

HOW WAS THE ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY FORMULATED AS A RESULT OF THE FOURTH-CENTURY CONTROVERSIES?

INTRODUCTION

The word 'Trinity', first used by Theophilus of Antioch (AD 180), is not found in Scripture. It is, however, in Christianity that the Trinitarian nature of God has been most complexly explored, affirming that there is the one God, who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The basis for this doctrine in the Bible consists of threefold formulae like Matthew 28:19, I Peter 1:2 and Isaiah 6:3. These passages in no way predicate a God who is eternally three in one, but they set the terms for later thinking toward that end. Elaboration on the concept serves to defend the church against charges of di - or tritheism. Since the Christians have come to worship Jesus as a god, how can they claim to be continuing the monotheistic tradition of the God of Israel? Various answers are suggested, debated, and rejected as heretical, but the idea of a Trinity - one God subsisting in three persons and one substance ultimately prevails.

In the 3rd and early 4th centuries, against Sabellianism and Arianism, the Son and Father were defined as distinct yet coequal and coeternal. In the late 4th century, the Cappadocian Fathers took the final step by understanding the Holy Spirit as of the same status. God was then to be spoken of as one *ousia* (being) in three hypostases (persons), and this has remained the orthodox formulation. In this essay, I would try to demonstrate my understanding of the development through controversy and the final orthodox statement of the Trinity.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

Theologians such as Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian essentially continued the biblical way of thinking and speaking with little change beyond highlighting the Son's identity as cosmic *logos* (word). The formal doctrine of the Trinity was the result of several inadequate attempts to analyse who and what the Christian God really is. The first major attempt was that of Sabellius. He proposed that whilst God is Father, Son and Spirit, he is not eternally and intrinsically so but only in relation to creation and salvation. In addition, God is only ever one of the three and any given time. This was rejected on the grounds that it undermined both the biblical witness and the eternal identity of God.

Finding the appropriate concepts was not easy, and many 2nd and 3rd centuries Christians adopted views that were later considered unorthodox. These included the so-called 'economic Trinity', in which the distinctions between the Persons depended solely on their distinct functions (or 'economies') towards the created universe.

Tertullian taught that the divine Word existed originally within the Father's mind, and first became a distinct Person when the world was created; the Spirit's Personality was subsequent to that of the Word; they were thus not strictly co-eternal with the Father. Origen conceived the Word (or Son) as the offspring of the Father and the Spirit as coming into being through the Word; their special roles were respectively to control the universe and inspire the saints.

Such subordinationism is not counterbalanced by Origen's affirmation of the eternal generation of the Word from the Father, since Origen held that the whole universe of created spirits had always existed in some form, so that the Word's co-eternity with the Father does not entail equality. These subordinationist views echoed those of contemporary Platonists, who envisaged three eternal divine powers arranged in descending order of dignity. The opposite deviation, extreme Modalism, pictured only one divine person who acted successively as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier.

If Sabellius raised the problem of God's plurality, Arius raised the problem of monotheism. In order to defend God's radical oneness, he argued that the Son was created. This was rejected, however, on the grounds that it undermined the eternal identity of God as Father: if there was a time when the Son was not, then God's real identity cannot be that of Father. Ultimately, on Arius's view, we do not know God's real identity.

To deal with these problems the Church Fathers met in 325 at the Council of Nicaea to set out an orthodox biblical definition concerning the divine identity. Here it was established that the Son is *homoousios* (of the same substance) with the Father. God, it was affirmed, is definitely Father and Son. Then in 381, at the Council of Constantinople, the divinity of the Spirit was affirmed with equal explicitness, due mainly to the efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. But before that time, there was this very crucial Arian controversy I briefly mentioned above which prelude the Constantinople affirmation.

TRINITY ACCORDING TO ARIUS

The Arian controversy began either shortly before or shortly after the year 320. His bishop, Alexander, opposed Arius, a presbyter at Alexandria. Arius responded by appealing to other eastern bishops who were favourably inclined towards him. In the second and third centuries many of the Fathers saw the Son as in some way subordinate to the Father, but unlike Arius none of them saw him as strictly a creature. Arius shares with the Origenist tradition a clear emphasis on the distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, like Origen, has them graded hierarchically. The major difference between them (which is a vital difference) is that for Origen deity filters down from Father to Son to Holy Spirit (and on to us); for Arius monotheism is paramount and only the Father can be God.

As Arius himself put it: 'we acknowledge one God, alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone unbegun, alone true, alone immortal, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign.' Arius' aim was to preserve a pure and strict monotheism. God's substance is indivisible and cannot be shared or communicated, lest he be seen as mutable and there should be more than one divine being. The transcendent God needs a mediator between himself and his world. But this must not be allowed to compromise a strict monotheism. For Arius, the uniqueness of the Father means that all else, including the Son, is created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). He is willing to refer to the Son as the Father's offspring – but only in the loose sense that he was created out of nothing.

The difference between a creature and an offspring is crucial. A scientist might create a robot and beget a child. The latter is human, like its parents; the former is not human but something manufactured. For Arius the Son is not truly the Father's offspring (and therefore God) but his creature. He is a perfect creature, far surpassing all other creatures, 'a creature, but not as one of the creatures' – Arius is happy to exalt the Son as high as possible, within the constraints of the fact that he is a creature. Though, on the ground that the Son is created out of nothing it follows that he has a beginning. He is not coeternal with the Father. He maintained on the one hand that the Son exists before all ages and before all time, yet on the other hand that 'before his generation he was not'. This sounds inconsistent but is not. The Son has a beginning – but before time.

Arius also argued that the Son is not strictly speaking, the Word or Wisdom of God. Rather, the Son is loosely or inaccurately called Word and Wisdom because God created him through his word and wisdom and the Son participates in these. Again, 'Son' and 'God' are only courtesy titles given to him. He was also accused of teaching that the Son has no direct or perfect knowledge of the Father, because of the latter's transcendence. What Arius achieved in the final analysis was that the Church was driven to acknowledge the full deity of Christ.

THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

The deity of the Holy Spirit was the chief issue at the second ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople in 381. There was a group of 36 Macedonian bishops at the council and the aim was to win them over to accept the deity of the Spirit. The

third clause of the creed teaches the deity of the Spirit, but without openly using terms such as 'God' or homoousios. Unfortunately the creed failed in its immediate aim to win over the Macedonians, but it has become the one creed that is shared by East and West alike, though with one crucial difference.

The majority of the Eastern Fathers maintained that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son. But the Western Fathers, especially Augustine, taught that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son. This difference reflects a real difference in the doctrine of the Trinity. While for the Cappadocians, following Origen, the Father alone is the source of deity, for Augustine the source is the common divine essence shared by all three persons.

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The driving force for the controversy was the disagreement between the two major non-Arian groupings, the Origenists on the one hand versus other Easterners and the West on the other hand. The conflict took place because these parties distrusted one another; it came to an end when a solution was found which took account of their differing concerns. In fact, it was not between orthodoxy and heresy but between two half-truths – the reality of the trinity (origenism) versus the deity of Christ and the unity of the Godhead (Nicea). The conflict was concluded not by the victory of one party but by the emergence of a synthesis, which held together the legitimate concerns of each side.

Part of the problem was that in secular usage the two Greek words *ousia* (substance or essence) and hypostasis were not clearly differentiated. A major part of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century is the formulation of a clear distinction between these terms. This shows that the early Fathers, far from being enslaved to Greek philosophical terminology (as is sometimes claimed), remoulded it in order to express Christian doctrine.

Basically, The Eastern bishops were simply Origenists of one sort or another; the views of most of them owed nothing to Arius or Nicea. They believed in a graded trinity and held to the Origenist formula that they are three hypostases. The Son they saw as clearly distinct from the Father and also subordinate to him, but not as a creature. While they affirmed the deity of Christ, they were reluctant to concede him full deity. They were also suspicious of both the term *homoousios* and the Creed of Nicea. Their preferred term to describe the relation between Father and Son was that they were 'like in all respects'.

In 358 a group of anti-Nicene Origenist bishops met at Ancyra and produced a manifesto. This contained a set of anathemas in pairs – anti-Arian and anti-Sabellian. Here was a serious attempt to hold both sides together. The deity of Christ was affirmed, but they were not ready to accept the term *homoousios*. Instead they proposed the similar term *homoousios* that Father and Son are *like* in substance.

THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS

According to these people, there is just a single Godhead, which exists simultaneously in three *hypostases* or modes of being. These three have a single nature – deity. The Father is the source or origin of deity and he shares his being with the Son. Actually, this follows Origen, but without the subordinationism.

Gregory of Nazianzus states that, just as each of us is made up of universal ‘humanity’ and our own individual characteristics, so also each *hypostasis* of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) comprises the common *ousia* of deity together with his own distinguishing features. He states that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different ‘ways of existence’, three different ways of being God. In his own argument, Basil explains that the distinguishing feature of each person was that they were fatherhood, sonship and sanctifying power. The problem with the last of these is that it relates to the work of the Spirit in salvation, not to the relationships within the trinity.

The following year, bishops gathered at Constantinople sent a synodical letter to Rome, which refers to a (lost) *tome* that had been sent from the council in 381. This synodical letter speaks of the ‘one Godhead, power and *ousia* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the dignity being equal and the majesty being equal in three perfect *hypostases*, i.e. three perfect persons’. This finalised the terminology used for the Trinity in Greek. God is three *hypostases* or persons (Greek *prosopon*) with a single substance (Greek *ousia*) or nature (Greek *physis*). This doctrine again gives some basis for the belief that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three Gods and that was able to unite most Eastern Christians.

In the West, the doctrine was developed in a somewhat different manner. Starting not from the difference of the persons, as did many of the more philosophically minded Greek Fathers, but from the unity of the Substance, it readily safeguarded the co-equality of the Persons. The procession of the Holy Spirit was attributed both to the Father and the son.

The chief exponent of the teaching of the Latin Church during the patristic period was St Augustine. His great contribution was the comparison of the two processes of the Divine life (the later 'filiation' and 'spiration') to the analogical processes of human self-knowledge and self-love. Whereas his conception of the generation of the Son as the act of thinking on the part of the Father was based on Tertullian, the explanation of the Holy Spirit as the mutual love of the Father and the Son was the fruit of his own reflections.

ST. AUGUSTINE

Augustine expresses the unity of the three in a variety of ways. He speaks of them as mutually indwelling one another, 'coinhering' one another. This could be compared with the way in which the three dimensions of a cube coinhere one another, though Augustine's own preferred analogies are personal rather than mathematical. He also holds that the Trinity have a single will and a single indivisible action. All three are involved in the action of any one of them.

He sees the distinction between the three in terms of their relationship to one another. At this point he is following the Cappadocian, when he described the distinctive features of each person in terms such as fatherhood and sonship, which illustrates the eternal relationship between them. In the same way Augustine saw Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three different modes or ways of being (in particular, of being God) not as three individuals.

As an analogy: 'We may be confronted by many who individually share in human nature, such as Peter, James, and John, yet the "man" in them is one'. It also holds that the Father is the single focus of unity in the Godhead, and the source of the other two persons. Western thought, on the other hand, starts with the unity of the Godhead and tries to understand its threeness. Augustine's contribution, elaborated by the scholastics, was to conceive this in terms of relations: in his best-known analogy, the Father is the lover, the Son the loved one, and the Holy Spirit the love between them.

In all, Augustine progresses through eight different analogies. As he proceeds he shows the inadequacies of the earlier analogies and refines them. Augustine concludes by stressing the inadequacy of all such analogies. We are mere creatures, and fallen at that, so the image is imperfect. Again, the three human faculties (memory, understanding and will) are not as perfectly united as are the Trinity. Also, paradoxically, the three faculties are not only less united than the Trinity but also constitute only one person, while the Trinity itself is three persons.

CONCLUSION

In the early Church and ever since, there have been two different approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity. Some, like Origen and the Cappadocians, emphasised the trinity; others, like Augustine and the West, emphasised the unity. The former tended to use the analogy of three people, the latter the analogy of one person. Both approaches are tenable and each can be cogently presented. Both have equal and opposite weakness. Neither can exclude the other but synthesis is impossible.

Earthed in the biblical revelation and in Christian experience, the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that 'all things issue in mystery'. Yet it is important for the mind of man, receptive and yet adventurous, to probe as far as it is can before retiring baffled. To do otherwise is not the deeper reverence but the greater sloth. At the end of the day, the doctrine of the Trinity involves a paradoxical affirmation of unity and trinity. This was why the Greek Fathers found it necessary to develop a distinction between the words *ousia* and *hypostasis*, words that were originally nearly synonymous.