**Assignment 2.**

**Q. How would you reconcile these two statements; “God is a person”; “God is three persons”?**

To look at the above statement we need to look at what is a person and how can God be a person let alone three.

Early theologians and ordinary Christians have thought of God as a personal God. Christian practice of prayer for example has been modeled on a child & parent relationship. As John Oman puts it, *“is simply trust in a person whose whole dealing with us proves him worthy of trust”.*

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:19; “*that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us”.*  This clearly shows human personal relationships. [[1]](#footnote-0) So this would suggest that through personal faith, a sinful man & God reconcile the relationship of 2 people. Does this then reduce God to a human level, if we speak of God as a person?

To speak of God as a person would amount to denying the Trinity. Many writers who spoke of God as ‘a person’ were not happy with God as three persons.

Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) was a philosopher whose theories were based on experiences derived from the senses, and wrote in his book; *Philosophical Commentaries,* that God should not be spoken of as ‘a person’ for this reason.[[2]](#footnote-1)

So what do we mean by ‘person’

The word ‘person’ comes from the latin word*, ‘persona’* meaning mask, or character played by an actor. In modern terms “person” means little more than, “An individual human being”.

Tertullian, a latin- speaking theologian (C.160-c.220) used this to help him communicate some aspects of the Christian God to the Roman culture during this time.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Early Chrsitain writers saw the word “persons” as, ‘an individual’s way of speaking, their actions, and their social relationships’.

Therefore making God a ‘personal God’ that is a God with which we can have a relationship similar to us as we do with other human beings.

Aristotle the greek philosopher in the 17th century argued that God could not love us as we loved God, otherwise it would make him less than. Therefore God was ‘impersonal’. Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) also believed that people could love God but not that God could love people. He thought it to be a one way street. He believed any part in God’s passion towards us would make him less than God. Either God moves to a greater perfection or lesser, either way God’s perfection would be compromised. God loving anyone would prove him to be inconsistent with the idea of God being perfect.[[4]](#footnote-3)

Modern philosophical analysis of the idea of ‘person’ or Dialogical personalism. (conversational and shared dialogue)

Martin Buber a Jewish writer wrote a book in 1923 called *“I and thou”* where he looked at the relationships between personal = I -You and impersonal I-It.

I-You relations were between 2 active subjects that are both mutual and reciprocal. The relationship itself is an intangible and invisible bond.

I-It relations were between subject and object. Ie. a human being and a pencil. Human being is active and the pencil is passive.

We can know about something and know about someone. We know about itbut we are known by, a you. [[5]](#footnote-4)

How does this relate to christian theology as God as a person?

1. God cannot be reduced to a concept. Only an *IT* can be. “You who can, by its nature, never become an It. That is God is a being who escapes all attempts at objectification and transcends all description. Theology must learn to acknowledge and wrestle with the presence of God, realizing that this presence cannot be reduced to a neat package of content. [[6]](#footnote-5)
2. The revelation of God is a self-revelation, not just on facts. Therefore the knowledge of God as both an IT & a You. It's about God making it possible for humans to know God and to know about God. Buber’s framework allowed these ideas about revelation to be in a more supportive and rigorous structure.
3. Buber’s dialogical personalism allowed criticism that God was a passive object. In the 19th century the phrase, “Man’s quest for God”, God being an ‘It’ waiting to be discovered by male theologians, who are viewed as active subjects. Emil Brunner (1889-1966) in his *Truth as Encounter (1937)* argued thatGod had to be viewed as a You, an active subject. Therefore the initiative taken from humans, through self-revelation and willingness to be known in a historical and personal form, ie. Jesus Christ.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Trinity - God in three persons.

The Trinity can be defined as; “*God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is only one God. [[8]](#footnote-7)*

The word Trinity is not found in the Bible, though the idea of the word is taught in many places in the Bible. Trinity means, ‘tri-unity’ or ‘three-in-oneness’. It’s teaching is that God is three persons yet one God.

In the old testament we read in Gen. 1:26, God says “ Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness”. Some have said that this was often referred to speech a king would use to say, “we are pleased”. However in the old testament Hebrew there is no other use of this regarding any royalty. So this implies that more than one person is involved. [[9]](#footnote-8)

In the new testament Matt.3:16-17. During the baptism of Christ we clearly see the Godhead working separately. God the Son is being baptised, God the father is speaking from heaven and God the Holy Spirit descends from heaven to rest on Jesus to empower him in his ministry. [[10]](#footnote-9)

Also in John 1:1-2, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God”. the Word being Jesus was with God, shows them to be different persons. [[11]](#footnote-10)

Trinitas.

Tertullian (mentioned above) is said to have coined the word, “*Trinity*” or “*Trinitas*”, the latin form.

Persona

He looked at *Persona*, as already mentioned above. He wanted the reader to realise that God was three persons in one, like an actor who plays lots of roles but one actor. God acting in multiple manners.

Substantia

This term was used by Tertullian to try and explain that within the Godhead they were all the same substance. Their unity but outward appearance of diversity.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Each person of the trinity is fully God. So although 3 are seen to be separate they are fully God as Scripture tells us.

God the Father is clearly God as shown in Gen. 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and he earth”. God the father is Sovereign Lord both in the new & old testaments.

God the Son. In John 1;1-4, the second half says, “*all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men”*. This clearly affirms the deity of Christ. Also John 20:25-31, where Thomas meets the risen Christ who asks Thomas to touch his wounds etc. Thomas exclaims, “*My Lord and my God”*. Heb. 1:3, “ *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word”.*

Holy Spirit is fully God. in Matt. 28:19, “*Therefore go make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ''*, this clearly makes the Holy Spirit equal to God & Jesus. In Acts 5:3-4, “ *Ananias,how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit'',* “You have not lied just to human beings but to God”. Peter here is saying that God and the Holt Spirit are equal….[[13]](#footnote-12)

So are we to assume then that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are 3 different beings. Scripture clearly tells us that there is only one God. Isiah 45:5=

“I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God”.

Isaiah 45:21-22, *“And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and Saviour; there is none but me. “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other”.* [[14]](#footnote-13)

The new testament also states there is only one God.

1 Tim;2:5, “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.*

James 2:19, “*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder”.*

So we can now establish that God is fully God, and only one God. God is one being yet 3 persons. Each person has the whole fullness of God himself. The Son is not one third of God but fully God. The Holy Spirit is not one third of God but fully God, and all are equal and have the same attributes. They are all real persons and not just different ways of looking at one being of God. This was modalism or sabellianism thinking. Modalism and Sabelliansim thought God was one person but in 3 different forms.[[15]](#footnote-14)

It may be clearer to look at the relationships between the Godhead rather than being different ‘beings’. God is so much more than we can imagine and so we find it hard to imagine God having 3 interpersonal relationships, hence 3 persons. So the differences are the way in which they relate to each other and Creation. The unique way the Father relates to the Son and the Holy Spirit, as a Father. The unique way the Son relates as the Son, and the unique way the Holy Spirit relates to the Spirit. [[16]](#footnote-15)

Conclusion.

The Trinity is probably the hardest concept for us to grasp in Christian theology. The word ‘person’ falls short when describing God, the Son and Holy Spirit and their relationship with each other. God is far too great for our understanding. We describe God as 3 persons as we have limited vocabulary and reasoning and it seems the best way to describe the Trinity. God is far greater than any person/human and most analogies fall short. As long as we know that the persons of the Trinity are co-equal in every way and are God in substance and character and we don’t lose sight of this. We must never minimise God in any way.

1. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p177 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p178 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p178 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p179 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p180 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p180 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p181 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p226 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p226 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p230 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p231 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Alister McGrath. Christian Theology an introduction. 6th edition. Wiley Blackwell.p304. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p237 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p239 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p241 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology.* p252 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)