Trinity, Imago Dei, and Tripartite Anthropology:

Exploring Augustine's Contention that Human Triads Mirror the Trinity

Author Note

Daniel G. Sinclair, Masters in Theology Program

CT 550

Williamson College

Contact: dgsinclair@gmail.com

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1   Abstract

Augustine wrote *The Trinity* over twenty years, ending with a text so enormous that it was published in parts, in rough form, and later revised by Augustine (Harmless, 2010, p. 286). At a high level, the book may be viewed as having two halves – the first half contains Augustine's theological explanations of the Trinity, while the second half, looking for triads in anthropology, is based on Augustine's assumption that a reflection of the Trinity must be in man as part of the *imago Dei (ID)*. In this paper, I explore the major views of what makes up the *imago Dei,* Augustine's criteria for a proper triad reflecting the Trinity, whether his Trinitarian-human analogy can also support a tripartite view of man, and conclude that Augustine's approach is scripturally sound and perhaps helpful for supporting a tripartite Biblical anthropology.

2   Major Approaches to the Imago Dei

The discussion of which attributes of God are mirrored in man as the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) continues after nearly 2000 years of Christian theology. Hoekema (1994) makes a historical survey of notable theologians on this matter, first quoting Irenaeus (130-202 AD), writing "For Irenaeus, the image of God meant man's 'nature as a rational and free being, a nature which was not lost in the fall'" (p. 34). By contrast, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD) thought the ID was to be found in the intellect of man, not in the free will as Irenaeus thought. John Calvin (1509-1564 AD), attempting like most reformers to think supremely biblically about such matters, concluded that the ID was in the mind and affections, or "in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness." More recent theologians, however, like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and G. C. Berkouwer all deny that the ID is found in the intellect and stress either the

male/female aspect (Barth) or the moral and spiritual communion aspects of mankind (Brunner

and Berkouwer) as the functional aspects that reflect the ID.

If we examine scripture, especially Genesis 1 where the ID is introduced and either

explicitly or implicitly defined, we can generalize the following possibilities for defining the ID:[1]

2.1   All of Christ's Attributes

Emil Brunner argues that the ID is nothing less than Christ-likeness, as He is "the express

image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3 NKJV) – when coupled with "put on the new self, which is

being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10 NIV), we may

conclude that Christ's image, that is his qualities in us, constitute the ID.

> "The whole work of Jesus Christ is reconciliation and redemption may be
>
> summed up I this central conception of the renewal and consummation of the
>
> Divine Image in man." (Brunner, 1979, p. 501)

2.2   Male and Female

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male
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> and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, NIV)

This is the most explicit biblical definition of the image of God, and based on that we

might tend to side with Barth on this point as well, although his oppositional model of

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[1] A comprehensive review all of scripture related to the ID is outside the scope of thi paper, but we should at least consider James 3:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:7 which instruct us that the ID is not lost in fallen man. However, in general, most other passages modify our view of the ID rather than define new categories. It is also possible to view every type of "Christ-likeness" to an attribute of God that may be part of the ID, though since fallen man still retains the ID, holiness and righteousness may NOT be part of the ID. These details point us back to Genesis as our best source for defining the ID, unless, as Brunner does, we take the tack that the image is being restored through sanctification.

male/female relations seems an odd way to characterize the ID in male and female. [2] Perhaps in addition to or instead of the idea of internal conflict in the godhead, God intends to show that He has attributes in tension (e.g. war and nurture) and that he is internally relational as well as (pro) creative.

2.3   Procreation and Dominion

Dominion is mentioned at least twice as part of the image of God passages in Genesis 1. The first is in v. 26:

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness."
>
> They will rule…the whole earth." (Genesis 1:26)

This ruling appears a direct continuation of the discussion of the image of God. Secondly, directly after God's declaration of creating them, male and female in his image, he gives them a charge, which can also be seen in Genesis 1:28 – "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it."

2.4   Animalis Via Negativa

Augustine and others have often approached the ID merely as the attributes that make us different from the animals. This thought may have originated with Aristotle, who postulated a hierarchy of souls, from plants (nutritive soul) to animals (sensitive soul) to mankind (rational soul). This methodology led initially to emphasis on the *rational mind* or intellect, but later

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[2] "Could anything be more obvious than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God significs existence in confrontation, i.e. in this confrontation, in the juxtaposition and conjunction of man and man which is that of male and female…?" (Karl Barth from Church Dogmatics, quoted in Hoekema, 1994, p. 49)

theologians like Brunner, Berkouwer, and Barth rejected this for the moral sense [3] and what some anthropological dualists (body and soul/spirit) call the "higher" or "spiritual" functions of the soul [4] [5]

2.5 Moral Sense

Although our moral sense can be deduced using the *animalis via negativa*, there is a more direct biblical reference that we can point to:

> "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you
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> will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5)

To leverage this scripture, we must assume that Satan was telling a half-truth – that having a moral sense is part of the nature of God. The lie is that God was not only keeping this nature from them, but this knowledge. However, God fully intended for Adam and Eve to learn about evil and build virtue through *resisting* it rather than *participating* in it, as part of their probationary righteous status. (Vos, 2014, pp. 29–33). Nevertheless, our moral sense, often grouped into the "higher" functions of the spirit (*conscience, intuition, communion*) may be the true seat of the ID in humans (Nee, 1965; Sinclair, 2020a).

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[3] "Early in the history of Christian theology…man's intellectual and rational powers were singled out s one of the most important, if not *the* most important, features of the image of God….Certainly included in the image here is man's moral sensitivity…and his conscience. Included also is the capacity for religious worship (what Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis* or "awareness of divinity"). An important human quality frequently mentioned by recent theologians is that of responsibility: man's ability to respond to God and his fellowmen." (Hoekema, 1994, p. 70)

[4] Though a dualist himself, Grudem's understanding, if not subconscious admission of the taxonomic value of tripartitism is very clear in his summation of sanctification by listing these exact soulical functions as a group, followed by what he describes explicitly as the sanctification of *spirit* and *body* (1994, pp. 756–757)

[5] "In this more accurate use, *psyche* denotes man's immaterial part in its inferior powers and activities; as *psyche*, man is a conscious individual, and, in common with the brute creation, has an animal life, together with appetite, imagination, memory, understanding. *Pneuma*, on the other hand, denotes man's immaterial part in its higher capacities and faculties; as *pneuma*, man is a being related to God, and possessing powers of reason, conscience, and free will, which difference him from the brute creation and constitute him responsible and immortal." (Strong, 1972, p. 484)

2.6   The Trinity

Lastly, we arrive at Augustine's significant investment in the idea that the image of God is importantly a trinity, and we should see that reflected in anthropology. This assumption also has some direct scripture that implies it, the aforementioned Genesis 1:26 passage, which has God referring to himself in the plural ("let *us* make man in *our* image"). If we read this a dialog among the Trinity, then it makes sense that this is part of the ID.[6]

3   Augustine's Criteria and Triads

Augustine spends nearly half of his 20-year, 1400+ page tome exploring possible triads in human function and structure. However, he is not merely looking for triads, but triads that meet the conditions for being an analog of the Trinity. Those principles are nicely summarized by Harmless:

> [Augustine] is carefully testing analogies using very specific criteria…at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. He is testing whether [the elements]…are (i) the same substance, (ii) equal to each of the others, (iii) distinct (but not different) from one another, (iv) mutually inter-related, (v) mutually indwelling, and (vi) united (but without any mixture) (Harmless, 2010, p. 298)

Focusing on the functions of the soul and senses of the body, Augustine identifies at few major triads, including the relational *lover, the beloved, and love itself,* the mind's functions of *mind, knowledge, and love,* or *memory, intellect,* and *will*, as well as the relational triad of *father, mother,* and *child*. As an example of Augustine's vetting of these triads, see Augustine working through the *lover/beloved/love* triad to test for proper analogy:

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[6] If we view this through Divine Council theology, that would remove this implication (Heiser, 2019).

> In these three, when the mind knows itself and loves itself, a trinity remains: the mind, love, and knowledge. And there is no confusion through any commingling, though each is a substance in itself, and all are found mutually in all. (On the Trinity 9:5.8 in Harmless, 2010, p. 299)

Augustine likely focused on the *mind*, or *soul* of man because it was in the *intelligence* that early Christian theologians supposed the ID resided, and the majority view of biblical anthropology was bipartite (a.k.a. dualistic), and like Augustine, assumed the mind as part of the spirit.[7] Later theologians moved more towards the "spiritual" function of *communion with God* and *moral sense*, since these seem more distinct and absent in animals rather than possibly a mere matter of degrees different (e.g. animals have intelligence, ours is not different just greater). These later theologians still approached biblical anthropology as bipartite (dualist), but moving towards the "spiritual" functions begs the question of an obvious trinitarian-based biblical anthropology – a tripartite view of man, comprised of *spirit, soul,* and *body* (1 Thes. 5:23).

4   The Trinity and Tripartism

If we examine the tripartite anthropological model and use Augustine's criteria, we may be able to evaluate if this model, arguably more directly biblical than Augustine's triads, meets the criteria for a reflection of the Trinity in man. Additionally, two important theologians have weighed in on this issue, both in the negative, one a bipartite supporter (Augustus Strong), the

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[7] Augustine almost took a tripartite view, but associated the mind with the spirit instead of the soul as modern triadists do, writing "And inasmuch as there are three things of which man consists—namely, spirit, soul, and body—which again are spoken of as two, because frequently the soul is named along with the spirit; for a certain rational portion of the same, of which beasts are devoid, is called spirit: the principal part in us is the spirit; next, the life whereby we are united with the body is called the soul; finally, the body itself, as it is visible, is the last part in us." (Symbolo 10:23 Augustine, 2015, pp. 42–43)

other a primary tripartite theologian (John Heard). Examining their thoughts can help us review

our reasoning in light of their rational and theological doubts.

4.1   The Tripartite Model of Man

While there is no universally accepted model of

triadism, modern triadists rely heavily on the model

outlined by Watchman Nee in his perennial classic

The Spiritual Man (Nee, 1968). Nee presented his

triadism in a bullseye diagram, in part to show that the

spirit is at the core of the person, the body as the outer

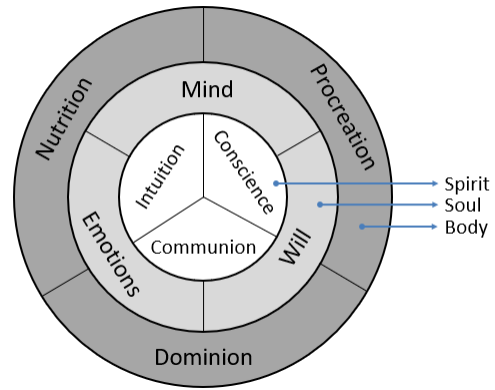man, and the soul existing between (Nee, 1965). A

Figure 1: The Triadic Model of Man

simple set of definitions for the three major parts might be as follows: "The body gives us *world*-

consciousness, the soul gives us *self*-consciousness, and the spirit gives us *God*-consciousness"

(Heard, 1868, p. 268; Nee, 1968, p. 26 Vol. 1). Also included here are Nee's proposed functions

of *spirit, soul,* and *body*. Those too could be evaluated for Trinitarian analogy, but that is outside

the scope of this paper.

4.2   Evaluating Tripartitism with Augustine's Criteria

Examining the *spirit/soul/body* triad using Augustine's criteria can reveal if it qualifies as

a trinitarian reflection. I note, however, that these criteria may be ambiguous enough that it is

likely we could accept most triads - but the exercise is still worthwhile.

4.2.1   The Same Substance or Essence

The classic trinitarian formula for God is "three persons, one essence." A similar formula

for tripartitism is "three parts, one essence." Additionally, if Jesus can be (temporally) *physical*,

while the Father and Spirit are *immaterial*, then the human's *physical* body, along with their *immaterial* soul and spirit seem like a close analog.

4.2.2   Equal to each other

Equality in the Trinity is not unambiguous, in that the subordination of Christ to the Father might imply some inequality, at least in function. However, in Christian theology, while the spirit is supposed to lead, the soul and body are not of less value, but part of God's "good" creation. So a very similar dynamic of *equality with subordination* exists in triparitism.

4.2.3   Distinct but not different

Certainly, the body is distinct from the soul and spirit, but are the latter two substantially different? In *Principles for Understanding Differential Use of "Soul" and "Spirit" in the New Testament* (Sinclair, 2020b), I outline many principles for distinguishing soul and spirit – if these arguments are sound, then spirit and soul may be viewed as distinct but not different.

4.2.4   Mutually inter-related

Certainly, man is an integrated whole. This can be seen in God's desire to save and sanctify the entire person (1 Thes. 5:23 speaks of the entire person being sanctified), and the resurrection includes a physical body because the entire human is to be redeemed. It is fairly sure that the unity of the human denies modalism, as in the Trinity, assuring us of an inviolable inter-relatedness.[8]

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[8] The non-modal unity of mankind is somewhat contradicted by the traditional doctrine of conscious non-corporeal existence in the interim state between death and resurrection, a conflict often ignored or excepted by traditionalists.

4.2.5   Mutually indwelling

All three are localized in the human body, and not apart. These are more mutually indwelling than perhaps even the trinity since Jesus was at least temporarily not conterminous with the omnipresent Father while here on earth.

By these Augustinian criteria, the tripartite view has a significant analogical similarity to the Trinity, perhaps closer than Augustine's triads themselves, in which he expressed some doubt.[9] However, two important Christian theologians, Augustus Strong and John. B. Heard, do not support this trinitarian analogy to triadism.

4.3   Strong and Heard's Contrary Arguments

Augustus Strong (1836-1921) was an American Baptist minister who wrote one of the central evangelical Systematic Theology texts, still referred to by many. At the turn of the last century, triadism was very popular, and he felt compelled to write on it in his classic text:

> The element of truth in trichotomy is simply this, that man has a triplicity of endowment, in virtue of which the single soul has relations to matter, to self, and to God. The trichotomous theory, however…endangers the unity and immateriality of our higher nature, by holding that man consists of three substances…and that soul and spirit are as distinct from each other as are soul and body. (Strong, 1972, p. 484)

In Strong's language, we can see language similar to Augustine's, wondering if the three substances can be viewed as distinct but integrated. Strong argues that soul and spirit are not

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[9] In the final book of *The Trinity*, Augustine explores some weaknesses in this trinitarian approach to anthropology. He does not believe that such human triads prove the divine Trinity, and he admits that there is no obvious direct analogy. Augustine hides this lack of congruity behind Paul's admission of incomplete knowledge ("now we see as through a glass darkly, 1 Cor. 13:12), but it may just be that the congruity is a bit of a fabrication, and that our *imago Dei* has little to do with the Trinity.

distinct substances, both being immaterial, and leans on his arguments that these are also used interchangeably in scripture (for a refutation, see Sinclair, 2020b).

Even more interesting is J.B. Heard's refutation of the Trinitarian/triadism parallel, since he was a notable triadist supporter, having written what Grudem calls "the most recent scholarly defense of trichotomy, which is from more than 100 years ago." (Grudem, 2016 Ch. 23 6:15). Heard, unlike Augustine, is skeptical of analogizing as an exegetical tool in general,[10] and not convinced by this analogy at all:

> In God there are three persons in one substance; in man three substances are fused into one person. Thus…the analogy…absolutely disappears….In the image of God made he man – not in the sense assuredly that the relation of Father, Son, and Spirit are to each other as Spirit, Soul, and Body. (Heard, 1868, pp. 142–143)

While Strong objects to considering spirit and soul as distinct substances, Heard is more narrow and demanding of the analogy, denying that there is any *direct correlation* between the three parts of the Trinity and the three parts of man (e.g. Father = Soul, Son = body, Spirit = spirit). He is not, however, applying the analogy as Augustine intends, while Strong does, maintaining his objection within the Augustinian claims.

5   Conclusion

In *The Trinity*, Augustine spends the entire second half of the book exploring the idea that the *imago Dei* in man must reflect the Trinity. He does not expect a 1:1 correlation with the three

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[10] "Analogies are of all arguments the most deceptive. That forward, forth-reaching faculty may land us on to the shore of truth, but it may as often mistake a sleeping whale for an island, and land us where there is not a foothold of certainty. Such has been the fate of all analogies from man to the universe, and such will the analogy prove, from the trichotomy to the Trinity. It will not bear the weight of solid reason." (Heard, 1868, p. 138)

persons of the Godhead, but merely identifies human triads that seem to meet the mysterious

attributes of the Trinity's combination of *persons* and *essence*. His assumption that the Trinity

should be included in the *imago Dei* has some scriptural warrant, and is certainly a natural

intuition, considering the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity to the nature of God. However,

his attempts at finding the correct analogy, if there is one, seem stymied by his narrow focus on

the mind as the locus of the *imago Dei* rather than the functions of moral sense and communion

with God, as later theologians do. He does consider triads in the body, but he still limits his

scope to the *functional* attributes of man, rather than including the *structural*. [11]

One primary and obvious structural approach is that of tripartite anthropology. Though

Augustine elsewhere admits the reality of the tripartite components of mankind, his functional

focus plus his anthropological dualism prevents him from considering a tripartite connection to

the Trinity.[12] When the tripartite model is considered using Augustine's qualifiers for a valid

Trinitarian analogy, the model fares quite well. However, this analogy is rejected by two

significant theologians, one dualist and one tripartite. The former (Strong) probably agrees with

Augustine's dualist exclusion due to a lack of sufficient separation between spirit and soul, while

the latter (Heard) demands a direct correlation between the persons of God and the components

of man, and finds none. I find Heard's narrowness missing the point of analogy, while I find

Strong's denial of sufficient distinction between soul and spirit arguable, and perhaps based on

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[11] Hoekema asks well, "Must we think of the image of God in man as involving only what man is and not what he does, or [vice versa], or both? Is "image of God" only a description of the way in which the human being functions, or is it also a description, the kind of being he or she is? Some theologians lay most of their emphasis here on the structural aspect…whereas other theologians put most of their emphasis on the functional aspect. (1994, p. 69)

[12] Excluding the structure of man, whether the body or spirit, from the *imago Dei* has additional problems. "Man's body also belongs to the image of God…The body is not a tomb but a wonderous masterpiece of God, constituting the essence of man as fully as the soul…it belongs so essentially to man that, though through sin it is violently torn away from the soul [in death], it is nevertheless again united with the soul in resurrection." (Herman Bavinck, Dogmatiek 2:601, quoted in Hoekema, 1994, p. 68)

an outdated hermeneutic that lacks the ability to understand the use of the words for soul and

spirit, especially in the New Testament (see *Principles for Understanding Differential Use of*

"Soul" and "Spirit" in the New Testament, Sinclair, 2020b). With Augustine, I agree that such

triads do not prove the reality of the Trinity, but they do provide for me some extra justification

for a tripartite biblical anthropology.

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