

‘What is the Trinity; how does it work? 15 June 2025

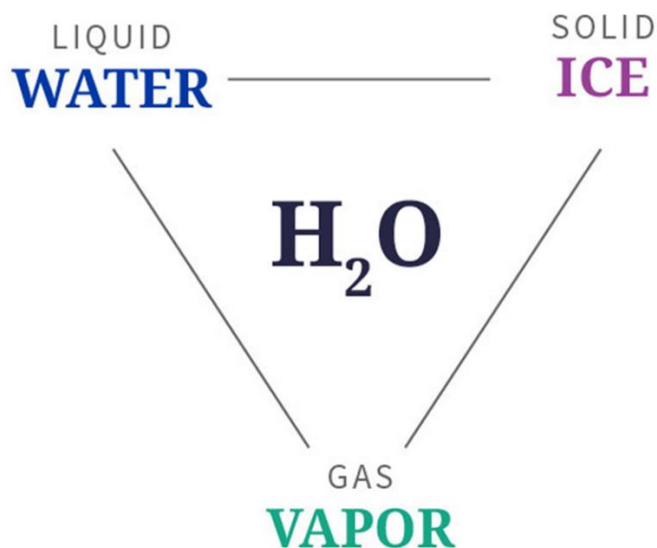


Andrei Rublev's (c.1360-14.30) famous icon of the Trinity, sitting around a communion table, is one of the most impressive depictions of the Trinity that we have. It shows the three required figures, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit doing what they do best; being in communion with each other. What one thinks, they all think; what one does, they all do; what one commands they all command and that which one loves they all love. Considering that no-one actually knows quite how the Trinity actually works, it is quite an impressive effort of understanding.

It is because no-one knows quite how it works that makes the Trinity still an eternal mystery. Many have tried to explain it, but the limitations of our brains and certainly our language make it impossible this side of eternity for us to entirely understand it.

No-one has come up with the definitive description of its workings, though plenty have tried. These descriptions mainly fall into one of four 'heresies': modalism; partialism; tritheism and subordinationism.

Modalism is when the three are separated into three individual and separate concepts that have no relation to each other, other than they are derived from the same type of source, as this diagram of water shows:



Yes, all derive from water, but once separated, the liquid water, solid ice and the vapour have no link between themselves.

Partialism is where an original whole is split into different segments but retaining a common link, as depicted by the shamrock:



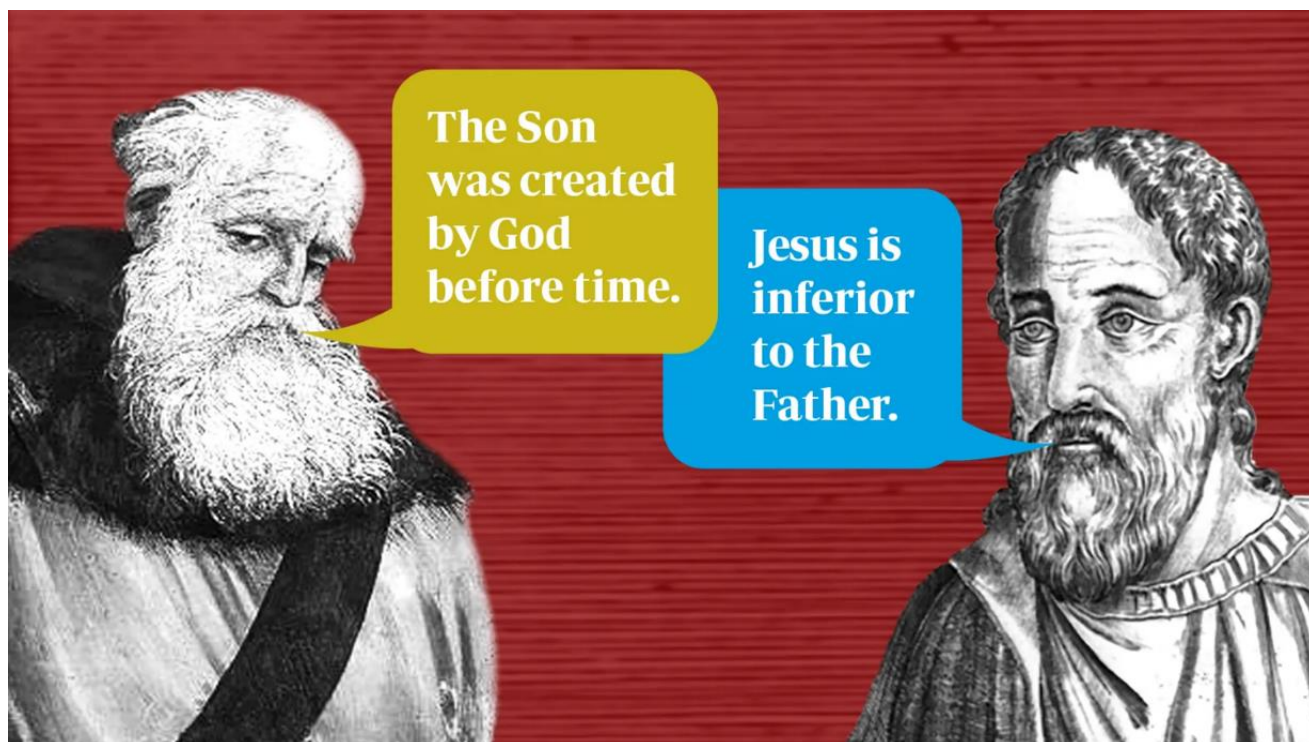
This model fails because, the members of the Trinity are capable of acting separately as well as collectively. Pull the three leaves of the Shamrock apart and all you will end up with is a dead shamrock, in pieces, never to be joined again!

Tritheism is where the three are regarded as three separate God's with no common link, as in this picture of a stained-glass window:



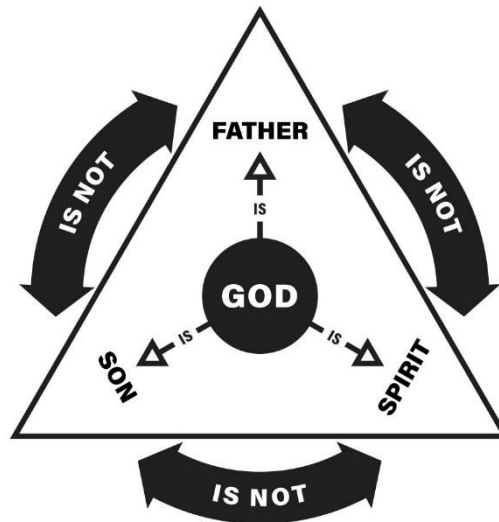
The three members of the Trinity are there and one can tell which is which, but there is nothing to connect them in communion or to suggest they are connected.

Subordinationism is where one may have the three members of the Trinity and they may even be in communion with each other, but where one or two of them are considered superior to the other(s), as here:



So how can we describe the Trinity? There are two possibilities that I know of to do this.

Firstly, a visual diagram:



Here, we can see clearly that each member of the Trinity is to be regarded as God, yet at the same time they are distinct from each other. What this doesn't show is how the three interact with each other, so it is not a perfect example.

Another way to think of the Trinity that I found helpful is as an audio experience. When a pianist plays a chord of three notes, our audio experience is to hear one block of music, yet, this block is itself made up of three distinct notes working together, at the same time as doing their own thing. I think this is the closest we can come to describing the Trinity without using the limitations of paint, pen or paper!

The important thing is that when glory comes and the Lord brings all to himself, then we will see and know.

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