

# 5 The Holy Spirit and the Trinity

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## I

For 18 centuries, stretching back before the definitive pronouncement in the fourth-century ecumenical councils at Nicaea and Constantinople, it has been a mark of Christian Orthodoxy to regard God as a Trinity of three persons. To be sure, in the last few centuries, and especially in the twentieth, Trinitarian doctrine has come under increasing attack from within the Church. Up-to-date theologians are unlikely to identify themselves as 'Unitarians', but Unitarianism is embraced by thinkers as diverse as the Anglican theologians G.W.H. Lampe and Maurice Wiles, on the one hand, and John Hick on the other. Nevertheless, there are still strong tendencies among more traditionally minded theologians such as Karl Rahner to defend Trinitarian ways of thinking. And Christian liturgy, hymnody and devotion is so strongly marked by a Trinitarian framework that the most radical of surgeries would be required to remove it.

The push towards Unitarianism has, historically and presently, largely comes from doubts about the full divinity of Jesus Christ, doubts well expressed by the contributors to the volume edited by John Hick entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*.<sup>1</sup> If Jesus Christ is not divine, the main Christian motive for positing a distinction within God between Father and Son disappears. In this paper, which is concerned with the claim of the Holy Spirit to be a third divine person, I shall abstract altogether from Christological issues. I shall simply assume some traditional doctrine of the Incarnation – one that fits the pronouncements of Chalcedon, let us say – and will likewise assume that this requires a distinction within the divinity between the person of the Father and the person of the Son. Since I am setting Unitarianism aside without a hearing, I shall not be concerned with standard trinitarian problems as to how a plurality of persons can make up one God and as to how to construe the divine unity (a numerical unity, a unity of kind, or what?). Worries about these

problems have also been an important source of Unitarianism. I shall just assume, for purposes of this discussion, that conceptual problems about the Trinity can be settled in some satisfactory way.<sup>2</sup>

Assuming, then, that the general picture of a plurality of persons in the divine being can be worked out in an acceptable way, and leaving aside questions concerning the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity in Jesus Christ, what sort of case can be made for the addition of a third person, the Holy Spirit? Granted that we have at least a Binity on our hands, why posit a Trinity? That will be the central topic of this paper.

## II

Trinitarian theology is rarely tackled in just this way. As suggested above, most of those who reject or question the Trinity do so either because of opposition to the Incarnation and hence to the acceptance of the second person of the Trinity, or because of general difficulties in the view that God embraces any kind of plurality of persons. Such people never find themselves in the position of accepting Binity but raise questions about the addition of a third person. Nevertheless, this issue is not unknown in the history of Christian thought. Going back behind the formulations of Nicaea and Constantinople and the Patristic discussions that led up to them, there is considerable evidence that St Paul did not distinguish between the pre-existent Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the period of the Apostolic Fathers the Logos that became incarnate in Jesus was generally identified with the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Though some of these interpretations can certainly be questioned, especially that of St Paul, there can be no doubt but that Binitarian thinking was not uncommon prior to the second-century Apologists. Hence the question of this essay did unmistakably arise for the likes of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras. And in more recent times we find tendencies to Binitarian thinking in C. D. F. Moule<sup>5</sup> and E. Schillebeeckx.<sup>6</sup>

Why should anyone suppose that there is a special problem about the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity? Here is what I take to be the answer. If, as we are assuming in this paper, we can take Jesus to be an incarnation of God, in a strong sense of the term that implies that Jesus *is* God, then, given the strong Biblical evidence that Jesus was in personal interaction with God, we are inevitably led to make a distinction between different persons in God. If Jesus was God and

was engaged in interpersonal relations with God, then the divine person to whom Jesus was speaking and listening is a different person from the divine person that is identical with Jesus. Otherwise there is no interpersonal transaction. It takes (at least) two to tango. But we don't have the same kind of reason to regard the Holy Spirit as a distinguishable divine person.<sup>7</sup> Let me spell this out by enumerating the various functions that have been assigned to the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition, and asking why we should suppose that these functions are being performed by a divine person other than the Father and the Son.<sup>8</sup> First the list of functions.

1. *Prophecy*, construed broadly as speaking forth the word of God. Part of the very sketchy description of the Holy Spirit in the (so-called) Nicene creed is 'Who spoke by the prophets'.
2. '*Charismatic*' *phenomena*, including speaking in tongues, healing and least some forms of prophecy.
3. *Intellectual illumination and inspiration*. This can take both individual and corporate forms. In the latter guise it is familiar in the form of the doctrine that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in its deliberations and decisions. An individual form is the doctrine, particularly stressed by Calvinism, that the Holy Spirit provides an 'internal witness' to the authority of Scripture.
4. *Sanctification*. Bringing it about that the individual is moving in the direction of sainthood, in the direction of being the kind of person God designed him/her to be. This is the function of initiating, sustaining, fostering and developing the Christian spiritual life of the believer. It includes the 'fruits of the spirit', canonically listed by St Paul as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal. 5: 22-3) It also involves the establishment and development of the 'theological virtues' – faith, hope, love. There is, notoriously, a long history of controversy over the way in which the Holy Spirit is operative in this area, and the relation of this to human free will and responsibility.<sup>9</sup> But whatever the details of the transactions, this is a central facet of what the Christian tradition ascribes to the Holy Spirit.
5. *Unification*. The Holy Spirit works to bind the faithful together, to forge bonds, to create fellowship. 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit...' <sup>10</sup>

No doubt, this list could be extended. And things could be classified differently. But I believe that the list as it stands gives a sufficient idea of the range of functions most prominently attributed to the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition. One more general point remains to be mentioned. It is at least implicit in this list of functions that the Holy Spirit is thought of as *internal* to the believer, as 'indwelling', as working *within* us. The Holy Spirit is God as intimately present to us, God getting inside us and working from within, whether this work takes the form of illumination, inspiration, guidance, sanctification, or in extreme forms, according to some accounts, taking over our normal psychological functions and acting in our stead.

Now let us ask whether there is anything about these functions that requires a third divine person as agent. Do we have solid reasons for supposing, with respect to each function, that it could not be performed by the Father or by the Son?

First, if we take certain kinds of Biblical evidence seriously, we can at least rule out the Son, if Jesus *is* the Son. For example, both John and Luke, among others, make it explicit that Jesus and the Holy Spirit have different spheres of operation. The scenario is that Christ must complete His earthly work in the form of Jesus of Nazareth and return to the Father before the faithful can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

If I do not go, your Advocate will not come, whereas if I go, I will send him to you. (John, 16: 7)

While he was in their company he told them not to leave Jerusalem. 'You must wait', he said, 'for the promise made by my Father, about which you have heard me speak: John, as you know, baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and within the next few days. (Acts, 1: 4-5)

It is, of course, abstractly possible that the divine person that is present to the faithful after the Ascension and known as 'Holy Spirit' is the same one that was incarnate the Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>12</sup> But the repeated assertions of separate operations of the two, as in the above quotations, give us reason for making a distinction here.

But that leaves the Father as a candidate for being the divine person responsible for the phenomena in question. And what basis do we have for excluding this alternative? Why suppose it is not the Father, the original font of all being, that is active within us to enable some to prophesy and some to speak with tongues, that illuminates and



enlightens our understanding and guides us in our deliberations and our activities, that endows us with the 'fruits of the spirit' and the theological virtues and thereby gives us a boost in our journey towards sanctification? Why should it not be the Father that is active in engendering in us the dispositions and exercise thereof that strengthen bonds of Christian fellowship and builds community? Of course, it would be the *Spirit* of the Father that is responsible for these developments. But God *is* spirit. Each divine person, however many there are, is (has) a spirit; that we may take as uncontroversial.<sup>13</sup> Thus it would seem that we may construe what is traditionally taken as the work of the Holy Spirit in the world as simply the work of God the Father when He is functioning as an indwelling spirit at work within His rational creatures.<sup>14</sup> One could hardly claim that the Father is incapable of doing this indwelling work. Surely omnipotence is up to that! If we are to hold that these 'internal' operations are the province of a third person of the Godhead, we shall have to suppose that this is the way it is in fact, not that this is the only way in which those operations could be carried out. And what reasons are there for supposing this?

A comprehensive treatment of all the reasons that have been given, much less all that could be given, for the separate personality of the Holy Spirit is a task that extends far beyond the limits of this paper. Any discussion here will perforce be highly selective. I shall proceed as follows. After a brief indication of the variety of familiar considerations, and an even briefer indication of why I do not take any of them to be conclusive, I shall concentrate on a recent defence of the doctrine by David Brown in the aforementioned book, *The Divine Trinity*. Though I find Brown's argument quite impressive, I shall present reasons for not taking it to be compelling. Nevertheless, I shall acknowledge that the considerations Brown brings forward render it not unreasonable for a Christian to assent to standard Trinitarian doctrine. I shall then conclude with some reflections on the place of high-level theological positions like this in the Christian life.

### III

Any survey of bases for Trinitarian doctrine must begin with Scripture. As for the Holy Spirit in particular, there is no paucity of references in both Testaments. But the totality of such references hardly add up to a single coherent picture, much less one that

amounts to standard Trinitarian doctrine, even in inchoate form.<sup>15</sup> The Old Testament references cannot be claimed to support the idea that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine person; the general impression, rather, is that it is an aspect or function of the one God, as in the passages that speak of God's 'pouring out' or 'bestowing' His spirit (see, e.g., Joel, 2: 28–32, cited by Peter in his Pentecost address; Isaiah, 42: 1). It has, indeed, been common in the Christian tradition to take the Old Testament personification of Wisdom<sup>16</sup> as a reference to the Holy Spirit, but this is controversial at best. In the New Testament one of the strongest supports for distinct personality comes in the Gospel of John, particularly in the Valedictory discourses, in which Jesus speaks of asking the Father to send the Holy Spirit, thus suggesting a threefold *dramatis personae*. For example, 'If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot receive him, because the world neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he dwells with you and is in you' (John, 14: 15–17). And again, 'I have told you all this while I am still here with you; but your Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you' (John, 14: 26). St Paul, on the other hand, often seems indifferent as to whether he calls the divine within us the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the Father, the spirit of Christ or Christ (see, e.g., Romans, 8: 9–11). Though there are also a number of passages in which he seems to be treating the Spirit as a distinct personal agent, it cannot be said that this picture clearly emerges from the relevant Pauline texts as a whole.

Thus, though individual texts, like the Johannine passages just quoted, can be found which support the standard Trinitarian reading, the Bible as a whole presents a bewildering diversity of ways of thinking about the divine Spirit. This being the case, it can hardly be said that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a third divine person can be decisively supported by appeal to the authority of scriptural pronouncements, even if that is the right way to use Scripture in theology, as I believe it is not. So far as I can see, in communicating with us through Scripture God is working through human messengers who understand the divine communications in terms of the conceptual and theoretical baggage they bring to it, and who do not always grasp, even in their own terms, the full import of the divine message. Unless we construe the matter in some such terms, I do not see how we can understand the diversity in Biblical thought

on a given topic, or the presence therein of elements that seem clearly to be at variance with the highest Biblical teaching. If that is the right way to think about the matter, we should use the Bible in theology not by taking particular pronouncements as authoritative, but by participating ourselves in the divine-human dialogue the Bible represents, responding ourselves to the divine messages we find there and seeking to formulate them as best we can in the light of any relevant considerations, Biblical and non-Biblical. David Brown's treatment of the Holy Spirit, to be discussed below, represents a fruitful implementation of this strategy, one in which Brown seeks to find the experience of God that is behind various Biblical formulations and to give a critical analysis of the doctrinal formulations that emerge from that experience.

What other reasons can be adduced for the separate personality of the Holy Spirit? A natural place to look is the writings of the early Fathers from the time, in the second century, when the weight of opinion was shifting from the identification of the pre-existent Logos with the Holy Spirit to their separation. Prior to that separation there was general assent to a threefold distinction in the Godhead *after* the Incarnation, on the basis of scriptural testimony for the distinction of the Holy Spirit both from the Father and, after the resurrection, from the Son. But before the time of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras the tendency was not to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the *pre-existent* Logos that became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. It took the Incarnation, so to speak, to pry the Logos apart from the Holy Spirit. Once the Logos is permanently entangled with human nature in the very strong sense of taking the latter into its very being, while the Holy Spirit is not, they can no longer be identified. But with the Apologists the plot line changes. Now an eternal trinity of persons is recognized in the divine nature.<sup>17</sup>

If this is where the crucial transition to the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity took place, we would expect to find in the Apologists and their successors a rich mine of arguments for the separate personality of the Holy Spirit. But alas, this is not the case. Such arguments as were put forward are directed to establishing the full divinity of the Spirit, rather than His separate personality. It was assumed on all hands that the Holy Spirit is a something-or-other – person, agency, force, or what have you – that is distinct from the Father and the Son. The pervasive tendency of the New Testament writers to speak of the Holy Spirit as a distinct entity settled that question for them. The only question is as to the status of this something-or-other *vis-à-vis* the

divine. Is the Holy Spirit an activity? Is it a creature, perhaps a super-angel? Is it a demi-god? Or is it fully divine, of the same nature as the Father and the Son?<sup>18</sup> It is to this question that the Fathers were addressing themselves. Thus, skipping ahead in time a bit, Athanasius argues, in support of the divinity of the Spirit. 'Who will unite you to God, if you have not the Spirit of God, but the spirit which belongs to creation?'<sup>19</sup> And Basil of Caesarea argues as follows:

We pity those who speak of the Holy Spirit as a creature, because by such a statement they fall into the unpardonable calamity of blasphemy against the Spirit. For those who are even slightly instructed in the Scripture, it needs no argument that the creation is distinct from the godhead. Creation is a slave; the Spirit sets free. Creations stands in need of life; the Spirit is the life-giver. Creation needs instruction; the Spirit is the teacher. Creation is sanctified; the Spirit is the sanctifier.

In short, since the Spirit functions like God, the Spirit is God.

But all this assumes the distinctness of the Spirit and is concerned rather with His nature. It would appear that we simply do not find arguments in the Fathers for His distinctness, apart from references to the assumption of distinctness in the New Testament authors.<sup>20</sup> Wolfson is so far from finding significant arguments for the distinctness of the Holy Spirit that he attributes it to the influence of Philo, who had made such a distinction, working, of course, exclusively with Old Testament texts. It is true that various Fathers were moved by Neoplatonic thinking, or by the features of Platonic and Stoic philosophy that eventually developed into Neoplatonism, in the direction of recognizing two divine entities that come from the ultimate source. If we may use the term 'Logos' for the first, the second is variously construed (I am thinking here of the full range of philosophers involved, not specially of the Christian thinkers) as a Soul of the world, or an immanent spirit, reason or mind. A penchant for such metaphysical speculation could well make a Christian theologian inclined to acknowledge a second eternal 'emanation' from the Father, the specific function of which is to operate from within the created world. But this could hardly be supposed to carry any normative force for Christian belief.

As for the post-Patristic era, there is little pressure on Christian thinkers to defend the postulation of a third person of the Trinity, given the general acceptability of a plurality of persons in God. We find a proliferation of analogies such as those in St Augustine's *De*

*Trinitate*. There are abstruse metaphysical arguments for the necessity of exactly two 'processions' (and hence exactly three persons) in God.<sup>21</sup> But rather than go into all this, I choose to devote my limited space in this paper to the twentieth century. And from the variety of twentieth-century treatments, I have chosen, as I said above, the discussion in *The Divine Trinity* by David Brown. A consideration of Brown's arguments is particularly relevant to this essay, for Brown approaches the problem in precisely the same way as this paper, taking it as established that there is a distinction in the Godhead between Father and Son, and then considering what reasons we have to add a third divine person to the list.

#### IV

Brown's argument, in chapter 4, 'Holy Spirit: The Argument from History', is quite complex and richer in detail than I can convey in a short summary. I shall undertake, however, to give enough of the main lines of the argument to permit an evaluation. He begins with a consideration of the experience of the disciples at Pentecost, as narrated in Acts 2: 1–13. After defending the essential historicity of the account, he interprets it as recording the disciples' construal of the experience as involving being possessed by a divine power, a divine something-or-other that was not to be identified with the risen Christ and, indeed, seemed not to be a *person* at all, but rather a force or power that is expressing itself through them. It may be well to quote some of his words on this:

For just consider how different the two types of experience, Resurrection and Pentecost, must have felt to those who encountered them. In the one case we have visions of an exalted Lord whom the disciples had already known as the subject of personal experiences... In the other case we have, by contrast, an experience with no obvious personal marks about it; if anything at all was seen or heard, it was entirely impersonal ('a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind' and 'cloven tongues as of fire'); central to the experience was rather its internal, 'felt' character, 'being filled with the Spirit'. What could be more natural than that the object of the experience should be thought of as something that had taken control of them and as quite

distinct from the very personal characteristics displayed by the object of their Resurrection experiences?

Yet at the same time their Pentecost experience was such that it would be natural for them to ascribe divinity to its object in a way that it would not be natural to do in respect of the Resurrection experience. For in the later case both the fact that they had known Jesus as a human being and the militant monotheism of the Jewish cultural milieu in which they lived must have acted as a considerable constraint... But with Pentecost there were no such restraints... moreover an ascription of divinity must have seemed especially appropriate in view of the supernatural powers with which they now felt themselves endowed... (p. 184)

Brown then switches to St Paul, whom he interprets as taking the Holy Spirit to be personal but not to be distinguished from Christ (or at least there is no such clear or consistent distinction in Paul, who not infrequently exhibits an indifference as to whether he says 'Christ', 'the Holy Spirit' or 'the spirit of Christ').<sup>22</sup> He finds the deepest roots of this non-distinction in the character of Paul's experience of Christ, as contrasted with the resurrection experiences of those who knew Jesus in his earthly life. Since Paul's encounter with the risen Lord was more like the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit (and its innumerable sequels), he was naturally led to merge the two. Brown then plumps for following Paul on the personality of the Spirit, but deviating from him in distinguishing the Spirit and Christ. As for the former, his basic argument is that since the effects in the believer that are attributed to the Spirit are personal in character, we would seem to be warranted in taking the Spirit to be personal. The failure of those at Pentecost to do this is largely attributed to a difficulty in making sense of the notion of one person acting from within another. Brown finds no difficulty here, 'provided we think of the human agent becoming a free, cooperative channel for the expression of the will of the divine indwelling power' (p. 199).

As for the deviation from Paul, Brown presents two arguments for distinguishing the Spirit from Christ. Here is the first:

Basically, the point is that, if the God of theism really was using this as the decisive period of history in which to communicate his essential nature... then it is extremely puzzling why certain objective experiences were allowed to occur which suggested to

the recipients the presence of a third distinct aspect in the deity if that was not intended. It would after all have been so easy to ensure that they were automatically viewed as an experience of Christ present in a new way. For instance, the Spirit could have been given immediately in the context of the Resurrection experiences... My conclusion, therefore is that... the only viable option is to accept that God's intention was to reveal a third, distinct aspect of deity; for otherwise the ordering of providence seems to border on, if not be tantamount to, incompetence. (p. 195)

The second argument begins with a consideration of the contrast between an experience 'in which an individual claims to be assailed by demons' and one

in which the person describes his experience as one of demon possession. The difference surely amounts to this: the former still feels that his person is intact but that it is under attack from without, whereas the latter sees himself as no longer in full control of his own personhood. Indeed, he either regards the demon as now the appropriate subject of all his actions or he views the situation as in flux, with his own will sometimes to the fore and sometimes suppressed, the demon then being the exclusive subject. (pp. 200-1)

By analogy, 'the point of the terminology of indwelling', which is so common in reports of the activity of the Holy Spirit from Pentecost on, is 'to describe a special form of divine activity, in which God is seen as the true subject of the individual's actions' (p. 201), i.e. as analogous to demon possession rather than to being assailed by demons from without. 'Now, if this is what is happening, the appropriate description for indwelling becomes something like the following: God as subject or pressing to become subject (though a pressing that is without compulsion) (p. 201).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that it is a distinct divine person that is functioning in so distinctive a fashion, one that involves a heightened degree of internality (to the individual human being), in which God offers to be the subject of some of the individual's behaviour, thoughts and feelings. But Brown recognizes that this does not completely settle the matter. 'The alternative remains open that there is one person who is called Father or Son when an object experience is in question and Holy Spirit when a

subject experience is in the offing' (p. 202). However, he takes this binitarian interpretation to be ruled out by another feature of our experience of the Spirit.

Thus it is not that always when experienced the Spirit is experienced as pressing to become subject but rather that when experienced he is experienced as pressing to become a subject always; in other words, that he be enabled to act exclusively in that way. So the import of 'always' is not to isolate one form of experience of God which can then be appropriately labelled 'Holy Spirit'; rather it is to indicate a universalizable intention present in the divine subject of the experience. (p. 202)

In further support of this reading he refers to 'the whole emphasis of the New Testament on the permanence of the Spirit in the Christian...it was thought that the perfect indwelling meant the Spirit as always subject with the individual Christian permanently a pure channel of grace' (p. 203). In other words, since the Holy Spirit aims to be permanently functioning as subject of the human being's experience, thoughts and actions, we can hardly suppose that He is the same person as either of the ones we experience as *other persons*, 'over and against ourselves'.

Brown follows up this last consideration with an appeal to certain kinds of mystical experience, both Christian and otherwise, that is in some ways the most striking feature of this entire line of argument. Speaking of some quotations from Ruysbroeck, for example, Brown (p. 209) writes:

Clearly, for Ruysbroeck the common contrast between monistic and theistic mysticism, between identification and intimacy, is a false one. For him at least both are true; there is such identification with the indwelling Spirit that he can speak of himself as God, while through such identification there comes what is rather a union of intimacy with the Father, being 'God with God' so that here some sort of separate identity is still being maintained. If that is so and this is the correct account of the experience, then what we seem to have is a record of human individual himself experiencing a distinction within the Godhead, with the Spirit so catching him up into his own life as to make him part of his own experience within the Godhead in relation to the Father.



Brown then goes on to find similar reports in other Christian, Hindu and Moslem mystics. If one is aware simultaneously of God as functioning as the subject of one's experience and also as the object of that experience, then, assuming that the experience is veridical, we have the same kind of ground for regarding Father and Spirit as distinct divine persons that the Gospel records give us for regarding Father and Son as distinct persons. In both cases there is an interpersonal relation that, as such, requires two persons as participants.<sup>24</sup>

I find this line of argument quite impressive. In fact, it seems to me the strongest case I know for treating the Holy Spirit as a distinct person. If we avoid the 'proof-texting' Biblical approach, then we are either thrown back on very general theological and metaphysical arguments for supposing that there are (at least) three persons in the Godhead, related in the way the Christian tradition has taken Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be related, or we rest the case on features of our experience of God that seem to indicate, or are best explained by, a separate personality of the Holy Spirit. I do not find the former approach compelling, though I am not able to defend that stance in this paper. This leaves us with the appeal to experience. Before reading Brown's book, I saw no reason to suppose that the Christian experience of God as working from within, in the various ways enumerated above, could not be construed as an experience of God the Father or God the Son carrying out a function different from those they perform in other contexts. Brown has presented us with such reasons. How conclusive they are I now want to consider.

Brown's case for the *separate personality* of the Spirit emerges only at a late stage of his argument. Early on he is concerned to establish the distinctness of the Holy Spirit and Christ (a point not really at issue in this paper) and the personality of the Holy Spirit, in the sense that it is a personal being carrying out the distinctive functions of the Spirit, again something that I am not questioning. If it is the Father with whom we are in effective contact in experiences of the operation of the Spirit (and in the operation of the Spirit whether we are aware of it or not), then it is obviously a *personal* agent that is doing this work. Brown's case for the non-identity of the Father and Spirit rests on two alleged data. (1) The central Christian experience of the Spirit is of God always 'pressing to be subject' (of the thoughts, experiences and actions of the individual human being), and (2) mystical experiences of 'being God in relation to God'. Now I have no

inclination at all to deny that these do provide support for the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit. One can, as in all such appeals to experience, question or deny evidential force on the grounds that the subject has simply read into the experience his/her antecedent theological prepossessions. In that case the experience is no more solid empirical evidence for the distinctness of the Holy Spirit than the report of UFO sightings by dedicated UFO enthusiasts is solid empirical evidence for the presence in our atmosphere of alien spacecraft. I am not at all tempted by this move. I take any claims to have experienced something or other to be *prima facie* credible, acceptable in the absence of sufficient grounds to reject the report,<sup>25</sup> especially if the reports are generated within the context of a long continuing, socially established practice of producing and assessing such reports.<sup>26</sup> And in these cases I believe that we are without sufficient reason for rejecting the reports, whether on grounds of the falsity of what is reported (as established elsewhere), the unreliability of the reporters, discrediting explanations of the experiences, or whatever. Hence I believe that we are justified in taking the experiences at face value, at least to the extent of according some credibility to what the subjects claim to be experiencing. But since it is still possible that the subjects may be reading more into what they encounter than is required by the experience itself, we have to consider how strong a support this gives to the Trinitarian thesis. More specifically, we have to consider whether these data compel acceptance of the separate personality of the Holy Spirit or whether they still leave us with options.

Let us begin with the biblical experiences. There is, first of all, a problem as to why Brown thinks it clinches the matter that the Spirit is 'pressing to become a subject *always*' (my emphasis). Even if the Spirit only aspires to be a subject of my experiences, thoughts and actions part of the time, wouldn't Brown have the same reason for distinguishing the person of the Spirit from the person of the Father that he has if the Spirit's ambitions extend to always taking over my subjecthood. For the basic argument would seem to be, as with the appeal to mystical experience, that if God is playing the role of both subject and object in my experience of God *even once*, there must be two different divine persons involved. To be sure, that argument presupposes that the Spirit's aims are sometimes realized, that the Spirit does sometimes succeed in taking over my subjecthood. For otherwise there are no actual transactions that require two divine subjects. But that point reveals a further difficulty in Brown's appeal

to the alleged unlimited imperialism of the Spirit. For even if the Spirit does aim at always taking over my subjective functions, it is admitted on all hands that He does not always do so; I do not always cooperate. Perhaps sinful human beings rarely cooperate with Him. But then if an occasional function of the Spirit as subject requires separate personhood, why would it not still require that even if the Spirit did not aim at always performing that function? The alleged experience of the Spirit as 'pressing to become a subject always' seems to be doing no work in the argument, so far as the 'always' qualification is concerned.

But perhaps I have missed the point. I do not see how a close reading of the text could fail to show that Brown does intend to be arguing here, just as in the case of mystical experience, that when God is functioning as both subject and object there must be two divine persons involved. But in stressing the intention of the Spirit to 'always be subject', he may be making another point. This is clearly indicated when, after making the central point that 'when experienced he is experienced as pressing to become a subject always'; he adds, '*in other words, that he be enabled to act exclusively in that way*' (p. 202; my emphasis). It looks as if Brown's reason for stressing the point that the Spirit aims to always be the subject of each individual human being (or at least of those with whom He is in effective contact) is that he takes this to imply an aim to function *only* in this way. And if that implication were valid, the argument would certainly go through. No divine person who aims to restrict His activity to the takeover of creaturely subjectivity could be the Father or the Son.<sup>27</sup> But the inference is patently invalid. At least it is invalid if 'being a [human] subject always' means something like 'being a [human] subject whenever there is opportunity to do so'. For an aim at that by no means implies an aim to be nothing else, or to function in no other way. I may have an aim to teach epistemology whenever there is an opportunity to do so (or even, if I am sufficiently megalomaniac, to teach all the epistemology that gets taught), without also having the aim to teach nothing but epistemology, much less the aim to do nothing at all except teach epistemology. To be sure, Brown might understand 'being a [human] subject always' so that it does amount to 'doing nothing but be a human subject', in which case the implication does go through, on the principle that *p* implies *p*. But then he loses the plausibility of taking this to be a datum of experience. How could I know from experience that the Holy Spirit wants to do nothing but be a human subject? What in my awareness of the operation of the Holy

Spirit within me could tip me off to that? I might suppose that the Holy Spirit told me that, but neither Brown nor anyone else, so far as I know, makes any such claim. Thus if the appeal to experience is not to lose all credibility, 'being a human subject always' must be given the weaker interpretation, in which case the argument from Biblical and other non-mystical Christian experience boils down to the same point garnered from the sort of mystical experience Brown considers, viz. that one sometimes experiences God as both subject and object of one's experience; and the claim that the Holy Spirit aspires to being *always* in this position drops out as adding nothing to the argument.

So what are we to say about the alleged experiences of God occupying both subject and object position. I have already acknowledged that the experiences do have evidential force. Since many subjects have taken themselves to be experientially aware of a situation so described, we have, in the absence of sufficient overriding reasons to the contrary, a significant reason to suppose that this is actually the case. On the other hand, we have to be alive to the possibility that they have overstated their experience in reporting it in this way. Here it would be useful to treat the Biblical and the non-Biblical mystical experiences separately.

As for the former, Brown's account of how the subjects understood their experiences seems to me highly questionable. To discuss this matter properly we would have to go into the issue of how to recover descriptions of the *experience* of God from Biblical literature, by no means a straightforward matter. But sticking to the strongest candidates for Biblical reports of experience of the Holy Spirit, it is not at all clear that the subject typically supposed him/herself to be aware of God as taking over the normal position of the human person as subject. This is, indeed, a natural way of understanding what is happening in such phenomena as 'speaking in tongues' when it seems to the person as if something other than himself is calling the shots. But it is by no means clear from the allusions to such matters in the New Testament, including the account of Pentecost in Acts 2, that this is what the participants *thought* was happening, much less that they took themselves to be experientially aware of such a situation. Nor can I see that Paul's many references to the Holy Spirit as 'bearing witness', 'interceding', 'teaching', 'giving life', and so on, referred to by Brown on p. 198, are in terms of the Spirit's taking over the normal subjective functions of the human person. Here is a representative passage.

You are on the spiritual level, if only God's Spirit dwells within you; and if a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian. But if Christ is dwelling within you, then although the body is a dead thing because you sinned, yet the spirit is life itself because you have been justified. Moreover, if the Spirit of him raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, then the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give new life to your mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit. (Romans, 8: 9–11)

For all who are moved by the Spirit of God are sons of God. The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry 'Abba! Father!'. In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying that we are God's children . . . (Romans, 8: 15–16)

This passage exhibits the Pauline tendency noted earlier to refer indifferently to the Holy Spirit, Christ and the spirit of Christ. But that is not my present point, which is rather that Paul does not at all suggest that the Spirit is taking over the functions of the human self. Though he mentions several standard functions of the Holy Spirit – giving (new) life, enabling one to be 'spiritual' by entering into fellowship with God, and so on – there is no hint that the human subject has been displaced in any way. The suggestion, rather, is that the Spirit *enables* or *assists* the human subject to do and be the things in question. He speaks of 'the Spirit of God joining with our spirit'. Indeed, in the Pauline passages that most clearly suggest a takeover scenario, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned as such:

You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose. (Philippians, 2: 13)

I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me. (Galatians, 2: 20)

Because of Paul's looseness with persons of the Godhead, I do not want to put any stress on the fact that the term 'Holy Spirit' is not used in these passages. Rather, my point is that such a 'not I but God is doing it' is not typical of Pauline pronouncements on the work of God as indwelling. The earlier passage from Romans is much more representative.

Thus I am not inclined to agree with Brown that the main weight of the New Testament witness is that the Holy Spirit is 'always pressing

to be subject' (and sometimes succeeding), much less that the Holy Spirit is 'pressing to be subject always'. However, I cannot say the same for the mystical literature he cites, including Ruysbroeck and St John of the Cross from the Christian tradition, Sankara and Ramanuja from the Hindu tradition, and various Sufis from Islam. These, and many others mystics, do unquestionably speak of God as occupying both the subject and object position. It is greatly to Brown's credit to have stressed the point in this context. This is particularly noteworthy, since the main emphasis in most treatments of the more highly developed ranges of mystical experience is on claims to the disappearance of any distinctions at all within the experience, including distinctions of subject and object. Not enough attention has been given to the forms 'unitive' mysticism takes in theistic mystics.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether the mystics in question have not overstated what they were aware of. (And, of course, the same question arises for the Biblical witnesses, in so far as they do make such claims.) Nelson Pike has pointed out that when theistic mystics report a disappearance of all distinctions in the One or the Godhead they can be interpreted as simply reporting that they were aware of no distinctions at the time, rather than claiming that there were no distinctions (e.g. between the human subject and God) involved in the situation at all.<sup>28</sup> A similar suggestion can be made here. Perhaps the intimacy with the divine was so great at the climax of the experience that the mystic was not aware of any distinction between him/herself as subject and God. But not being aware of any such distinction is to be distinguished from being aware of God as being the subject of one's experience. In the first one is not aware of something, in the other one is being aware of something. I do not wish to claim that it is clear that the experiences in question are to be construed in the way just suggested rather than in the way these mystics seem to be doing. I am only pointing out a possibility that would need to be set aside before we are in a position to take this argument for the distinctness of the Holy Spirit to be compelling.

## V

Where does this leave us? The strongest argument I have been able to find for the distinctness of the Holy Spirit from the Father is something less than compelling, though it is not without force. On

the other hand, the biblical witness certainly contains elements that point in the direction of the functions attributed to the Holy Spirit being performed by a third person of the Godhead. And the widespread adherence to the doctrine in the Church through the centuries is not to be taken lightly. A decision on this matter partly depends on our standards for accepting propositions, either in general or in this particular area. If we are working with rigorous requirements, according to which no thesis that goes beyond reports of experience is to be accepted unless we have a compelling argument for it, then rejection of the doctrine would be indicated. If, on the other hand, we take a somewhat more relaxed approach, at least in theology, we may rightly feel that there is no sufficient reason not to go along with the main weight of the Christian tradition and think of the Holy Spirit as a third divine person. After all, we are assuming in this paper that there is no obstacle to recognizing a plurality of persons in God, and assuming that we must, from a Christian standpoint, recognize at least two – the Father and the Son. That takes away the most strongly felt barrier to acknowledging the separate personality of the Holy Spirit. That being the case, even if there are no conclusive grounds for supposing the work of the Holy Spirit to be performed by a person distinct from the Father and the Son, we may as well go along with the tradition on this point, in the absence of strong reasons for not doing so. I am well aware that this is a lukewarm endorsement, at best, of full Trinitarianism, but given the considerations put forward in this paper, I feel that it is the best I can manage.

I would like to close with some general reflections on the place of high-level theology in the Christian life. Getting back to the particular point at issue in this paper, I am strongly inclined to think that it does not make a great deal of difference to the Christian life whether we are Binitarians or Trinitarians. So far as I can see, we can be as open to the operations of the Spirit of the sorts listed earlier – inspiration, witness, sanctification, and so on – whether we think of this as the work of the Father (the spirit of the Father) or as the work of a third divine person. And, indeed, it is not only that the work can be carried out as successfully (or unsuccessfully) whichever way *we think of it*. It can be as successful, or the reverse, whichever way *it is*. No one, I dare say, is inclined to deny that the Father has the power to do this work. It would seem that the resolution of this issue will not have crucial implications for our relationships with God and, more generally, for the shape of the Christian life.

I am not at all inclined to generalize this conclusion to all theological issues. With Christology it makes an enormous difference whether Jesus of Nazareth was an incarnation of God. If he was, we can take him as a clue to the divine nature in a way we would not otherwise be able to do; and his words have a kind of weight and authority they could not otherwise have. Correspondingly, it makes a big difference to the Christian life what view we take of the status of Jesus. We cannot wholeheartedly relate to him as Christians have done traditionally unless we take him to be divine. Again, and for similar reasons, the question of the divinity of the Holy Spirit is of crucial importance for the Christian life. As we noted above, the third- and fourth-century Fathers argued, quite rightly, that if the Holy Spirit were a creature, His work could not have the sanctifying effect traditionally ascribed to it. But I do want to suggest that there are high-level theological issues the resolution of which does not carry practical implications for the Christian life, and that the question of the separate personality of the Holy Spirit is one of them.

We might analogize this to the relation of some high-level scientific issues to the technological application of science. Here, too, some theoretical issues in science make a big difference. The basic laws of mechanics, electromagnetic theory, and so on, are constantly relied on in technology. But, by and large, the resolution of debates over general relativity, the catalogue of ultimate physical particles, and the fine print of the origin of the universe have little influence on our getting around in the universe and putting bits of it to work. This may change. It is a familiar story that what started out as purely theoretical speculations may turn out to have surprising technological applications. But at any given time, in both science and theology, there will be issues of theoretical interest that have little or no bearing on the associated sphere of practice. And, given the difficulty of reaching assured conclusions on such matters, this is just as well.

## NOTES

1. London: SCM Press, 1977.
2. I do not mean to imply that these are not serious, important and difficult questions which may well not have received a fully satisfactory



treatment. It is just that I am not attempting to deal with them in this paper. The problems that I shall raise about the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity are problems that would arise even if general worries about the Trinity, and about the first two persons thereof, could be satisfactorily handled. For an impressive recent attempt to assuage intellectual doubts about the Trinity, see David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Pub. Co., 1985).

3. For this interpretation see, e.g., Brown, *ibid.*, ch. 4, and Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), ch. VIII.
4. For a very full documentation of this see Wolfson, *ibid.*, ch. XI.
5. See his *The Holy Spirit* (London: Mowbrays, 1978).
6. *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975).
7. Let me say a word about the term 'person' as it functions in these discussions. Among the many topics I do not have time for in this paper is the interpretation of 'person' in Trinitarian formulations. It is a commonplace in contemporary discussions, particularly those that are directed to rendering the doctrine palatable, that 'person' in the traditional formulations does not have its contemporary meaning as an independent center of consciousness, selfhood, and agency. I myself think that this point has been overstated and that ancient and medieval uses are not as far from typical twentieth-century conceptions of a person as is often alleged. However, I cannot go into all that here. Suffice it to say that in affirming that there are three divine persons, one is at least committing oneself to there being three distinguishable 'personal agents' in the Godhead, three distinguishable agents who act in the light of knowledge to carry out purposes.
8. Any attempt to ascribe particular functions (within creation) to a particular divine person would seem to run into conflict with the Augustinian principle that all the persons take part in any external function of any one of them. (See, e.g., *Enchiridion*, 38.) But presumably this principle is not to be so understood as to rule out any differentiation of function. If it were, that would subvert the main reason for distinguishing persons in the first place, viz. the need for interpersonal interaction between the incarnate Son and the Father, which obviously involves each of them occupying a position, and carrying out a function, not shared by the other. In so far as the principle is defensible it will have to be interpreted as asserting a cooperation by the entire Trinity in the external operations of any one person.
9. For some discussion of different models of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, see my 'The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit', in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
10. For a fine statement of this function, see J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM Press, 1972).
11. There is also the point that the Holy Spirit is reported to have descended on Jesus at his baptism. If Jesus is the Son, then we can hardly suppose that he descended on himself.

12. Some of the early Fathers took it that we have a Trinity only after the Resurrection and Ascension. For only after that do we have a continued incarnate divine person to be distinguished from the divine person that is intimately present to the faithful. For documentation of this point, see Wolfson, *op. cit.*, chs. VIII, XI.
13. See, e.g., St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, xxxvi, 1.
14. This point is powerfully made in G.W.H. Lampe's *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
15. For a survey of Biblical evidence see Moule, *op. cit.*, chs. II, III; H. B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1909); C. K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1966); E. F. Scott, *The Spirit in the New Testament* (London, 1923).
16. See, e.g., Proverbs 8, 22ff.; Wisdom of Solomon, 7: 22b-8: 1.
17. For documentation of this point see Wolfson, *op. cit.*, ch. XII, sec. 3.
18. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, 31.5.
19. *Letters to Serapion*, ed. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 1.29, p. 138. The above comment on this argument is taken from Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
20. For documentation of this point, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), chs. IV, V, X.
21. See, e.g., St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Qs 28, 30.
22. See, e.g., Romans: 8, 9-11, quoted below.
23. 'Without compulsion', since the free cooperation of the human being is required for God to take over, temporarily, as subject.
24. Among the features of Brown's argument I have not touched on is an elaborate discussion of why references to the Spirit are so scanty in the words of Jesus as reported in the Synoptic Gospels, an argument that Paul is less reliable than Luke and John as a source for the thought of the early Church about the Spirit, and a rejection of the view that the Pentecost experience was simply a self-induced fulfilment of expectations. The reader is referred to ch. 4 of *The Divine Trinity* for a full presentation.
25. This is an application of what Richard Swinburne calls the 'Principle of Credulity'. See his *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. 13.
26. For a defence of this position, see my *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chs. 4-7.
27. Given the fact that other functions are ascribed to the Spirit in the Christian tradition, I doubt that Brown wants to be committed to this in any event.
28. See his *Mystic Union: An Essay on the Phenomenology of Mystical Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).