

## CHURCH FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

It is a commonplace to speak today of all theology as contextual but it is more than merely interesting to set doctrinal theology against its historical and political context. For then we begin to see how our practice is so often reinforced by our theology rather than informed by it.

The theology of the Holy Trinity is a case in point. Used so often as it is to provide for us a model of how our Church should be structured, it is doubly important for us to ask: “which comes first, the theology or the structures?”

A major question for trinitarian theologians to address has always been of course, how can the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if so different, be understood to be a unity? In what way can they cohere and at the same time acknowledge their distinctiveness?

In the Western Church the answers to the mystery have tended to revolve around a stress on the central Unity of the three - in fact Thomas Aquinas began his search there at the centre of the matter rather than to concentrate on the differences of the three. In the Eastern Church however, matters have been addressed from a totally different perspective. There the emphasis has tended to be on description of the three persons as being essentially in communion, in ‘perichoresis’ and hence in Unity. How instructive then to recognise that the former concentration on the central unity of the Trinity in the West is derived from a Church which was *already* committed to a centralised Church structure, where the bishop of Rome was accepted as the bishop above bishops and the curia as the central authority around him. No wonder they felt that it was right to see God as essentially centralised with the three persons of the trinity playing their part within that framework.

In the Eastern Church the relationship of the Patriarchs and bishops was of a different character. No surprise then that the theology of the Trinity began not so much from concentration upon the central unity of the Godhead as upon the equality of the separate Persons of the Trinity. When the two sides were squabbling, the eastern Cappadocian Fathers saved the day by defining a ‘person’ as a ‘being in relationship’, thus easing a way for some agreement between the two models.

But even the eastern writers of today cannot really follow through their radical theology for fear of being ‘misunderstood’ by their Church hierarchies. And so they paint a picture of the three persons of the Trinity as equal in every way *except* that the Son and the Holy Spirit become mystically inferior to the Father - as if his ‘right and left hand’ - and so the unity of the Trinity is therefore safeguarded by denying the proper and full equality of the three persons. This allows an autocratic and patriarchal hierarchy to be reinforced by reference to theology of the God head.

All this serves to beware.

## **Outline:**

### **1. Inclusive Trinity**

No one has had the guts (except Jesus?) to spell it out. God does not despise difference, God creates it. East West models.

Church as defence against God indeed.

### **2. Our Mission or God's mission?**

What is Church for?

therefore - what shape ministry?

### **3. Culture?**

youth culture as an example.

Church as distanced sub-culture pros and cons.

Lambeth

### **4. Basic Community**

local and issue-based

Church centred or mission centred?

### **5. Reality**

Paying for it - ideologues don't pay your wages.

Problems for the CofE

-buildings / heritage important!

- legal red tape

- lots about every member ministry: but that is pretty good anyway!