Must We Say Anything of an “Immanent” Trinity?: Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams on an “Abstruse” and “Fruitless” Doctrine

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This essay engages two figures often left on the periphery of conversations about Trinitarian doctrine: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams. I engage Schleiermacher’s rationale behind embracing the Sabellian heresy as a way of arriving at a set of criteria for judging the adequacy of Trinitarian doctrine. In short, Schleiermacher forces one to ask whether we must say anything at all about the “immanent” rather than the “economic” Trinity, and, if so, we must prove that it gives a significant gift to the life of the church. I then piece together strands of argumentation from Rowan Williams’s thought to give an answer to these objections and show that the “immanent” Trinity is not the “abstruse” and “fruitless” doctrine that Schleiermacher and others have claimed it is. Rather, the immanent Trinity is necessary language for describing the shape of Christian salvation and is deeply rooted in a disciplined apophaticism.

Introduction

This paper utilizes an uncharacteristic pair of interlocutors for Trinitarian thought, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams, to attempt an investigation into the necessity of Trinitarian language. The target of my inquiry will be the concept of the “immanent” as opposed to the “economic” Trinity, by which I simply mean an account of the relations within the divine life of the Godhead.1 While my title

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1 For the classic account of the distinction, see Karl Rahner, The Trinity (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005). I want to point out that this distinction was certainly not known to Schleiermacher, at least in all of its modern detail. Moreover, the distinction itself has come under criticism both historically and theologically. For the history of the distinction and its criticism, see Ralf Stolina, “Ökonomische’
question might appear brazen I do not pose this question in jest. I truly want to put the following question to the Christian theological tradition: is it possible to speak with any accuracy about an immanent Trinity? I am going to respond that it is possible by using Williams's work as an answer to several objections put forward by Schleiermacher. My argument will begin by outlining Schleiermacher's objections to the Nicene or Athanasian conception of the Trinity, being careful to note why it is that Schleiermacher favored the Sabellian tradition instead. These objections, as I read them, are as follows: namely, that any attempt to speak of an immanent Trinity is unnecessarily speculative, and that the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, even if it were defensible, bears no fruit for the life of the church. Next, I shall engage with Williams in the hopes of demonstrating two things. First, that an inquiry into the immanent Trinity is not, contrary to the assertion of Schleiermacher and others, an inevitable tumbling into speculative abstruseness. Instead, the immanent Trinity springs from a rigorous apophaticism rather than being a violation of it. Second, the immanent Trinity does, in fact, bear essential fruit for the life of the church. The immanent Trinity, it turns out, is not a foolhardy “tack on” to a revealed Trinity but is rather a fundamental description of Christian salvation. I arrive at both of these answers to Schleiermacher, if you can call them “answers,” through the Christian experience of prayer as we are incorporated into the inner relations of the Trinity and are forced to speak of these experiences as not reducible simply to “economic” activity of the Godhead.

Schleiermacher on Sabellius and the Trinity

Schleiermacher succeeded, perhaps to a greater extent than any other theologian before him, in reconciling the inherited Reformed doctrine of election, sin, and grace with the principles and demands of the Enlightenment. His fundamental presupposition was that Christian theology must begin from the ethical life of the church but should be a systematic and rational account of this life according to the standards of his day. Thus, he opens the first chapter of the Glaubenslehre with the following assertion:

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The present work entirely disclaims the task of establishing on a foundation of general principles a Doctrine of God, or an Anthropology or Eschatology either, which should be used in the Christian Church though it did not really originate there, or which should prove the propositions of the Christian Faith to be consonant with reason. For what can be said on these subjects by the human reason in itself cannot have any closer relation to the Christian Church than it has to every other society of faith or of life.²

A purely speculative beginning of Christian theology is rejected outright, but perhaps the typical counter of “experience” is too broad for what Schleiermacher has in mind as the more adequate foundation. The beginning of all Christian theology for Schleiermacher must be the living faith of the Christian community, the ethical outpouring of the bearers of Christ’s redemptive God-consciousness. Thus, the dogmatics of the church are, at their root, a systematic expression of Christian piety, the feeling of absolute dependence.

Schleiermacher’s standing as the “father of modern theology” is reason enough to engage what he has to say on the subject of the doctrine of the Trinity, but this unique and profoundly influential mode of doing theology, as one might expect, yielded provocative conclusions about the traditional doctrine of the Triune God. At the outset, it seems to place the Trinity in an odd sort of liminal space within Schleiermacher’s dogmatics. How can a systematic explication of Christian piety ever yield what we would today call a doctrine of the “immanent” Trinity? If anything, such doctrine must be a result of our more foundational reflection on piety and not the other way around. Hence, we find Schleiermacher’s treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity at the end of his Glaubenslehre, a theological maneuver that Barth would famously reverse, but one that is vastly influential on those who still see themselves as modern theologians taking up Schleiermacher’s mantle.

Luckily, Schleiermacher did not leave us with only a “conclusion” sized statement of his thoughts on the Trinity. In his programmatic and often under-read essay “On the Discrepancy Between the Sabellian and Athanasian Method of Representing the Doctrine of the Trinity,”

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Schleiermacher set out to show why he believed that the Trinitarian theology of Sabellius, contrary to those who labeled the ancient priest’s theology as heretical, avoided the significant problems with which the Nicene tradition has been beset since embracing the Athanasian mode. I would like to frame my discussion of this text with a few initial standards that Schleiermacher sets up to determine the adequacy of any doctrine of the Trinity, whether Sabellian or Athanasian. In the opening paragraphs Schleiermacher utilizes an enlightening analogy, what I will call the analogy of the “two shoals.” The analogy is a means of categorizing the two obstacles that early Christians faced when attempting to reason through just what it meant for them to believe that Jesus was God. He writes:

Inasmuch, however, as this belief [in Jesus’ divinity] would appear polytheistic to the Jews, while the Gentiles at the same time would accuse Christians of being impious because they did not admit of manifold divisions or individualities in the divine nature, so was the church exposed to two shoals in the difficult voyage undertaken for the further formation and exhibition of this doctrine, between which it must take its course. On the one hand, it must give such a direction to that distinction of the Godhead which was appropriately Christian, as that it would by no means dash upon polytheism, but preserve the true characteristics of *monarchia* (sole supremacy); while on the other, it must not veer towards Judaism so as to become implicated in it. That which distinctly marked its removal from Judaism, was the Christian *oikonomia*.³

So, on one side, the flimsy vessel that was the ancient church must take care, according to Schleiermacher, not to run aground upon the shoal of *polytheism*. In its articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity the ancient church had to be sure that it continued to contend for the “sole supremacy” of God, in that the Triune God was *one God* rather than *three* individual deities. Yet, on its other side, lying in wait with as much destructive power, was the shoal of *Judaism*. Thus, the church also had to take care not to ever forsake the Christian economy of

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salvation when confronted with the stark difficulty of confessing both that YHWH was God and that Jesus was God. The temptation to “Judaize” and to downplay Jesus’ divinity had to be resisted if an adequate doctrine of the Trinity was to be constructed.

These two shoals combine to form a perennial cross-pressure at the heart of Trinitarian doctrine. For the one mistake Schleiermacher clearly does not make is to assume that avoiding one shoal is sufficient to ensure we do not run aground upon the other. In fact, what Schleiermacher contends—and this is why I think we are right to call the “two shoals” a cross-pressure—is that the two shoals operate like an ongoing “push and pull” within Trinitarian theology. Continuing with the analogy he remarks:

There was, indeed, a considerable width left for sailing between the two shoals; yet the signals on both for keeping aloof brought with them this disadvantage, that when one, directed by his reckoning or by the wind, took his course between them, he seemed to some to be too near one of these signals, while he himself believed that he was only holding a middle course; and yet, after all, he was actually sailing too near the other signal.

Try as we might, it does not appear that any solution will be without its dangers. For we could always, in taking the course surest to us, find ourselves assuredly steering clear of one shoal while drifting headlong toward another.

Schleiermacher thinks this pressure within the Trinitarian enterprise can “account for all the various views which stand related to the Trinitarian doctrine of our Symbols, and which have given more or less occasion to its gradual development.” To that end, Schleiermacher then undertakes the difficult task of explicating the development of the Sabellian school of thought through a genealogy of the work of its forebears. Recapitulating his entire historical survey is obviously beyond the scope of our inquiry. What I would like to do, however, is to present a few key contentions from Schleiermacher’s exposition. These contentions center around the problems that the mistakes of the Nicene tradition generate and the superior gifts that

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4 Schleiermacher, “Comparison,” 331.
the Sabellian tradition, according to Schleiermacher, might give to the life of the church.

The first contention is something like the following: the Athanasian mode of representing the doctrine of the Trinity created an irresistible temptation toward subordinationism, and this tendency weakens what we might call the “redemptiveness” of redemption. In their attempts to preserve the *monarchia* of the Father, the Athanasian proponents chose to describe the person of the Father as utterly non-dependent while the Son and the Spirit both received their Godhead only in and through the Father. Now, while the Nicene thinkers might have qualified this attribution as a very *particular type* of dependence, Schleiermacher rejects the notion that any sort of generation in the divine could occur and still produce persons on equal standing. With dependence always comes subordination to the one upon whom the divine person is dependent.

This tendency toward subordinationism produces a resulting deficiency in the person of the Redeemer. Thus, Schleiermacher contends the following:

> It is certain, moreover, that the more full and complete the Godhead in the Redeemer is acknowledged to be, and the less any circumstances are added which diminish or degrade it, the more complete must we suppose his humanity to be. But if any person ascribes to him only a Godhead of an inferior kind, one merely approaching true divinity or elevated towards it, so must the human nature of the Redeemer be more or less changed in its phenomena.6

In calling the Father the source of all divinity the Nicene proponent unwittingly lowered Christ to a position that weakened his divine nature and, in turn, his human nature as well. Christ is not quite human because he is somehow God, yet Christ also is not quite God because he is not the Father. With this deleterious ontological difference having snuck in the back door of Nicene theology, the economy of redemption—the “redemptiveness” of redemption as I called it above—is fundamentally weakened.

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The second contention, directly related to the first, comes out in Schleiermacher’s discussion of the early Modalist thinker, Beryll, Bishop of Bostria. Beryll’s solution to the problem encountered above, and a solution that Schleiermacher believes Sabellius achieved at the highest level, was to keep the *monarchia* of God unblemished by claiming that there was no hypostatic division within God. Rather, there were “appropriate circumscription[s] of the divine Being” in the case of the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁷ Hence, Christ and the Holy Spirit were divinely initiated events within the created order, but were not instantiations of distinctions within God, thus safeguarding the simple unity of the Godhead.

At this point Schleiermacher draws a striking conclusion. Writing about the superiorities of Beryll’s position over Origen’s, Schleiermacher argues,

It is not however merely that the interests of Christian faith are promoted by such a creed as that of Beryll, as much as by the one that was opposed to him, (inasmuch as the Christian *oikonomia* suffers nothing by this creed, and the doctrine of the *monarchia* remains entirely uninjured); but even the deeper scientifical views, which the handling of Christian doctrine demands and which belong to the proper theologian, become by this opinion neither more abstruse nor more unfruitful. Not more abstruse; for by this theory we are saved from making any effort to account for it, how there can be diversity of relations and persons in the Godhead in and by itself, or in what these consist, inasmuch as all (on the ground now in question) is viewed as having relation to the Godhead as *revealed* to men. Not more unfruitful; for if we could even give an adequate and satisfactory account of all these distinctions and relations of the Godhead as it originally was in and of itself, this would have no important bearing on the operations of divine grace; which, after all, are the appropriate objects of true evangelical doctrine and instruction.⁸

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Here we have the second, and I think most persuasive, contention: namely, that a doctrine of the Trinity is bound not to be more abstruse or more unfruitful in the manner Schleiermacher describes if it is to be counted as adequate.

This contention’s pair of sub-claims bears further discussion. The first inherent sub-claim is that almost all of our inquiries into the distinctions and relations of the immanent Trinity and, especially, their relations to the economy of salvation will inevitably descend into abstruse vanity. The inscrutability of these questions speaks not to a need for further clarity but rather to a fool’s errand. The second sub-claim is this: even if we could come to a satisfactory account of the immanent Trinity it would have no positive benefit for the life of the church. Without this practical cash-out, the need for the doctrine does not seem “actual,” in any sense of the word. If the doctrine cannot show itself as giving a much needed gift to the church, bearing fruit as it were, then Schleiermacher seems to contend it must be revised or entirely abandoned. Thus, those foolhardy enough to cling to an immanent Trinity will soon find themselves with an inferior account of the Godhead and, moreover, with a doctrine that has no use within the church’s life of piety.

Schleiermacher’s final contention concerns the benefits of adopting the Sabellian position over the Athanasian. Perhaps the most programmatic statement one could draw from Schleiermacher as concerns Sabellius’s Trinitarian doctrine is this one: “[the] Trinity was not essential to Godhead as in itself considered, but only in reference to created beings and on their account.” While Beryll had achieved the innovative solution of “circumscriptions” of the Godhead in God’s relation to the created order, Sabellius found a way to ensure that the effects of these circumscriptions—Christ and the Holy Spirit—were not transitory but permanent effects. The new manifestations of the Godhead were appropriate in the same way that the gifts of the Spirit were appropriate among the body of believers. Drawing these strands together, Sabellius then argued, “The Trinity, therefore, is God revealed; and each member of the same, is a peculiar mode of this revelation. The Godhead, however, in each of these, is one and
the same and not a different one; but still, it is never revealed to us as it is in itself, but as it is developed in the persons of the Trinity.”

Note that Schleiermacher’s contention that the Sabellian position was the superior of the two options revolves around two benefits which arise from adopting the Sabellian mode. Notice also that these benefits accord with the earlier requirements for an adequate doctrine of the Trinity: one of them keeps the doctrine from being too abstruse, the other from being unfruitful. Since the Sabellian position ends all need to scrutinize the inner relations of the Godhead, Schleiermacher contends that Sabellius succeeded in preserving the apophatic to a greater degree than the Nicene tradition. As Schleiermacher says, “One can truly say, that the antithesis between God unrevealed and God revealed was never more completely and strictly carried out . . . than by Sabellius.” Hence, Sabellius avoided an abstruse Trinitarian doctrine by avoiding an inquiry into the inner life of God all together and, thereby, also avoiding a violation of the apophatic principle.

Secondly, Sabellius’s doctrine bears significant fruit and does so in a peculiar way. We might be surprised to find Schleiermacher contending that an entirely unrevealed Godhead was necessary for a more fruitful doctrine of the Trinity, but the fruit it bears has to do entirely with a way of prayer. Schleiermacher claims, quite assuredly, that the Sabellian position prevents absurdities in our manner of prayer, thus preserving the practice of right piety in the church. He writes:

If now a question be raised here, respecting limitations of a transcendental nature; then Sabellius might well have asked, how he who prayed to the Son, could pray to a Godhead that was begotten; and he who prayed to the Spirit, could pray to a divine nature proceeding in an indescribable manner from the Father; and yet the petitioner at the same time be able to separate the one from the other (as he was required to do), when at the very same time also he was required to consider the generation of the Son as unlike to any thing human, which of course made it inconceivable and indescribable to him?

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Sabellius’s position bears a defensive fruit but a fruit nonetheless. For what Sabellius’s disciplined refusal to forsake the unity of God protects against is the inferior mode of prayer that the Nicene tradition creates. The Sabellian mode offers simplicity itself: we pray to one Godhead, not several processions of that Godhead.

To sum up, Schleiermacher argued that the Athanasian mode of representing the Trinity led to two problems. The first was that it lessened the redeeming power of the Redeemer by inscribing an irresistible temptation toward subordinationism, even though it explicitly disavowed this “heresy” with all fervor. Secondly, Schleiermacher argued that the Nicene position, and any doctrine of the Trinity for that matter, had to live up to the following twofold standard: namely, an adequate doctrine of the Trinity had to resist abstruseness on the one hand, and produce fruit in the life of the church on the other. The Nicene doctrine did neither of these as it winged higher and higher into the ether of the immanent relations “within” the Godhead and, Schleiermacher contends, created an entirely befuddled mode of prayer as a result.

Taking a further step back, I would hold that the force of Schleiermacher’s argument is not in its compelling us to deny the truth of the immanent Trinity. The crux of his objections are found in their ability to pose a devastatingly simple question, “Must we say anything of the immanent Trinity?” The question does not concern the logical coherence of the immanent Trinity, though that is certainly a concern, but rather the necessity for the doctrine of the immanent Trinity for the life of the church. What Schleiermacher cannot justify, and, hence, what leads him to reject the doctrine all together, is the notion that the life of the church would be incomplete without such a doctrine or, more accurately, without a particular form of the immanent Trinity. Hearkening back to Schleiermacher’s brilliant twofold standard, one could say that unless a doctrine of the immanent Trinity could prove its necessity for the life of the church (standard of fruitfulness) while also avoiding baseless speculation into the unrevealed life of the Godhead (standard of abstruseness), only then would Schleiermacher’s objections be answered.

Avoiding Abstruseness: The Trinity and Apophaticism

I want to give a first attempt at an answer to Schleiermacher’s critique through the thought of Rowan Williams. I shall begin our discussion of Williams’s thought on the Trinity with another programmatic
quotation: “We do not begin with the trinitarian God and ask how he can be such, but with the world of particulars, cross, empty tomb, forgiven and believing apostles, asking, ‘How can this be?’”\(^\text{14}\) One might understandably read this passage as supporting much of what we have already heard from Schleiermacher. We begin with revelation and, indeed, the experience of revealed persons or modes or circumscriptions is all that we seem to have. There is then no need, it would seem, to move beyond revelation and into the inner being of the divine life. Such attempts, at their very best, would be counted as profoundly speculative. Even more importantly, and much of my argument hinges on this point, any attempt to get “beyond” revelation and “into” the inner workings of the divine relations would seem to violate the common-sense principle of apophaticism. Any account of the immanent Trinity seems to have as its central prerequisite our saying more of God than we may.

Williams, on the other hand, uses the quotation above in an argument in support of the immanent Trinity and, he contends, its deeply rooted apophaticism. How can he accomplish this maneuver? First, we are obviously dealing with a different definition of apophaticism or, more accurately, Williams has shifted the goal of an apophatic grammar away from solely preserving the mystery of the divine esse. In other words, through Williams one might ask, “What is the apophatic requirement for? What is it trying to protect and what do we gain by it?” By framing the question this way we arrive at a vastly different answer than Schleiermacher to the question of abstruseness.

Hence, my first objection against Schleiermacher’s charge of abstruseness will revolve around what apophaticism is and what it is trying to protect. In an essay on the thought of St. John of the Cross, Williams reorients the target of an apophatic grammar of God when he writes, “A negative theology of the trinitarian life . . . derives its negative character not from general and programmatic principles about the ineffability of the divine nature, but from the character of the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and thus also in the lives and life-patterns of believers.”\(^\text{15}\) What apophaticism is attempting to preserve, then, seems to be more than just the mystery of the divine


esse, though this is still surely one of its goals. Instead, Christian apophaticism attempts also to safeguard the ineffable mystery of human salvation—the economy of revelation that seeks to incorporate us into the relations that already exist within the Triune life.

I should say more about this last point, in particular about the character of the relations Williams is describing. What exactly are the relations “enacted in the story of Jesus”? As I read Williams, the relations he means to describe are the relations between the Word and the Father and between the Word and the Spirit as they are both revealed within the economy of salvation. Williams explicitly connects these relations to soteriology thusly:

Briefly put: the human relation with God lives in a tension between the nuptial and the filial. The eros of the created self for God, understood as the longing for communion with the Word, is a desire not for the Word or Son as terminus of prayer and love, but a desire for the desire of the Word—i.e. for the Word’s own desire for the Father and the relation in which that desire exists, the relation we call ‘filial’. Union with the divine partner is union with that partner already and eternally in relation to the Source from which the partner originates. But the love of the Son for the Father is itself a desire for the desire of the Father, and so for the Father’s excess of love ‘beyond’ what is directed to the Son. Thus we, incorporated into this relation to the Father, share the ‘deflection’ of the Son’s desire towards the Father’s excess of love: we are taken into the movement of the Spirit.¹⁶

Note that even beginning to talk about the patterns inherent within human salvation necessitates talk of these “deflections” of desire within the divine inner relations. Moreover, human salvation does not just force talk of these movements but rather, Williams suggests here and elsewhere, salvation simply is the economy of these movements, in a way that human words cannot fully describe. The relations enacted in the story of Jesus become, as has been the capstone of the church’s kerygma since its birth, the mirror image of our life in God—the movements of love that lead St. Paul to wish that he could know as he is fully known.

Williams has turned Schleiermacher’s objection to the immanent Trinity on its head. Apophaticism, it turns out, is not concerned solely with guarding the divine essence from theological overreach. Instead, the target of our apophatic grammar has shifted away from the essence and come to locate the primary mystery it protects in the economic activity of the Godhead. To say the least, it seems that an apophatic grammar is now just as concerned with protecting the account of our being incorporated into the divine relations as it is with keeping us from saying too much about them. Calling a doctrine “abstruse,” then, must take on an entirely different connotation. Schleiermacher held that to say anything of relations within the Godhead was to say more than we were allowed of the divine mystery. Under Williams’s account, however, we can no longer call the doctrine of the immanent Trinity “abstruse” without saying the same thing of what Schleiermacher would consider the more “practical” doctrine—the doctrine of redemption.

My second objection against Schleiermacher’s charge of abstruseness is rooted in Williams’s answer to the question of what we mean when we call the Trinity “revealed.” Schleiermacher’s concurrence with the teachings of Sabellius was based predominantly upon the way in which the Sabellian doctrine of the Trinity was able to preserve the divinity of Christ and the Spirit without lending credence to a useless attempt to infiltrate the hidden divine nature. This explanation safeguarded Christian piety, and its simplicity was a strength that the Nicene version of the Trinity surely lacked. Ockham’s razor seemed to cut the advanced trinitarian mathematics of the Nicene tradition to the quick. After all, why pray to three hypostases when you could pray to one God?

What Williams contends is that this separation between the God revealed and the God hidden is a distinction of which no sense can be made. Its fatal flaw lies in this mistake: “We acknowledge the inseparability of revelation and hiddenness in our encounter with God, yet feel that its character as encounter can only properly be salvaged by holding to a model of God as three more or less perceptible objects, united by a life whose nature evades all description.”17 The separation that Schleiermacher believed would safeguard both apophaticism and the revealed economy actually fails to do justice to both. It fails to do justice precisely in that it believes apophaticism and revelation are

separate things, that what is revealed has no connection to what re-
 mains hidden. Williams here is making the opposite claim. In reveal-
ing Godself, God is only further reinscribing the hiddenness of God. In fact, this revealed hiddenness is what makes encounter recogniz-
able as encounter in the first place.

Our target in this section was objecting to Schleiermacher’s label of “abstruse” for any and all inquiries into the inner divine life. Wil-
liam’s conception of apophaticism leads to a more direct objection against Schleiermacher by redefining what “abstruse” must mean in judging the adequacy of Trinitarian doctrine. To that end, I point to a passage from Williams’s work on the sacraments.

If we try to signify God and his work by resorting to abstract expressions, talking about minds and ideas in a vacuum, we dangerously forget what we are (flesh and blood, timebound), and create a phantom world of pseudo-objects alongside our own familiar one. But the ‘otherness’ of God is not like that; it is more radical. And it is only by speaking and engaging with the material world in a particular way that we come to express truly and respond properly to the real otherness of God.18

I do not bring up the subject of sacramental theology to insinuate an in-depth comparison between the eucharist and the immanent Trin-
ity. Rather, this passage brings to light the following truth concerning divine encounter: as human beings we have no access to knowledge, even knowledge of the divine relations, apart from making signs. This is not to say that there is nothing beyond material signs. It is rather to assert that even something radically other to our world of finitude must be “shown or signed materially” in order for it to be accessible to human beings.

This Wittgensteinian turn is of immense importance because, as I hinted at above, it redefines what we mean by “abstruse.” What Schleiermacher meant by “abstruse” was the theological attempt to asser t knowledge about something to which the human being can claim no legitimate access within the framework of Christian piety. Based on what I have said above, I think I can both agree and disagree with

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18 Williams, On Christian Theology, 200–201.
Schleiermacher here. On the one hand, I agree that there is no sensible account of the inner workings of the divine nature, or any other doctrine for that matter, which might somehow avoid being grounded in human signs. An account that forsook such signs—whether relying on the concepts of “minds” or “words” or “ideas,” being sure to note this key phrase from Williams, *in a vacuum*—will rightly be called abstruse because an account of this sort can have no use for human knowledge. I disagree with Schleiermacher, however, in that it is possible and necessary to “make a sign” for the immanent Trinity. Williams has helped us to see that we cannot help making these signs as it were. Not only that but these signs of our encounter, even in their attempt to safeguard against theological overreach, press us irrevocably to say something of three persons rather than merely one Godhead. Most importantly, this encounter is re-presentable in a non-abstruse way precisely because it is human encounter. The necessity to express this encounter within human signs leads to Schleiermacher’s charge of the immanent Trinity as having no generative effect on the living piety of the church.

*Avoiding Unfruitfulness: The Trinity and Prayer*

Encounter with the revealed God seems to force us into affirming more than just a revealed Trinity. Here I have reached a point of fundamental impasse between the thought of Schleiermacher and Williams. For Schleiermacher, there is nothing about the shape of the Christian life—nothing, in other words, about the revealed life of God—that necessitates the notion of an inner Triunity to God. It is appropriate to speak of the “three” only as a mechanism for describing revelation but not as something that is constitutive of the One that is revealed. Williams could not be more opposed to this idea, and here I need finally to say why.

For Williams, it turns out that the entirety of the economy of the Christian life is oriented toward the fact that there are inner relations within the Godhead precisely because it is entrance into these relations that revelation (and an apophatic grammar of describing this revelation) has invited us into. What we are talking about when we talk about redemption, then, simply is God’s invitation into the relations of the inner divine life. It is precisely this entrance into those relations that is saving, not, as Schleiermacher might contend, something that is accomplished by particular modes of these revelations.
Schleiermacher thought that we had to speak of a Trinity in some way because it assured us that the God-consciousness of Jesus Christ was truly redemptive. Thus, the church could assert that it was the bearer of this consciousness and thereby of true salvation.

This is not, however, what Williams sees as the fruit which the doctrine of the Trinity bears in the life of the church. Much like the question of abstruseness, the question of how the Trinity bears fruit is turned entirely upon its head. I would put it this way: Williams is arguing that the inner life of the Trinity does not bear a particular kind of fruit because this inner life is the root through which all Christian fruit ripens in the first place. The truth of the inner relations of the Trinity is not a tacked-on doctrine that is necessary so that we can trust the validity of Christian revelation. It goes much deeper than that. To that end, Williams writes:

The spirituality of the first Christian centuries was shaped by two convictions—that Christian identity was a matter of coming to share by God’s gift the relation that eternally subsists between the Logos and the divine Source; and that what we encounter in prayer is never capable of being reduced to a finished conceptual scheme, however much we may labour to remove obvious inadequacies and misunderstandings in our speech about God.¹⁹

Thus, at the same time, we find ourselves both bound to an affirmation of an inner differentiation within the living God in order to make sense of what it is that the Christian life is about in the first place, while at the same time bound to the apophatic grammar we discussed above, wherein we can no more give a neat, conceptual schematic of these relations than we could for the life of the universe.

This encounter that makes necessary an inner differentiation within the Godhead in order to make sense of Christian salvation occurs, for Williams, within the practice of Christian prayer. Once we give ourselves fully to this “contemplative living in the Trinitarian life,” we find ourselves able and even compelled to say certain things about the inner relations of the Triune God. Indeed, we have already shown above that the “deflections of desire” which Williams takes to be constitutive of human salvation is revealed within and entered into

through prayer. The life of Christian prayer incorporates us, quite literally it would seem, into the inner relations of the Trinity. We take the place of the Son through the work of the Spirit in order to share in the Word’s relations to the Father and the Spirit. What is most important in that earlier quotation, however, is that “the tension between nuptial and filial in our contemplative stretching-out Godwards itself becomes a clue to how we might speak of God’s own self-relatedness as trinity.”

I would point out here that this profoundly negative way of characterizing the inner life of the Trinity—that of desire deflected and never fully finding closure in its grasp of the other—is only reached through our embracing the practice of Christian prayer and contemplation. In short, the fruit of the immanent Trinity is that it functions as the rootedness out of which all other fruit springs. It is the Ur-fruit (to use a very odd expression) of the Christian life solely because it is what grounds the Christian life as Christian in the first place. The immanent Trinity, then, becomes not a speculative and un-apophatic attempt at saying what God is, but rather becomes a seemingly ecstatic way of describing the mystery of what we are in God. Therefore, we find ourselves forced to say something of the immanent Trinity—to “go on saying ‘God,’” as Williams cheekily puts it—because we find it necessary to say something of ourselves in relation to God. The great darkness at the center of the divine life is not a distant and inscrutable myth. The Christian gospel asserts, in an appropriately shocking manner, that we are wrapped up in that darkness and participate in it. This is the meaning of Christian salvation and, hence, the beginning of any sense of Christian fruitfulness.

**Conclusion**

It would seem I have traveled a great distance only to arrive back at the beginning, at least to some of the “beginning” wisdom of the Christian tradition. I have been arguing that it is necessary to speak of the immanent Trinity regardless of how abstruse or unfruitful it might feel. Schleiermacher put flesh on these creeping doubts in the form of several objections. Trying to pray to three distinct persons who are technically one Being confuses our prayer life. The simplicity

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20 Williams, “Deflections of Desire,” 120.
of praying to one God, who has chosen to reveal God’s self in three
distinct ways, is lost in favor of a theological overreach. Moreover,
this overreach bears no fruit in the lives of believers. It lends itself to
an utterly speculative mode of theology. If the church could only be
satisfied with a hidden essential Unity that grounds a revealed Trinity,
then its doctrine and praxis would be much improved.

Yet, Williams’s radical contention, and mine along with him, is
that what constitutes our individual lives as “Christian” and what casts
the horizon of our community as “covenanted church” can only be
properly understood, and even properly experienced, by speaking of
inner Trinitarian relations. For being caught up into the divine life,
in a movement of love which is just as deep a mystery as the divine
esse, is the meaning of Christian salvation, and growth in awareness
of this state of being is the object of Christian prayer. Hence, to assert
that we can say nothing of the immanent Trinity is to assert that we
can say very little about ourselves as redeemed. Finally, to assert that
such a doctrine bears no fruit is to misconstrue just what the doctrine
actually is. It is not, it turns out, a means of spiritual fruit. It is rather
language about the roots from which all Christian fruitfulness springs
forth in the first place.

Ultimately, I take it that the worst way one might interpret think-
ers like Williams (and Sarah Coakley along with him) is to take them
to be saying that only through contemplative prayer can one see the
necessity of speaking of the immanent Trinity, not to mention the fact
that we have not even discussed precisely which tradition of contem-
plative prayer we take to be most effective or doctrinally sound. What
we ought to hear in Williams’s account, and in my fledging attempt
to appropriate a few of his arguments for my own purposes, ought to
be a type of invitation toward further “sign-making.” It would seem
that while our incorporation into the Trinitarian life is an incorpora-
tion into a definite type of relation within a definite community—that is
what I mean by the phrase “what we are in God”—the nature of
the Living God implies that no one entry point will ever be shown
to be the only entry point into understanding the Trinitarian life.
While I am not fond of the gendered nature of the quotation, I think
C. S. Lewis’s Great Divorce is appropriate here: “Come and see. He
is endless.”

22 C. S. Lewis, The Great Divorce, in The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics