The idea that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery suggests one strategy. It is to find something else that defies human comprehension but which we firmly believe in, and use it to speculate about the Trinity. And the obvious—perhaps too obvious—place to look is in ourselves. There are several aspects of human beings that defy human comprehension. One of these is our persistence over time. In this paper I explore the idea that the three Persons stand to each other in a way somewhat analogous to the temporal stages of an enduring person.

INTRODUCTION

“How is it possible for three persons to be one God?” This is not, I take it, merely a request to be shown the strict consistency of the assertion. If that was the problem we would first point out that there are three divine substances only in the sense of hypostasis and one divine substance only in the sense of ousia. So any charge of obvious inconsistency results from failure to disambiguate the term “substance” between “hypostasis” and “ousia.” To establish inconsistency would then require some extra premise connecting substances in the two senses, but this could be met by insisting that the Trinity is a mystery and hence there are no reliable intuitions connecting the different senses of “substance.” For instance any supposed intuition that a person has to be a substance in both senses could be dismissed as an intuition about human persons and so irrelevant to the Trinity.

To be sure the statements of the so-called Athanasian Creed, reflecting St Augustine’s ideas, are more problematic, but they are of doubtful authority, even in the West. In any case I am satisfied that van Inwagen, has shown the formal consistency of even such paradoxical sounding assertions as ‘The
Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods.”

I do not, then, interpret the “How is the Trinity possible?” question merely as about consistency. Instead I treat it as a request for a hypothetical explanation, and the answers to it—the hypotheses—may be compared, with some being more successful than others. We have, however, no good reason to hold any of the available hypotheses to be true. Hence the hypotheses should be called speculations. Speculation is often condemned as frivolous but there are three justifications for speculating about the Trinity. The first is that there is apologetic value in showing that Christianity is supported by human reasoning at its best. The second is that unless we offer answers to “How is the Trinity possible?” questions then this quite central Christian doctrine could become something the faithful believe to be true without actually believing, in much the way that I might believe to be true something Richard Swinburne says in Russian, without believing it—for I do not understand Russian. The third reason is that by speculating and working out just why we reject various speculations we might eventually find a hypothesis which was so much superior to the others that it is no longer mere speculation but a serious hypothesis. I would welcome such a hypothesis about the Trinity, in spite of the apparent arrogance of ever claiming to have found one. For I submit that the real arrogance is for us to infer from our inability now to understand something that human beings will never understand it—as if no one could ever do better than we can!

Even speculations that are contrary to the teachings of the great Ecumenical Councils can still be valuable if they provide partial understanding. To those who say that the danger is that the speculator will fall in love with the speculation, and come to believe it to be more than mere speculation, I am inclined to reply that little harm will be done by such vanity provided the speculation does not become widespread. In any case we speculators should openly acknowledge that these are just speculations. An alternative way of preventing metaphysical speculation being taken too seriously is to provide several incompatible ones.

When it comes to the Trinity what we are looking for is a way of combining the unity of God with a multiplicity of divine persons. This suggests two ways of providing a speculation about the Trinity. One is to start with the three divine persons and then explain how they are one God. The other is to start with the one God and explain how there are three persons.

If we start with a community of divine persons, we can then moderate the resulting Tritheism until we reach a point where we say there are not three gods but just one God. We might do so by insisting that the relations of loving knowledge between the divine persons are essential. This corresponds to one tenable interpretation of the ousia/hypostasis distinction. *Ousia/hypostasis* is substance in the sense of *that capable of existing by itself*, which is not