



IONA SCHOOL FOR MINISTRY

The Nature of God and God's Creation: Trinity, God, Creation, Providence

Seniors
September 12, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Travis Helms

STUDY GUIDE

Required Reading (to be completed in advance of class):

Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, Introduction to Theology

Chapter 4 Trinity – pp. 67-88

Chapter 5 God – pp. 89-108

Chapter 6 Creation – pp. 109-121

Chapter 7 Providence - pp. 122-132

Douglas, Part I (skim), Ch. 4 (focus); McGrath Reader #3.23, 3.32, 3.40, 3.41, 3.42

While reading chapter 4, consider the following questions:

- 1.) How does sacred scripture witness to God's self-revelation as Trinity? What do descriptions of God found in Hebrew Scripture tell us about the reality of God? What does the New Testament tell us about the nature of a triune God?
- 2.) How would you define the patristic *terms ousia, hypostasis, substantia, and persona*? Why are these terms important? Do they help us deepen our understanding of God's nature?
- 3.) What did the church's orthodox theologians find most problematic about Sabellianism and Arianism? Why is the Nicene definition of the Trinity important for our understanding of who God is, and how God relates to human creatures?
- 4.) How does the question of God's personhood relate to that of human personhood? What does each tell us about the other? Which of the four descriptions of divine 'personhood' outlined on pp. 83-84 do you find most compelling, and why?
- 5.) Thomas develops a view of the Trinity along the lines of a psychological analogy (p. 84), while Wondra stresses the importance of considering relational / social dimensions of the triune God (p.85). Which of these models do you find most helpful, or convincing? Do you think there is a way in which these two views might be reconciled?

For reflection: Why do you feel that a deeper understanding of the Trinity may (or may not) be important for your ministry?

While reading chapter 5, consider the following questions:

- 1.) How would you describe God's transcendence? How would you describe God's immanence? Do you think these two aspects of God can be held in creative tension?
- 2.) How do the authors define God's Lordship and Holiness? Do you find traditional images of God as Lord, and Holy, helpful — theologically, and with regard to an aim of human flourishing?
- 3.) In this chapter, it is argued that "the wrath of God is simply the necessary correlate of the divine love" (p. 101). Biblically and theologically, how can realities of God's love and anger be shown to co-exist?
- 4.) What do you make of this chapter's presentation of *pantheism*?

For reflection: What are the images of God that you find most compelling, and how do those images inform your ministry? What are alternative images of God you may want to study more deeply, and integrate into your lived theology and practice?

While reading chapter 6, consider the following questions:

- 1.) Describe the differences between the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and the ideas of creation out of chaos, and cabalistic *zimzum*. Why do you think *ex nihilo* became the orthodox position?
- 2.) Do you find it important for theology to address the "relation of creation to time" (p. 116). Why do you think this question has so preoccupied theologians, and how has it been addressed?
- 3.) Why is a doctrine of theological *monism* problematic? And theological *pantheism*?
- 4.) What models does this chapter offer for the relationship between theology and science? Which do you find most persuasive, and why?

For reflection: What is your personal version of a theology of creation? What implications does this theology have for the ways in which you approach your personal life and ministry?

While reading chapter 7, consider the following questions:

- 1.) How does this chapter account for God's influence on human creatures in a way that does not undermine human free-will?
- 2.) Which of the "eight ways of dealing with evil and suffering" described on p. 125 do you find most compelling, and why?
- 3.) Which of the views that account for the "how" of providence" outlined on pp. 127-129 do you find most compelling, and why?
- 4.) Define "process theology." Do you find this framework helpful, and reconcilable with an Anglican / Episcopal theology of providence?

Practical application of theory (project to be completed by class time):

Imagine that you have been asked to develop a curriculum for an Adult Confirmation Class in your parish. Your plan requires you to teach a one-hour class on the nature of God and the Trinity. Develop a two-page class outline or lesson plan that provides historical context for this exploration, as well as several practical illustrations you might use to help curious catechumenates understand the paradoxical nature of the Trinity. Get creative! How would this lesson plan be altered if teaching a group of adolescent / young-adult candidates?

OR

Imagine that you have received a call from a despondent parishioner. This individual has just experienced the personal upheaval of losing a job, and has been told by a well-meaning loved one, "Do not worry. God has a plan." What support could you offer this parishioner, based on your understanding of God's providence? Write a two-page "verbatim" dialogue in third-person that presents a hypothetical conversation between yourself and this parishioner.