

TITLE:

How was the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity formulated as a result of the fourth century controversies?

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B. ....**THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY.**

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D. ....**ATHANASIUS' CONTRIBUTION.**

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***A. Historical Review.***

Trinitarian doctrine is inherent in the New Testament itself, and the theology developed because it was the only way to account for the New Testament witness to Jesus and the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>. The fact that it took so long to express such an early teaching satisfactorily, amidst so much controversy, suggests strongly that it derives from Jesus and the apostles rather than from the beliefs of the early Church. The theological process was not so much a development, but an unpacking, of New Testament teaching.

Nevertheless from the earliest times Christians affirmed the Trinity even though they could not yet express it coherently. Thus Clement of Rome, writing at the latest in Domitian's time, was able to affirm the Trinitarian oath:

As surely as God lives, as Jesus Christ lives, and the Holy Ghost also (on whom are set the faith and hope of God's elect)...amen.<sup>2</sup>

In Church life the faithful felt their way towards an understanding of this mystery. For example, in Ignatius we read what is probably part of an early hymn:

Very flesh, yet Spirit too;  
Uncreated, and yet born;  
God-and-Man in one agreed,  
Very-Life-in-Death indeed,  
Fruit of God and Mary's seed;  
At once impassible and torn  
By pain and suffering here below:  
Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know.<sup>3</sup>

What is remarkable is that the early Christians found no contradiction between such words and a strict monotheism, even though Ignatius' church of Antioch had strong Jewish roots<sup>4</sup>, and might be expected to balk at such a high

view of Christ. But before long the Church had to recognise and resolve the conflict both because of accusations of inconsistency from critics<sup>5</sup> outside, and because of heretical deviations from within.

Before the fourth century, the focus of controversy was predominantly Christ's divinity, partly because the greatest stumbling block to acceptance of Christianity was the worship of a crucified man, and secondly because most Christian responses were made in terms of *Λογος* theology. Platonic thought had a concept of a divine Unity radically distinct from matter, which was why the God-man Jesus Christ was such a cause of offence to educated Greeks. Apologists like Justin were able to invoke the Platonist idea of God's thought, or *λογος*, which was the necessary mediator between God and the created order, and apply it to Jesus *via* John 1's use of the term (which was actually more likely linked to Jewish ideas).

Unfortunately this idea carried the risk of dichotomising the Godhead. The first effect of this was to 'lose' the Holy Spirit in the discussion. The second was the tendency to too great a separation of the *λογος* from God. Justin himself tends in this direction (by neglect, rather than intention<sup>6</sup>). But the tendency was carried to extremes in the Gnostic proliferation of *æons*, and was echoed in Origen's 'radical subordinationism' of Son and Spirit, which paved the way for the later eastern tendency to tritheism.

In reaction to this, the west jealously defended God's Unity by tending to lose the distinctions within the Trinity. This accounts for the 'modalist Monarchianism' associated with Sabellius, which views the Trinity merely as three modes of God's activity, and was justly anathematised as Patripassian. A

more orthodox expression of this reaction was in the ‘economic Trinitarianism’ of Irenæus, Tertullian and Hippolytus. This saw the Trinity in terms of function in salvation-history, and therefore as only ‘potential’ in eternity.

A third strand present as the fourth century began was that represented at Antioch and related to the teaching of Paul of Samosata, which seems to have taken the ‘*potentiality*’ of economic Trinitarianism to the point of inadequately affirming the individual personhood of the Word (and hence the Spirit).

***B. The Arian Controversy.***

Despite the differences above, it is important to note that the three main traditions present in the fourth century all held to the basic tenets that God is one, yet Father, Son and Spirit are divine and distinct. That is why the views of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius were attacked so hotly, since they undermined the balance of theological truth maintained by the Catholic Church (as we have seen) from earliest times. It also accounts for the fact that Arius’ protestations of sincerity and orthodoxy<sup>7</sup> were not believed.

Arius in essence cut through the problem of maintaining God’s Unity by denying outright Christ’s (and subsequently the Spirit’s) divinity. He exaggerated Origen’s subordinationism to the point of subordinating Christ out of the Godhead. Although admitting the Word as ‘begotten’ of God, this was re-interpreted as virtually a synonym for ‘created’, so that Christ is not co-eternal with God:

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And before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently Arius denied that Christ was *ὁμοουσιος* (of one being) with God, which Origen (with reservations) had affirmed.

The matter came to the Emperor Constantine's attention because Arius was loudly condemned by his own bishop. Constantine's advisor Hosius, sent to resolve the issue, realised its importance and had Arius' views condemned at a council in Antioch. But Arius found numerous supporters amongst the Origenist eastern bishops, so that the debate became a threat to civil, as well as Church, peace. Consequently Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325, whose conclusion was an anti-Arian creed, affirming Christ's full deity, with four *anathemas* appended, denying specifically that Christ 'once was not' or that he was created *ex nihilo*.

Two technical terms were used in this declaration. The first, in the body of the creed, was *ὁμοουσιος*, already in use by the orthodox but rejected by Arius. However, its secular use admitted of different meanings. In particular, it could refer to two senses in Aristotelian thought; the first meaning 'individual being' and the second 'class of being'. The distinction can be exemplified by that between a 'human being' and 'humanity'. Since, with reference to God, the first meaning could suggest tritheism (the eastern tendency) and the second Sabellianism (the western tendency), the word led to suspicion and misunderstanding between the two.

The second technical term was *ὑποστασις*, used in the *anathema* to condemn those who said the Son was of a different *substance* to the Father. It was essentially a synonym for the *ουσιος* in the creed, but was another

potential cause of division because the eastern Origenists believed the Father and Son to be distinct *ὑποστάσεις*, but using the term in a different sense from the western bishops. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Latin translation of *ὑποστάσις* was *substantia*, used by Tertullian to describe the one ‘substance’ of the Trinity. So the West, misunderstanding the east’s usage, anathematized their belief in the three *ὑποστάσεις* of the Trinity at Sardica in 343. Consequently at the earliest opportunity the Nicene Creed was dropped by the Origenists, together with the term *ὁμοουσιος*, to which they preferred *ὁμοιουσιος*, ‘of like substance’.

### ***C. The Anomoeans.***

Then came a resurgence of Arianism in Antioch and Alexandria under the teaching of Ætius. He, by defining God as ‘the One who is ingenerate’, thereby excluded the begotten Son (and the Spirit) from the Godhead (whereas Arius had effectively denied the Sonship of Christ by reducing it to a synonym for creation). Ætius’ supporters had great influence at the court of Constantius, who amid great lobbying and intrigues was persuaded to try and resolve conflict by forbidding the use of the ‘divisive’ word *ουσιος* in favour of the unarguable statement that the Son is *like* the Father. But since the orthodox could not be brought to accept the Arianism that this allowed, Constantius ended up persecuting them<sup>9</sup>. This turn of events gave east and west the incentive to resolve their disagreements.

**D. Athanasius' contribution.**

The next important development was by the hand of the veteran of Nicea, Athanasius. He had several times endured exile for his single-minded opposition to Arius. From Alexandria in 362, in a book called *the Tome to the Antiochenes* he now sought to heal the breach among the orthodox over the word *ὑποστασις*, by clarifying how each side actually used it. From the Nicean side, he disowned the Council of Sardica's anathematisation of the Origenists' description of the three *ὑποστασεις* of the Trinity, whilst condemning the Arian understanding of the term. From the Origenist viewpoint, he allowed the use of *ὑποστασις* for the single essence of Godhead, whilst excluding a Sabellian understanding of this. He had already (in 360<sup>10</sup>) proposed the end of dissension over the other difficult word, *ὁμοουσιος*, saying that in fact the Niceans and Origenists intended the same thing and should discuss the matter as brothers: it was the Arians who were the real enemy.

Meanwhile, Athanasius had also argued against the followers of Macedonius of Constantinople who held that, whilst the Son was *ὁμοουσιος* with the Father, the Spirit was a created being, for he could not be begotten like the Only-begotten Son. In this they claimed the support of the Nicean Council. Athanasius replied by citing John 15.26, that the Spirit is not begotten, but *proceeds* from the Father, and so is still divine but in another manner. These *Pneumatomachi* ('Spirit-fighters') were always relatively small in number. But the involvement of Athanasius in countering their assertions broadened out the question under debate to the need to formulate a fully Trinitarian doctrine of God.

**E. The Council of Constantinople.**

This role eventually fell to the ‘Cappadocian Fathers’ (Basil of Caesaria, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nyzianzus), who, gradually building up a pro-Nicene power base around themselves, were eventually able to develop a theological bridge between east and west. Their greatest contribution was to refine the disputed terminology, so that instead of being almost synonymous, *ουσια* and *υποστασις* became specific terms. The former signified the single divine essence, originating in the Father and shared through begetting by the Son, and through procession by the Spirit. Though its origin in the Father accommodated to the eastern Christians, the radical subordinationism of Origen was dropped, which made the idea acceptable to the Niceans. The latter term signified the three ways of ‘being’ of the Trinity, and thus defined was also acceptable to both sides. The Cappadocians therefore affirmed three beings (*υποστασεις*) in one essence (*ουσια*).

The ability of this formula to unite the Church was demonstrated at the Council of Constantinople in 381, when what we now call the *Nicene Creed* was adopted. This was fully Trinitarian, although cautious in its description of the Holy Spirit. This was partly because the Cappadocian Fathers were still conservative in too overtly ascribing full deity to him, but more because the council was attempting to win over the followers of Macedonius (in which it eventually failed).

For these two reasons, instead of appealing to the language of substance and being, the Creed bases its assertion of the Spirit’s deity on Scriptural statements about him (his role as Creator – ‘*Lord and Lifegiver*’, his

procession from the Father, his inspiration of divine prophecy); and on the Church's tacit recognition of his deity ('*together with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified*'). This follows the arguments Basil of Caesaria had developed in his writings.

#### ***F. Conclusion.***

The outcome of the Council of Constantinople was accepted by both eastern and western arms of the Church. It effectively ended the Trinitarian controversies of the previous century, and provided a Trinitarian theology, through the Creed, which adequately expressed orthodox Biblical faith: it confirmed the indivisible unity of God, the essential equality of Father, Son and Spirit, and yet their distinctive identities and roles.

Some work remained to be done in refining the theological understanding of relationships in the Trinity. Since the Cappadocians saw *ουσια* in terms of the Platonic concept of "underlying nature" (e.g. human nature), their formula was vulnerable to being twisted to the teaching of tritheism. To some extent this weakness reflected the longstanding Origenist bias of the east.

In the west, at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine produced a major work of Trinitarian theology. This was dependent on the work of the Cappadocian Fathers<sup>11</sup>, but developed fuller analogies of the interrelationships of the Trinity. However, since he inherited, and crystallised, the Latin bias towards merging the *υποστασεις*, the full adoption of his position by the west led to further disagreement (and finally to schism) with the east which has still not been adequately resolved.

Even so the theological basis for these real differences is minor when compared to the threat which had been posed by the lack of a coherent Trinitarian theology to the very existence of apostolic Christianity. The struggles that culminated in the Council of Constantinople and the Nicene Creed, though painful, were ultimately of immense value to the progress of Christianity.

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(2361 words)

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson & Wright, p.691.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Clement 59.

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius to the Ephesians 7.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note the 'Greek' concept of God's impassibility even at such an early, pre-philosophical, stage in Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> *'If these men worshipped no other God but one, perhaps they would have a valid argument against the others. But in fact they worship to an extravagant decree this man who appeared recently, and yet think it not inconsistent with monotheism if they also worship his servant.'* Origen, *contra Celsum VIII.12*, quoted in Young, p.33.

<sup>6</sup> Justin, *Trypho*, CXXVIII-CXXIX.

<sup>7</sup> Bettenson, p.39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Chadwick, p.123-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>11</sup> *'All those Catholic expounders of the divine Scriptures, both Old and New, whom I have been able to read, who have written before me concerning the Trinity, Who is God, have purposed to teach, according to the Scriptures, this doctrine, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality.'* Augustine, *de Trinitatis*, I.4.7.

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