

Development of the trinity within the patristic era



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Essay Examining the key people, ideas and contexts that influenced the development of the Trinity within the patristic era.

Introduction

This thesis examines developments in doctrine, contexts and the characters that influenced change in respect to the Trinity during the Patristic period (100-450 c. e.).

The thesis will also examine the contemporary importance of the thinking, any broader implications of the doctrinal edicts and draw together conclusions in commentaries from other biblical scholars.

Background and Context

The Patristic Period is a seminal point in the history of the Christian church since it contextualises early Christian information from the time of the death of the last Apostle (John, c. 100 c. e. to the Middle Ages, 451 c. e. and the council of Chalcedon). It describes the relationship between the Jewish and early Christian faiths and various theological points being enshrined as doctrine. Most denominations find this period of church history fundamentally important, from Roman Catholicism to the Reformed Churches. For obvious reasons the church continues to believe this doctrine to be orthodox over all other developments.

During the first two hundred years of this era the Church was under persecution from various Roman emperors which came to a peak with Diocletian in 303 c. e. – (Mason pg 57), who even persecuted his own wife and daughter for being Christians (now that's real attention to detail).

However, Christianity became 'legalised' as a religion towards the end of

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this era with Constantine (321 c. e.) which was the complete antithesis in relation to previous persecution. The legacy of Constantine was to enforce a common doctrine and to clear out heretical beliefs. It is from the council of Nicaea (a 'Whole Church' council) that a common orthodoxy w. r. t. Christian beliefs was enshrined. Prior to this all such meetings had been local with only local jurisdiction and effect. From the Nicaean council Christianity had its first Ecumenical meeting

Also at this time, various cities and geographical areas became significant. The city of Alexandria emerged as a centre of Christian theological study. The city of Antioch also became a leading centre of Christian thought. Western, North Africa gave birth to such men as Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo. All theologically significant in their own right (McGrath, Christian history, pg. **). Many scholars refer to this age as when the early church 'fathers' (babies?) took significant steps in working out Christian theology. Further, many of the debates of this time are based in both theological and philosophical issues, without an understanding of which, students of historical theology will find the patristic period difficult to unpick.

There was also a major division in the church in terms of language and culture. The Eastern Greek-speaking and the Western Latin-speaking church had both political and linguistic barriers to overcome. This rumbled on for the next half-century and led to a separation of these two arms (the East - West Schism of 1054) that the church, the author feels, never recovered from.

Overview of key theologians during the patristic period

Tertullian (c. 160-255) Western Church

Despite being considered a conservative by many theologians (McGrath, Christian Theology), Tertullian advanced the development of much of early Church doctrine. He is possibly the first writer to use the term trinity (Latin: trinitas) and was a major figure in early Latin theology who produced a series of significant and at the times, controversial ideas. He had the ability to coin new Latin terms by conjoining two words to make a singular word representing his concept (tri - nitas, three - united) to translate this new theological vocabulary of the Greek-speaking eastern church. According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,

'Tertullian's trinity [is] not a triune God, but rather a triad or group of three, with God as the founding member'.

A similar word had been used earlier in Greek, though Tertullian's 'trinitas' was used in both the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. Tertullian also used 'three persons, one substance' [Lt tres personae, una substantia]. This was directly from the Greek 'treis hypostases, homoousioi'. Tuggy et al note that Stoic philosophy undoubtedly influenced the 'substance' in Tertullian thinking. This was a physical substance and indicates that Tertullian's concept was that all three came from and shared the same matter (one mansion all made from the same bricks but having different rooms)?

He was undoubtedly influenced by catholic Christians who objected to late second century 'logos' Christology where the pre earthly Jesus (logos, John Ch 1) was THE creator. This ran alongside the belief held that the divine part

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of Jesus was the Father himself. Practically this leads to some believing Jesus to be a man inhabited and used by God, while others thought that Jesus and the Father were one and the same - the same self and the same God (Heine 1998).

In opposition to these viewpoints, Tertullian developed logos Christology in his own, unique way not a triune God, but rather a triad or group of three, with God as the founding member.

The trinity according to Tertullian

At the beginning, God is alone and exists with a self-awareness, reason and thought. Then, as part of His thought, he brings the Son into existence in order to create, using but not separating a part of his spiritual matter (assigning part of his being to creating, begotten not made). The Son's first action is then to use a portion of the divine matter shared with him to bring into existence the Spirit. The two of them are now God's co-autonomous entities used for the creation and governance of the Universe (s - Multi-verse?). Here is where it gets interesting: Tertullian's belief is that all tangible things are material, physical, God on the other hand must be spirit, he sees spirit as a *material* thing but made out of a finer, unique sort of matter.

Against all of this, Tertullian upholds the monotheistic viewpoint in that he strongly emphasises that although they are three where no-one is the same, they are 'undivided' in the sense that the Father, in sharing some of His matter, never loses any, rather, that matter comes to simultaneously exist as more than one being.. The Father is one entity, the Son is a second, and

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the Spirit is a third. But note, they are not parts of any whole, the Son and Spirit are two beings that simply share some of the Father's divine matter.

Tertullian argues that although the above process results in two more beings who are to be called God, it does not introduce two more gods – not in the way that Yahweh *is* God. Moreover, as there can only be one ultimate source and origin for everything, the Father, monotheism is maintained. The one God is unipersonal at both the start and the end of Tertullian's process and the three gods are equally divine. However, as Tertullian points out that the Son is unaware of 'the last day and hour, which is known to the Father only.' (Tertullian, against Praxeas, ch. 27; Matthew 24: 36) he also tips towards a hierarchy in the 'one being'. This is against a backdrop of other patristic theologians being reluctant to speak of the Spirit as a God indeed at the council meeting in Constantinople, the Spirit is described as the 'Lord the giver of life...'

Despite these fundamental differences from later orthodoxy, Tertullian is praised by Trinitarians for his use of the term 'Trinity' (trinitas) and his view that God consists of three persons with a common or shared 'substance'.

Cappadocian Fathers, Eastern Church,

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-389)

Basel of Caesarea (c. 330-379)

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332-395)

The 'Three Cappadocians', are Basil the Great who was bishop of Caesarea; Basil's younger brother Gregory who was bishop of Nyssa and a close friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, who later went on to be 'Patriarch of Constantinople'.

The Cappadocian Fathers developed their standpoint from the difficulties posed from Sabellianism (where God 'assumed roles' of Father, Son or Spirit) which had the simple advantage of being founded in a single God but posed the problem and concept that God never actually presented His true self, only 'acted out' these roles dependent upon the situation. They were so obsessed in addressing the shortcomings of the Sabellian approach that they insisted on the removal of the use of the word person or persona for each member of the one God. Their whole drive was to attempt to protect the doctrine from such suggestions. The Cappadocians would speak of three beings in referring to the Trinity whilst the Nicæan creed was inclined towards the use of verbal images indicating one source extended into three (light of light etc.). By doing this, the creed came to be known as being interested in the Trinity more than the unity of God. McGrath (Christian History pg **) points to the West beginning with the unity of God and moving to the Trinity, while the East went in the opposite direction (if only they could have met in the middle?).

Basil wrote in defence of the Spirit and spoke of paternity, son-ship and sanctification that he said are attributed to Father, Son and Spirit respectively. For Basil, the Spirit 'makes creatures to be like God' (?) - and only one who is divine can bring this about. The reference to the Spirit in during baptism, he said, supported the divinity of the Spirit. Baptism took place in the name of the 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28: 17-20).

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Athanasius and others argued that this formula established the closest connection between the three members of the Trinity, making it impossible to suggest that the Father and Son shared in the substance of the Godhead, while the Spirit was nothing other than a creation. In a similar way, Basil argued that baptism in Mt 28, clearly implied the integral nature of Father, Son and Spirit. He argued that this verbal association clearly had considerable theological implications. The admission of the full divinity of the Spirit thus took place at a relatively late stage in the development of patristic theology.

Gregory Nazianzen wrote defensively on the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity saying that God was Unbegottenness, generation and procession particular to Father, Son and Spirit which verifies the order of God that Jesus attests to in scripture (all well and good).

Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430)

Is widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer and made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Christian understanding of history.

Augustine wrote about his writings on the Trinity

' This Work is Written Against Those Who Sophistically Assail the Faith of the Trinity, Through Misuse of Reason. They Who Dispute Concerning God Err from a Threefold Cause. Holy Scripture, Removing What is False, Leads Us on by Degrees to Things Divine. What True Immortality is. We are Nourished by Faith, that We May Be Enabled to Apprehend Things Divine.'

Talk about setting out your stall and taking the legs away from you critics...

Summary

All of the above viewpoints develop the learning and possibly the understanding of the Trinity through the patristic era. Little further development is undertaken from herein as there is little practical development (no-one has a sample of God they can analyse and verify). But in all of this the question has to be ' *How do we know God as Holy Trinity?*' Through our ' *interpretation and application*' of Holy Scripture (hermeneutics). During the height of the fourth century Trinitarian debates, none of the above authors thought they were describing the true nature of God by logic and reason alone. All authors believed that their opinions were supported by the Bible but because they brought different hermeneutical beliefs to scripture, they found themselves forming different understandings of divinity that were sometimes at odds, even in subtle opposition to others. Then we must say ' Can we truly *know* God this side of the great divide?' Yes, but as Paul said, ' Now we see a poor reflection, dimly as in a mirror...'

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