Trinity's truth reflected in creation

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In any age, when believing the Christian faith is at a low in the diverse cultures of the world, essential doctrines of the Christian faith are often challenged. Although most of the challenges have already been met in the first few centuries of Christianity, old heresies keep reappearing. One such heresy is a denial of the concept of the Trinity. This essay explores the evidence for the Trinity to be found in creation, and provides commentary on the practical implications of this doctrine.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the basic Christian beliefs. It concerns not only the activity of the three Persons in God's plan of salvation, but it addresses a major philosophical question as well—the idea of the one-and-many. This idea is one of the fundamental presuppositions about reality. R.J. Rushdoony writes:

> "Whether recognized or not, every argument and every theological, philosophical, political, or any other exposition is based on a presupposition about man, God, and society—about reality. This presupposition rules and determines the conclusion; the effect is the result of a cause. And one such basic presupposition is with reference to the one and the many."[1]

It might even be argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is the centrality of Christian belief because it helps identify the God whom Christians say is the Creator of the universe. Perhaps it can be argued that the Trinity, while being essential, is an undervalued and underappreciated belief. One writer has gone so far as to suggest that the modernity of our world is the result of a defective view of creation and the Trinity.[2] Thus, a fresh look at the Trinity is in order to see how its practical implications might be understood.

But not only is the Trinity a key doctrine or concept Christian belief, some recent theologians have realized it addresses a central problem related to knowledge. They ask: is there anything that unifies all things; thereby, in the midst of diversity, creating a genuine universe? This question is characteristic of discussions in epistemology;[3] it is referred to as the problem of the one-and-many or as the problem of the existence of universals and particulars. How, then, does the Trinity fit into this philosophical question?

The one-and-many defined

Since the time of Thales there has been discussion on what has become known as the one-and-many problem. There are two parts to the problem of knowledge. First, what is it that unifies everything? Is there some substance such as air, water, fire or earth that is common to all things that provides the unifying principle? If not, is it possible to *make sense* of particular individual objects in the universe? The second part of the problem is the question of individuation: how can we tell the difference between one object and another?[4]

The question of the one-and-many is, as already indicated, therefore, also the problem of universals and particulars. What exactly are universals and particulars? Particulars are the individual things that might be observed. An animal with four legs that has fur is a particular. A thing with four legs that you sit on is a particular. But how is one particular thing distinguished from any other particular thing? That is done by making use of universals. These are categories or generalizations, a way of saying that one particular thing belongs to this category and not another. Thus, an object with four legs that you sit on could be a chair or a horse. And it is by making use of the universals 'chair' and 'horse' the distinction is made (figure 1).

When the phrase *one-and-many* is used in this context, it is important to remember that *many* does not refer to number. It refers to *unity*. Thus, a particular animal we call a horse belongs to a class or group of many animals called horse. The word 'horse', in other words, identifies many individual animals that are *united* in properties (capacities, attributes, qualities, tendencies) that distinguish them from cows or dogs.

There's more. A horse, for example, is an animal and mammal. Animals are distinct from plants. Consequently, people can identify the differences between a rose and a horse, the same way they can tell the difference between a dog and a horse. But without the universal categories such distinctions between particulars are not possible.

The one-and-many of the universe

While the one-and-many issue has application to living (animate) and non-living (inanimate) things, it also has its broadest application in cosmology, in the idea of a *universe*. 'Universe', as has already been alluded to, is a word that combines unity and diversity. It makes us think there is some way of connecting all the diverse particulars of the cosmos with each other. If there is, what is it that even allows us to think such a connection is possible?

Unity comes, as the category of the animal groups indicate, by generalization. This animal kind here has certain features, so we know it is a dog. Without such generalizations all we have are the individual particulars—called 'abstract particulars'. However, abstract particulars have a peculiar feature: *they cannot be known*. The essence of the argument is that abstract particulars are particulars that have no connection to any other particular, and there is, therefore, no possibility of establishing any coherent meaning of the particular that is their bearer. They are what the philosophers call brute facts, or unique facts. They are facts that have no relationship to any other fact. But not only philosophers recognize the notion of brute facts. Molecular biologist Gunther Stent explains,

"Let us recall, first of all, that science—that is, the effort to abstract causal relations from observable public events, of the outer world—is by its very nature a statistical endeavor. The scientist thinks he recognizes some common denominator, structure, in an ensemble of events, infers these events to be related, and then attempts to derive a 'law' explaining the cause of their relation. An event that is unique, or at least that aspect of an event which makes it unique, cannot therefore be the subject of scientific investigation. For an ensemble of unique events *has* no common denominator, and there is nothing in it to explain; such events are *random*, and the observer perceives them as noise."[5]

In other words, events, or things, or particulars, need something that connects them to something else, a *common denominator*. And it is the common denominator that eventually helps provide meaning for the particular, whatever it might be.

Is there, then, something that ties all the individual parts of the universe together? For the Greek philosophers the answer to this question was to be found within the universe itself: fire, earth, water, or even air. That is, they sought an *immanent* solution to the problem of knowledge. The questions of essence, motion, and being occupied their thoughts, but they were unable to find satisfactory answers to these issues. Two key figures to emerge in the debate were Heraclitus and Parmenides. For Heraclitus, everything was in constant change and motion. The emphasis here is on the many. Nothing remains the same, for you cannot step into the same river twice. Not only has the river changed, but the person stepping into the water has changed, even if imperceptibly. Parmenides, on the other hand, emphasized the oneness of reality—its unchanging nature. Gunton described Parmenides' view as "Reality is timelessly and uniformly what it is, so that Parmenides is the philosopher of the One *par excellence*."[6] It implies that Heraclitus was the philosopher of 'manyness'.

The Greeks sought an *immanent* solution to the one-and-many issue because they believed all reality was one. For them, there was no concept, as there is in Christianity, of an uncreated reality as well as a created reality. Metaphysically, everything was of one 'stuff'. For the Greeks, the many came out of the one. But if everything is ultimately one, how can differentiation be achieved?

When taken to its logical conclusion, as is done in some aspects of Hinduism, there is no plurality of objects in the universe: all is one. In this view, God, man, and the devil

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Figure 1. Two objects. Both have four legs and you sit on them. But what is the difference, and how is that difference identified?

were ultimately the same. If there is a divine mind, there is no *substantial* difference between that mind and the mind of man. Any difference is one of quality only. But if God, the devil, and man are ultimately the same, then everything is finally meaningless and irrelevant.

Thus, in the case of Plato, all of reality was interpreted in the light of Ideas,[7] but he could not get around the problem of unity and particularity. If particular items cannot be differentiated, then on what basis can particulars be brought together to form some kind of unity? In Christianity, on the other hand, all of reality is interpreted on the basis of the ontological Trinity. And therein lies Christianity's solution to the one-and-many problem, as we shall see below.

Before exploring the solution, consider the idea of the one-and-many has application in other areas, too.

The one-and-many of words

We can also think of words. Each word is a particular. But each particular word finds its meaning within a broader context of universals. Nouns, verbs, subject and predicate, are all categories that provide meaning to *particular* words. Without those syntactical relationships, words are mere sounds and have little or no meaning at all.

The one-and-many of relationships

Any attempt to deal with the question of human relationships identifies very quickly the problem of the one-and-many. What is more important: the marriage or the individuality of husband and wife? In local communities there is a challenge to balance the needs of individuals with that of the community itself. In its broadest terms, politics can be seen as an expression of the one-and-many, where totalitarianism is an attempt at unity by repression of the individual. Complete libertarianism, on the other hand, emphasizes the individual at the expense of the many. Thus the history of mankind can be seen as a panorama of the working out of the one-and-many issue in relationships.

The opportunity that was missed

Reading Greek philosophy is to read the vain attempts to resolve the question of the one-and-many from a non-biblical perspective. It is the key to knowledge, to epistemology. And it should not surprise us that unbelieving philosophers tend to abandon traditional epistemology and limit it to what can be verified, or perhaps try to find the solution in the structure of language.[8] That is because they have not found a genuine way of resolving the problem of identifying any unifying principle. But if you step backwards in time, you find that the Christian theologians were not offering any solution to the problem of the unbelieving philosophers. And it is this

failure that Colin Gunton, in his 1992 Bampton Lectures, identifies as the doorway to modernity.

Thus, Christians might have their creedal formulations about the Trinity, but it was a belief that seemed to have very little practical outcome in the world. Or so some people thought. The effect was, however, that the quest for knowledge and a better life led to Christianity being seen as an unnecessary or irrelevant ingredient.

Part of the problem was an imbalance in doctrinal teaching. For example, the monolithic church of the latter Middle Ages seems to emphasize the unity of the one at the expense of the many as people sought a little more freedom from ecclesiastical influence. Gunton states it thus: "much modern social and political thought can be understood as the revolt of the many against the one, and at the same time that of humanity against divinity".[9] This should not be surprising. For as early as the 16th century God was becoming irrelevant to the important questions of epistemology, such as "How do we know?" Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was quite adamant that any attempt to build science on either Greek philosophy or the Bible was an exercise in futility. Rene Descartes (1596–1650), in similar fashion, was arguing that knowledge was certain not because of God's existence but because of his own. *Cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am. The divorce between God and everything else became very bad, a state which historian Henry Buckle expressed as follows:

> "Among the innumerable symptoms of this great movement [of secularism—IH], there were two of peculiar importance. These were the separation of theology, first from morals, and second from politics. The separation from morals was effected late in the seventeenth century; the separation from politics before the middle of the eighteenth century. And it is a striking instance of the decline of the old ecclesiastical spirit, that both of these great changes were begun by the clergy themselves."[10]

The great movement was the secularization of culture. Not that secularization achieved any significant benefit. Apparently when man attempts to find the unifying principle of all knowledge within himself he fares worse, rather than better, as we shall see below.

The history of Christian theology reveals that there was very little attempt to address the issue of the one-and-many from a biblical perspective. It is as if the Bible were silent on the subject. This is acknowledged by Colin Gunton when he said that the modern age "or aspects of it at least, arose out of the failure of the doctrine of creation".[11] It is within the doctrine of the Trinity, however, that the unique biblical response is to be found regarding the one-and-many issue.

Gunton argued that the modern world was a result of the failure of Christendom to develop a theology of creation that dealt with the one-and-many. He attributed the failure to the influence of Platonism in Christian theology. The result was
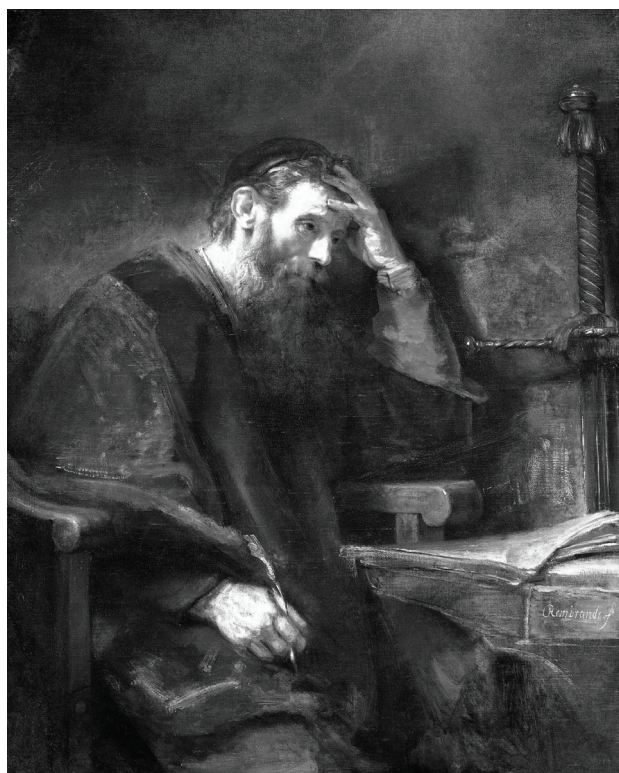
Figure 2. The Apostle Paul.

an abstract doctrine of creation that contributed little to the questions of particularity over 'manyness'. The defective theology, with its emphasis on unity, was abandoned as people then rejected God as their solution to the question of particularity or individuality.

> "Christian theology, although it had every op-
> portunity to develop a theology of creation in which
> the rights of the particular were given due place, made
> the major mistake of entering into the wrong kind of
> compromise with Platonism."[12]

Thus, the problem is a disconnect between the real world elements of the one-and-many—that is, creation—and the doctrine of God.

The solution

With this as background to the issue, we come to the doctrine of the Trinity as a solution to the problem of knowledge, the one-and-many or universals and particulars, and therefore as a solution to the issues of relationships, or community. Christian theism provides a solution to the one-and-many problem in the Trinity where the absolute, self-sufficient God is both unity and diversity. Thus R.C. Sproul:

> "But in the Christian faith, all diversity finds its
> ultimate unity in God Himself, and it is significant
> that even in God's own being we find both unity and

diversity—in fact, in Him we find the ultimate ground for unity and diversity."[13]

Cornelius Van Til recognized the question of the one-and-many as a metaphysical issue.

> "Using the language of the One-and-Many question
> we contend that in God the one and the many are
> equally ultimate. Unity in God is no more fundamental
> than diversity, and diversity in God is no more
> fundamental than unity."[14]

This is referred to as the *ontological* Trinity, and describes the relationships of the Trinity within itself.[15]

But if the Trinity is so important, it should be apparent in the universe created by the triune God. And it is, but there are some questions to be answered in order to appreciate both creation and the Trinity.

The origin of the one-and-many

Since universals and particulars can be identified, it is reasonable to argue that they have their origins in God and not in man-made categories distinguishing between particulars. This is precisely what the Bible teaches.

Genesis 1 records the following words:

> "And God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation,
> plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in
> which is their seed, each according to its kind, on
> the earth.' And it was so. The earth brought forth
> vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own
> kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed,
> each according to its kind. And God saw that it was
> good" (Gen. 1:11–12).

There, right at the foundation of the universe, God created particulars and kinds (universals). In other words, the very notion of universals and particulars has as its origin in God, who is the ultimate particular and universal, the ultimate one-and-many.

When the Apostle Paul (figure 2) wrote his letter to the church in Rome, he had the idea that the God who created all things—his divine power and attributes—were evident in the creation itself. So clear were they, Paul said, that all men are 'without excuse' when it comes to the question of the existence of God and the origin of the universe.

> "For what can be known about God is plain to them,
> because God has shown it to them. For his invisible
> attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature,
> have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of
> the world, in the things that have been made. So they
> are without excuse" (Rom. 1:19–20).

Paul's understanding of God's nature, however, was not a limited, unitarian (i.e. non-Trinitarian) view. For Paul, it was the Messiah in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). This point he made again in his first letter to the Corinthians when he wrote, "yet for us there is one
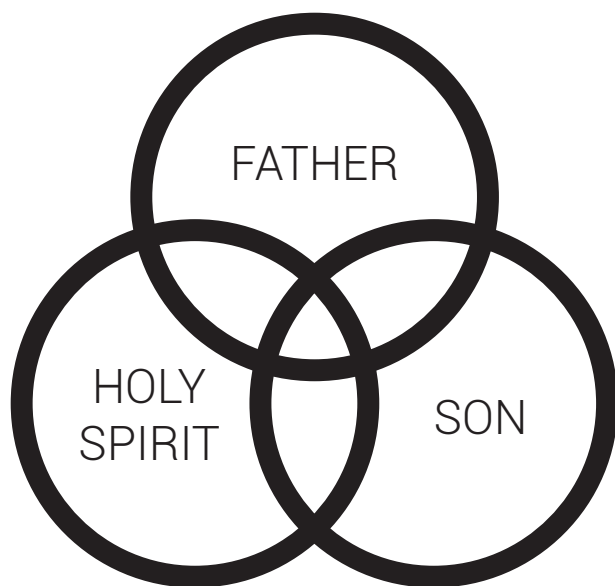
UNITY and DIVERSITY

Figure 3. The ontological One-and-Many is thereby an explanation for the existence of universals and particulars.

God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, through whom were created all things and through whom we have our being" (I Cor. 8:6, CJB). Paul was clear on the origin of *existence*, echoing the words of John's Gospel:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1–4).

It was the Gospel of John, more than any other, which encouraged the development of the idea of the Trinity. It is not too difficult, then, to take a small step from the words of Scripture concerning God to the creation and the Trinity. Because universals and particulars are found in the creation, the creation reveals not only the power of God but his attributes. Creation reveals a one-and-many universe brought into existence by a one-and-many triune God.

Implicit in the *facts* of the universe from the biblical position is the idea that *all facts* are *created facts* (except God, who is, by definition, uncreated, since He is eternal). No fact derives its true meaning from any other source other than the Creator. This is another meaning in the words of Paul, that the creation reveals the Creator. And because all the facts of the universe are known by God and are where they are by the creative act of God, there really is a *uni*verse that is not an accumulation of unknowable abstractions. Without such a belief in a unifying principle in a universe,

science is not possible. It is the unifying principle, the common denominator, that provides order and coherence—rationality—to the universe. This is one of the unproven assumptions of science.[16] So it is not a coincidence that science has grown on the back of a Christian culture and worldview in the West.[17]

God is the author of the one-and-many

Thus, in *Christian* theology, the *temporal* one-and-many is set over against the *ontological* One-and-Many, God. The ontological One-and-Many is thereby an explanation for the existence of the temporal one-and-many. Such a view does not exist outside of Trinitarian Christianity, so it is not surprising that the general discussion of the one-and-many issue outside of Trinitarian Christianity rarely takes place (figure 3). Secular philosophers ignore the question because an adequate resolution to the issue has not been found by them. But biblical commentators can also miss the point because they do not appreciate the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Anthony Buzzard, for example, argues that the Trinity is Platonic in origin.[18] In dismissing the topic, however, it was evident he had no intention of supplying any alternative explanation for the existence of universals and particulars. Such a dismissal naturally fails to explain why the universe reveals the one-and-many, universals and particulars. Why is the universe like this? Since God created the universe, what did He use as a model for the universals-particulars universe? The doctrine of the Trinity suggests that God Himself is the model of the universe. There is no answer to that question of what ties *everything* together, the one-and-many, outside of the Trinitarian concept of God. In other words, the universe reflects God Himself. God's revelation of Himself in both Scripture and his creation thus weaves a single story.

Practical considerations

The one-and-many issue, however, is not simply a cosmological question. It has implications in human relations. This led Colin Gunton to ask, "In what manner is, or should be, a human society a unity or totality; and in what sense a set of more or less loosely connected individuals?"[19] R.J. Rushdoony devoted a whole book to the practical implications of the Trinity in a discussion on political theory.[20] The history of mankind is an ongoing story of the struggle to find the balance between unity and diversity. Should the individual be free to do as he pleases? If so, how can there be unity (or, we might say, community)? Or is the individual to be suppressed and absorbed into the One? If so, what is the One that will absorb individuality?

The Greeks, unable to find a *transcendent* answer to the one-and-many issue, ended with an *immanent* answer, individual man subject to politics. Hence Plato, in his

Republic. But with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent development of the Trinity, a universal was found that was truly transcendent. This means, among other things, that the political order *cannot* be the unifying principle for man. For the political order itself is subject to God, the ultimate One-and-Many.

Throughout the ages the question of man in society has been discussed, and central to this is the role of the state. In the doctrine of the Trinity there is an equality of the One-and-Many. God is both one and many at the same time, and because He is absolute perfection, there is equal ultimacy of the One and the Many. In God, there is both individuality and unity and they are equally important. In God, unity does not destroy individual persons, nor do the individual persons destroy unity. They are equal in every way.

In practical terms, the doctrine of the Trinity stands against all forms of totalitarianism in the activities of man. Neither church nor state can claim a form of absoluteness that enforces oneness (unity) at the expense of the many (individuality). Thus it is not surprising to find that where Trinitarianism has triumphed, so too has the idea of liberty for man in the political realm. All forms of communism or totalitarianism are rejected because they attempt to force the oneness or unity of man at the expense of the individual. But at the same time, anarchy is also rejected because it promotes the individual at the expense of unity. Even in family, the Trinity provides a frame of reference for balancing the family as a unit against the individuals in the family.

The non-Christian world struggles with an either/or understanding of particulars and unity. Because anarchism has so low an acceptance due to its near impossibility, the swing in non-Christian cultures is to unity—the total absorption of the individual into the body politic, the state. The later Caesars of the Roman Empire sought unity, and the origin of the Christian persecutions were an attempt to stamp out diversity in the Empire. Another example of this is Islam, with its concept of Allah as a monad. In the words of Robert Letham:

> "Islam's doctrine of God leaves room neither for diversity, diversity in unity, nor a personal grounding of creation, for Allah is a solitary monad with unity only. The Islamic doctrine of God is centered on power and will. There is virtually no room for love."[21]

> Any love in this context would amount to narcissism, almost the direct opposite of the biblical concept of love.

When people today realize the encroachments of the political order upon individuality in various forms, such as control of education, even in private schools, what they are witnessing is the unbeliever's solution to the one-and-many issue. Having denied the Triune God as the resolution of the one-and-many problem, unbelievers locate the solution in the only place remaining, man himself, and in particular the political order, the state. But man, especially sinful man, has nothing within himself to balance unity and diversity, so the drift towards totalitarian is both noticeable and real.

What now?

The rise of the Enlightenment and its rejection of God, however, raised the question of the one-and-many again, though many people did not realize it as such. But with the abandonment of God came the rejection of God as the unifying principle of all things.

What did the Enlightenment propose as an alternative to the one-and-many problem, which is inescapable (just because God is rejected does not mean the *concept* of the one-and-may disappears)? Rather, it means the attributes and powers of God are merely transferred somewhere else.

Where, then, is the unifying principle in the post-Enlightenment to be found? There are obvious contenders, such as the pursuit of happiness. But a much stronger candidate is this: the mind of man, who is to bring unity to the universe but which does so *without* any reference to God. Thus Gunton:

> "God was no longer needed to account for the coherence and meaning of the world, so that the seat of rationality and meaning became not the world, but the human reason and will, which thus *displace* God or the world. When the unifying will of God becomes redundant, or is rejected for a variety of moral, rational and scientific reasons, the focus of the unity of things becomes the unifying rational mind."[22]

> What started as air, water, fire and earth has now become the autonomous reason of man himself. And if events in the world are any indication of the failure to find a meaningful answer to the one-and-many, this is not working out very well. The French and Bolshevik Revolutions stand as monuments to man's failure to provide a principle that balances individuality and unity.

From a biblical perspective, it all began with the attempt of man to "be like God" (Gen. 3:5), and is a unifying principle doomed from the outset. In the history of man, "unitary deity, whether theist or deist, is commonly seen to be at the root of totalitarian or repressive forms of social order".[23] If the unifying principle is man and now man 'playing God', then the man-god is a 'unitary deity' and totalitarian and repressive forms of social order are the consequence. "[T]he displacement of God does not and has not given freedom and dignity to the many, but has subjected us to new and often unrecognized forms of slavery."[24]

It is reasonable to say, as the modern world struggles with the questions of unity and diversity, and personal freedom against national unity, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity provides a true balance in what is a largely unbalanced arrangement in human relationships.

Music and the trinity

A few comments about music, my own profession, are in order. Western music had a high point in relation to the concept of the Trinity and is especially characteristic of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). For example, a fugue is a composition that has many voices, but they create a unity in sound. It is not a mere 'accident' of Western culture that such music should arise in those places most affected by Trinitarian belief. Bach may not have self-consciously thought *I'm composing Trinitarian music*, but he inherited a rich background of counterpoint that allowed him to take a particular art form to its highest pinnacle, a true application of the One-and-Many in everyday life. As the culture has moved away from its Trinitarian moorings, music has tended to be either a single unity (melody) with harmony, or has broken down into a cacophony of individual but unrelated sounds. It is the opinion of the writer that 'avant-garde' art can, therefore, be seen as the empty hope of creating unity out of chaos, which echoes the ancient Near-Eastern chaos religions.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity is a very important doctrine, not only for our understanding of the nature and character of the Creator, but also that of the world in which we live. Without such a doctrine that explains the one-and-many (universals and particulars), the scientific community lacks an adequate justification to distinguish between a dog and a horse. The development of science in the Trinitarian Western world is an illustration of the practical aspects of Christian theology.

But the idea of the Trinity works in abstraction without the doctrine of creation. It is only as the doctrine of creation in all its fullness is restored that the Trinity can once again become the unifier of both cosmology and social order.

So, too, has the development of federalism as a political concept been unique to Christianity. Under federalism, each area (e.g. state, nation, family) has its own unique jurisdiction, and one sphere should not encroach on the God-given areas of the others. This serves to prevent the development of a totalitarian regime, instead balancing the immanent one-and-many with the transcendent One-and-Many, who alone is capable of creating community without destroying individuality or the individual.

In the area of politics, the Trinity provides a balance to be applied in the practice of order and ultimacy. And it is only a return to orthodox Trinitarian Christianity that can provide an antidote to the totalitarian dreamers and a satisfactory solution to the meaning of the universe.

In the broader context of human relationships, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a rich framework for balancing the needs of individuals against those of the group. The practical application of the Trinity is thus an urgent and necessary task by those who hold to the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

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