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Essay

The Origins of the Christian Idea of Trinity: Answering Jewish Charges of Heresy; Exhorting Pagans against Polytheism; Countering False Gnostics

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Abstract: In this essay I explain that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was first developed as a response to Jewish claims of Christian apostasy and polytheism. At the beginning of Christianity, most of its converts were observant Jews. The Jewish authorities took steps to reclaim their lost sheep and to stem the flow of departures. Their primary intellectual ammunition in that effort was the claim that the Christians were polytheists, because they claimed to believe in two Gods–the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. The Christians' apostasy was manifest by simple referring to the Mosaic commandment that righteous Israel should have only one God. This Jewish accusation of polytheism also neatly answered the inflammatory Christian charge that the Jews had crucified God and raised significant doubt about their claims of a special resurrection. The doctrine of the Trinity answered all those criticisms. God and Jesus Christ together were the one true God. But the nature of that oneness took some time to work out, and it is within a process of contending with pagan philosophical arguments and intra-Christian heretical positions, that a Christian doctrine of the Trinity begins to congeal. The work of Ante-Nicene Fathers—Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Novatian, and others—whose voices we allow to be heard below—contain a trajectory of ideas that explain how the tri-unity is expressed in the momentous Creeds of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (381).

Keywords: Patristics; Trinity; Heresy; Judaism; Paganism; Christianity; one substance; homoousios

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1. Introduction

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explain how the idea of monotheism became the established doctrine of Judaism by the time of the coming of Christ. In any case, I have done that elsewhere (Thompson 2019, pp. 13–42). Different sects had developed in Israel after the Israelite (re-)possession of their earlier homeland in Canaan, but all of those sects were united in their recognition of the laws given through Moses, including the prohibition against worshipping other gods. The prophecies of a Messiah to come grew over the centuries, but Jesus of Nazareth did not satisfy the criteria in those prophecies set out for the Israelites remaining in Judah by his time, primarily because he had suffered an ignominious death and had not redeemed the nation from its occupied status. The suggestion that Jesus was not only the promised Messiah, but that he was also the Son of God was blasphemous, if not seditious, since it threatened the established religious and political order. The claim that he had been resurrected after his crucifixion was exasperating since it unravelled Jesus' death as an end to the disturbance, and there was no obvious and tidy way to shut down the new claims.

In this essay I first emphasize the charge that the Christians were polytheists became the central plank in Jewish intellectual and theological efforts to deny the ongoing claims of Jesus' Messiahship and resurrection. The accusation of Christian polytheism also answered the inflammatory claim that in crucifying Jesus, the Jews had killed their God and rightful King. The reason why the polytheism charge became the most effective anti-Christian

weapon of the Jews, was because it squashed Christian claims of Jesus' Messiahship, Godhood and resurrection all at the same time. If there was only one God, which was theology in which all the original Christians were deeply indoctrinated, then Jesus could not be He. And if Jesus was not God as he claimed, then the Messiahship claim was also fraudulent, as was the claim of resurrection which no-one but his biased followers claimed to have witnessed. It was an effective and foundational challenge because it was so rhetorically simple and difficult to rebut. Simple denial of the polytheism charge was tantamount to an admission that Jesus was not divine after all, and it was complicated to explain his oneness with the Father when every Jewish schoolboy had been taught that it was sinful to acknowledge more than one God.

Anders Runesson has suggested that interaction between Christians and Jews was generally positive between the first and fifth centuries, though he conceded that even if it is fictive, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* was based on a real issue between the two different religions (Runesson 2017, pp. 250–55). But in the same volume on *The Early Christian World* (edited by Philip Esler), James Aitken observed that the Jews treated the Christians in the same way as the Samaritans, and there was a curse on heretics (*minim*) because of the desirability of a unified nation, and Aitken conceded that "there appear[ed to be] a genuine Jewish propaganda against Christians" to which Justin Martyr responded in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (Aitken 2017, p. 88). Claudia Setzer's work on *Jewish Responses to Early Christians* probes much further. She traces both positive and negative Jewish reactions to Christians from Jews between 30 and 150 C.E. through New Testament scripture (and particularly the Epistles of Paul) and into the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers. She considered the existence of the *Birkat ha-Minim* curse in rabbinic literature as "a general wish for the destruction of heretics" but save in the Gospel of John (Setzer 1994, p. 89 refers to John 9:22; 12:42–43; 16:2–3) she found 'no evidence' that the curse was used for the permanent expulsion of people from the synagogue, and therefore she does not consider it was significant evidence of Jewish persecution of believers in Jesus Christ (Setzer 90), noting that some commentators think Justin Martyr's commentary about this curse is biased (141, 160). Her observations allow that "law-observant Jewish Christians might have been acceptable to some Jews throughout this entire period" (182), but that generally speaking "the vast majority of reactions to Christianity attributed to the Jews are negative" (ibid.). Those reactions ranged from verbal antagonism (65, 138–142 referring to Acts 2:13, 15 and 18:5–6; 19:9), through the disciplinary expulsion from the synagogue, floggings (reported by Paul in 2 Cor 11:24–26), to spontaneous mob violence, the use of official Jewish and Roman channels for legal prosecution, and even murder (Setzer 1994, pp. 58–74, 87–93, 143). But of the three modern authors just discussed who note Jewish antipathy towards Christians, none have considered how the doctrine of the Trinity began in and developed from this context.

While admittedly the Trinity doctrine was probably not a 'conversion tool' like the claims of Jesus' Messiahship and resurrection, I argue that it certainly answered Jewish theological criticism and protected the convictions of the early Christian converts. I explain the development of this doctrine in four Parts.

In Section 2, I briefly review the antipathy that existed between the early Christians and the majority of Jews who did not join the new Christian movement. In Section 3, I outline the development of the idea of the Trinity in the early Church (Ante-Nicene) Fathers. I do not treat every nuance of that development, but I identify the germs of the idea that were postulated by Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, and Clement of Alexandria in the second century A.D. In Section 4, I spend more time with Tertullian and Origen because these latter two and particularly Tertullian are considered to be the authors of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. But as that discussion reveals, Tertullian's ideas are uncontroversial save for his innovative idea 'one substance'- that the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit went not just to purpose, but also in some way which he could not explain, to substance (*una substantia* = one and the same underlying Being). Excepting this feature, the more mysterious/mystical aspects of Trinitarianism come later in Saint

Augustine. That is because Tertullian did not write just to rebut the Jewish theological challenge that had subsided by the third century: he also wrote to rebut various heretical ideas about Jesus and God that were growing out of the existing Trinitarian responses to the Jews. Though Origen disagreed with Tertullian's idea that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were somehow "of one substance," the Nicene bishops in their credal formulation of AD 325), did not, although what the Greek translation into *Homoousios* ("of the same essential Being") meant to any of them is not clear, and came to be a matter of ongoing debate (even to this day!)

In Section 5, I briefly survey the contributions of Irenaeus and his disciple Hippolytus (mainly from the second century) along with Novatian and Gregory of Thaumaturgus (in the third). I conclude that the Trinity doctrine was developed to answer insightful Jewish theological criticism that challenged the foundations of Christian faith. Rather than simply disavow their orthodox Jewish theological ancestry (as early Christians might have done if they had known that Christianity would numerically trump Judaism within three centuries), the post-Apostolic Christian Fathers tried to explain the divine Father/Son/Spirit relationship. While those explanations led some to excess, even those named as heretics remained convinced that Jesus was God and that he was one with the Father in a mysterious way not easily understood or explained by mortal man without divine help.

2. Early Conflict between Christians and Jews

I herewith briefly review the material in the writings of the pre-Nicene Fathers which confirm the Jewish evidence, found especially in the Talmud[s], that the Rabbis at the time of Christianity's advent considered Christians "bad men" or heretics (*Talmud Yerushalmi* [= *Jerusalem Talmud*, using Schwab ed.] 168). Orthodox Jewish antipathy towards Christianity had many levels, we need to realize, and theology was just one of the battlefields. The martyrdom of Stephen, Saul's crusade to rid the world of the Christian menace and the various intrigues to later discredit or eliminate him, are recorded Christian anecdotes that suggest that this war became a matter of life and death for both sides. For orthodox Jews living during the ministries of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the assertions of 'the Christians' (Acts 11:26) constituted 'heresy'; the perversion of the law of Moses, the doctrine of God and the Davidic Messiah into a Galilean cult that deified a Nazarene carpenter's son. Like all 'Reformations,' it was at first resisted as the rebellion of a charlatan. Heresy was treason and heretics (*minim*) or 'blasphemers' (*khilul*) were capitally punishable under rabbinical law (e.g., Mishnah: Sanhedrin 6:4; 7:5;10:1, 11:5–6; Talmud Bavli [= Babylonian Talmud, Davidson ed.] 26b:17) while among early Christians for the equivalent (note *hairetikos* in Tit. 3:16) only shunning was prescribed. Part of the Christian kerygma, of course, involved disparaging Rabbinism through the 'corrective' teachings that Jesus Christ had outlined in His Sermon on the Mount. The Law of Moses was about love, reconciliation and forgiveness–about brotherly kindness and quiet charity rather than ritual punishment for technical violations of the Oral Law and self-serving public religious observance to be seen of men (Jesus himself announcing this difference in Matt 23:23 implicitly referring to Hosea 6:6; 12:6 and Micah 6:8). The Rabbis defended their traditions with all the tools at their disposal and they turned blind eyes towards the excesses of their 'religious policers' who breached the Roman secular law by ferreting out many Christians to despatch them (most significantly, see Acts 7:57–8:1; Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaica* 20, 20).

At a theological level, the Rabbis' war was waged with doctrine and claims to orthodoxy. The Christians' deification of Jesus Christ (earliest in the hymn quoted by Paul in Phil. 2:16–11, with Hunter 1961, pp. 40–42) was exposed as a form of polytheism barely removed from the Roman practice of Caesar worship. And theologically, it was this charge of polytheism that stung the early Christians the most. Jewish monotheism had become their badge of civilization, honour and identity. Jewish monotheism distinguished the one true and living religion that was Judaism from the idolatry of the Greeks and Romans that accommodated every savage cult in the empire in the interests of a homogenized multicultural hedonism. Monotheism had become the Jewish badge of righteous

honour; a quiet yet very visible and self-serving emblem of peculiar but royal difference (see Frey et al. 2007).

At first, the Christians did not know how to respond to the derisive epithets that were hurled at them. To be called Christian, was at first not a term of respect, but it became so as these mostly converted Jews found a familiar spirit in their persecuted peculiarity (I Peter 12:9; yet cf. Deut 14:2). But an adequate intellectual response to the charge of polytheism took longer to develop since there was no simple answer to the charge that Christians were just one more example of polytheist infidels.

Theological Battle Lines

In his twelfth century magnum opus, the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides wrote that "Jesus the Nazarene. . .[was] a greater stumbling block" (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:10–12) to the Jews than anything else in their history. The Messiah was supposed to redeem, save and gather Israel, but this would-be Messiah had caused other nations to scatter, humiliate and destroy her and to replace the Torah rather than to strengthen the commandments.

Maimonides' work was retrospective. Christoph Ochs (2013, p. 2) captures the original Christian theological problem more exactly when he writes that the identity of Jesus was a paradox for the early Christians:

> It would have been far easier to abandon the intellectual embarrassment of a divine-human Christ in favor of a purely human or purely divine Jesus.

Ochs observes that "the question of how Jesus came to be understood as divine is much debated" but that the belief was well established by the end of the second century (2–3), and this belief is what has taken "center stage over the discussion of his Messiahship" (5). Quoting Michael Whyshogrod (1996, pp. 195, 197–98), Ochs says that

> [t]he divinity of Jesus has been rejected by all Jewish (and Muslim) authors as incompatible with true monotheism and [as] possibly idolatrous (Ochs 5).

He notes Robert Chazan's agreement that the Christian doctrine of Jesus' incarnation receives "the harshest Jewish criticism of all" (Chazan 2004, p. 349). That is because the Christian doctrine of incarnation is central to "the definition of God's nature and holiness" (Ochs, 6). Jewish polemicists argued that it belittled God to suggest he had entered into a woman's body to be "born into the world like other men" (Ochs 2013, p. 6, citing Lasker 1977, pp. 107–8). For Christians this humility did not detract from God's dignity at all but rather ennobled Him (see earliest Phil. 2:7–8), yet for Jews, the very suggestion was a crime of *lèse majesté*, the greatest heresy of all and thus a treason.

The point of Ochs' work is to show that the New Testament Gospel of Matthew was written as "the gospel for the Jews." Matthew wrote to convince Jews from their own Old Testament scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth was Jesus Christ (right from the start in 1:1a, 23) or in other words, their long-awaited Messiah. But Ochs also explains that the Jews used the Gospel interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures against the Christians—as for example, when they answered the Christian interpretations of the word "virgin" in Isaiah 7–9, to explain contextually that the words from which it was translated could also mean "maid" or "young woman."

Ochs says that the Jewish scholars "were not merely defensive, [but]. . .actively sought out. . .debate with Christians" (Ochs 16). On the one hand, the Christians used Jewish scripture as a proselyting tool to win Jewish converts for Christ, and on the other hand, the Jews would use the 'faulty' Christian interpretations to win back their misguided brothers and sisters to the true faith of their fathers. Just as the Christians developed interpretations of the Old Testament to explain the Messiahship of Jesus Christ, so scholarly Jews made themselves familiar with the Christian New Testament Gospels and Letters for their own polemical purposes (Ochs 17–18). While this process developed over centuries and became very complicated and detailed during the Middle Ages, it began during the early Christian era. As Marvin Pate (2011, p. 120) writes,

> the Ante-Nicene church fathers had to assume the role of apologists refuting the claims made against Christianity by Judaism on the one hand and by the Roman Empire on the other hand. Judaism, with its tenacious commitment to monotheism, accused Christianity of polytheism – worshipping two gods (Christ and God) and even three gods (the Trinity).

Pate says the Christians were in trouble with the Romans because they denied the imperial cult which upheld Caesar as the Lord "through which all religions derived their meaning." For first century Jews, the Christian claims that Christ was divine simply contradicted monotheism. Pate says that when Jesus referred to himself as "the great I am" (Mark 14:61–64), the High Priest Caiaphas rent his priestly garment because Jesus had committed blasphemy by making himself equal with God. More cautious because of the risk of offence to the Jews and the death penalty under sectarian law, Paul and John were both at pains to explain that "Christ's deity did not compromise the *Shema*, Israel's great confession of monotheism" (referring to Deut 6:4 as honoured by Paul in 1 Cor 8:4–6 and perhaps by John in Revelation 4–5). This Jewish antipathy towards Christianity's doctrine of Jesus' divinity continued into the second and third centuries and is manifested in the early Patristic period by Samaritan -'Gentile' Justin Martyr (AD 100–166 AD) in his famous Dialogus (=*Dialogue with Trophy* [the Jew] (see *Ante-Nicene Fathers, The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Coxe edn., vol. 1, pp. 194–270), probably written in Ephesus (Osborn 1973, pp. 6–8). Trypho's very Jewish accusation against Christianity is that 'if Jesus is God, then the Christians must be polytheists.' Justin responded much as Matthew had done in his gospel and by explaining among other arguments, that Jesus was the angel of the Lord–God–who appeared to Abraham, Jacob and Joshua ([chs.] 56, 58, 61, 128). But he did not use the language of the Trinity. Rather he explained that though Jesus Christ is divine ("light from the Sun," "fire from fire" [128]), He is not the same as the Lord God and is subject to Him (129; 141). For Justin Martyr, though Jesus is distinct from God in person, He is one with God in will because they have precisely the same purposes and because He does God's bidding as His subordinate (139–141).

Initially, the Christian response to the Jewish charge of polytheism was thematically that there was no polytheism. Jesus Christ and the Lord God (and for that matter, the Holy Spirit) were separate and distinct individuals who were united in all their purposes. As we shall see, the language of the Trinity was first used by Clement of Alexandria in the second century to explain this very specific kind of 'unity of purpose' (Roberts 1924, pp. 23–24), but Trinitarian doctrine was not 'maturely formulated' until late in the third century before the Councils at Nicaea (in 325) and Constantinople (381) settled it into a Creed that all Christians were called to affirm in conconcordance (Kelly 1960a, pp. 211–16; 301–4).

3. The Development of the Idea of Trinity

3.1. Justin Martyr

In the writings of Justin Martyr that have survived, he responded to official persecution of Christians on two fronts. In his *First Apology,* he sought to distinguish Christian theology and practice from the Jewish misinformation that was the cause of their persecution by the Roman authorities as seditious heretics. And, secondly, in his *Dialogue* (as above) he explained the different Jewish and Christian conceptions of God from their common Scriptures.

While we may wonder whether Justin was wise to criticize his Jewish theological cousins when he sought tolerance from the Roman secular lords over both religious groups, he clearly believed that the Jewish and Christian doctrines about God were distinct and different. For the Jews, there was only one God. For the Christians, the Maker of all things and his Son Jesus Christ, were separate and distinct but were in one purpose. Justin's understanding of the Christian doctrine of God has an ironical side, since the Christian Councils in the fourth century sought to re-align the doctrine of God in the two faiths so that both had only one God. Justin Martyr's teaching that God and Christ were distinct might appear like an exercise in 'pagan' philosophical speculation (Engelhardt 1878, pp. 127–31;

cf. Lebreton 1910, p. 585a), but he is also accepted as an authentic Ante–Nicene Father of Christianity and his understanding of the Christian doctrine of God in the second century is largely accepted as assisting in the development of that doctrine. Like the Apostle Paul and others in the New Testament before him (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:3; I Cor 11:18; Gal 1:6; 1 John 2:18; 4:1; Jude) the concerns to keep apostolic teaching are clear but the arguments are not always authoritatively resolved doctrinally, and the extant writings of Justin 'do not give a well-round picture' to clinch later expectations of theological impeccability (Quasten 1950, p. 207).

3.2. Justin's Apologia Prima [First Apology] to the Romans

Justin wrote his *First Apology* (=[1] *Apologia pro Christianis*) to defend Christianity before the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius his family, Senate and counsellors (for easy reference, see Coxe edn. vol. 1, pp. 163–87). Writing as a philosopher in Rome in the 150s (Barnard 1967, p. 19), he demanded that the Emperor order a judicial investigation into the conduct and faith of the Christians so that "traditional opinions" caused by "irrational impulse or evil rumours" about them might be put to rest ([chs.] 1–3). This context did not require substantial discussion of the nature and differences between Christian and Jewish doctrines, but Justin explained the doctrine of Christ thoroughly to rebut misinformation that might have come to the Emperor from other sources. He denied the charge that Christians were atheists (6), and noted that similar mischaracterization of the teaching of Socrates had led to his "death, as an atheist and a profane person [who was]. . .introducing new divinities" (5). Christians were god-fearing patriots taught to obey the established secular authorities. Their doctrine that Jesus Christ was born the Son of God, ought not be the subject of persecution since Roman religion also held that Jupiter had sons (21). But Justin differentiated the Christian idea of God from that of the Jews so that the Romans might understand their differences and treat them separately and respectfully. He said that the Jews worshipped a "nameless God" who spoke to Moses, whereas Christians worshipped Jesus as the Christ or Messiah and as the Son of God (63). Neither Justin's denigration of Jewish theology, nor the reasons why he so wrote to Caesar are important in our context, but his blunt description of their differences in theology, are. The Jews believed that there was only one God, not two as Justin asserted for the Christians. This was the point of difference in their theology that Justin wanted the Emperor and his advisers to understand. For Justin, this difference proved that the Jews were not really "acquainted with the Father [of the Universe]" because they did not know that He had a Son (ibid.).

3.3. Writing to the Jews (the Dialogue with Trypho)

While there is debate as to whether Trypho was a real Jewish rabbi (such as Tarphon of Ephesus, so, e.g., Kiefer 2012) or a fictional character Justin invented to present his message (e.g., Setzer 1994, p. 215), no one questions the authenticity of Justin's reply or theology.

Justin's core message was that there is no polytheism in Christianity. Let us explore his arguments further than we have already. He discussed Moses' account of Abraham's experience "under the oak in Mamre" (Gen 13:18):

> He who appeared to Abraham. . .is God, sent with two angels in His company to judge Sodom by Another who remains ever in the super-celestial places, invisible to all men, holding personal intercourse with none, [and] whom [Justin] believe[s] to be the Maker and Father of all things ([ch.] 56).

But Trypho and his colleagues disagreed with Justin's assertion that these passages proved "that there is any other God or Lord, or that the Holy Spirit says so, besides the Maker of all things." Justin replied, as Pate has observed above, that there is "another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things; who is also called an Angel, because He announces to men whatsoever the Maker of all things–above whom there is no other God–wishes to announce to them" (ibid.). Again, Trypho does not accept Justin's interpretation and says rather that God "appeared to [Abraham] before the vision of the three," and that

the "three whom the Scripture calls men, were angels; two of them sent to destroy Sodom, and one to announce the joyful tidings to Sarah, that she would have a son" (ibid.).

In Justin's account of the dialogue, he tries to explain again and in more detail. He says that this one angel that Trypho had said was sent to proclaim the joyful tidings of Sarah's pregnancy with Isaac, returns and is called God in the scriptural text when He counsels Abraham to accept Sarah's wish that Hagar and her son should leave lest there be a contest over entitlement to Abraham's inheritance. While Trypho concedes that Justin has shown him that the "angel" who originally announced Sarah's pregnancy was indeed the Creator of all things manifest in angelic or human form, Justin is not satisfied with Trypho's concession and tries to show him from the Psalms, that the angel/god/man who made the pregnancy announcement to Abraham is distinct from God, the Maker of all things, though not in will (ibid.). Justin's efforts to persuade Trypho and his companions from the Psalms that there is more than one being called God in the Hebrew scriptures, are no more successful than his explanation of Abraham's experience under the oaks of Mamre.

What is clear from all Justin Martyr's efforts to persuade Trypho, is that Justin believed that God and Christ are separate and distinct beings, but that they are unified in their will and purpose. Christ does the bidding of the Father or Maker of all things. For Justin, Jesus is the God or Lord "who received commission from the Lord who (remains) in the heavens" (ibid.).

In the continuing dialogue, Justin and Trypho discuss what the Hebrew Scriptures about the visit to Abraham at Mamre mean when they say that all three who met Abraham ate the food he set before them, and they discuss without any final agreement, God's dealing with Jacob and Moses (125–129). Justin insists that the "God who appeared to Abraham, and is minister to God the Maker of all things" (56), is Jesus Christ who was "born of the Virgin, [and] became man, of like passions with all" (85) of us. For Justin, Jesus Christ was begotten of God the Maker before all other creatures and is variously called by the Holy Spirit, "the Glory of the Lord,,.. the Son,. . . Wisdom,. . . an Angel,. . .God. . . [and] Lord and Logos" (61). When Jesus Christ "appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nave (Nun), "He call[ed] Himself Captain" (ibid.). "He can be called by all those names, since He ministers to the Father's will, and since He was begotten by the Father by an act of will; just as we see happening among ourselves" (ibid.) when we will to do something.

Justin also cites the words "let Us make man after our image and likeness" as another argument in favour of his separate identification of the Father and the Son (ibid. 62). For Justin, God the Maker, did not say this to Himself. That is, unlike the English Monarch, Elizabeth II, the God who is Maker of all things does not use the pronoun 'we' when speaking only of Himself. When explaining the creation with the "Let Us" words, the God who is Maker of all things "conversed with someone who was numerically distinct from Himself" (ibid.).

According to Justin's account, after this explanation, Trypho conceded that Justin had proven a separation between Father and Son (or Angel) in the Hebrew scriptures and they then went on to discuss Christ's incarnation in the flesh. Justin's interpretation of the words "let us make man after our image and likeness" from Genesis is different from that of the Rabbi Samlaï discussed in the Jerusalem Talmud (Thompson 2019, pp. 80–82). But it is not necessary to try and reconcile these different interpretations. Writing before the Christian Councils of the fourth century AD, Justin Martyr believed that God, Christ and perhaps, the Holy Spirit, were separate and distinct.

But Justin Martyr was not the only Ante-Nicene Father who wrote about the Christian doctrine of God in the second century A.D., and the others did not agree with him on all points.

3.4. Theophilus (with Athenagoras)

Theophilus is reputed to have been the sixth Bishop of Antioch from *ca.* AD 168 until his death between 181 and 185 (see Coxe edn. vol. 2, p. 88; Rogers 2000, pp. 4–14). He

is recognized as the first person to have used the term "Trinity" of the Christian God in written literature. But his mention was brief. Thus:

> In like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity (*trias*) of God, and His Word, and His wisdom. And the fourth is the type of man, who needs light, that so there may be God, the Word, wisdom, man.
>
> (*Apologia ad Autolycum* [= *Apology to Autolycus*] Bk 2 [otherwise known as the *Syngramma*] [sect.] 15)

The context surrounding this quotation does not help us understand what Theophilus meant. In discussion with his pagan friend Autolycus, he seems to be comparing a Trinity of God, the Word, and Wisdom, to the first three Days of the Biblical story of Creation, to confirm the Christian God is the repository of Reason and Wisdom (two attributes of God earlier introduced at 1.3–4). Although Christian commentators have suggested that Theophilus was referring to God, Christ (the Word) and the Holy Spirit (Wisdom) as the Trinity in what is now the classically understood sense, it is not clear in Theophilus' other writing or in contemporary literature that these references would have been taken at the time to signify the triune Christian God. Other surviving second century literature does not use the word Trinity. The most that can be said, is that Theophilus spoke of only one God. While Theophilus' God is not separated from Christ or the Holy Spirit (the latter extolled as the Inspirer of prophets [2.9]), Christ and the Holy Spirit are not mentioned and not in such a way that we can infer that Theophilus saw them as one and the same Christian God whom he constantly upholds. The one possible reference to Christ as God is oblique; when Theophilus asseverates that God "made all things out of nothing. . .[and] willed to make man by whom He might be known," He does so with inside assistance; that is, through "His own Word [Logos] internal within His own bowels, [He] begat Him [the Logos], emitting Him along with His own Wisdom before all things. . .as a Helper (Grk. *hupourgon*) in the things that were created by Him" (2.10). In this way Theophilus is exegeting and revising John 1:1. (Rogers 2000, p. 96), not deferring to Plato's demiurge (*Timaeus* 30D) but with Word and Wisdom looking to be subordinate Agents of God (cf. Marcus 1963).

Even while discussing the separate emanation of the Word from God (and by implication of Wisdom as the Holy Spirit) (cf. also 2.22), Theophilus basically retreats to the idea that there is but one God. He says that "He is called the beginning or governing principle (*archē*) . . . being Spirit of God, and governing principle and wisdom, and power of the highest, [which] came down upon the prophets" (2.10). To counter his pagan friend's polytheism, Theophilus repeats that God created all things including Man, and while he mentions the use of "Us" in Genesis 1:26, 27 (2.13–18), he makes no comment on the significance of this plural pronoun (unlike Justin and other apologists of the early Christian era). However, for Theophilus, God is clearly unembodied, and he clarifies that talk of God walking in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:8) is simply figurative (2.22). The essence of Theophilus' message to his idol worshipping friend, is that Christianity must be true because it relies upon Jewish history, and because this background is earlier and can be traced by its distortions in Greek literature, and because pagan "writers who spoke of the multiplicity of gods came at length back to the doctrine of the unity of God" (2.38). Interestingly, Theophilus is making a defensibly Jewish point in the end, suitable also in exchanges with unconverted Hebrews: there was only one Creator; Moses had temporal priority over Hesiod and of course Plato (Greek-writing Jews such as Philo Judaeus and Josephus had argued as much); and if we find in Theophilus an allowance for the 'extension' of God in Word and Wisdom, had not Philo already been teaching this in advance in Alexandria? (see, e.g., Dodd 1963, pp. 54–73). But in his *Apology* Theophilus' attention is on convincing the Gentiles, not fending off Jewish accusations. "Theophilus takes a very similar approach to a near contemporary apologist, Athenagoras of Athens (*flor*. 170s) who answered common pagan accusations that Christians were atheists by declaring "we acknowledge one God," indeed "astonishingly speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

. . . in union and distinction" yet without using the term *trias* (*Apologia* 10; cf. Quasten 1950, p. 233).

3.5. Clement of Alexandria

A generation after Justin, Theophilus and Athenagoras, we discover in Clement (*ca*. 150–215), Athenian-born[?] founder-figure of a famed Christian School of Theology and Philosophy in Alexandria (Osborn 1957, pp. 3–7), and in remnants of some early liturgies linked to him, usages seeming to carry the classic, by-now modern meaning of the word Trinity. But since they come so soon after Justin and his stress that the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit was one of purpose only, we must be careful not to impose later paradigms on what Clement meant. The phrase "Holy Trinity" appears in his miscellaneous writings or *Stromata* (Grk, *Stromateis)* (see Coxe edn., vol. 2, pp. 299–568). In Book 5, in the long chapter 14 (Stählin edn., vol. 2, pp. 390–420) and in the context of his case for saying the Greeks had plagiarized their history from the Hebrews (as Theophilus also maintained beforehand), what Clement wrote of the Trinity when adjudging that Plato's coupling of the "Father and Son" was in completely Hebrew terms. He first quoted Plato to make his point, and comments on the mode of the great philosopher's thought

> in invoking by oath, with not illiterate gravity, and with all culture, the sister of gravity, God the author of all, and invoking Him by oath as the Lord, the Father of the Leader, and author; whom if we study with a truly philosophical spirit, we shall know (Stählin 395, cf. Plato, *Epistulae* 6).

Clement says that in Plato's address in *Timaeus* (written *ca*. 360 BC) he "evokes the creator, Father, speaking thus"

> Ye god of gods, of whom I am Father; and the Creator of your works (*Tim*. 41A)

and elsewhere

> Around the king of all, all things are, and because of Him are all things; and he [or that] is the cause of all good things; and around the second are the things second in order; and around the third, the third (*Epist*. 2).

Clement says that he

> understands [from Plato in these passages] nothing else than the Holy Trinity (Grk. *hagian triada*) to be meant; for the third is the Holy Spirit, and the Son is the second, by whom all things were made according to the will of the Father (Stählin 395).

Clement does not use the term "Trinity" again in the remaining works attributed to him. By itself, Clement's commentary is not very helpful since the Jews had become emphatic monotheists by this time. Yet when Clement suggests that Plato plagiarized the idea of Father and Son from the Jews, it appears that the Alexandrian believed a separation between Father and Son was already postulated in the theology of Judaism during Plato's lifetime.

If Clement was writing to explain and justify Christianity as a religion for educated Greeks and Romans in the late second century AD, and cited Plato (and other Greek philosophers) to prove concurrence between Greek philosophy and pre-Christian Jewish theology as part of his argument, his reference to the Trinity seems out of place. Not only was Jewish theology becoming thoroughly monotheistic in Plato's time, but the idea that it contained elements of Trinity seems misjudged or anachronistic. Even if Clement was arguing that the origins of Christian Trinitarian theology could be discerned by thoughtful Greeks in the philosophy they had developed from a Mosaic theology, this does not really explain the curious argument. Rather, what Clement's use of Trinity in the *Stromata* perhaps best shows is that Trinitarian language was *already commonplace* among the Christians of his time and so it was a natural part of his reasoning. But Clement does not explain what he meant when he wrote of the *hagia triada,* and we would have to say this particular referencing was ambiguous. For while it may mean that he saw three different aspects of God present in the creation accounts available to him, his words do not reveal whether he

believed that the Father and Son were separate beings, united only in their purposes, or whether they were more substantially united in the later Nicene sense (see also Osborn 1957, esp. 38–44).

In his pedagogical work (*Paedagogus*, roughly translated as 'the Instructor' or 'the Tutor') (see Coxe edn., vol. 2, pp. 209–96), Clement explained that Jesus Christ's primary role on earth was to be the teacher or pattern for all mankind. All Christians are Christ's children, chickens or sheep (ibid, pp. 209–15), and Christ was the guiding God of the Old Testament (1. 6–8). But once again, and probably because Clement was more concerned to explain Christianity to his Gentile contemporaries, he did not write enough to answer the question whether he believed that God and Christ were separate or substantially united. When he touched that issue writing to Gentiles, he was ambiguous. The following quotations demonstrate:

> [O]ur Instructor is like His Father God, whose Son He is, sinless, blameless, and with a soul devoid of passion; God in the form of Man, stainless, the minister of His Father's will, the Word who is God, who is in the Father, who is at the Father's right hand, and with the form of God is God (1. 2).
>
> And Man has been proved to be loveable; consequently Man is loved by God. For how shall he not be loved for whose sake the only-begotten Son is sent from the Father's bosom (compare Theophilus' metaphor "bowels"), the Word of faith, the faith which is superabundant; the Lord Himself distinctly confessing and saying, "For the Father Himself loveth you because ye have loved Me"? (3 [with John 16:27]).

Quoting Isaiah, Clement wrote

> Here am I, and the children that God hath given me (5 [with Isa 8:18]).

and he observed that

> Isaac . . . was a type of the Lord, a child as a son; for he was the son of Abraham, as Christ the Son of God (ibid. [with Gen 22]).

Clement also wrote that

> Since Scripture calls the infant children lambs, it has also called Him–God the Word–who became Man for our sakes, and who wished in all points to be made like to us–'the Lamb of God'–Him, namely, that is the Son of God, the child of the Father (ibid. [with John 1:29]).

and that

> The universal Father is one, and one the universal Word; and the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere, and one is the only virgin mother (6).

Finally, from many other Clementine examples that could be used, he wrote

> the Father of all alone is perfect, for the Son is in Him, and the Father is in the Son; it is time for us in due course to say who our Instructor is.
>
> He is called Jesus. . ..the holy God Jesus, the Word, who is the guide of all humanity. The loving God Himself is our Instructor . . .[who] provided sufficiently for the people in the wilderness. . ..He who appeared to Abraham (7).

There are elements of modern Trinitarian doctrine in several of these passages but it is not clear that Clement had anything more in mind than the same kind of oneness between Christ and the Father that Christ had sought for his disciples in His intercessory prayer in John 17. As one reviews this coverage, indeed, one is left with a vague concern that the single reference to *hagia triada* may not even have been Clement's at all, but an interpolation, leaving one guessing.

The possibility of later interpolation was referenced by Cleveland Coxe when writing about fragments of an early liturgy also attributed to Clement. Writing as the Note Editor for the second volume of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers, The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*

that deals with the authenticity of these materials, Coxe ([1885] 2004a, vol. 7, p. 533) opined that:

> The age ascribed to these [liturgical] documents depends very much on the temperament and inclination of the inquirer. Those who have great reverence for them think that they must have had an apostolic origin, that they contain the apostolic forms, first handed down by tradition, and then committed to writing, but they allow that there is a certain amount of interpolation and addition of a date later than the Nicene Council. Such words as 'consubstantial' and 'mother of God' bear indisputable witness to this. Others think that there is no real historical proof of their early existence at all – that they all belong to a later date, and bear evident marks of having been written long after the age of the apostles.

Coxe concluded "[t]here can scarcely be a doubt that they were not committed to writing till a comparatively late day" (ibid.).

That possibly being the case, it may not be wise to accept that Clement clearly believed in the Trinitarian nature of God in the early third century, or that the Nicene-like understanding of the triune God was common parlance in his time. That conclusion could also mean that traces of the Trinity idea are very far apart in the early centuries of Christian thought. But let us now turn westward to Tertullian of North Africa (*ca*. AD 160–225), a virtual contemporary to Clement to the east, to see whether we should re-think our assessment.

4. Tertullian and Origen

4.1. Tertullian

A certain irony surround Tertullian's relevant teaching. For while he is credited as the source of the doctrine that became foundational for Christianity at Nicaea (e.g., Coxe [1887] 2004c, vol. 3, pp. 4–5), there are other Christian commentators left troubled that he should be credited with that much authority (e.g., Roberts 1924, pp. 20–21, 23, 132, 136–37). His authority is drawn into question on one important account, that later in his career he dabbled in Montanism, an apparent (proto-Pentecostal-looking) heresy holding that direct revelation by the Holy Spirit had not ceased in the African churches (Roberts 1924, pp. 20–21). Since he apparently left opportunities in Rome because of this allegiance, might this be enough discredit his development of the doctrine of the Christian Church in an age when certainty was imperative? Tertullian's own inflexible view was that heretics should not even be allowed to read the Scriptures, let alone publish treatises about their meaning which could mislead the body of Christ (*De Praescriptione haereticorum* [=*The Prescription against Heretics*] [sect.] 19 [see Coxe [1887] 2004c, vol. 3, pp. 243–65]). The irony or anomaly just sits there, however, passed over because in orthodox Western Christianity what Tertullian wrote as the strongest original contributor of Trinitarian ideas has been welcomed as approved by the 325 Council of Nicaea, even if improved by the post-Nicene Cappadocian Fathers of the late fourth century (Roberts 1924, pp. 132, 136–37).

While there is debate about whether Tertullian knew Hebrew, or whether he simply preferred to rely on the Greek or Latin version of the apostolic writings, because there was as yet no canonized New Testament, he took the "Rule of Faith" as his surest guide. That is to say, he would not rely on anything unless he knew it had been "handed down from Christ through the apostles and the churches." In fact for him The Rule of Faith was the tradition "by which even the Scriptures were to be tried" (Roberts 1924, p. 18; Ferguson 2015, pp. 5–6). But as Robert Roberts problematized it, the

> Rule of Faith was not as 'constant' and 'immoveable and irreformable' as Tertullian would have us suppose . . . [for] Tertullian did not hesitate to import into it whatever was necessary to refute the views of heretics or to convey his own opinions (Roberts 1924, pp. 15–16).

While Tertullian adopted the "essentials [of the Rule of Faith] from his predecessors," he included as his own "additions"

> the priority of the Son to all creatures,. . . His agency in the work of the creation. . . and the qualification of the assertion of the Unity of God by the introduction of the notion of the divine *oikonomia* (ibid. p. 17).

Tertullian wrestled to provide definite answers to questions about the nature of the Christian God, but he was hamstrung by an absence of authoritative source material. He defended Christianity against Greek philosophy, Gnosticism and Marcionitism (13), but he improvised when he felt he had to and felt justified in doing so because the Holy Spirit was working in him, one suspects Montanist-style (cf. Chadwick [1863] 2017).

Roberts (1924, pp. 130–31) fairly asserts that two "passages in Tertullian's writings [in *The Apology* and *Against Praxeas*] . . . are of greatest importance for ascertaining his doctrine of the Trinity." In the first and shorter passage, Tertullian says his purpose is to make "a remark or two as to Christ's divinity" (*Apologia* [ch.] 21). He does not mention the Holy Spirit at all, but he does seek to explain how the Father and Son are one and that they are spirit. He observes that Christ's coming and birth were announced by God, and that Christ had no reason to be ashamed of either his paternal or his maternal origins, since his Father was God and his Mother was a virgin. Tertullian then continues:

> He proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God. For God, too, is a Spirit. Even when the ray is shot from the sun, it is still part of the parent mass; the sun will still be in the ray, because it is a ray of the sun–there is no division of substance, but merely an extension. Thus Christ is a Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. The material matrix remains entire and unimpaired, though you derive from it any number of shoots possessed of its qualities; so too, that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence – in position, not in nature; and he did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God, then, as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb is in His birth God and man united. The flesh formed by the Spirit is nourished, grows up to manhood, speaks, teaches, works, and is the Christ (ibid.).

Here Tertullian may have taken his cue about the God/Logos relationship from the influential gnosticizing Eastern thinker Tatian (AD 117–172) who taught in Rome (see Quasten 1950, pp. 220, 222), but Tertullian is clearer that the Logos is Jesus Christ and that His being the Creator or Logos was quite consistent with heathen philosophy (*Apol*. 21).

But for Roberts, it is Tertullian's later more detailed statement in *Adversus Praxean* (=*Against Praxeas*) (see Coxe [1887] 2004c, vol. 3, pp. 597–627) that is more significant. There Tertullian

> set[s] out the Trinitarian doctrine in a form, which despite its limitations and imperfections, supplied the framework for the later presentation of the doctrine at the Council of Nicaea, and by the Cappadocians (Roberts 1924, pp. 130–31).

In this case the Christian Father is not contending against Jewish monotheists or pagan polytheists but a Christian heretic who over-accentuated the unity of God to the point of asserting that God co-suffers with Christ, as at the crucifixion (Monarchianism and Patripassianism) (see Kelly 1960b, pp. 120–21). The views of Praxeas (who was also anti-Montanist) draws out Tertulllian's longer exposition of the Trinity:

> We . . . believe that there is one only God, but only under the following dispensation, or *oikonomia,* as it is called, that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. Him we believe to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her – being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name of Jesus Christ; we believe Him to have suffered, died and been buried, according to the Scriptures,

> and, after He had been raised again by the Father and taken back to heaven, to be sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that He will come to judge the quick and the dead; who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost. That this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the Gospel, even before any of the older heretics, much more before Praxeas, a pretender of yesterday (*Adv. Prax*. [ch.] 2).

Tertullian then briefly explained Praxeas' error for holding that "one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person." This mistake, according to Tertullian, was to imply that

> one were not All, in that All are One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity (*Trinitas*), placing in their order the three Persons (*Personae*)– the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance (*substantia*), and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (ibid.).

Tertullian further clarified "how they are susceptible of number without division" (ibid.). En route, Tertullian could see how his defence of the Trinity could help fend of enduring Jewish criticism, not only correct contemporary Christian teachers who misunderstood the doctrine. As he put it, at times rather juristically,

> They are constantly throwing out against us that we are preachers of two gods and three gods, while they take to themselves pre-eminently the credit of being worshippers of One God; just as if the Unity itself with irrational deductions did not produce heresy, and the Trinity rationally considered constituted the truth. We, say they, maintain the Monarchy (or, sole government of God)... As for myself, however, if I have gleaned any knowledge of either language [Latin or Greek], I am sure that *monarchia* (or monarchy) has no other meaning than single and individual rule; but for all that, this monarchy does not, because it is the government of one, preclude him whose government it is, either from having a son, or from having made himself actually a son to himself, or from ministering his own monarchy by whatsoever agents he will... If moreover, there be a son belonging to him whose monarch it is, it does not forthwith become divided and cease to be a monarchy, if the son also be taken as a sharer in it; but it is as to its origin equally his, by whom it is communicated to the son; and being his, it is quite as much a monarch (or sole empire) since it is held together by two who are so inseparable. Therefore, inasmuch as the Divine Monarchy also is administered by so many legions and hosts of angels, according as it is written, "Thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him;" [referring to Daniel 7:10] and since it has not from the circumstance ceased to be the rule of one (so as to no longer be a monarchy), because it is administered by so many thousands of powers, how comes it to pass that God should be thought to suffer division and severance in the Son and in the Holy Ghost, who have second and the third places assigned to them, and who are so closely joined with the Father in His substance, when He suffers no such (division and severance) in the multitude of so many angels? Do you really suppose that Those, who are naturally members of the Father's own substance, pledges of His love, instruments of His power itself and the entire system of His monarchy, are the overthrow and destruction thereof? ...the overthrow of a monarchy ... [rather occurs] when another dominion, which has a framework peculiar to itself (and is therefore a rival) is brought in over and above it: when, for example, some

> other god is introduced in opposition to the Creator, as in the opinions of Marcion; or when many gods are introduced, according to your [gnostic] Valentinuses and your [pagan] Prodicuses. Then it amounts to an overthrow of the Monarchy, since it involves the destruction of the Creator (3).

We could spend time on scholarly reactions to Tertullian's Trinitarianism. Most scholars make comparisons with the later Nicene Creed and find connections, although the orthodox usually ignore the material that is actually inconsistent with the Creed because he apparently asserts there was a time when Jesus did not exist (27). They also avoid some of his "less than perfect analogies" to the Trinity (sun, ray and apex; root, tree and fruit; well, spring and river), since "all figures of the Trinity" are inherently imperfect, and his images were left too unqualified (Roberts 1924, p. 133). Apart from differences of assessment over the years, in the seventeenth century, for example, Jesuit Dionysius Petavius unnerved, yet Anglican bishop George Bull defending; in the nineteenth Anglican bishop John Kaye wishing him to be less provocative, and Lutheran Adolf von Harnack finding his "economic Trinity" defective (pp. 133, 139). Tertullian himself seemed to expect further revelation to himself when he admitted that the mystery "which distributes the Unity into a Trinity" (*Adv. Prax*. 2) was still guarded, but that did not prevent him from attempting his account. His explanation was that there is an order between the three persons of the Trinity, and their difference is a difference in degree, form and aspect, rather than of condition, substance or power. But then he appears to contradict himself by saying that the difference of the three persons who make up the Trinity is one of substance, condition and power after all (cf. Osborn 1997, pp. 65–87).

Although Tertullian is said to have deplored Greek philosophy and Hellenism in general (remember his saying, what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? [*Praescr.* 7]), his discursive tools for explaining the Trinity mediate between abstraction and the deployment of (parable-like) analogies however imperfect those of a philosophical bent may find them. There is still the need to defend the oneness of the Christian God as images of the divine have been carried out of a Jewish base, and that background factor seems lurking and never forgotten in his method of approach (which is grounded in the 'whole Bible'). Yet in his context, much later than Justin, the heretical position of Praxeas has brought up old issues about monotheism within the Christian fold itself, and we can hardly deny that the genesis of strong monotheism and its persistence in Christian thought lies in the Jewish tradition. Praxean Monarchianism marks its covert force enduring in Christianity as successor to Judaism and its high conceptual and worshipful expectations of God's oneness. On close inspection, many of the Christian heresies of Ante-Nicene Christianity relate in different ways to what we may call the 'watershed' of Jewish criticism. Contemplate Adoptionism, Apollinarianism, Macedonianism, Marcionism, Sabellianism, Subordinationism—they all relate to issues about compromising the divine oneness. But Christians of whatever strand were persistent in not wanting to forego the latter-day miracle of their Lord, and Tertullian was the most cunning Latin mind to defend the new understanding of Divinity in the fast-growing, emergent Faith in Christ.

Tertullian wrote more about how the Son came forth from the Father, and in that sense his focus is similar to the Nicene creed, which unlike the Creed of Constantinople has no developed statement about belief in the Holy Spirit. We have identified the basics of Tertullian's Trinitarian theology, and quite apart from his formulation's possible effect on Nicaea and aside from further need to estimate the extent of influences upon him (probably mostly from Tatian), we can also see his innovation. Tertullian's original contribution was that the Father and Son were as unified in substance as they were in purpose. In Justin Martyr's understanding, a unity in purpose was sufficient to rebut Jewish criticism of Christian polytheism, but Tertullian felt the need to probe the unity of Father and Son more deeply because he was confronted by a heretical Monarchian, who might be said to revert to Judaism by swallowing up the roles of Son and Spirit in too narrow a monotheism. Tertullian explained the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in greater depth by his use of the word *substantia* (underlying being?): their unity extended to their very

substance. But the analogies which he preferred as explanatory devices do not really merge the personalities of the Father and the Son. On the one hand, a monarch is still a monarch even if he assigns his genetic son as an executive in the kingdom. On the other, a sun-ray is still made of the same substance as the sun from which it was sent forth even though it is physically separated from that source. The Father and Son were still separate personages as they had been in Justin Martyr's understanding, but their Oneness was deeper than in just a unity of purpose.

4.2. Origen

Like Tertullian, the famed Origen (185–254) was a prolific theologian whose reliability has been questioned because some of his views were later deemed heretical (even anathematized by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553). In an apologetic, rather pious tone, Cleveland Coxe laments the sad awkwardness, that

> before the great Synodical period (A.D. 325 to 451), while orthodoxy is marvelously maintained and witnessed to by Origen and Tertullian themselves, their errors, however serious, have never separated them from the grateful and loving regard of those upon whom their lives of heroic sorrow and suffering have conferred blessings unspeakable. . . . [but] the Church cannot leave their errors uncorrected (Coxe [1887] 2004b, vol. 4, p. 223).

In the West, in any case, Jerome (347–420) accused Origen about a century after his death as departing "from the Catholic Faith" in his high-profile work *De Principiis* (*On First Principles*) or was anxious that what Origen said in particular about the Trinity had been corrupted by his Latin translator Rufinus of Aquileia (*ca*. 345–410) (esp. *Contra Johannem* 29–36). A scholarly successor to Clement in Alexandria, however, Origen stood upon the shoulders of various predecessors, and in more recent scholarship there has been less concern to stress differences between Origen's version of the doctrine and what was ruled in the "Great Councils," than to acknowledge him as one of the builders of the "theological system that weds the church's three-fold understanding of God," systematizing and incorporating previous explanations on the matter (e.g., Nathan 2013, p. 1). Justin Martyr had defended Christianity against the charge of atheism by linking the "Logos" notion (with a triad of God, Logos and Psyche known in Stoicism and Platonism) with the Christian triad of Father, Son and Holy Ghost (cf. *Dialogus* 3–6). After him, Irenaeus (*flor*. 170s) and Hippolytus (*flor*. 200s), Tertullian and Clement, warn a vulnerable Church against various heresies distorting Christian belief in God as "both one and three." Yet their "Economic Trinitarianism" was confusing: even though sharpening the understanding of "the distinct individuality of the Logos immanent eternally in the Godhead," their general approach left unanswered questions about whether the Son, who began before the creation, somehow postdated the Father. Tertullian had certainly moved to resolve these conundrums by explaining that the Son and Holy Spirit shared in the *substantia* of the Godhead, but it was Origen's work to "harmonise. . .the Church's threefold understanding of God to the categories of Middle Platonism." Not happy about repeating others' varying thoughts Origen tackles the ambiguities head-on: by speculation, theological research and sheer effort of mind, he circumvents previous mind-sets to strike out on a new path. While he relies on Scripture and the Rule of Faith revered in tradition, he feels quite at liberty to speculate when there is a vacuum in understanding.

Following the first chapter of the Gospel of John (1:1–2), Henry Bettenson (1956, pp. 230–43) maintains that in *De Principiis* ([Bk.] 6 [ch.] 1)

> Origen explains that this one God is the God-in-Godself and his divinity is his own and not derived whereas the Logos is simply called God because his divinity, though real and true, is derived from the Supreme God. This Supreme God who is generating a Son and breathing forth the Spirit also constitutes a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the triadic understanding of God which Christian faith confesses and which forms the basis of salvation (here conveniently summarized by Nathan 2013, p. 5).

But Origen is also confusing because, while his use of the term *hypostasis* (to "signify the distinct and individual existence of the members of the Triad") corresponds with Greek *prosopon* in Hippolytus and the Latin *persona* in Tertullian, it "can also refer to the being or substance of something and was identical with the Latin term *substantia*." But he does "break with predecessors" when he asserts that the Son and the Holy Spirit are co-eternal with the Father (*Princ.* 2. 6). For Bettenson (via Nathan 2013, p. 6) this is where Origen displays his originality. He has moved away from the Stoic idea of "the immanent expressed in the Logos," from which his predecessors had drawn their understanding of the Triad, and has found the co-eternality idea which resonated with the Council at Nicaea (see *Princ.* I,3,4). That original insight is best demonstrated with a quotation from *De Principiis* where Origen is concluding his chapter on how the Holy Spirit is a co-eternal part of the Godhead:

> Nothing in the Trinity can be greater or less, since the fountain of divinity alone contains all things by His Word and Reason, and by the Spirit of His mouth sanctifies all things which are worthy of sanctification. . . There is also a special working of God the Father, besides that by which He bestowed upon all things the gift of natural life. There is also a special ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ to those upon whom he confers by nature the gift of reason, by means of which we are enabled to be rightly what we are. There is also another grace of the Holy Spirit, which is bestowed upon the deserving, through the ministry of Christ and the working of the Father, in proportion to the merits of those who are rendered capable of receiving it. . . From which it most clearly follows that there is no difference in the Trinity, but that which is called the gift of the Spirit is made known through the Son, and operated by God the Father . . . Having made these declarations regarding the Unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, let us return to the order in which we began this discussion. God the Father bestows upon all, existence; and participation in Christ, in respect of His being the word of reason, renders them rational beings. From which it follows that they are deserving either of praise or blame, because capable of virtue or vice. On this account, therefore, is the grace of the Holy Ghost present, that those beings which are not holy in their essence may be rendered holy by participating in it. Seeing then, that firstly, they derive their existence from God the Father; secondly, their rational nature from the Word; thirdly, their holiness from the Holy Spirit, -those. . ...will. . .by the ceaseless working of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost in us, . . .be able at some future time. . .to behold the holy and blessed life (1,3,7–8).

Bettenson (1956, pp. 240–43) opines that Origen overstated the distinctions in the Trinity, the subordination of the Son and the limitations of the Holy Spirit too much for the later church. But he says that Origen still laid the theological foundations upon which Athanasius and the Cappadocians built the "great doctrinal formulas" which were sanctioned by the Great Councils.

5. Other Ante-Nicene Theologians: Novation and Gregory Thaumaturgus and Others

Other Ante-Nicene Fathers wrote about the nature of God and even about the Trinity, but none contributed as much to the Nicene doctrine as those discussed above. In Irenaeus, for example, as for Justin Martyr, there is no suggestion of a consubstantial being. The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are separate and distinct but unified in purpose (Coxe edn., vol. 1, p. 329). Hippolytus (170–235 A.D.), a disciple of Irenaeus, expresses the Trinitarian idea that "[t]he Father decrees; the Word executes and the Son is manifested" (*Contra Noetum* [=*Against the Heresy of One Noetus*] 14) (Coxe [1886] 2004d, vol. 5, pp. 223–31). The context is not very Trinitarian but suggests that again, he was writing in response to early positions affected by Jewish criticism:

> If, then, the Word was with God, and was also God, what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one; of two Persons however, and of a third economy (disposition), viz., the grace of

> the Holy Ghost. For the Father indeed is One, but there are two Persons, because there is also the Son; and there is the third, the Holy Spirit. . .
>
> . . .The economy of harmony is led back to one God; for God is One. It is the Father who commands, and the Son who obeys, and the Holy Spirit who gives understanding: the Father who is above all, and the Son who is through all, and the Holy Spirit who is in all. And we cannot otherwise think of one God, but by believing in truth in Father and Son and Holy Spirit. For the Jews glorified (or gloried in) the Father, but gave Him not thanks, for they did not recognise the Son.

And then he summarizes:

> And by this He showed, that whosoever omitted any one of these, failed in glorifying God perfectly. For it is through this Trinity that the Father is glorified (ibid.).

In effect, Hippolytus uses the expression of Trinity against the heretic Noetus of Smyrna, a Patripassian (see Kelly 1960b, pp. 120–23), in much the same way he might counter the continuing criticism of the Jews. They failed to glorify the Father whom they purported to worship because they did not recognize, worship and glorify His Son. To fail to recognize Jesus Christ as the Father's Son and Agent was to deny the Father.

The most specific ante-Nicene Christian work on the Trinity was written by the later anti-Pope Novatian (200–258). *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*) (see Coxe [1886] 2004d, vol. 5, pp. 611–44), extensive on the subject, was written in the wake of the so-called Sabellian heresy (see Kelly 1960b, pp. 119–24) in *ca*. 257 some 20 years after Origen's *First Principles*. Although some have interpreted his move to set himself up as a rival Pope, subsequently causing schism and the excommunication of his supporters, more charitable interpreters insist we only have the story from his enemies, and have defended his orthodoxy. They maintain, in any case, that he was only ever deemed heretical in respect of church discipline, since he would not forgive and permit the re-baptism of those whose faith had once lapsed. We follow Coxe here, who in any case considers his "work upon the Trinity . . . a most valuable contribution to ante-Nicene theology" (Coxe [1886] 2004d, vol. 5 pp. 607–8).

In 31 chapters, Novatian sets forth from reason and the scriptures, the nature of God. God contains all things and is inexplicable ([ch.] 2); He is infinite (4); His anger, indignation and hatred are not human in nature (5); He does not have a bodily nature (6); but Jesus Christ was truly Man (10) and God also (11–6). It was Jesus Christ that appeared to Abraham and Jacob (18–19) (as Justin had taught). Christ is distinct from the Father (24–28) and suffered death while the Father did not (thus Novatian rejecting Patripasssianism) (24–25). But nonetheless there are *not* two Gods (29–31).

In Novatian we find a closer proximity to the Nicene formulations than in most earlier cases, and his reasoning stands out when contrasted with that ascribed to another third-century anti-Sabelllian writer Gregory Thaumaturgus (213–270). He was a disciple and apologist for Origen in the East who became the Bishop of New Caesarea. His Trinitarian reasoning is confusing and seems inconsistent (see (Coxe [1887] 2004b, vol. 4, pp. 228–29 [cf. vol. 6. 40–47]) and the problems may go back to scribal hands trying to gloss his work in the context of heated debate over Sabellius' 'monarchianist' teaching or that of Arius, who triggered Nicaea. For, on the one hand Gregory purportedly writes

> Some treat the Holy Trinity in an awful manner, when they confidently assert that there are not three persons, and introduce (the idea of) a person devoid of substance. Wherefore we clear ourselves of Sabellius, who says that the Father and the Son are the same . . . We foreswear this, because we believe that three persons – namely, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are declared to possess the one Godhead; for the one divinity showing itself forth according to nature in the Trinity establishes the oneness of the nature. . . 'There is one God the Father' [Deut. 6:4]; and there is divinity hereditary in the Son, as it is written, 'The Word was God' [John 1:1b]. and there is divinity present according to nature in the

> Spirit – to wit, what subsists as the Spirit of God – according to Paul's statement, 'Ye are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwelleth in you' [1 Cor3:16]. Now the person in each declares the independent being and subsistence . . . wherefore, if the divinity may be spoken of as one in three persons, the trinity is established and the unity is not dissevered. . ..Wherefore if there is one God, and one Lord, and at the same time one person as one divinity in one lordship, how can credit be given to (this distinction in) the words 'of whom' and 'by whom' as has been said before? (Confessio Fidei (=*A Sectional Confession of Faith*) 7)/

But then he continues

> We acknowledge that the Son and the Spirit are consubstantial with the Father, and that the substance of the Trinity is one . . . And those who have fellowship with men that reject the consubstantiality as a doctrine foreign to the Scriptures, and speak of any of the persons in the Trinity as created, and separate [as Arius taught], that person from the one natural divinity, we hold as aliens (18).

The apparent inconsistency may lie in dubious or spurious scribal interference, probably introducing consubstantiality ex post facto Nicaea (see also Coxe [1885] 2004a, vol. 7, p. 533), and it is more likely that Gregory "believed" (as he testified just before the probable interpolation above):

> in one God, that is in one First Cause, the God of the law and of the Gospel, the just and good; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, true God, that is, Image of the true God, Maker of all things seen and unseen, Son of God and only-begotten Offspring, and Eternal Word, living and self-subsistent and active, always being with the Father, and in one Holy Spirit (*Confess*. 14).

Dionysius of Rome (d. AD 268), or someone in his name, also wrote briefly against the Sabellians in the same period (see Coxe [1885] 2004a, vol. 7, pp. 365–66). He was less anxious about faith in God as Three in One resulting in the kind of straitened monotheistic reaction associated with the Sabellians. But he was concerned that the "Church of God" could find itself worshipping "three powers and distinct substances (*hypostases*), and three deities, [and] destroy it[self]". For he said that "the doctrine that there are three gods is neither taught in the Old nor in the New Testament." He continued in what Trinitarian scholars must consider a very advanced vein, as if nipping Arius' errors in the bud, by asseverating:

> It is therefore not a trifling, but a very great impiety, to say that the Lord was in any wise made with hands. For if the Son was made, there was a time when He was not; but He always was, if, as He Himself declares, He is undoubtedly in the Father (*Contra Sabellianos* (=*Against the Sabellians*] 2).

This is a strong view more consistent with the anathemas after Nicaea against those who taught that the Logos was a "creature" (*ktisma*) and that there was a time when "He was not" (Kelly 1960a, p. 216).

6. Conclusions

And so I complete this analysis of the teachings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers concerning the nature of God.

To re-capitulate, in the first half of the second century, Justin Martyr maintained that God and Jesus Christ were separate and distinct individuals but that they were united in their purposes. He wrote to respond to Trypho's Jewish criticism that the Christians were polytheists and his appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures, that Christians worshipped more than one God. Further into the second century, Theophilus of Antioch was the first of the Christian writers to use the term "Trinity" (*trias*) but he did not use it in connection with God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit to explain their integral relationship. Rather, he used the term to persuade an intelligent pagan friend named Autolycus, that the Christian God was the repository of all Logic and Wisdom, hoping to build a bridge of understanding for his friend who was familiar with Greek philosophy.

A generation later, crossing over into the third century, Clement of Alexandria is said to have drawn the term "Trinity" (*triada*) further into Christian theology. His argument, apparently designed for interested pagan parties, was that Greek philosophical insights about great principles of Creation derive from the Hebrew Scripture and he was not engaged in a theological probing of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, 700 miles away in Carthage, Clement's near contemporary Tertullian in Carthage was focused on rebutting contemporary in-house heresies and arrived at discursive formulae that foreshadowed and were used in the momentous Trinitarian statements of the Nicene and Constantinopolitan Creeds. Tertullian affirmed that the Son not only shared the same mind with the Father, but because he came forth from the Father, he was also of the same *substantia* (underlying being) even if the nature of that oneness had not been fully revealed. Though Tertullian did not directly respond to Jewish monotheistic criticisms of Christian belief about God, most of his writing corrected Christian apologists who had made mistakes while retorting to Jewish charges of Christian polytheism.

To the east, Tertullian's contemporary Origen, as Clement's disciple in Alexandria, summarized and systematized all that the predecessors he knew had written about the Trinity. Origen charted a new course by harmonizing previous views about "the Church's threefold understanding of God to the categories of Middle Platonism" (Nathan 2013, p. 4). He developed the Stoic paradigm of the immanence of the Godhead into the new idea that the three *hypostases* that comprised it, were co-eternal. While Origen made distinctions between the different persons in the Godhead that were set aside at Nicaea, his insights concerning their co-eternality resonated with those there who were called upon to resolve the Arian controversy. The major Nicene expressions correcting Arius' theology had all been seeded by the time that Tertullian and Origen finished their work. In this light, the Trinitarian formulations of Novation and Dionysius against the Sabellian heretics, and those attributed to Thaumaturgus, are less innovative than at first sight.

When the idea of the Trinity developed by the Ante-Nicene fathers is traced to its source, we find it originated as a response to Jewish alarm that the Christians were heretics (*minim*) because they believed in more than one God. As a resolution of this original problem, the idea that the Father or Maker and Jesus Christ were the same being (ontologically) may be detected in both Tertullian and Origen, with neither of them suggesting that the Father and Son are the same Person. For everyone earlier, Christ was completely unified with His Heavenly Father in purpose, but did His bidding. And in the Gospels Jesus sought that same oneness for all who believed what He taught. There was nothing of nirvana in Jesus' aspiration in His intercessory prayer, nor was there any suggestion of ontic identity between Father and Son. The Son sought simply to completely and exactly obey the Father, and to please Him.

This foundational understanding of the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity in response to Jewish criticism, bemused pagans and mistaken or heretical Christian teachers. It also provides the three-hundred-year-long contextual background to the Council of Nicaea and the crucial theological discussions that occurred during six weeks between May and July in AD 325.

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