CHAPTER TWELVE

SOCIALISATION AND EMPIRICAL-THEOLOGICAL MODELS OF THE TRINITY: A STUDY AMONG THEOLOGY STUDENTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Mark J. Cartledge

SUMMARY

The socialisation of Christian doctrine is an area of empirical-theological research that has received very little attention. Therefore this study begins to highlight this avenue of research by considering the impact of specific socialisation factors on certain Trinitarian beliefs. It investigates this relationship through an analysis of quantitative data collected from a sample of 244 theology students training at 11 residential theological institutions in the United Kingdom, representing Ecumenical, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Adventist educational contexts. The aim of this chapter is to test the ways in which Trinitarian beliefs are transmitted via socialisation. The key research question can be stated thus: what is the influence of socialisation factors on empirical-theological models of the Trinity in the context of specific background variables? From a theoretical account of socialisation, which includes a discussion of the reference group, significant others, environment and media, and the individual, the impact of socialisation on the key models of the Trinity is tested. These Trinitarian models are: (1) orthodox-exclusivist; (2) pneumatic-social; (3) modalist; (4) subordinationist; and (5) transgender. The findings of this research are important and show that gender, educational qualifications, Christian age (how long a person has been a Christian) and educational contexts all influence Trinitarian beliefs (especially orthodox-exclusivism and modalism) via the specific socialisation factors of famous preachers, magazines, audio and video tapes, and personal bible study. It is hoped that this study shows the importance of such an enquiry and suggests possibilities for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Socialisation refers to the process whereby individuals become members of a particular social group and adopt certain roles and behaviour; in other words, become actors or agents in the various scenarios of
life in particular cultures. It is a process that usually begins within a family context (referred to as primary socialisation) and continues throughout the life-span of individuals as they move through formal education and on into the world of work (referred to as secondary socialisation). Standard sociological textbooks will normally outline a number of theoretical perspectives, for example role theory, associated with the structural-functionalist tradition, symbolic interactionism and psychoanalytic theory (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). This chapter begins by offering a brief outline of these broad traditions before identifying key socialisation factors that are important to the enquiry.

*Role theory* stresses the requirements and obligations of roles as defined by different cultures, and socialisation is the process through which individuals learn how to enact them. This is achieved not only by external definition but by the internalisation of social expectations so that they are understood and embraced by the person. The degree of freedom that individuals have to adopt a role is debated within the literature. It is increasingly recognised that social roles are more akin to loose frameworks within which people can and do improvise through their actions (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). The importance of socialisation is that it enables an account to be given of the process whereby individuals within a given social and cultural context play certain accepted social roles and embody particular attitudes appropriate to those roles (Mayer, 1970). In role theory the goal of socialisation ‘is to bring the individual to a proper regard for the limits of desirable and acceptable behaviour in various situations and relationships’ (Danzinger, 1971: 22). Understandably we think of children being born within a family unit and being socialised through their upbringing into the beliefs, values and practices of the wider community. The family, school, university, and other institutions, such as the Church and voluntary organisations, provide contexts in which such socialisation occurs (White, 1977). The physical environment, the mass media, including literature and the internet, also contribute to the learning process. Indeed, it could be argued that any process whereby an individual transfers from one culture to another and becomes a member of that second cultural group necessarily involves some mechanism of socialisation. Therefore, social mobility and major social changes involve the re-socialisation of people of all ages and the transference from one social world to another is made increasingly possible and desirable (Berger, 1969).

*Symbolic interactionism* is associated with the work of George Herbert Mead (1964) and Erving Goffman (1963) and the social construction