

ESSAY
BA course year 2 no. 8
"The Trinity II. (De Deo Trino)"

"Christian mathematics: one plus one plus one equals one". How do we make logical sense of the Holy Trinity, if such logic is appropriate? Or must we take refuge in credo quia absurdum? Examine TWO theological attempts to make sense of the mystery of the Trinity.

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1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Mannheim). So it might happen that I had problems with the translation into English, then I used the German original word in brackets “()”. In most cases I've tried to translate it into English.

2. The Dogma of the Trinity – in general

The Trinity is the term employed to signify the central doctrine of the Christian religion -- the truth that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these three persons being truly distinct one from another. Thus, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God." In this Trinity of persons the Son is begotten of the Father by an eternal generation, and the Holy Spirit proceeds by an eternal procession from the Father and the Son. Yet, notwithstanding this difference as to origin, the persons are co-eternal and co-equal: all alike are uncreated and omnipotent. This, the Church teaches, is the revelation regarding God's nature which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came upon earth to deliver to the world: and which she proposes to man as the foundation of her whole dogmatic system.

In Scripture there is as yet no single term by which the three divine persons are denoted together. The word “trias” (of which the Latin “trinitas” is a translation) is first found in Theophilus of Antioch about 180 AD. He speaks of "the Trinity of God [the Father], His Word and His Wisdom.

Numerous attempts have been made since the Early Church Fathers to find theories on the Trinity. In the following I'd like to take a look at two approaches – one of St. Justin Martyr and one of St. Athanasius.

3. Trinity in the view of St. Justin Martyr

St. Justin Martyr was a Christian apologist, who was born at Flavia Neapolis about 100 AD, and converted to Christianity about 130 AD. He taught and defended the Christian religion in Asia Minor and at Rome, where he suffered martyrdom about the year 165. Two "Apologies" bearing his name and his "Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon" have come down to us.

His teaching concerning God, the Logos and the Holy Spirit is as follows:

a. God

We can see two tendencies in his teaching about God:

On the one side the influence of philosophy betrays itself in his concept of the Divine transcendency, thus God is immovable¹; He is above the heaven, can neither be seen nor enclosed within space²; He is called Father, in a philosophic and Platonistic sense, inasmuch as He is the creator of the world³. On the other hand we see the God of the Bible in his all-powerful⁴, and merciful God⁵; if He ordained the Sabbath it was not that He had need of the homage of the Jews, but that He desired to attach them to Himself⁶; through His mercy He preserved among them a seed of salvation; through His Divine Providence He has rendered the nations worthy of their inheritance; He delays the end of the world on account of the Christians⁷. And the great duty of man is to love Him⁸.

b. The Logos

The Word is numerically distinct from the Father⁹. He was born of the very substance of the Father, not that this substance was divided, but He proceeds from it as one fire does from another at which it is lit; this form of production (procession) is compared also with that of human speech. The Word (*Logos*) is therefore the Son: much more, He alone may properly be called Son¹⁰; He is the *monogenes*, the *unigenitus*¹¹. Elsewhere, however, Justin, like St. Paul, calls Him the eldest Son, *protokos*¹². The Word is God¹³. His Divinity, however, seems subordinate, as does the worship which is rendered to Him¹⁴¹⁵. The Father engendered Him by a free and voluntary act¹⁶, at the beginning of all His works¹⁷; in this last text certain authors thought they distinguished in the Word two states of being, one intimate, the other outspoken, but this distinction, though found in some other apologists, is in Justin very doubtful. Through the Word God has made everything¹⁸. The Word is diffused through

¹ see: I. Apology

² see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

³ see: I. Apology

⁴ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

⁵ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

⁶ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

⁷ see: I. Apology

⁸ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

⁹ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

¹⁰ see: II. Apology

¹¹ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

¹² see: I. Apology

¹³ see: I. Apology

¹⁴ see: I. Apology

¹⁵ Teder, "Justins des Märtyrers Lehre von Jesus Christus", Freiburg im Breisgau, 1906, 103-19

¹⁶ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon and Teder "Justins des Märtyrers Lehre von Jesus Christus"

¹⁷ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

¹⁸ see: I. Apology and Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

all humanity¹⁹; it was He who appeared to the patriarchs²⁰. Two influences are plainly discernible in the aforesaid body of doctrine. It is, of course, to Christian revelation that Justin owes his concept of the distinct personality of the Word, His Divinity and Incarnation; but philosophic speculation is responsible for his unfortunate concepts of the temporal and voluntary generation of the Word, and for the subordinationism of Justin's theology. It must be recognized, moreover, that the latter ideas stand out more boldly in the "Apology" than in the "Dialogue."

c. The Holy Spirit

The Holy Ghost occupies the third place in the Trinity²¹. He inspired the prophets²². He gave seven gifts to Christ and descended upon Him²³. For the real distinction between the Son and the Spirit see Teder.

Justin insists constantly on the virgin birth²⁴ and the reality of the flesh of Christ²⁵. He states that among the Christians there are some who do not admit the Divinity of Christ but they are a minority; he differs from them because of the authority of the Prophets²⁶; the entire dialogue, moreover, is devoted to proving this thesis. Christ is the Master whose doctrine enlightens us²⁷, also the Redeemer whose blood saves us²⁸. The rest of Justin's theology is less personal, therefore less interesting. As to the Eucharist, the baptismal Mass and the Sunday Mass are described in the first "Apology", with a richness of detail unique for that age. Justin here explains the dogma of the Real Presence with a wonderful clearness: "In the same way that through the power of the Word of God Jesus Christ our Saviour took flesh and blood for our salvation, so the nourishment consecrated by the prayer formed of the words of Christ ... is the flesh and blood of this incarnate Jesus." The "Dialogue" completes this doctrine by the idea of a Eucharistic sacrifice as a memorial of the Passion.

d. Résumé of Justin's teaching

The great contribution to theology of the Trinity was to explore the theme of Christ as the Logos (maybe inspired by John's Gospel). Justin drew an understanding of the Logos as a mediating figure between god the Father and the lower world from Platonism. God is

¹⁹ see: I. Apology

²⁰ see: I. Apology

²¹ see: I. Apology

²² see: I. Apology

²³ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

²⁴ see: I. Apology

²⁵ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

²⁶ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon

²⁷ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon & I. Apology

²⁸ see: Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon & I. Apology

revealed through Jesus, the Logos. For Justin the Logos is by nature not as transcendent as the Father.

Besides finding it hard to express the equality of Father and Son, Justin found it hard to locate the Holy Spirit.

4. Trinity in the view of St. Athanasius

St. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria; Confessor and Doctor of the Church was born in Alexandria, most probably between the years 296 AD and 298 AD, and died on 2nd May 373 AD.

Five months after the close of the council of Nicaea the Primate of Alexandria died; and Athanasius, quite as much in recognition of his talent, it would appear, as in deference to the death-bed wishes of the deceased prelate, was chosen to succeed him. His election, in spite of his extreme youth and the opposition of a remnant of the Arian and Meletian factions in the Alexandrian Church, was welcomed by all classes among the laity

He was the greatest champion of Catholic belief on the subject of the Incarnation that the Church has ever known and in his lifetime earned the characteristic title of "Father of Orthodoxy", by which he has been distinguished every since. Besides his anti-Arian works he wrote a biography of St. Anthony and a series of Festal Letters.

In the following I'd like to take a closer look at the teaching of Athanasius concerning the Holy Trinity:

a. De Incarnatione (an early work)

In this early work Athanasius still sees Jesus, the Logos, in terms of a world-soul responsible for human rationality, but interested in understanding our salvation.

"Whence the Word of God came in his own person, that, as he was the image of the Father, he might be able to create afresh the man after the image... For as, when the likeness painted on a penal has been effaced by stains from without, he whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood, for, for the sake of his picture, even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the outline is renewed upon it; in the same way also the most holy Son of the Father, being the image of the Father, came to our region to renew man once made in his likeness...."²⁹

To sum it up it can be said that only one who is God can divinise, so the Son who divinises us must be true God. This interest in our salvation drives Athanasius' later work.

b. De Decretis

²⁹ De Incarnatione, St. Athanasius

In his work “De Decretis” Athanasius attacks Arius’ idea that God made one creature (=Jesus, the Word) and left him to make everything else. At the same time Athanasius demolishes the assumption, which was made by St. Justin Martyr, that the transcendent God cannot be in direct contact with the lower world and he needs a mediator between Him, God, and the world. In contrast Athanasius teaches that the Logos in not one step down in a hierarchy of degrees of being, but is equal with the Father. The Word and the Father are working together with one divine, creative power, even though it is still possible to speak of the Father creating through His Word.

“...If for the toil’s sake God was content with making the Son only, instead of making all things at once, this is an irreligious thought...He it is Who through His Word made all things small and great, and we may not divide the creation, and say this is the Father’s, and this the Son’s, but they are of one God, Who uses His proper Word as a Hand, and in Him does all things...”³⁰

c. Discourse against Arians – Contra Arianos

The main message of this work is that the distinction between Father and Son is quite other than the distinction between Creator and creature.

The Arians argued that if Jesus is the Son born from the Father then He must have come into existence as other creatures did.

Athanasius could speak of that “reciprocal delight” between Father and Son that existed “prior” to creation. To deny the eternal existence of the Son would be to deny the eternal fatherhood of God.

The Son did not “come into existence” – referring to Athanasius –, He is not made, He is begotten, He is from the Father in an eternal, divine way that is mysterious, which can be called “birth” but is unlike human birth.

“... For even if the Son is distinct from the Father, as His Offspring, still as God He is identical with Him; He and the Father are one by specific and proper nature, and by the identity of the one Godhead.... The same things are predicated of the Son as of the Father, except the title of ‘Father’.”³¹

Additionally Athanasius replies in this work to another Arian argument, relying on Gospel-texts where Jesus speaks of being subordinate to the Father, or of being ignorant. Athanasius distinguishes this statements relating to Christ into those that speak of His divine equality with the Father, and those that speak of His human inferiority.

“...This is plain to everyone, that the flesh indeed is ignorant, but the Word Himself, considered as Word, knows all things even before they come to be. For He did not, when He

³⁰ De Decretis, St. Athanasius

³¹ Discourse against Arians – Contra Arianos

*became man, cease to be God; nor, whereas He is God does He shrink from what is man's...for the all-holy Word of God did this, that so carrying our ignorance, He might vouchsafe to us the knowledge of His own only and true Father...*³²

d. Letter to Serapion - Ad Serapionem

In this work Athanasius defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit also by reference to His sharing the divine work of creation and sanctification.

Replying to the Arian teaching he writes: *“As the Arians in denying the Son deny also the Father, so also these men in speaking evil of the Holy Spirit speak evil also of the Son.”*³³

They misunderstood the Spirit to be an angelic creature who differed from the other angels only in rank and not in nature. For Athanasius it was to be *“guilty of a direct impiety against the Son himself”*³⁴ to call the Spirit a creature. According to Athanasius the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and is “given” by the Son as being truly divine.

The Spirit is the “in the Son”, as the Son is “in the Father”. But this thinking of the Trinitarian relations raised two difficulties:

If the Spirit derived from the Father, the Spirit has to be a Son, which would mean that Spirit and Word have to be “two brothers”.

Athanasius teaching of the Spirit being “in the Son” and the Spirit bearing “the same relation to the Son as the Son to the Father” as image of the Son lead to the objection “If the Spirit is of the Son, then the Father is the Spirit’s grandfather”. But we shouldn’t dare to ask such human questions about God, as God can’t be pressed into human relations and thinking.

Concerning the divine status of the Holy Spirit Athanasius argues in a parallel way to his argument for the divinity of the Son. As the creative activity of the Word/Son shows that he cannot be a mere creature, so it is with the “re-creating” activity of the Holy Spirit. It is “through the Spirit” that we become “partakers of God”. In this way he attributed to the Son the work of creation and that of sanctification and divinization to the Spirit.

*“...If we are made sharers in the divine nature through our partaking of the Spirit, it would only be a madman who would say that the Spirit is of created nature and not of the Nature of God.... It is clear that the Spirit is not a creature but shares in the work of creation. The Father creates all things through the Word in the Spirit...”*³⁵

e. Résumé of Athanasius’ teaching

³² Discourse against Arians – Contra Arianos

³³ Letter to Serapion – Ad Serapionem

³⁴ Letter to Serapion – Ad Serapionem

³⁵ Letter to Serapion – Ad Serapionem

Besides his central support for the reception of Nicene faith in Jesus' divine consubstantiality with the Father, Athanasius expounded the fatherhood of God and, consequently, the inner-trinitarian relations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That involved him both in defending the truly divine status of the Spirit and in endeavouring to say something coherent about the external operations of the tripersonal God.

But two questions were left open by Athanasius:

- How to express the distinction of the Spirit from the Father and from the Son, as He is not another Son or even a grandson. (St. Augustine was able to find an answer to this question later on)
- To find a technical term to express the unity and the threeness of God, as Athanasius has only found singular words like "ousia" or "hupostasis", he couldn't find a plural word.

5. Comparing St. Justin Martyr and St. Athanasius

If we compare the works and the teaching of St. Justin Martyr and St. Athanasius we can see a development in the Trinitarian relation, which I'd like to summarize here:

The relation between Father and Son.

For Justin everything flows from the Father through the Logos / Word, who is less transcendent than the Father but close enough to Him to be called "God" and "Lord". In his concept the Logos is subordinate to the Father. In contrast to it Athanasius defends the equality of Father and Son, which is also called consubstantiality ("homo-ousios"), and was also declared in the Council of Nicaea (325) to exclude the Arian heresy. But he interpreted this Nicene formula much more radically in his message on the substantiality and his way of presenting the Holy Trinity in justice to the Biblical revelation.

The image of the Holy Spirit.

Justin found it hard to locate the Holy Spirit, he did more concentrate on the relation between Father and Son. He only sees the work of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of the prophets and in giving the seven gifts to Jesus, the Logos.

In contrast Athanasius did defend the Son's divinity and the Spirit's on the same grounds. He sees the divine work of the Holy Spirit in the creation and the sanctification. Athanasius places all three – Father, Son / Logos and Holy Spirit – on the divine side, both Logos and Spirit being equal to the Father.

6. Own résumé

This studying on the Holy Trinity has been very fascinating for me, as it brought to me new insights into different views in this subject and made me think more intensively about the fact

of “three persons in one”. It has changed my whole view on the Trinity in the last few weeks, which might have been very simple before, as my faith is only about 3 ½ years old.

The Holy Trinity grew in its complexity and in its importance for me. I’m looking forward to reading much more interesting books on this subject, especially some of Karl Rahner, who’s a very famous theologian here in Southern Germany.

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