSMENT

The God of Theism and the Christian God

Lash is correct in asserting that the God of modern theism is a most unchristian deity. Christians should unashamedly be trinitarians. As Lash maintains, we must, from the beginning, speak of him who is known to us through the Son in the Holy Spirit. I do not believe that such a move makes the apologetical enterprise obsolete, since the agenda of theism is apologetical in nature. As it stands now, however, it most definitely means that the apologetics of modern theism is misleading. If indeed part of the task of apologetics is to clear up false understanding, then apologetically, trinitarianism clarifies the notion that the God of modern theism is not the Christian doctrine of God. Not only has modern theism warped how Christians should be talking about God, it has distorted the Jewish and Muslim concepts as well. In a Christian context to say God is to say God's Trinity.

God Talk

Lash's work is also exceedingly helpful in reminding us how dangerous it is to speak of God, not because he is so far away, but because God is not anything else. Talking of God so easily invites us into a most subtle form of idolatry. In the perception that we have grasped on to God's nature we end up even more distant from him; for our hearts have turned to something less than God. This is why Lash wants to restrict God-talk to negative propositions. Declaring what God is not insures us against idolatry. Indeed the incomprehensibility of God means that at the outset, before we even mention what God is not, we declare that God is mystery. Theism makes the mistake of confessing God as mystery after the discussion of God has gone as far as possible. The doctrine of God's Trinity, on the other hand, is the doctrine of the unknown God who is known to us through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

Yet do we want to speak of God only in the negative? If indeed God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and if God is as God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, then is it not possible and even necessary to speak of God in positive propositions as well? Viewed from this perspective it may mean that we cannot speak positively of God's omniscience or omnipotence; after all, what human being knows what it means to be all-knowing and all-powerful.⁴²

siveness in dealing with the subject of parable interpretation.

After a brief summary of conclusions to part one, part two, the author's analysis of particular parables, begins in chapter six. In this part of the text the author fully accomplishes his stated goal: to apply his distinctive method to the parables, defend their authenticity, and point out allegorical elements, without doing a full-blown exegesis. Blomberg gets to the heart of each parable and distills its essence down to two or three main points. What results is an accurate synopsis of the focal teachings of each parable, making this volume an excellent reference for use in testing the results of one's own exegetical work.

The author seems to be particularly sensitive to the modern homiletical applications of the parables. He finds a delicate balance between false, anachronistic exegesis and the beneficial moral and spiritual outcome of such exegesis by distinguishing between the author's original intention and perfectly valid modern reapplications. In this way, he is careful not to throw the "applicatory baby" out with the "over-allegorized bath water."

While the author's analyses of the various parables in chapters six through eight are for the most part accurate, there are a few exceptions. The first is his examination of the parable of the children in the marketplace in chapter six. At the start of this chapter, entitled "Simple Three-Point Parables," he explains that these "monarchic parables" typically portray an authority figure judging between two subordinates on the basis of contrasting (moral versus immoral) behavior. The authority figure almost always stands for God or his representatives (angels or Abraham). The parable of the children in the marketplace (Mt. 11:16-19) does not fit this pattern in the least. First, the judging figure (the seated children) actually rejects God rather than revealing Him in the act of condemning the other children (God's representatives, John the Baptist and Jesus). Second, the subordinates here are not distinguished on the basis of good and bad behavior; Jesus and John both faithfully represented God, only in different fashions. Third, there is no judgment made between the subordinates, but rather both subordinates are rejected by the seated children. In this parable wickedness is ascribed to the judging figure, not to either of the subordinates.

Chapter seven, "Complex Three-Point Parables," contains the other two exceptions to the author's otherwise splendid analysis of the parables. In his discussion of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), Blomberg erroneously excludes the possibility of degrees of rewards in heaven. He can only make such an assertion by totally ignoring the Matthean context of the parable.

Just prior to the telling of this parable, Peter had inquired what would be the disciples' reward for leaving everything to follow Jesus (19:22-27). In response, Jesus had promised the Twelve a special status in the coming kingdom, and the rest of his disciples the multiplied return of all they had abandoned to follow Him (19:28-29). Immediately following the parable an internecine dispute breaks out among the disciples over who would obtain the positions of highest honor in the kingdom (seated by Christ). Jesus settles the

becomes the indispensable arena in which God is discussed. Yet I must state that doctrine should also be understood as substantive in some way. I do not believe that Lash's approach excludes doctrine as substance. Certainly doctrine is more than grammar. Didn't Nicea assume that it was accomplishing more in its doctrinal pronouncements than providing grammatical constraints?

Concluding Remarks

Lash is indeed right. Talking about God is very dangerous business. He is also correct to assert that, in spite of this, we can continue to talk about God. Complete silence is not the answer. This would be agnosticism. The event of Jesus Christ has brought God into focus and interprets and reinterprets what we know about God. God is as God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. If Karl Barth is right that the confession of God's Trinity is precipitated by the confession "Jesus is Lord," then it is not only important to ask how people are talking about God, but to ask as well how people are talking about Jesus and what are they saying about him. If indeed Jesus is really who the Scriptures and the historic creeds confess, then talking about God is not only dangerous, it is necessary.

NOTES

¹Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. 227.

²Ibid., p. 103. Here Lash refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Deism," "Deist," "Theism," "Theist."

³Ibid., p. 264.

⁴Ibid., p. 277.

⁵Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 1. See Nicholas Lash, "Considering the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2 (April 1986): 185.

⁶Lash, "Considering the Trinity," p. 187.

⁷Ibid., p. 185.

⁸Ibid., pp. 185-186.

⁹Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 103.

¹⁰Idem, "Considering the Trinity," p. 186. See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 222.

¹¹Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, pp. 98-99, 111.

- ¹²Idem, "Considering the Trinity," p. 187.
- ¹³Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, pp. 231-232.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 233.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 226.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 232.
- ¹⁷Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 257.
- ¹⁸Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 257.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 258.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 259.
- ²²Ibid., pp. 159-160.
- ²³Ibid., p. 260.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 266.
- ²⁵Idem, "Considering the Trinity," p. 189.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 183.
- ²⁷Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 267, n. 21.
- ²⁸Idem, "Considering the Trinity," p. 187.
- ²⁹Ibid.
- ³⁰Idem, "Considering the Trinity," p. 188.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³Ibid., p. 191.
- ³⁴This is Karl Rahner's expression. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 279.
- ³⁵It is my contention that the modern notion of person is simply a false category.
- ³⁶Lash, "Considering the Trinity," p. 192.
- ³⁷Ibid.
- ³⁸Idem, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 273.
- ³⁹Ibid. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 35.
- ⁴⁰Lash, "Considering the Trinity," pp. 183-184, 192, 194.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 194.

⁴²This does not mean that God is not omniscient and omnipotent. It does mean that in discussing it we have to do so in the negative.

⁴³.Geoffrey Wainwright, “Ecumenical Dimensions of Lindbeck’s ‘Nature of Doctrine.’ ” *Modern Theology* (April 1986): 125-126.

⁴⁴George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 32f.

