

## God and The Trinities

The Rabbi 's deep voice echoes through the dusk "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One." What a far cry that is from Judah's offspring, Christianity, and her belief in the Trinity.

While the majority of the Christian world agree with Jaroslav Pelikan's concept that to be a part of the church in its broadest sense one must believe in the trinity (*History of Theology* xvi), many historians and Bible scholars agree that the Trinity of Christianity owes more to Greek Philosophy and pagan polytheism than to the monotheism of the Jew and the Jewish Jesus.

Records of early Mesopotamian and Mediterranean civilizations show a polytheistic religion, though many scholars believe that earliest man was monotheistic. Rev. Alexander Hislop devotes several chapters of his book *The two Babylons* to showing how this original belief in one God was replaced by the triads of paganism which were eventually absorbed into Catholic church dogmas. An Egyptologist, Erick Hornung, refutes the original monotheism of Egypt: "Monotheism is . . . a phenomenon restricted to the wisdom texts," dated between 2600 and 2530 BC (50-51), but there is no question that ancient man believed in a "sole and omnipotent Deity who created all things" (Hislop, 14) at one time; and in a multitude of gods at a later point. Nor is there any doubt that the most common grouping of gods was a triad; usually Father, Mother, and Child.

Most of ancient theology is lost under the sands of time. However, recent archaeological expeditions in ancient Mesopotamia have uncovered the fascinating culture of the Sumerians, which flourished over 4000 years ago. Though Sumeria was conquered by Assyria, and later Babylon: her gods lived on in the cultures of those who conquered. The historian S.H. Hooke tells us in detail of the ancient Sumerian trinity: Anu was the primary god of heaven, the father, and the King of Kings. Enlil, the "wind-god" was the god of the earth. He was also a creator God. Enki was the god of waters and the lord of wisdom (15-18). This was highest Sumerian trinity. A lesser trinity "was composed of Sin, the moon-god, Shamash, the sun-god, and. . .Hadad, the storm-god." (19). The historian H. W. F. Saggs explains that the Babylonian triad consisted of three gods of roughly equal rank. Their "inter-relationship is of the essence of their natures."

Is this *positive* proof that the Christian trinity descended from the ancient Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian triads? No. However, Hislop furthers the comparison: "In the unity of that One, Only God of the Babylonians there were three persons, and to symbolize that doctrine

of the trinity they employed...the equilateral triangle, just as it is well known the Romish Church does at this day." (16)

Egypt's history is nearly as old as Sumeria's. In his *Egyptian Myths*, George Hart shows how Egypt also believed in a "transcendental, above creation, and preexisting" one, the god Amun. Amun was really three gods in one. Re was his face; Ptah his body; and Amun his hidden identity (24). The well-known historian Will Durant concurs: "In later days Ra [sic], Amon [sic], and Ptah were combined as three embodiments or aspects of one supreme and triune deity."

(Our Oriental Heritage, 201) A hymn to Amun written in the 14th century BC distinguishes the

Egyptian trinity: "All Gods are three: Amun, Re, Ptah: they have no equal. His name is hidden as Amun, he is Re before [men], and his body is Ptah." (Hornung, 219)

Is this *positive* proof that the Christian trinity descended from the ancient Egyptian triads? No. However, Durant submits that "from Egypt came the idea of a divine trinity..." (Caesar and Christ, 595). Laing agrees when he says that "it is probable that the worship of the Egyptian triad

Isis, Serapis, and the child Horus helped to familiarize the ancients with the idea of a triune God and was not without influence in the formulation of the doctrine of the trinity as set forth in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds." *The Encyclopedia of Religions* goes even farther when it states that as Christianity "came in contact with the triune gods of Egypt and the Near East, it developed a trinity of its own."

Though famous, these were not the only trinities early Christians were exposed to. Jesse Benedict Carter tells us of the Etruscans; a group that appear to have originated in Babylon. As they slowly passed through Greece and went on to Rome, they brought with them their trinity of Tinia, Uni, and Menerva (16-19). This trinity was a "new idea to the Romans," and yet it became so "typical of Rome [that] it was imitated in the capitolia of Italy. . . (26)" Even the names of the Roman trinity: Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, reflect the ancestry. Is this *positive* proof that the Christian trinity descended from the Etruscan and Roman triads? No. However, Dr. Gordon Laing convincingly devotes his entire book *Survivals of the Roman Gods* to the comparison of Roman Paganism and the Roman Catholic Church. Pelikan adds to Laing's work when he states that the early church fathers used and cited the Roman Sibylline Oracles so much that these were called "Sibyllists" by the 2nd century critic Celsus.

There was even a medieval hymn, "*Dies irae*" which prophesied the coming of the day of wrath on the "dual authority of David and the Sibyl." (*Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* 64-65). The attitude of the church toward paganism is best summed up in Gregory the Great's words to a missionary "you must not interfere with any traditional belief or religious observance that can be harmonized with Christianity" (qtd. in Laing 130).

Judaism is strongly monotheistic with no hint of a trinity. The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) is filled with scriptures such as "the Lord your God is One", "I am the Lord. . . and my glory I will not give to another", "thou shalt have no other gods before me". Even though "Word" "Spirit" "Presence" and "Wisdom" are used as personifications of God, Biblical scholars agree that the Trinity is neither mentioned nor intended by the authors of the Old Testament.

We can conclude without much difficulty that the trinity dogma did not come from Judaism. Nor did Jesus speak of a trinity. The message of Jesus was of the coming kingdom; it was a message of love and forgiveness.

Nowhere in the Bible is the Trinity mentioned. The word "trinity", and the words in the Nicene creed "*hypostasis*," and "*ousis*" are not biblical. Pelikan concurs when he adds that one of the most widely accepted conclusions of the

19th century history of dogma was the thesis that the dogma of the trinity was not an explicit doctrine of the New Testament, still less of the Old Testament but evolved from New Testament times to the fourth century. (*History of Theology*, 134)

If the Trinity did not originate with the Bible, where did it come from? To find the origins of the trinity in Christianity, we need to take a look at the circumstances in which early Christians found themselves.

Even the Church of the Apostles day was far from unified. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that "the mystery of iniquity does already work." Throughout his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Walter Bauer effectively proves that many early Christians were influenced by gnosticism. He believes that certain "'heresies' [recorded by early Christian writers] originally had not been such at all, but. . .were simply Christianity (xxii). In considering the trinity Bauer goes even farther, as he proves that early Christians in Odessa appear to have been followers of Marcion's beliefs, with "orthodox" views being strongly in the minority, to the extent that "Christian" referred to one with Marcion's beliefs, and "Palutian" referred to one with "orthodox" (by today's standards) beliefs. (21-38). In his work *The Greek Fathers*, James Marshall Campbell bears out the great fear of gnosticism prevalent in the early church. With Gnosticism being so prevalent in this early period, it behooves us to learn in what way they viewed God, for the early church writers were influenced by their fear of gnosticism.

Jurgen Moltmann writes about the early Syrian traditions of the Gnostics: "in both being and activity the Holy Spirit hides the motherly mystery of God. . . ." (xiv) McGiffert interprets the early Christian fathers as believing "the Gnostic systems [are] identical to all intents and purposes with Greek polytheism." It is certain that gnosticism borrowed much of its philosophy and religion from other religions, oriental mysticism, astrology, magic, and Plato. It was a very pessimistic religion that considered matter to be evil and opposed to Deity. It relied heavily on visions, and sought salvation through knowledge.

Knowledge was also the desire of the Greek philosophers. We owe a lot to these sages of old. J. N. D. Kelly states that "[the concepts of philosophy] provided thinkers. . .with an intellectual framework for expressing their ideas. . . [it] was the deeper religion of most intelligent people. . . ." (9) The great theologian Alolf Harnack considered Greek philosophy and culture to be factors in the formation of the "ecclesiastical mode of thought." (127) According to McGiffert, the concepts of philosophy prevalent during the time of the early church were Stoicism, which was "ethical in its interests and monistic in its ontology" and Platonism, which was "dualistic and predominately religious." (46).

That these philosophies affected Christianity is a historical fact. What did these philosophers teach about God? In Plato's *Timaeus* "the Supreme Reality appears in the trinitarian form of Good, the Intelligence, and the World-Soul." (qtd. in Laing 129). Laing continues "The Neoplatonists had elaborated trinitarian theories. . . . That Neoplatonism was one of the operative factors in the development of Christian theology seems certain." (129) Durant ties in philosophy with Christianity when he states that the 2nd century Alexandrian Church from which both Clement and Origin came from "wedded Christianity to Greek philosophy." (*Caesar and Christ*, 613)

World conditions were hardly conducive to the foundation of a new and different religion. Pagan gods were still the gods of the state, and the Roman government was very superstitious. Whether it rained too much or not enough, all was considered the displeasure of the gods. When the dissolute Roman government began to crumble, it was not seen as a result of corruption within, but as the anger of the gods. If gods are angry they must be placated – and who better to sacrifice than the worshippers of a new god – a god who was totally foreign to their gods, and thus there were strong persecutions against Christians.

In such a time was Christianity born. On one side were persecutions; on the other the seduction of logic and philosophy. To remain faithful to the belief of Jesus Christ meant hardship and ridicule. It was only for the simple poor – and the rich in faith.

With this background, let's look at the growth and evolution of the Trinity. As previously stated, the Bible does not mention the trinity. Harnack affirms that the early church view of Jesus was as Messiah. After his resurrection he was "raised to the right hand of God" – but not considered as God. (78) Lonergan concurs that the educated Christians of the early centuries believed in one, supreme God. (119). As for the Holy Spirit, McGiffert tells us that "They [early Christians] thought of [the Holy Spirit] not as an individual being or person but simply as the divine power working in the world and particularly in the Church." (111) Durant summarizes Apostolic Christianity thus: "In Christ and Peter Christianity was Jewish; in Paul it became half Greek; in Catholicism it became half Roman." (*Caesar and Christ* 579).

As the apostles died, various writers undertook the task of defending Christianity against the persecutions evoked by the Church's expansion. The writers of these "Apologies" are known to us now as "Apologists". Pelikan states that "it was at least partly in response to pagan criticism of the stories in the Bible that the Christian apologists... took over and adapted the methods and even vocabulary of pagan allegorism." (*Emergence of Catholic Tradition*, 30)

Campbell agrees when he states that "the Apologists borrowed heavily, and at times inappropriately, from the pagan resources at hand." (23) They began the 'process of accommodation' between Christianity and the common philosophy, and used reason to try to "justify Christianity to the pagan world."(22-23).

The most famous of these Apologists was Justin Martyr (c.107-166 AD). He was born a pagan, became a pagan philosopher, then a Christian. He believed that Christianity and Greek Philosophy were related. According to McGiffert, "Justin insisted that Christ came from God; he did not identify him with God. . . [He] conceiv[ed] of God as a transcendent being, who could not possibly come into contact with the world of men and things." (107)

Not only was the Church divided by Gnosticism, enticed by philosophy, and set upon by paganism, but there was a geographic division as well. The East (centered in Alexandria) and the West (centered in Rome) grew along two different lines. Kelly shows how the East was intellectually adventurous and speculative (4); a reflection of the Greek culture surrounding. The theological development of the East is best represented in Clement and Origen.

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-220) was from the "Catechetical School" of Alexandria which wedded Christianity to philosophy. His views bordered on

Gnostic, and McGiffert informs us that Clement "insists that philosophy came from God and was given to the Greeks as a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ as the law was a schoolmaster for the Hebrews." (183). McGiffert further states that "[Clement] distinguish[ed] God the Father revealed in the Old Testament from the Son of God incarnate in Christ and [identified] the Logos with the latter. . ." (206). Clement did not complete his work "*Didascalos*" and his most important work was carried on through his pupil, Origen.

- Origen AD185-253
- Tertullian AD160-230
- Hippolytus AD160-220

We can trace the evolution of the trinity through Clement of Alexandria, and his pupil Origen in the East, and through Tertullian in the West. Athanasius was the final link on the chain which drew the God of the Jewish Christ through paganism and Greek philosophy unto the final evolution of the trinity.

The Roman empire began to crumble. Constantine came to power Constantine wished to unify the empire, and chose Christianity to do so. Constantine was in for a surprise. Christianity was far from unified. Constantine invited the bishops from East and West to join him in the small seaside village of Nicaea for a council to unify the church.

Three main groups were present at this council Eusebius of Nicomedia presenting the Arian version of the trinity, Alexander of Alexandria presenting the Athanasian version of the trinity, and Eusebius of Caesarea presenting an in-between version.

The order of procedure at the Nicene Council was: Arians presented theirs first. It was perceived that they questioned the deity of Jesus. Eusebius was shocked and presented the Caesarian baptismal creed. Alexander was wise and only suggested a few changes. Had he presented his own it would have been rejected.

There still was not unity. Eusebius did not like the wording of the creed. He thought it smacked of Sabellianism. Though he signed the creed, he was opposed to it enough that he wrote the following explanation to his home church in Caesarea: Eusebius was not the only person unhappy with the Nicene Creed. Many of the people -- even of the bishops -- maintained Arian views.

Constantine stayed in close contact with Arius, and had his son Constantius raised by an Arian. The day before his death Constantine had Eusebius of Nicomedia, an Arian, baptize him. Constantius was an Arian.

The evolution of the trinity can be well seen in the words of the Apostles Creed (first two centuries ad), Nicene Creed (originated in 325 ad, revised in 381), and the Athanasian Creed (formulated in 5.. and still used today). As each of the creeds becomes more wordy and convoluted, the simple, pure faith of the Apostolic church has become lost in a haze. Even more interesting is the fact that as the creeds became more specific (and less scriptural) the adherence to them became stricter. While there are no threats in the Apostles Creed, there is the threat of being kicked out of the Church in the Nicene, and of eternal torment in the Athanasian.

Did these creeds with there strict rules for adherence help the Church become closer to Jesus and the Bible? Did they bring increasing light, as commanded by

**Jesus in "ye are the light of the world. . .so let your light shine before men."  
Quite the reverse. The acceptance of the Athanasian creed stood at the gateway  
to the dark ages of Medieval ignorance and spiritual poverty.**

**In summary, we have seen how the common culture of the day was one filled  
with triune gods. From ancient Sumeria's Anu, Enlil, and Enki to Egypt's Amun-  
Re-Ptah and Isis, Osiris, and Horus and Rome's Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva the  
whole concept of paganism revolved around the magic number of three. In Greek  
philosophy we have seen how the number three was used as an unidentified  
trinity of Intelligence, mind, and reason.**

**In stark contrast is the simple oneness of the Hebrew God. Even when the word  
"Echad" is used (a plural word), the Hebrew scholars -- both ancient and  
modern -- apply this to a grammatical "pluralism of majesty" -- not more than  
one. (Note: Russian and French still use this concept today. When one addresses a  
person to be respected, the polite form is the plural you form). Jesus was Jewish.**

**"Christianity did not destroy paganism, it adopted it." (*Durant Caesar and Christ*  
595) The concept of the trinity finds its roots in Pagan theology and Greek  
philosophy. It is a stranger to the Jewish Jesus and the Hebrew people from  
which he sprang.**

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