



## Divine Plurality: The Invitation of the Trinitarian Dogma

| van Buren, Paul M.

**The doctrine of the Trinity, indeed the dogma, is in serious need of attention, and not least because, instead of being our joyous confession of God-with-us, Emmanuel, and so of our identity before God, it has become a problem for most Christians.**

### The Invitation of the Trinitarian Dogma

by Paul M. van  
Buren

It is an  
honor, a  
privilege,  
and a  
pleasure to  
be here to  
deliver the  
first of what I  
hope will  
be a long list  
of lectures in  
theology at  
what I  
believe to be  
its utterly  
decisive  
and ecclesia-  
stically  
essential  
center,  
namely, how

our theology  
is shaped by  
and  
responsive  
to the God-  
given  
relationship  
between the  
church of  
Jesus Christ  
and the  
people of  
Jesus  
Christ. The  
church's  
theology  
arose out of  
that  
concrete,  
earthy  
relationship,  
but it got  
dangerously  
side-tracked  
into the  
generalities  
of God and  
humankind,  
or into the  
abstractions  
of divinity  
and  
humanity.  
The sad  
result was  
that theology  
came to be  
and  
continues to  
be regarded  
by the rank  
and file of  
the church  
as an  
abstract,  
esoteric, and  
even incomp  
rehensible  
activity best  
left to profes  
sionals. It is  
fitting that  
these  
lectures in

concrete  
theology  
should be  
named for  
one of the  
pioneers of  
this return to  
our senses,  
Dr. Lee  
Archer  
Belford, may  
his name be  
remembered

.

For this first Belford lecture, I have chosen to take a fresh look at that most characteristic and defining teaching of the church, the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine, indeed dogma, is in serious need of attention, and not least because, instead of being our joyous confession of God-with-us, Emmanuel, and so of our identity before God, it has become a problem for most Christians. The problem was nicely formulated by Dorothy Sayers some years ago in her version of the typical lay understanding of the so-called Athanasian Creed: "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible –

the whole damn thing incomprehensible." Many clergy, instead of looking forward to preaching on Trinity Sunday, seek excuses to avoid it, because for them too the glad tidings of this earthy doctrine have been muffled.

We can begin some fresh thinking about this doctrine by starting from where we are at present. After some four decades of an ever deepening and widening conversation with Jews, most branches of the church have made formal declarations affirming the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Reversing much traditional Christian teaching, the churches are now affirming that that covenant is eternal and that the Jewish people today are God's people Israel, as much the enduring form of ancient Israel as the church today is the enduring form of the church of the apostles. That is the conclusion reached in a WCC study of "Statements of the

World Council of Churches and its Member Churches," titled *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People* (1988). That is where we are now.

This growing Christian consensus is something new in the history of the church: it is a confession of the faithfulness of God, not to us, but to another. It constitutes, therefore, an addition, or it provides a new twist, to our understanding of God. If we remain true to our biblical foundations and to the insight of the Greek fathers that God is what God has done, is doing, and will do; and if we now confess (for the first time since the days of the Apostle to the Gentiles) that God's gift and call are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), then we are saying something new about God. We are saying that God has gone on being the loving God of the Jewish people all these centuries and right up into our own day.

The question that thus confronts us is: How we are to think about and pray to God now that we have come to renewed awareness of God's continuing relationship with the Jewish people? More specifically, how will this new apprehension of God's faithfulness to the Jewish people affect what we have said about God in our doctrine of the Trinity? Or to put it another way, if dogmas stand as old and tested guidelines for the church's life and language, then what new directions are to be detected in the trinitarian dogma by a church that has only recently discovered that it lives in the world alongside, not in place of, the Israel of God?

---

Some of us have been thinking hard about this question over the past ten or fifteen years and some of us think we have found at least the beginnings of an answer. Given the long tradition of almost nineteen centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and the

displacement  
theology of the anti-  
Judaic church that  
we have been, it  
seems essential, for  
our own souls"  
health, to begin our  
thinking whenever  
possible with the  
Sinai covenant that  
is so central to the  
developed Jewish  
tradition. If we do  
this, then we shall  
begin our  
distinctively  
Christian confession  
of faith by affirming  
that the God of  
Sinai can do and  
has done a new  
thing: the God of  
Sinai and of Israel is  
also fully present in  
the Jew Jesus and  
so is also God of  
and for Gentiles.

Putting Sinai first is  
a therapeutic move.  
Nineteen centuries  
of addiction are not  
easy to break, so  
we need to be firm  
with ourselves. We  
have drunk from the  
anti-Judaic jug so  
long that we have to  
keep that bottle out  
of reach. We should  
do well to take a tip  
from Alcoholics  
Anonymous. In our  
case, the AA stands  
for Anti-Judaics  
Anonymous. In  
order to stay away  
from that bottle, we  
need to start with  
Sinai, not Genesis  
1. Genesis 12 is  
where the Israel

story really gets started, and that is where it would be healthy for us to start. Perhaps in some distant future we shall be cured enough to go back and start from Genesis 1, as does the first article of the creed of the anti-Judaic church. But until we can be sure we won't once more hit the bottle that has Auschwitz written on its bottom, we should do well to start with Sinai and so make Genesis 12 and following, and then Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers. and Deuteronomy, our central texts for guiding how we speak of God. Those were probably the basic texts for the Jew who has become our Lord, and they certainly were and are for the developed tradition of the Jewish people.

This shift of emphasis means for us that we may not indulge in trapeze leaps from Genesis 1 to Matthew 1. Such a leap is evident in the creeds. I am not recommending that the creeds be



either abandoned or edited, but I am certainly suggesting that these are insufficient guides for the church today, because the creeds skip over just those parts of the story that could save us from misunderstanding the whole. The reason why we ought not to leap from Genesis 1 to Matthew 1 is because Matthew 1 and all the rest of the New Testament following it present us a Jesus "according to the Scriptures," certainly including the five books of Moses. The Jesus they present to us, and the only Jesus the church has ever had or needed, is the Jesus wrapped in all the Scriptures of the Jewish tradition.

This connection between Jesus and the whole of Israel's story is vital for us. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus left the disciples speechless, as their own testimony makes plain. They found their way out of speechlessness by way of the Scriptures. They found in those

Scriptures words with which to speak of Jesus's death and resurrection. So it came about that he always died for us and was raised "according to the Scriptures" ( 1 Cor. 15:3-4), and often word for word. Was he in fact born in Bethlehem? Did Judas in fact receive thirty pieces of silver to betray him? Was Jesus actually crucified between two thieves? Did Roman soldiers really cast lots for his garments? I doubt whether we shall ever know. What we can know is that all this was told of him in words taken from the Scriptures. The result is that Jesus– the only Jesus we have ever known– meets us and comes to us clothed in and inseparable from the traditions of his people. We simply cannot have one without the other.

Unless we are prepared to accept a gnostic, a-historical Jesus, we have no choice but to take him in the context of his people. Therefore we need to take the whole continuing history of the Jewish

people into account in order to have Jesus at all. When we understand this, then we begin to realize that to start with Sinai means that our doctrine of the triune God will be, as it always was for the Greek fathers, concerned with the economic Trinity. In other words, our doctrine of God will be, and ought to be, inescapably historical and functional. God, so far as we dare speak of God at all, is for us what God does for us, and God is known by us through God's actions. God is creator; God is elector; God is the maker and keeper of covenants. And God is the One who through the Spirit meets us in Jesus Christ.

God *is* that and all that, not someone or something that lies behind all that. In this, our knowledge of God is logically on a par with our knowledge of each other. You yourself are all the actual relationship in which you live and all the activities in which you have, are, and will be engaged. That is

the real you and  
that is the real me.  
Of course, I can  
say with reference  
to some particular  
situation, "But that  
wasn't the real  
me," and the truth in  
that will be that  
none of us is only  
who we are in a  
single action.  
Nevertheless, when  
we put all of it  
together, and  
especially when we  
do that in a story,  
we have the fullest  
and most accurate  
account possible of  
who we are. So it is  
with Israel's story  
of God, which  
comes to the church  
as the essential  
context of the story  
of Jesus Christ. So  
the essential unity  
of God appears as a  
unity of narrative:  
the one subject of  
Israel's long story is  
what Israel, and so  
the church, means  
by "God."

Because of this  
close connection  
between Jesus and  
Israel, reflected in  
the connection  
between Israel's  
story and the story  
of Jesus, and  
because his story is  
told as of one who  
was of and for his  
people, the two  
testaments are  
really all one story.  
The church has only  
one single,

undivided Bible,  
from Genesis to the  
Revelation of John.  
Put in the language  
of the story, what  
the God of Sinai has  
done and is doing in  
Christ is fully faithful  
to God's self. The  
creedal formulation  
of this claim is to  
assert that we  
believe in Jesus  
Christ, *theon ek  
theou, phos ek  
photos*, God from  
God, light from light.  
The story of Jesus  
continues to be the  
story of God, for  
God is shown to be  
true to God's own  
self in the story of  
Jesus. But since  
God's own self is all  
that God has done  
and is doing, then  
not only is the  
creator present in  
Jesus but also the  
maker and keeper  
of covenants and  
promises to God's  
people Israel. No  
wonder then that  
the results, the facts  
on the ground, we  
might say, were  
both creative and  
covenantal. I refer  
to the creation of  
the Christian  
community as a  
covenantal  
community of  
response and of  
responsibility. And  
as Paul saw so  
clearly, this took  
place in such a  
way as to confirm  
God's continuing  
covenantal  
faithfulness to the

Jewish people:  
"Christ became a servant to the Jewish people to show God's truthfulness," Paul wrote, "in order to *confirm* the promises given to the patriarchs" (Rom. 15:8). This continuity of God's story in the story of Jesus is the crucial truth which the trinitarian doctrine is meant to preserve.

That last quotation from Paul, however, brings out something lacking in our traditional doctrine of the Trinity, something that a church that wished to move beyond its anti-Judaic past would find it absolutely essential to add. Jesus became a servant *to his people*, not just obedient to his people's God, and God was not only faithful to his son Jesus, but was faithful to him in such a way as to *confirm God's covenant* with the Jewish people. How different might have been the interacting histories of the church of God and the Jewish people of God had this Pauline theme been preserved in

the church's  
doctrine of the  
Trinity.

---

In our review of  
where we have  
come thus far, I  
have been  
concentrating on the  
covenantal  
continuity within  
which alone the  
novelty of Christ  
makes sense. I now  
want to see if we  
can move further,  
by rethinking the  
novelty of Christ  
that can only appear  
as such within that  
continuity. I turn  
again for help to the  
Jewish Apostle to  
the Gentiles. "In  
Christ," Paul  
claimed, "God was  
reconciling the  
world to himself" (2  
Cor.5:19). We could  
rephrase that by  
saying: Emmanuel,  
God-with-us, was  
and is drawing all  
people to God's  
self, God's own  
people Israel first of  
all, but then also the  
Gentiles. That is  
what Jesus did,  
does, and who he  
therefore is: God's  
way of drawing all  
creation to God's  
self.

I want to begin by  
asking two  
questions about this

claim: What did it mean to its Jewish author in the first century, and what are we to make of it today? We know that the author was a Pharisee, surely the best attested Pharisee of whom we know, but not yet, of course, a Mishnaic rabbi, so he would not yet have learned, as we have learned from later Jewish thought, to focus so centrally on Sinai. He was more inclined to think of God as God of the fathers as well as the giver of Torah. This God, through the profound faithfulness of Jesus (a faithfulness so profound as to lead Paul to think that God had bestowed on Jesus, just as he had on Israel [Deut. 28:10], the name of the one to whom he was so faithful) was bringing the Gentiles into God's story with Israel. The great line of demarcation remained, but the conflict associated with it was fading away: no longer was it to be God and Israel versus the world; now God and all creation were together, groaning for the promised redemption of all.



Paul was obviously aware of the Jew/Gentile distinction, of the separateness or holiness of the Jewish people, and of the enmity between Jew and Gentile, and he had a suspicion, but not of course the knowledge that we have, of how badly Gentile Christians were going to treat his people. For a Jew and so for Paul, the Jew/Gentile distinction was fundamental, grounded as it was in God's electing will, but now in Christ, God was working with it in a new way.

---

If that is a reasonably fair picture of what lay behind Paul's first-century claim, what are we to make of it today? At the least, we are obliged to qualify it to some extent by our awareness of the history that lies between then and now. What has become increasingly clear to us is that we Christians do not exhaust the world of Gentiles. Those who are aware that God has reconciled

them to himself specifically in Christ consist only of a fraction of the Gentiles. We must add parenthetically that perhaps that fraction was all that Paul had in mind when referring in Romans 11 to the full number of the Gentiles.

As the opening section of *Nostra Aetate* can remind us, however, our situation today has become more complicated. On the other hand, we are aware of a biblical perspective which we Gentile Christians share to some extent with the Jewish people, but which we do not share with the great majority of Gentiles or non-Jews who have their own perspectives. On the other hand, we are also aware of what some might call a religious outlook or orientation, whatever that might be, which we share more with Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus than with most Jews, and which may be contrasted with the secular orientation of much of humanity. I think we can say that most

Christians today,  
but by no means all,  
and many Jews,  
but probably not the  
majority, find  
themselves drawn  
together both by a  
biblical perspective  
and a religious  
orientation. The  
paradoxical result is  
that we are thereby  
distinguished  
under the biblical  
heading from  
peoples of the  
Eastern traditions  
but allied to them  
under the religious  
heading. Ours is a  
situation  
considerably more  
complicated than  
the one of which  
Paul was aware.

How then are we to  
read the claim of 2  
Corinthians 5:19? In  
the light of history,  
we can begin by  
saying that in Christ,  
God was reconciling  
some of us Gentiles  
to God's self and so  
to God's covenant  
partners. But then, if  
we accept Paul's  
claim at all, we must  
say more. Yes,  
God was indeed  
reconciling some of  
us to God's self, but  
in Christ God was  
surely forgiving all  
those others out  
there. Surely we  
must see Christ as  
the sign and seal of  
God's being God  
also for all the  
others, not just for

Christians. So if we are to be, with Paul, ambassadors for Christ, as the Corinthian passage continues, then our ambassadorial message to all the others would have to be: "Be what God has made you, reconciled to God, and live the righteousness of God already granted to your account." Read those verses in Paul's letter with care and you may note with surprise that, in stark contrast to the slogans of this so-called "Decade of Evangelism," nothing is said there about people becoming Christians (that wasn't even a word in Paul's vocabulary) or about joining the church, not to speak of anything about the superiority of Christianity. We might be excused for remembering, in this context, Ghandi's deep respect for Christ, but not for Christians.

From such a reading of Paul's claim, it appears to follow that God is already reconciled to the world, to all those others "out

there," having reconciled them already to God in Christ. I am speaking of our God, God in Christ, the triune God. God is also for them, not just for us, but not necessarily as God is for us. Just as God, our God, is at the same time the God of Israel, of Sinai, and the covenant for Israel but not quite that for us, so God is God for us in Christ, the triune God, but not quite that for Israel. Might not God be God's true self in yet other ways for other people? If God has shown God's true Torah face to the Jewish people and God's true Christ face to us, could God have shown God's true emptiness face to the Buddha and God's true Qur'anic face to Muhammed? The Spirit, we are told, blows where it wills, so we have no grounds for excluding the possibility in principle. But it is also true that we do not know.

To be able to say that we knew that God had shown God's face to those of other traditions

would be to grant revelatory status *for us* to the Qur'an, for example, or to the sacred texts of Hindus. But that would be to confess that the founding event and texts of these other traditions had made us into a community, and that is obviously false. It appears, then, that we need a new, intermediate category with which to speak of events, texts, and stories that have formed and shaped communities, other than our own, which we might nevertheless dare to recognize coming in some way from God.

How are we to do this, and what criterion or criteria will make this possible? The clue for fresh thinking in this new area can come, I am convinced, from what we have discovered already from our newly-discovered God-given relationship to the Jewish people. The case of Israel, the Jewish people, is special for the church. Sinai was not our founding event, and Torah, although important,

is not central for us. Yet because Sinai was the founding event of the people of Jesus, and because he simply has never existed for the church as other than the Jew he is, we can and must confess the revelatory character of Sinai, Torah, and the Jewish Scriptures, which from our beginnings gave us the words to speak of God's self-revelation in Christ. Thus in discovering the Jewish people, we discover the starting point of the context in which Jesus has been given to us: namely, Sinai. If we thus find our way to the affirmation at least of this one other tradition, perhaps this may help us as we face the other traditions of this world.

As with Israel, so with other traditions, we must begin with Sinai, not as *Nostra Aetate* did in its first three sections. In those first three sections, grounds for the church's relations with people of other traditions are based on the universality of the search for answers to the riddle of human

existence, a common awareness of a hidden power beyond nature and history, or in the case of Islam an agreement in belief in the one creator God. None of these so-called grounds has ever been that on which we have based our own identity in saying who we were as the church of Jesus Christ. Only in the fourth and last section did the bishops of Vatican II become theologically responsible. There, finally, they began with the mystery of the church and, in doing so, found that they could not avoid seeing the Jewish people. That, however, is only one side of the matter.

What needs also to be explored, even if the Council's bishops lacked the imagination to do it themselves, is what we find out about ourselves when we take seriously the identity of the others in their own terms. The bishops, one could say, failed to see that there is a double twist in the way Paul, in Romans 10:6-8, interpreted



Deuteronomy  
30:12-14. ("This  
commandment ... is  
not too hard for you,  
neither is it far off. It  
is not in heaven,  
that you should say,  
"Who will go up for  
us to heaven, and  
bring it to us" . . .  
But the word is  
very near you, it is  
in your mouth, and  
in your heart, so  
that you can do  
it.") At first sight,  
Paul appears to  
have perverted the  
Torah text, but in  
doing so, he has  
invited a reverse  
twist, for what Paul  
was doing was  
interpreting Christ in  
the light of Sinai,  
learning from the  
Torah how to speak  
of him. So it is not  
simply the case, as  
the authors of  
*Nostra Aetate*  
believed, that when  
we look into our  
own mystery we  
come face to face  
with the mystery of  
Israel. That is surely  
true. But so also is  
its opposite, as  
any who have been  
in the Jewish-  
Christian  
conversation can  
testify: it is by  
looking deeply into  
the mystery of the  
other that we come  
to a new  
understanding of  
who we are. The  
better one knows  
and understands  
what it is to be a  
Jew, the more

deeply one  
discovers what it is  
to be a Christian.

---

Suppose we attempt to do the work that *Nostra Aetate* missed and try to understand not only ourselves on the basis of the Sinai covenant between God and Israel, bodied forth for us in the Jew Jesus, as some of us have been seeking to do over the past decade or two, but also the other great traditions of the world. We can begin by proposing some criteria for judging whether any tradition is even to be entertained as a sign of the work of the triune God, criteria which might help us to see why, for example, we might take Islam seriously as a possible fruit of the work of God, but not German National Socialism, the Nazi movement of the 1920s to 1940s. Such criteria will be expressed better, I suggest, in the terms of community and story in which Sinai is known to us, rather than as conceptual principles.

The first criterion with which to approach any tradition is whether it is decisive for it that it makes for and values community. We begin here because this is so central a feature of both Israel and the church. But because it is so for these two in quite different ways, we shall have to be open to other ways in which this emphasis might occur. For Jews, community is basically ethnic; for the church it is inter-ethnic. Jews prefer their form; we prefer ours. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and I see no grounds on which to count one superior to the other; they are just different. Both traditions make for and value community, which is why our preferred self-designations are communal: the church, and Israel, or the Jewish people.

It follows as a corollary of this first criterion that any tradition that meets it will have serious concerns for morals. It will be concerned

about political, social, and ethical matters. However, just how these may be manifest could be through such diverse forms as we find in monasticism, contemplation, Kabbalah, and Hasidism. In one way or another, the ethical will be a matter of serious concern.

The second criterion which Sinai leads us to see is the covenantal aspect. God, or Allah, or the gods, or nothingness, will be so construed as to make place for human responsibility for the future course of the good. For a tradition to be a candidate for possible positive evaluation as the work of the one we know as the triune God, it must have within it some correction to the dangers of determinism, passivity, and quietism. Lacking this aspect, how could we hope to see it as a response to the covenantal one who is the only God we know?

Finally, I suggest a

third criterion: room would have to be made, in any tradition being reviewed, for the other, the outsider, and for God being God for others, perhaps in ways strange to us who are doing this reviewing. Leaving or making room for the other and for God being God of the other need not require a systematic account of how this might be the case, only that it remain a possibility. As the Psalms make clear, the God of Sinai wills to be praised by all the nations, not just by Israel.

It should be evident that these three criteria raise questions about Israel and the church as well as about every other tradition. In applying them to other traditions, we cannot escape asking whether our own traditions have always met the standards which Sinai holds up in judgment before us. In applying them to others, we cannot escape continually reviewing our own tradition and our traditional understanding of God. But as we

attempt to appreciate different ways in which God may have been and may be God for other traditions, we shall inevitably be testing and perhaps stretching the limits of our own understanding of how God has been and is God for us. The truth of the matter is that, whether we think outward from Sinai or from Christ, we have never had a fixed idea of God that we then brought to bear upon each new situation in life. Rather, new events and each new situation, as we interpret them, shape afresh our conception of God – and keep on reshaping it.

---

So it is that our dogma of the Trinity is not a fixed point, other than as a signpost pointing in a certain direction and hinting at ever-new possibilities. I see in it four such hints:

*One.* The first hint is that God has been and is God in more ways than one, and

in each way that God is God, God is utterly faithful to God's self and to those on whom God has laid claim. God, it is hinted, may be God in more than two ways, and perhaps in more than three ways. There is nothing numerical in the dogma. He who begins to count, said Augustine, begins to err. Even in the church's developing doctrine, the movement from Binitarianism to Trinitarianism took some time and was quite uneven.

*Two.* Every confession of God, in whatever way it was founded and shapes one's own community, is always a communal act. That means, it is always also a confession of the community's self-understanding. In that way, it is, appropriately, always also a covenantal act, one in which the community, along with God, co-founds itself.

*Three.* The third hint is that the story of God is not over. Paul brought this

out with striking force in suggesting that in the end, "the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all," or everything to everyone (1 Cor. 15:28, in the context of verses 24-28). If we are to be changed, and Christ is to be changed, then so is God. If the story is not over for God's covenantal partners, it is not over for God. God's being too is a becoming.

*Four.* Finally, the dogma of the Trinity is a sign that points to God's plurality. It is right doctrine not as a last word but in the sense of inviting us onto the right track. It is an opening into God's truth that refuses to be more than an opening. What it points to has therefore always rightly been called the mystery of the Trinity, and liturgically, that is, doxologically, it has always been best rehearsed as a song.

---



Interpreted as an invitation to see well beyond the limits traditionally associated with it and on into a richness in God far exceeding our imagination, how would the doctrine of the Trinity look? We may review this in following its threefold structure or articles, rehearsing these as the church's song of praise and thanksgiving:

We begin, in communal song, our praise of a God who would not and will not be God alone, but who, by becoming creator, has forever committed God's self to being for and bound to another. A community schooled in Israel's Scriptures will read between the lines and so be praising God in full awareness that Israel's story of creation is absolutely dependent on and determined by Israel's story of God's commitment to Israel at Sinai.

We move then to praise this God of Israel, already

bound to God's  
people Israel, for  
having chosen one  
of them to be for us  
Gentiles the place  
and person before  
whom we find  
ourselves standing  
in the presence of  
God. Jesus's story,  
told always  
according to Israel's  
Scriptures, is no  
less than the  
miraculous story of  
how we Gentiles are  
privileged along  
with Israel to be  
falling on our knees  
before the God of  
Israel.

Finally, we praise  
God for being the  
life-giver to all those  
others as well as to  
us, to Hindus,  
Muslims, Buddhists,  
Animists, and  
Atheists, to those  
who are not in the  
church and to  
those who are not of  
Israel. God gives life  
first of all to his  
people Israel – God  
"has spoken  
through Israel's  
prophets," of whom  
the greatest was  
Moses – and he  
has spoken also to  
us Gentiles. God  
the Spirit has done  
so (to side with the  
Eastern fathers  
against the West on  
the *filioque* clause)  
out of God's own  
initial becoming as  
the self-binding  
covenantal creator,

not essentially  
through or from  
God's especially  
enlivening action  
toward us  
Christians. God  
nourishes and  
sustains all  
creatures, just as  
God nourishes and  
sustains those who  
belong to God  
through Jesus  
Christ. Such might  
be our reading of  
the trinitarian  
confession of the  
church.

How then might we  
understand a typical  
preoccupation of the  
Western church with  
the so-called  
essential Trinity,  
manifesting itself in  
the assertion of the  
pre-existence of the  
son. I think this  
Western  
preoccupation can  
be read to say: the  
God of the church  
and the God of all  
the others was  
implicitly there  
already in that initial  
and decisive move  
of becoming  
creator, by which  
God willed not to be  
alone but the God of  
another. God's  
other-orientation,  
God's self-  
determination to be  
God for others, is  
who and what God  
was and is in  
God's eternal  
decision to be the  
creator and so to be

Emmanuel. That is the heart of the affirmation of the pre-existence of God as outgoing, or of God as eternal son.

---

Have we done justice to the tradition's care for God's unity ? I would say we have for the best expression of that care is the maxim, *Opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*: the external works of the triune God (as distinct from inner relationships (such as "begetting" and "proceeding") are indivisible. I believe I have tried to be faithful to that maxim by stressing that in every work of God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God's work has always been that of the one creative and covenantal God of Sinai who confronts us in the Jew Jesus and reaches out in life-giving and covenantal love through all creation

In reflecting on the unity of God and its relation to what I have called God's

plurality, William James can help us. In discussing the ancient question of the one and the many in his lectures on pragmatism, James made the interesting move of applying both terms to the same subject. Far more interesting to James than the relations between the one over here and the many over there, or the one including the many, or the many making up the one, was the thought that anything and everything is both one and many at the same time. The universe is one in certain respects, but then not one in other respects. And this can be said of everything in our experience. I only need one chair to sit down. But that chair is also many, as its builder will know in making and assembling its different parts. And we can also say this of ourselves. From the perspective of my own identity, who I think I am and as the subject of all my experiences, I am one. But I am also one entity for my wife, a rather different one for my son, and something yet again for my

employer, not to speak of the Internal Revenue Service. If then it is true that all that we know, including ourselves, are both one and many, in different respects, could it be that God is both one and many?

From ancient times until only recently, it was blasphemous even to raise the question because it was understood that to be one, as to be changeless, was incomparably better than to be many and able to change. On grounds of Greek philosophy, reinforced in the Middle Ages, as Jewish philosophers learned Aristotle's metaphysics from the Muslims and Christians learned it from the Jews, God was absolutely simple. having no parts and, being perfect, incapable of change. Biblical texts which spoke of God changing his mind were interpreted as figures of speech adapted to our creaturely limitations: God only appeared to us to change his mind, but of course God could not change, and now we had

Aristotle to prove it. Only Kabbalists and mystics were able to play with texts that suggested a plurality in God.

If, however, we no longer feel obligated to Greek philosophy and are more skeptical of the sovereignty of any single metaphysical system, then we can at least reflect on what we are learning from the Jewish-Christian relationship: that whatever else we can say about God, one thing seems unavoidable to those of us who feel compelled to affirm both the Jewish and the Christian story, namely that God is able to be God for the Jewish people and relate to them through Torah and the Jewish tradition, and the same God is able to be God for a Gentile church and relate to it through Jesus Christ and the tradition of the church. We have learned in the dialogue to see the same God in both traditions, but we have also learned that those traditions are inexorably different.

What is of the deepest importance for our growing awareness of the plurality of religious traditions, however, is that we have been slowly brought to delight in and celebrate our differences. We are slowly coming to give thanks to God that the Jewish people are who they are and that the church is what it is. We are coming to the point where we can thank God for being able to be God in these different ways for different peoples. God's possibilities are larger than either of us knew before. God's love really does surpass human knowing.

If that is so, then on what possible grounds can we assume that God is limited to being what Jews on the one hand and Christians on the other have discovered? If God can turn a Torah face to Israel and a Christlike face to the church, may God not also have a Qur"anic face to turn toward Muslims and perhaps even an emptiness face for certain Buddhists? I am



not claiming that this is the case, only that we cannot know in advance that it is not the case. The Jewish-Christian dialogue, because of what it has taught us, invites us to explore what may be new apprehensions, not of how God is God for us, but of how God has been and is God for others. The discovery of a divine plurality, that God can be many as well as one, could be a cause for joy and wonder. To the joy and wonder of divine plurality, I suggest, we are invited by the doctrine of the Trinity.

---

This Inaugural Belford Lecture was delivered by Paul M. van Buren on March 5, 1991 at The School of Theology, The University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee.

First published in *Sewanee Theological Review* 35:3 (1992). With kind permission of