

Edmond Zi-Kang Chua

# **‘God-ness’, ‘God-ity’, and God**

A Historical Study and Synthesis of the  
Christian Doctrine of the Divine Being

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To the memory of David Eng Mong Chua (October 8, 1947–September 27, 2015),

a man loving with the Spirit of my Lord Jesus,  
the only begotten Son of God,  
now and forevermore with his blessed Father

## Abstract

A groundbreaking solution to the ageless three-one problematic of the logical coherence of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, *'God-ness', 'God-ity', and God: A Historical Study and Synthesis of the Christian Doctrine of the Divine Being* tracks down and formulates two major conceptions of the idea of 'God' in patristic and modern Christian theology, 'God' variously understood in terms of nature and relationship, and unifies them in a dazzlingly novel, tradition-based notion of a "perichoretic constitution".

According to this illuminating formulation, the divine Trinity is re-imagined as a community of three ontologically dependent entities, a proto-Father, proto-Son, and proto-Holy Spirit. Each of these proto-persons possesses a unique principle of wisdom, will, and agency of action, giving and receiving access to each other's unique principles to allow each single proto-person to be fully constituted as divine person embedded in an ontological framework arising from a communion of being.

In this manner, each divine person may be understood to be fully God, and the only God, because formed in this way from the exhaustive divinity of the ontology-forming fellowship of the three, "Though there are three divine persons, there is only one God;" and this only God is not simply one but generated by the community of three jointly-full divine persons, "Though there is only one God, there are three divine persons."

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## In Clarification

I wish to use this section to issue a clarification pursuant to a statement made in a review of the present work which appeared in *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, Vol. 23, Issue 3, July 2016, pp. 276-79.

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the reviewer, Adetunbi Richard Ogunleye (PhD, Ambrose Alli University), affiliated at the time of the review with the Adekunle Ajasin University in Nigeria, for a summary of the content of my book. I would like, however, to advert to the final sentence of the penultimate paragraph of the review in which the reviewer writes, “However, the author could not achieve his goal as various objections and implications were raised.”

This comment appears to be a reference to the section in the seventh chapter entitled, “An Important Objection Considered”, as well as the focus of the discussion of the eighth, which has in view the implications of the doctrine developed in my book.

I should like to intimate, respectfully, that in the section to which I have adverted, “An Important Objection Considered”, I have done more than simply consider a vital objection; indeed, I mounted an effective rebuttal of the specific objection in question. Furthermore, I believe that my work has succeeded rather than failed at formulating a doctrine of the Trinity which logically and coherently incorporates both the monotheistic idea of God as a single personal being and a Trinitarian one involving an acknowledgment of the full divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as being in their own right.

For avoidance of all doubt, therefore, I have elected to rename the section in question, “An Important Objection Refuted”. Finally, the eighth chapter addresses itself to implications of the doctrine I have developed and not those of the opposing doctrine.

## In Acknowledgement

The result of a drawn-out and personal search for a viable solution to the ostensible logical paradox of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, this very book might not have come into existence without the positive feedback given by an editor of the *Journal of Theological Studies* published by Oxford University Press. I had submitted a shorter manuscript for consideration of publication in the *JTS*, and Graham Gould (PhD, Cantab) responded with an in-depth review of my work on 23 July 2015.

In his critique, Dr. Gould commented on the comprehensive scope of the discussion and the “radical” originality of the coinage of the idea of “proto-divine persons” and a theory concerning how in a purely logical sequence they obtain each other’s unique principles, observing that I employ these conceptions to bring together a substance and relational understanding of the divine being, remarking that in view of these aspects, the shorter manuscript at the time was, in his informed and professional estimation, “a very good and stimulating piece of work.”

The *JTS* editor proceeded to explain at length why he deemed the manuscript submission unsuitable as a prospective journal article, and ultimately urged the reworking of the manuscript through expansion and amendments on areas specifically highlighted in the form of a book.

I have taken assiduous care in attending to the issues broached by Dr. Gould by way of dilating on the original material, which preserves the original final thesis, in such a way as to constitute a full-length monograph.



## Preface

There are a variety of conceptions of the single personal being of God<sup>1</sup> in light of triple personhood. By the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine of Hippo throughout their writings on the Trinity, God is posited as nature.<sup>2</sup> The being of God is equated in the thought of Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea with the person of the Father.<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth conceives of God as a particular state of the divine persons.<sup>4</sup> Pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria avers that God comprises the identity common to the divine persons.<sup>5</sup> In the writings of John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton, and Thomas Smail, one is confronted with the idea of the divine being as relational dynamic.<sup>6</sup>

Up until now, Christian theologians are presented in the doctrine of the Trinity with the unique twofold challenge of articulating tenets of a belief which, in the eyes of many, has not seen satisfactory internal synthesis, judging from references to a lack of understanding surrounding the doctrine<sup>7</sup> and attempts right up to the present time to comprehend afresh what it means to refer to God as single or formulate a scripturally

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<sup>1</sup> R. A. te Velde, 'The Divine Person(s): Trinity, Person, and Analogous Naming', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. G. Emery and M. Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Basil of Caesarea, *Spir.* 18.44; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 29.2; Gregory of Nyssa, *Abl.*; and Augustine of Hippo, *Trin.* 7.9.

<sup>3</sup> According to G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), pp. 98–99, 132–33, 142–45.

<sup>4</sup> According to E. Jüngel, *God's Being Is In Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. J. Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 42–45.

<sup>5</sup> Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, pp. 284, 295–301.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, CGT 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 17; C. E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 8–11; T. A. Smail, *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in Our Humanity* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 137–41, 147–50.

<sup>7</sup> A case in point is T. George, introduction to *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. T. George (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 9. Of note also is the skepticism of Maurice Wiles pertaining to the possibility of reconciling arguments mounted in the third and fourth centuries in support of differentiation and oneness in the Godhead respectively. M. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 124 (cited in S. Coakley, 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. S. Coakley and D. A. Pailin [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], pp. 29–30).

accurate analogy of the triune nature of God that bears explanatory value,<sup>8</sup> and expounding it.

Major theologians from the fourth century on have taken seriously implicit New Testament affirmations regarding the full deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From that standpoint, they have sought to do justice to the truth claim, also present in Scripture, to the effect that the deity is also one. Their definitions of what can be called the divine being have been a significant contribution to theological discourse concerning the nature of God as they hold the promise of reconciling in a coherent whole the ideas of God as three and yet as one.

Concurrently, there is also a sense of optimism that the Trinity can finally be coherently formulated as expressed by Brian Edgar at the beginning of his biblical exposition of the Trinity in speaking about the doctrine as being devoid of any real obscurity.<sup>9</sup> Some are sounding a clarion call to take up the immanent Trinity as a subject for exploration as one of eight tasks that form the core of thinking about the Trinity in the present time.<sup>10</sup>

## Object

This study has been undertaken with a view to commending the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in its metaphysical and ontological dimension as logically acceptable and intelligible without sacrificing scriptural faithfulness. A critical assumption is that this goal has not to date been achieved.

To be sure, as the previous section has briefly demonstrated, various conceptions of the being of God have been propounded, all of which pass the test of logical coherence. Whether, however, these same proposals will also be found to be completely consistent with the biblical revelation of the divine being is a different question altogether. The claim that undergirds this conspectus is that there is probably no existing exposition that can adequately account for both the one and three in God. Admittedly, this is an

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<sup>8</sup> J. Macnamara, M. La Palme Reyes, and G. E. Reyes, 'Logic and the Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), p. 7 (cited in J. S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001], pp. 496–98).

<sup>9</sup> B. Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity: Life in God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> G. Emery and M. Levering, "Prospects for Trinitarian Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. G. Emery and M. Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 604–5.

argument not from a positive demonstration that no such works exist, but an inference, grounded in the observation, already noted above, that scholars continue to grapple with the doctrine on a logical and conceptual level.

Nonetheless, lack of clear and undeniable evidence that the logical question of the immanent Trinity has been satisfactorily resolved should not inhibit academic exploration of a better way of understanding the doctrine, even if such a venture has to be justified by a mere assumption.

## Method

To achieve the object of this study, an attempt will be made to synthesize existing conceptions in the hope of uncovering a way to outline a scheme which neglects neither the one nor three in the divine being. Such an approach entails certain corollaries.

Solely those proposals which are useful for the formulation of a logically coherent and scripturally faithful scheme will be considered to any depth. Furthermore, the search for helpful proposals will end as soon as a sufficient number of them has been identified. Although the conceptual accuracy of these ideas will be shown via a survey and analysis of texts from its proponents, this validation will not interact exhaustively or even comprehensively with scholarship touching on those conceptions.

This, again, is due to the focused nature and clear object of the study, which is to develop a proposal concerning the divine being by building on existing schemes. In addition, the choice of theologians for study will not be grounded in any particular rationale, though the Cappadocian Fathers have been selected for their historical role in the formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

## A Note on Style

References to ‘the writer’ are usually to the author of this study.

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<sup>11</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318—381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 676 (cited in M. L. Chiavone, *The One God: A Critically Developed Evangelical Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009], p. 17).

## Abbreviations

AAR	American Academy of Religion
AB	Anchor Bible
<i>Abl.</i>	<i>Ad Ablabium</i>
ACD	Ancient Christian Doctrine
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Liber Apologeticus</i>
<i>C. Ar.</i>	<i>Orationes contra Arianos</i>
<i>Catech.</i>	<i>Oratio catechetica</i>
<i>Comm. not.</i>	<i>Adversus Graecos ex communibus notionibus</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialectica</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Eun.</i>	<i>Contra Eunomium</i>
<i>Exp. fid.</i>	<i>Expositio fidei</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
GNO	Gregorii Nysseni opera
GOTR	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>

<i>JTS</i>	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Mon.</i>	<i>Monologium</i>
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
<i>NZSTb</i>	<i>Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie</i>
OCC	Open Court Classics
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i>
PG	Patrologia Graeca
<i>PGL</i>	<i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i>
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
<i>Sanct. Trin.</i>	<i>De Sancta Trinitate</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>Spir.</i>	<i>Liber de Spiritu Sancto</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>

<i>Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>Utr. Pat.</i>	<i>Utrum Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus De Divinitate substantialiter praedicentur</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae Supplement Series
WSA	The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>

## Introduction

Enshrined in the fourth century Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed<sup>1</sup> subscribed to by Christians from across the three traditions, to wit, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism, the belief that the sole deity, whom Jews and then Christians worshipped, exists in three forms, namely the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,<sup>2</sup> has the status of settled doctrine. A common and widely accepted formulation<sup>3</sup> uses the terminology of being and personhood to distinguish between that which is single and unified in the godhead and that which is triple and differentiated in the same.

Utilizing the concepts of being and personhood, the doctrine of the Trinity can be summed up by a reference to God in the Christian understanding as being the only God, who has existed eternally in three persons, each of whom possesses the fullness of divine being in distinctive relations to the others, without constituting three autonomous deities or gods since there is a mutual interpenetration of the three persons in which each is an integral part of the others, and the others an integral part of each in such a manner that

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the translation of the Greek text printed by G. L. Dossetti in *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli*, pp. 244ff by R. P. C. Hanson in *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318—381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 815–16.

<sup>2</sup> While the Creed of Constantinople does not explicitly state that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and the Son, the idea is implicitly present. See J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2 of *The Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 2:378–79.

<sup>3</sup> Some attempts to make a distinction between God in His oneness and threeness try to eschew the language of personhood altogether, such as that of Rahner. See K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 110 (cited in R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004], p. 295) and P. C. Phan, 'Developments of the doctrine of the Trinity', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Trinity*, ed. P. C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 6. Colin Gunton notes Barth's distinctive approach in *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartsborne and Karl Barth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM, 2001), p. 141.