

BASIC BACKGROUND OF THE TRINITY

THE VARIOUS DOCTRINES ABOUT GOD AND CHRIST

CONCEPTION CHRISTOLOGY

The belief that the Son of God — Jesus — came into existence in the womb of Mary by the miraculous operation of God’s spirit and thus bringing Jesus, the Son of God into existence by a virginal begetting i.e. Jesus had no human father.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: Matthew and Luke (c. 50s and 60s A.D.).

DYNAMIC MONARCHIANISM

This is *Unitarianism* so that God is understood as an undivided unity and Jesus is the fully human Son of God divinely begotten at his conception in the Virgin Mary. Therefore, there is no belief in a pre-existent Son or the incorporating of the Logos Christology. The spirit is God’s personal power and not a person.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: Matthew and Luke (c. 50s and 60s A.D.), **the Alogi** (c.170), **Theodotus the tanner** (c.190), the Syrian/Antiochene theologians (late second century).

ADOPTIONIST MONARCHIANISM

This is *Unitarianism* so that God is understood as an undivided unity. Yet Jesus is seen as only an ordinary man, fathered by Joseph and so not virginally begotten. Jesus becomes the chosen Son of God only at his baptism.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: The heterodox **Ebionites** (mid-2nd century).

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All of the following authors and proponents were heavily involved in Neo-Platonic philosophy largely to the exclusion of any studies of the Hebrew background to the Scriptures.

LOGOS/SON CHRISTOLOGY

This is the application of the Platonic Greek “Logos” concept to Jesus in the Prologue to the Gospel of John; thereby making Jesus the pre-existent Word/Son.

AUTHOR: **Justin Martyr** (writings: c.150) was the first to write that Jesus pre-existed as a second god who is subordinate to God. II Clement speaks of one who was first spirit and then flesh.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENT: **Tertullian** (writings: c.200).

ARIANISM (stage 1)

This is *Unitarianism* so that God is understood as an undivided unity and the Son is subordinate to the Father. Yet, based on Logos Christology, the Son is a spirit being (*an angel*) who was created before the Genesis creation and is, in fact, the agent of creation. The holy **spirit is not a person** separate from God; but is God’s personal power.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: Justin Martyr (c.150) and Tertullian (150- c. 225).

ARIANISM (stage 2)

This is *Unitarianism* so that God is understood as an undivided unity and the Son is subordinate to the Father. Yet, based on Logos Christology, the Son is a spirit being (*another god*) who was created before the Genesis creation and is, in fact, the agent of creation. The holy **spirit is a person** (c. 360s) separate from God having been created by the Son.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENT: Arius (early to mid 300s).

MODALISM

This is *Unitarianism*. Modalism is also known as *Modalistic Monarchianism*. The One undivided God appears in 3 different modes. This belief denies Logos Christology but believes Jesus to be God. This view went out of sight after the 3rd century.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: **Noetus, Praxeus and Sabellius** (late second century).

THE DOCTRINE OF "THE ETERNAL SON"

This was proposed by Origen. He said the Son was eternally generated as light from the sun. Yet the Son was still subordinate *to the Father*.

BINITARIANISM

The Father and the Son are both God because the Son is the "Eternal Word" according to **Origen** (died 254). However, Jesus is subordinate and was seen to be fully human whilst on earth. The holy spirit is not a person separate from God; but is God's personal power and presence.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: **Irenaeus** (writing c.175). Also Tertullian (150- c. 225) who said of this concept: "I believe because it is absurd," **Hippolytus** of Rome (c.235). This was a commonly held view through the 3rd and early 4th centuries.

THE ECONOMIC TRINITY (stage 1)

This is *Subordinationist Trinitarianism*. The three persons fulfil different roles in salvation and revelation; but the Son and the Spirit emanate from the Father and are subordinate to him. Furthermore, the Spirit is subordinate to the Son. So this is not a "three persons in one substance" trinity.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: **Clement of Alexandria** (190-216), **Origen** (writings: c.225) who was the first to develop the idea of the "Eternal Son" but still subordinate, and **Tertullian** (early third century – died c. 225) who was originally an Arian Unitarian/Binitarian but, after converting to Montanism in AD 207, changed to believing that the holy spirit was a person. He was the first to define the one God as three persons of one substance but the logos and the Spirit were still subordinate to the Father. **Irenaeus** was, however, the first to speak of God in threefold revelation. Tertullian was the first to use the word *trinitas*.

THE ECONOMIC TRINITY (stage 2)

The Father and the Son are of similar nature (*homoiousios*). There was uncertainty about the status of the Spirit.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS: **Basil bishop of Ancyra** (350s).

THE ESSENTIAL TRINITY (stage 1)

The Father and the Son are of the same nature or essence (*homoousios*). This was established at the Council of Nicea in **325**. There was uncertainty about the status of the person of the Spirit. This is the first official appearance of a "three persons in one God" Trinity.

AUTHOR: **Athanasius** (300s)

THE ESSENTIAL TRINITY (stage 2)

Further development of the Trinity came when the theologians commonly called the Cappadocians asserted that the person *of the Holy Spirit was co-equal with the Father and the Son and of the same essence as them*. This was established at the Council of Constantinople in **381**. However, *the Son and the Spirit still proceeded from the Father* in spite of the fact that the doctrine states that God is 3 co-equal persons.

AUTHOR: **Basil of Caesarea** (died 379).

MAIN EARLY PROPONENTS DURING THE 380s: **Gregory of Nyssa** and **Gregory of Nazianzus**.

THE [SOCIAL] ESSENTIAL TRINITY (stage 3)

This focuses on the relational aspect of the one essence (*ousia*) Trinity.

MAIN EARLY PROPONENT: **Augustine** (after 386).

Augustine introduced the idea that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The Final stage of Trinitarian development came in 451 at **The Council of Chalcedon**. This led eventually to the producing of *THE FILIOQUE* Clause inserted in the Nicene Creed of 589. In time, this clause became the cause of the splitting of the Catholic Church across East-West lines. Also it was at Chalcedon that it was deemed that Christ assumed *impersonal human nature*. The **5th century so-called Athanasian Creed** (composed in southern France yet not by Athanasius who died in 373) gives the first clear expression of the Trinity as it is known today. This probably represents Augustine's version of the Trinity. Yet, this creed did not gain wide acceptance until **after the 7th century** and even then not in the Eastern churches until the 12th century.

So the doctrine of the Trinity was not officially established until 381 AD and, as known today, did not come into official existence until at least 350 years after the writing of the New Testament. Nevertheless, the many problems with the Trinitarian formula troubled theologians throughout the Middle-ages, and so leading to modern-day attempts to define it.

MODERN APPROACHES TO THE TRINITY

Theologians today approach the Trinity from:

1. *A ONENESS OF GOD PERSPECTIVE* (Karl Barth, Karl Rahner).

This perspective treats the Shema (Deut. 6:4) as paramount so that *the Father reveals Himself in the Son through the power of the Spirit*.

Barth stated that to talk about the Trinity was not to talk of three centres of consciousness – or three divine 'I's acting in concert. It was rather to talk of one divine 'I' three times over. Barth proposed that it was never the intention of the originators of the doctrine to apply ideas of personality, which speak of an individual centre of consciousness, will and emotions, to the three members of the Trinity.

Rahner stated that "the one God subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting...the Father, the Son and the Spirit are the one God each in a different manner of subsisting and in this sense we may count 'three' in God.

This is the view of the majority of biblical theologians.

Although denied, this view borders on Monarchian Modalism.

2. *A THREENESS OF GOD PERSPECTIVE* (Jurgen Moltman, Cornelius Platinga, Jr).

This is Social Trinitarianism - a divine society, and uses the term '*person*' in the modern sense of each having an individual centre of consciousness, will and emotions. The reasoning is that even God cannot be a person without other persons. So the term God is merely an abstraction for this "common divine society" of three individuals i.e. God is simply an essence. Social Trinitarianism is the view of the majority of philosophers and systematic theologians.

Although denied, this view is actually tritheism.

3. *THE "GOD WAS LITERALLY IN CHRIST" PERSPECTIVE* (D. M Baillie, Schliermacher)

This approach shows God **literally existing in** the man Jesus in the sense of an incarnation of the Father. In his book entitled *God was in Christ* D. M Baillie approaches christology from the perspective that Jesus was a particular, historical human who, as a baby, could not possibly have been the control centre of the universe. Baillie asks:

- How were the cosmic functions of the 2nd Person of the Trinity maintained during Jesus' earthly sojourn?

- How, in the Kenotic theory, can one lay aside omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence and still be God?

Although denied by some, this view is really an abandonment of the Trinity.

4. *THE “GOD WAS IN CHRIST” BY HIS SPIRIT PERSPECTIVE* (G.W. Lampe, James Dunn, JAT Robinson, Karl Josef Kuschel).

Rather than being an incarnation of the Father with God literally existing in the man Jesus this approach shows God **working through** the man Jesus, to reconcile the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). So Jesus is the supreme example of the gracious favour of the Father working in a human. The Spirit is simply God’s empowering of Jesus and is not a third *person* in the modern sense. This is the view of the minority, but leading biblical theologians.

Although denied by some this, too, is really an abandonment of the Trinity.

Hans Küng reminds us that:

Had people kept to the New Testament, they would have spared themselves the notorious difficulties which now arose over the relationship of the three persons ‘in’ God, all the speculations over the numbers one and three...If we take the New Testament as a criterion, we cannot deny that the Council of Nicaea certainly maintained the New Testament message and did not Hellenize it totally. But it is equally beyond dispute that **the council remained utterly imprisoned in Hellenistic concepts**, notions and thought-models which would have been completely alien to the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and the earliest community. Here in particular the shift from the Jewish Christians apocalyptic paradigm to the early church Hellenistic paradigm had a massive effect. *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, p 182.

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ORIGIN OF THE TRINITY CONCEPT

Most of the ancient civilizations developed triadic formulas which served as the basis for their later trinities.

1. The ancient **Babylonian–Assyrian culture** worshipped one God in three persons in the form of Ea-Damkina-Marduk and later Sin-Shamash-Ishtar.
2. The ancient **Egyptians** worshipped Ra-Amon-Ptah as a triune deity. They also worshipped Osiris, Isis, and Horus as a divine father, mother and son trinity.
3. **Hinduism** from ancient times has the supreme trinity of Brahma-Shiva-Vishnu.
4. The ancient Romans had Jupiter-Mars-Quirinus and later Jupiter-Juno-Minerva.
5. The ancient pagan **Greek** philosophy of Plato resulted in the trinity of Zeus-Persephone-Zagreus. Their Gnostic mythology included God the Father, God the Son and Sophia (the Mother goddess). The Neo-platonic developments posited a second rank god, the Demiurge, as the creator of the universe.

TRINITARIANISM IS A POST BIBLICAL DEVELOPMENT

It is the contention of the following studies that the Trinity is firstly the proposal of a model which combines the biblical concept of monotheism with Platonic triadic ideas of God and then seeks for support from the Scriptures rather than first seeking the natural sense of the revelation about God and Christ in the Scriptures. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* and the following sources show the Trinity to be a post-biblical concept:

In Scripture there is as yet no single term by which the Three Divine Persons are denoted together. The word [tri'as] (of which the Latin trinitas is a translation) is first found in Theophilus of Antioch about A. D. 180. He speaks of “**the Trinity of God** [the Father], **His Word and His Wisdom**” (“Ad. Autol.” 11, 15, P. G., VI, 1078). The term may, of course, have been in use before his time. Shortly afterwards it appears in its Latin form of trinitas in Tertullian...

Theologian Karl Rahner commented that:

Nowhere in the New Testament is there ... a text with ‘God,’ which has unquestionably to be referred to the Trinitarian God as a whole existing in three Persons.

Leonard Hodgson, DD, of Oxford commented that:

On the basis of the argument from the Bible containing revelation in the form of propositions held in common [by Trinitarians and Unitarians] the unitarians had the better case.

Dr. J. A Dorner (Professor of Theology at the University of Gottingen) comments that:

It must of course be allowed that the doctrine of the Trinity, as laid down even by the Nicene Fathers, leaves much to be desired ... How shall we determine the nature of the distinction between the God who became man and the God [how many Gods?] who did not become man, without destroying the unity of God, on the one hand, or interfering with Christology on the other? Neither the Council of Nicea, nor the Church Fathers of the fourth century satisfactorily answered this question.

History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ, Division 1, Vol. 2, p. 330.

Dr. Shailer Matthews writes that:

It must be admitted by everyone who has the rudiments of an historical sense that the doctrine of the Trinity **formed** no part of the original message. St. Paul did not know it, and would have been unable to understand the meaning of the terms used in the theological formula on which the Church ultimately agreed. *God in Christian Experience*, p. 180.

APPENDIX

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE EARLY COUNCILS CONCERNING THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The subject of who God and Jesus are was most hotly debated during the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Common Era and with no thought of Trinity in the earliest times. For much of this time the non-Trinitarian followers of Bishop Arius were deemed to be orthodox, yet after much hot debate the Trinitarian followers of Bishop Athanasius finally were deemed to represent orthodoxy.

325 AD — Nicea

Jesus is decreed to be of one substance with the Father. Many of the bishops were opposed to this view.

336 AD — Constantinople

At a meeting of the Eastern bishops, Arius’ theology is pronounced orthodox.

339 AD

Athanasius flees Alexandria having learned that he is about to be expelled as a heretic.

341 AD — Antioch

The first, second and third Arian confessions are written in an attempt to produce a formal doctrine to oppose the Nicene Creed.

343 AD — Sardica

Eastern bishops demand the removal of Athanasius.

346 AD

Athanasius is restored to Alexandria.

355 AD — Milan

Athanasius condemned.

357 AD — Sirmium

There is agreement that the Father is greater than His subordinate Son.

361 AD — Antioch

The Arian position is affirmed.

362 AD — Alexandria

The Holy Spirit was asserted as the third person.

381 AD — Constantinople

Emperor Theodosius has the Nicene Creed re-evaluated and accepted with the addition of clauses on the Holy Spirit so that it becomes the third person in the Trinity.

431 AD

It becomes mandatory to use no other creed but that of Nicea in reference to the subject of who God was.

451 AD — Chalcedon

It was deemed that Christ assumed *impersonal human nature*.

Although the theology of this website is not Arian or any variant of Arianism it is interesting to note that up to 381 AD *fifteen* of the councils concerned with this issue voted for an Arian creed concerning the origin of Jesus as compared to only *seven* councils which voted for a version of Trinitarianism. If it had not been for the draconian actions of Emperor Theodosius in banning Arianism and making the possession of any Arian writings a crime punishable by death then the orthodoxy of today would most likely have had an Arian creed rather than a Trinitarian one.

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