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Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives

# God

## Three Who Are One

Joseph A. Bracken, SJ

*Tatha Wiley, Series Editor*



A Michael Glazier Book

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## Editor's Preface

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII challenged those he gathered to take a bold leap forward. Their boldness would bring a church still reluctant to accept modernity into full dialogue with it. The challenge was not for modernity to account for itself, nor for the church to change its faith, but for the church to transform its conception of faith in order to speak to a new and different situation.

Today we stand in a postmodern world. The assumptions of modernity are steeply challenged, while the features of postmodernity are not yet fully understood. Now another world invites reflection and dialogue, and the challenge is to discover how the meanings and values of Christian faith speak effectively to this new situation.

This series takes up the challenge. Central concerns of the tradition—God, Jesus, Scripture, Anthropology, Church, and Discipleship—here are lifted up. In brief but comprehensive volumes, leading Catholic thinkers lay out these topics with a historically conscious eye and a desire to discern their meaning and value for today.

Designed as a complete set for an introductory course in theology, individual volumes are also appropriate for specialized courses. Engaging Theology responds to the need for teaching resources alive to contemporary scholarly developments, to the current issues in theology, and to the real questions about religious beliefs and values that people raise today.

Tatha Wiley  
Series Editor



## Introduction

# Faith and Ultimate Reality

To a little child reading the Baltimore Catechism, the answer to the question, “Who made me?” is easy: “God made me.” But if the child were further to ask, “Who made God?” there is apparently no answer. Nobody made God because God is by definition uncreated; God is the Creator of everything else that exists. Yet even God must have a reason to exist. On the contrary, you may say, God has no reason to exist; God simply is. God, in the eyes of Christians and other theists, is Ultimate Reality. Ultimate Reality simply is; one cannot logically ask why it is the way that it is. Otherwise it would not be Ultimate Reality, that which exists before everything else and upon which everything else depends.

Another way to think about Ultimate Reality is to ask how the world began. When the astrophysicist Edwin Hubble in 1929 noticed the so-called red shift in light coming from distant galaxies, he established empirically what had been theoretically predicted on the basis of Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity: the universe is expanding in all directions.<sup>1</sup>

But if the universe is continually expanding, then it must have begun long ago from equivalently a zero point in terms of space and time. One astrophysicist, Fred Hoyle, sarcastically referred to it as the “big bang” theory for the origin of the universe, but to Hoyle’s exasperation (since he favored a different “steady state” understanding of the universe), the term caught on and is commonly used today to explain the origin of

<sup>1</sup> See Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 195.

the universe.<sup>2</sup> But does it really explain how the world began or does the big bang itself need further explanation?

Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, in their book *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*, argue that there are five possibilities for the origin of the universe: random chance, high probability, necessity, universality, and design.<sup>3</sup> Random chance says in effect that there is no explanation; the universe just happened. High probability and necessity both suffer from the fact that we have no way of comparing our universe with other real or possible universes so as to judge the degree of probability or the necessity of our own universe. Universality presupposes that sooner or later everything that can happen will happen; so our universe is presumably just one of many universes that either have existed, exist right now, or will some day exist. Design insists that the universe in its “fine-tuning” is too complicated to be anything else but the work of a transcendent intelligence, in effect, a Creator God, who set up the physical laws and the initial boundary conditions for both the big bang and the subsequent development of the universe.

For our purposes, what is important here is to realize that whatever option one chooses regarding the origins of the universe, it is always made on the basis of an act of faith. That is, there is no way to prove that one option is right and that the others are mistaken. Yet the act of faith is different, depending upon the option that one chooses. If one, for example, chooses the first option, namely, that the universe originated by random chance, one’s act of faith is relatively impersonal. I believe that this is the way things are; there is no higher purpose or direction in the way the world functions. Whatever purpose or direction that exists in my own life is of my own design. I simply choose to live one way rather than another and I hope that it will work out, at least for me personally. On the contrary, if I put my faith in a Creator God who designed the universe as a whole and has given me a place within it, then my act of faith is more personal. I am not simply trusting that something is the case; I am trusting in a higher power in my life, a Creator God who cares for me personally.

Where does one get the courage to make that second act of faith? I would argue that it is due in no small measure to the way that one is raised and educated. If my parents and teachers themselves believe in

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 198–99.

<sup>3</sup> Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 53–59.

God and communicate to me their own faith through word and action, I will almost certainly follow their lead until something happens to make me question the faith of my parents and teachers. At that point I will have to decide for myself whether or not to continue to believe in the existence of God. This is the transition from the faith of a child to the faith of a young adult. It happens sooner or later to every young person, even though the temptation remains strong in many cases to ignore the question out of fear of making a mistake or because of social pressure from others. In the end, however, one comes to a personal decision on this matter, either through thinking it out for oneself or in virtue of a religious experience, a deeply felt encounter with the Sacred (God?) at some point in one's life. Sometimes it is the result of a combination of the two.

Since the rest of this book will be presenting a rational argument for belief in God as triune, a community of divine persons, I will offer here some thoughts on the other possibility of coming to believe in God, namely, having a felt interpersonal experience of God. In his widely read book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber noted that we humans live for the most part in what he called a "I-It" world.<sup>4</sup> That is, we unconsciously treat not just things but even other people as objects to be dealt with according to our own interests and desires. We have no personal interest, for example, in the person at the checkout counter in the supermarket nor are they especially interested in us except as another customer in the middle of a long day. But we do have in varying degrees personal relations with some people (family members, good friends, etc.). These people by their interpersonal communication with us lift us into another world according to Buber, the world of "I-Thou," at least at intervals.<sup>5</sup> We sense that we are special to them, and that they are special to us. But Buber also claims that every time we genuinely say "Thou" to another human being we are also experiencing the divine "Thou" within the human "Thou."<sup>6</sup> So the experience of God as a personal Other is not that rare; we simply do not pay much attention to it when it happens because our attention is focused on another human being.

In addition, most people can testify that at still other moments of their life they felt the presence of God. As Rudolph Otto notes in his

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, this is not always a pleasant experience; it can also be frightening.<sup>7</sup> We can feel a glow within as we witness a brilliant sunset and are brought to reflect on God's goodness to us in the gifts of creation. But we can also feel overwhelmed as we witness a violent storm at sea, a tornado, or other natural catastrophe and reflect on the power of nature and nature's God. But in either case God is no longer simply an idea in our minds but a dominant personal presence much greater than ourselves. Psychologists can tell us that we are suffering from an illusion, that what we are experiencing has a perfectly logical naturalistic explanation. But for many of us when it happens, it is a far more convincing argument for the existence of God than any possible line of rational argument.

Yet, in fairness to the secular psychologists, we should also recognize that not every "voice" that speaks to us out of the depths of our unconscious is the voice of God. Masters of the spiritual life like the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), St. Ignatius of Loyola, have carefully analyzed the various "movements" within human minds and hearts and laid down rules for the "discernment of spirits."<sup>8</sup> Ignatius himself believed in the existence of the devil as a malicious personal being who works in our minds and hearts in a manner opposite to the Holy Spirit. So his rules may seem a bit quaint to modern readers. But the inner conflict and anxiety that people sometimes experience during the process of conversion is real enough, whether one believes in the devil as the source of one's temptation or simply feels that one is dealing with long-repressed personal feelings and desires.

Ignatius of Loyola proposes a convenient rule of thumb for people who find it hard to decide which "voice" they are hearing. If one's life is a mess because of bad habits or harmful relationships, then the "voice" of God in these circumstances is usually insistent that it is time to make some changes. Don't delay any longer; act now. The "voice" of the evil spirit or one's own subconscious, on the contrary, urges caution and delay. It will be too hard to change. Besides, everyone else is acting the same way, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> Yet, says Ignatius, once an individual has gone through a conversion experience and seen the error of his or her ways,

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12–40.

<sup>8</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), 189–95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–25.

then the tactics of the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit are reversed. Now God is urging the individual to stay the course, not to become discouraged because of unexpected difficulties encountered along the way. The evil spirit, on the contrary, plays on one's fears and anxieties about the future, suggesting that it is futile to behave this way. In the end, it will be too difficult and one will be forced to give up.<sup>10</sup>

Ignatius also proposes that one should not make potentially serious or long-range decisions quickly and while under stress.<sup>11</sup> The Holy Spirit frequently needs time to bring us to a deep sense of peace and a strong feeling of certitude about what to do next. The evil spirit, on the contrary, will in similar circumstances urge us to decide quickly on the basis of the feelings of the moment. Why wait? If it feels good, just do it! Don't worry about the future; the future will take care of itself. Ignatius would likewise suggest that, depending upon the seriousness of the decision to be made, one should talk the matter out with a trusted friend, counselor, priest, or minister before coming to a final decision. The other person can help us see ourselves and our situation in a more objective light even if they have nothing specific to recommend.

To sum up, then, the study of theology is seldom, if ever, purely academic. After all, one is probing into the ultimate meaning and value of one's life, realizing that Ultimate Reality, however one conceives it, will always be somewhat distant and mysterious, requiring an act of faith in some form or other. But at the same time, no decision that one makes in the course of a lifetime is more important for one's self-identity or sense of purpose in life. Hence, as we go through the various chapters of this book, studying the history of the doctrine of God within the Christian tradition and noting its relevance for our own lives here and now, it will be good to pray as well as to think, at least at intervals to reflect on the personal significance of what we study for the conduct of our lives. In this way it will be a religious as well as an academic exercise for us and may well have practical consequences that reach far into the future.

### *A Question of Language*

In the chapters that follow, I will be making frequent reference to the classical names for the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet in the eyes of many contemporary Christians these same names or titles implicitly carry forward

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 126–28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 74–80.

and promote a form of patriarchy (literally, male authority) within Christianity, albeit unconsciously in most cases. Yet they remain the names most widely used both in public worship and in academic texts dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity. I thus face a modest dilemma in deciding how to deal with this issue. If I drop the classical names Father, Son, and Spirit and employ instead terms like Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I will surely please some readers. Yet there are problems in identifying each of the divine persons simply with a single role or function in salvation history. After all, all three persons should be involved in creation, redemption, and sanctification, albeit in different ways. But if I simply use the classical names without further qualification, I run the risk of offending still others. My solution in this book is to call attention at this point to the purely metaphorical character of these names. God has no gender. Therefore, addressing the divine persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is purely a matter of convention. In another age the terms Mother, Daughter, and Divine Breath might just as readily have been used. Second, I will have a chapter later in the book devoted to the issue of gender and God language where I summarize and evaluate the arguments of several prominent feminists about the gender bias implicit in the customary use of male names and titles for the three divine persons. While not always agreeing with their theoretical conclusions and action proposals, I have learned from these feminists the importance of the language one uses in referring to God. For what is ultimately at stake in this matter is not simply the vindication of the rights of women within the church and society at large. The overthrow of patriarchy and what it stands for in terms of the alleged superiority of men over women by reason of natural law or divine decree is equally important for men, albeit in different ways than for women. The truth must ultimately prevail on this issue if the divine plan both for the human race and indeed for all of creation is to be realized. Given this caution in the use of God language, let us begin our historical overview of the Christian doctrine of God.

## Part One

### Retrieval of the Tradition



## Chapter One

### The Birth of a Revolutionary Belief

In today's world Judaism and Christianity are seen as separate religions with different practices and beliefs. Jews go to synagogue on Friday night and Saturday morning. Christians go to church on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. Within the tabernacle in a Jewish synagogue Jews keep handwritten scrolls of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Within the tabernacle in their churches, many Christians keep the Holy Eucharist, consecrated hosts believed to be the ongoing physical presence of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior, in this world. Jews thus believe in divine revelation, above all, as found in the Torah, the written Word of God. Christians believe in divine revelation in the person of Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God. The life and teachings of Jesus, to be sure, are recorded in the gospel narratives; likewise, St. Paul and the other New Testament writers offer inspired commentary on the life and teaching of Jesus. But for Christians the primary source of divine revelation is not a text like the Torah but the person of Jesus Christ who is both divine and human. Much the same could be said about the differences between Christians and Muslims. Whereas Muslims treasure the Koran as the written Word of God dictated to Mohammed by God in the seventh century CE, Christians, as noted above, regard the New Testament as secondary to Jesus himself as the Incarnate Word of God.

#### *God as One in the Hebrew Bible*

Christians, Jews, and Muslims thus believe in God. But whereas Jews and Muslims believe that God is one person, Christians believe that God

#### 4 *Retrieval of the Tradition*

is three persons who are nevertheless together one God. How this paradoxical belief, that God is both one and three at the same time, came about needs further explanation. As the book of Genesis testifies, Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation, since he was called by God to leave his ancestral home in Haran (located in contemporary Iraq) and journey westward to the land of Canaan (modern day Israel/Palestine) and there to found a great nation (Gen 12:1-3). At the time of Abraham virtually every tribe had its own god to whom the tribe looked for survival in competition with other tribes and with the forces of nature. So it was not unusual that Abraham and his family should likewise worship a god to whom they looked for protection. But the temptation, if not for Abraham himself, at least for his descendants, was to change gods, to worship the gods of their neighbors if they saw any political or economic advantage in doing so. Thus worship of many gods rather than of the one God who spoke to Abraham and promised to make him the father of a great nation was an ongoing problem for the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, throughout their long history.

There were, however, key moments in that history when the Israelites recognized that they must worship the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not the gods of the people with whom they lived. One of those moments came during the exile of the Israelites in Egypt, the land to which they had migrated earlier because of a famine in their own land of Israel. The Israelites were at that point in time a captive people forced to do hard manual labor by the Egyptians. But, as recorded in the book of Exodus, God raised up a leader for the Israelites named Moses who would deliver his people from their captivity in Egypt and lead them back to their homeland. Early in that pilgrimage Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai, the first of which was to worship God in exclusion of all other gods:

I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20:2-6)

Still another dramatic moment in the history of God's dealing with the Israelites came in the time of King David (1000–962 BCE) and his son Solomon (961–922 BCE) when the first temple to Yahweh, the God of Israel, was erected. Previously the people of Israel felt the presence of Yahweh with the ark of the covenant, a portable tabernacle carried on poles by chosen Israelites as they moved from place to place in their long journey to the Promised Land (Canaan) and then kept in one place once they crossed the Jordan River and conquered the local inhabitants. But with King David's military victories and in the time of peace during the reign of his son Solomon, the Israelites built a permanent home for the ark of the covenant in the form of a large temple in Jerusalem, David's capital city. Some centuries later, in 587 BCE, this temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. But after their return from exile in Babylon, the Israelites rebuilt the temple, which lasted until after the time of Jesus and was eventually destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE as punishment for the rebellion of the Israelites against Roman occupation.

### *The New Christian Experience of God*

This brief historical overview is only intended to make clear how important belief in one God was to the ancient Israelites. They had to struggle to continue worshipping Yahweh in the midst of their neighbors who practiced various forms of polytheism. Imagine the consternation of most inhabitants of Jerusalem and Palestine, therefore, when the early Christians proclaimed that Jesus was divine and was to be worshiped as God with the same status as his Father in heaven, Yahweh, the traditional God of Israel. Likewise, St. Paul's writings and the Gospel of John make repeated references to still a third divine personality, the Holy Spirit, who regularly descended upon newly baptized Christians giving them the gift of speaking in foreign languages, the gift of prophecy or interpretation of these strange languages, and other miraculous ("charismatic") gifts. For ordinary Jews this was yet another indication that the early Christians had abandoned their Jewish heritage, belief in one God, and become polytheists, worshipers of many gods, after the fashion of their pagan neighbors within the Roman Empire.

But for these early Christians who as faithful Jews still went to the synagogue or temple on a regular basis, there was no denying their personal and group experience, even if it posed theoretical problems for continued belief in one God. They all still worshiped Yahweh, the God of Israel, whom Jesus in his lifetime addressed with the familiar name

“Abba,” Daddy. The apostles and other witnesses of the life of Jesus, however, testified that Jesus was more than human. He preached with uncommon authority and worked healing miracles during his public career. But above all, in the manner of his death and his appearances to his followers after his resurrection, his divinity shone through. Thomas’s profession of faith, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28), summed up the impact that Jesus as the risen Lord had on the majority of his followers. Finally, with the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and in the Spirit’s manifestation to the Jerusalem community at other times (e.g., Acts 4:31; 10:44-46), it was clear to them that, besides God the Father and his Son Jesus the Christ, there was a third divine personality at work in their lives. Deciding how to defend the reality of these three divine persons while at the same time retaining traditional belief in God as one, however, took several centuries for the early Christians to think through and eventually to formulate in articles of belief, initially the Apostles Creed (*Symbolum Apostolicum*) and then much later the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (recited in many churches every weekend after the homily).

### *Work of the Early Fathers of the Church*

Johannes Quasten, in his monumental three-volume work titled *Patrology*, traces the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and other Christian beliefs over the first four hundred years of the Christian era. I will make brief reference to a few of the fathers of the church whose life and work he analyzes. Quasten notes, first of all, that a rudimentary form of the Apostles’ Creed was in circulation almost from the time of the apostles, although its exact authorship remains unclear.<sup>1</sup> This early creed referring to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19) was used in the ceremony of baptism when converts were immersed three times into the baptismal pool. Likewise, the early Christian writer Justin Martyr in the first of his *Apologies*, or Explanations of the Christian Faith to non-Christians, about the year 150 makes reference to baptism in the name of the three divine persons.

As Quasten further explains, however, Justin was not clear on the relationship between Jesus as the Word Incarnate and God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth. Justin compared Jesus as the Word Incarnate

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 23–24.

with the *Logos* (Word), the principle of order and intelligibility within this world according to the philosophy of Stoicism. Hence, Jesus would seem to be less divine than the Father as the source of all that exists.<sup>2</sup> Another of the early church fathers, Athenagoras, clearly affirmed the equality of the Divine Word, or Second Person of the Trinity, with the Father. But neither he nor Justin had a clearly defined understanding of the third divine person, the Holy Spirit. Finally, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in France at the end of the second century, claimed that the divine Son and the Holy Spirit were the “two hands” of God the Father in the work of salvation as recorded in both the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, and the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in opposition to some Gnostic teachings, Irenaeus made clear that there are not two gods, one good and one evil, at work in human history but only one and the same trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But this was just the beginning of efforts to give a rational justification for Christian belief in God as Trinity. Clement of Alexandria in the third century, for example, deepened Justin Martyr’s notion of Jesus as the Word Incarnate who is both creator of the world and the revelation of the Father to human beings. As the *Logos* or Word Incarnate, Jesus is “the saviour of the human race and the founder of a new life which begins with faith, proceeds to knowledge and contemplation and leads through love and charity to immortality and deification.”<sup>4</sup> Clement’s successor at Alexandria, Origen, was accused of heresy by many of his contemporaries, but his teaching on the Trinity still represented a major step forward in thinking through what is meant by the expression “three persons in one God.”

### *Origen’s Controversial Theories*

Origen recognized that if God is pure spirit, the Son cannot originate from the Father by some sort of physical generation but only by an eternal spiritual generation.<sup>5</sup> So, contrary to what the celebrated heretic Arius would later claim, there never was a time when the divine Son did not exist. Father and Son were of one and the same spiritual substance, *homoousios*, as the Council of Nicaea would later affirm. At the same time,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 294–95.

<sup>4</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, vol 2 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1964), 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Origen claimed that only God the Father was unbegotten so that technically the divine Son was a “second” God, and the Holy Spirit was even lower in rank within the Trinity than the Son: “we say that the Saviour and the Holy Spirit are without comparison and are very much superior to all things that are made, but also that the Father is even more above them than they are themselves above creatures even the highest.”<sup>6</sup> Many theologians even today would say that this is heretical because it makes the Son and the Spirit less divine than the Father. Origen may have had in mind only a necessary hierarchical order among the divine persons. If so, he was presumably influenced by the teachings of the Neoplatonists, who believed that everything in this world emanates from an absolutely transcendent deity, the One, and eventually through various intermediaries returns to it.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Origen was clearly influenced by the Platonists in his belief that the souls of human beings existed in a purely spiritual realm prior to their existence in a physical body within this world.<sup>8</sup> Life in this world was thus both a punishment for sin committed in the prior realm of the spirit and an opportunity for redemption and return to full union with God.

### *Tertullian and Other Western Theologians*

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the early Christian world, a somewhat different approach to the Trinity gradually took shape. Whereas Origen and other theologians in the Eastern Mediterranean tended to be guilty of subordinationism in dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, in treating the Son and Holy Spirit as subordinate in status to the Father, Western theologians like Tertullian subtly moved in the direction of modalism, one God in three distinct “modes” or ways of existing. Writing against the heretic Praxeas who claimed that the Father rather than the Son became incarnate as Jesus, Tertullian stressed the divine monarchy shared equally by all three divine persons:

Three, however, not in quality, but in sequence, not in substance, but in form, not in power but in aspect; yet of one substance and one quality and one power, because there is one God from whom

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. Reference is to Origen’s commentary on John’s gospel, 13:25: “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28).

<sup>7</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 131–32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 131; also Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, 91–92.

these sequences and forms and aspects are reckoned out in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian in North Africa and his contemporary Hippolytus in Rome both made use of Irenaeus's notion of the "economy" of salvation, the way in which the three divine persons functioned within human history as recorded in the Bible. Thus they tended to distinguish between the Divine Word within the Trinity and the divine Son who became incarnate in Jesus. But Son and Holy Spirit are both "persons" and God is a "Trinity," according to Tertullian, thus coining the term that would later be used at the Council of Nicaea and afterward.<sup>10</sup> Yet the tendency to modalism remained in that the word "person" in Latin originally meant "mask," a device for projecting one's voice in theater productions.<sup>11</sup> Are then the persons of the Trinity just masks for one and the same God behind the masks?

Two other theologians with strong modalist tendencies, who subsequently were declared heretics because of their views, were Paul of Samosata and Sabellius. Though they differed in their approaches to the monarchy or rule of God in this world, they both ended up as virtual unitarians (believers in one God), not trinitarians (believers in the Trinity). Paul of Samosata proposed that Christ was a human being inspired by divine Wisdom. Hence, while he continued to refer to the Trinity, what he really meant was that "the Son and the Spirit were merely the Church's names for the inspired man Jesus Christ and the grace which God poured upon the apostles."<sup>12</sup> Equivalently, then, Jesus was Son of God by adoption at his baptism by John the Baptist rather than by nature from all eternity. Sabellius proposed that the one God took different forms in dealing with human beings: "Thus the one Godhead regarded as creator and law-giver was Father; for redemption It was projected like a ray of the sun and was then withdrawn; then, thirdly, the same Godhead operated as Spirit to inspire and bestow grace."<sup>13</sup> Sabellius's notion of God, accordingly, was quite impersonal. Not a personal God, but the Godhead (the nature of God) took on three different forms in dealing with human beings.

<sup>9</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, 286; see also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 110–15.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 112–13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

One more theologian out of the Western Mediterranean world should be mentioned before moving to the dramatic events that took place at the beginning of the fourth century. Novatian was a third-century Roman theologian who wrote a treatise on the Trinity that advanced the trinitarian theology of Tertullian and Hippolytus by urging that the Divine Word, or Second Person of the Trinity, was Son of God, not just in the economy of salvation within this world, but from all eternity: "He Who is born before all time must be said to have always existed in the Father; for a date in time cannot be fixed for Him Who is before all time. He is eternally in the Father; otherwise the Father were not always Father."<sup>14</sup> Yet Novatian himself could be accused of a subtle subordinationism in his treatment of the relations between Father and Son within the Trinity. Referring to New Testament texts in which Christ speaks of himself as coming forth from the Father and returning to the Father, Novatian sometimes speaks of Christ as the Father's "messenger" or "angel."<sup>15</sup>

### *Arius and Arianism*

All of these theological speculations about Christian belief in the Trinity came to a head at the beginning of the fourth century in the person of Arius, a priest of Alexandria in Egypt who contended that Christ was not divine but only the first creature of God. After all, if God is unbegotten and therefore strictly immutable, then God cannot share the divine being without undergoing change: "Therefore whatever else exists must have come into existence, not by any communication of God's being, but by an act of creation on His part, i.e., must have been called into existence out of nothing."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, did not St. Paul in his epistle to the Colossians (1:15) refer to Christ as "the firstborn of all creation"? Hence, Christ, the Divine Word, must be a creature who serves as the mediator between God as completely transcendent to the world and the world of creation. To be sure, Christ "is a perfect creature, and not to be compared with the rest of creation; but that He is a creature, owing His being wholly to the Father's will, follows from the primary fact that He is not self-existent."<sup>17</sup> As a creature of God the Father, therefore, Christ had a beginning.

<sup>14</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, 227. Reference is to Novatian's *De Trinitate*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, 228–29; see also Gerard S. Sloyan, *The Three Persons in One God* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

Although born outside of time, prior to his generation by the Father he did not exist: "There was when He was not."<sup>18</sup> Christ being called the Son of God is simply a metaphor to express his exalted dignity as God's first creature.

In many ways, Arius and his followers were simply drawing out the logical consequences of the subordinationism implicit in the teaching of Origen. But whereas Origen had distinguished between the Father first begetting the Son from all eternity and later creating the physical world, Arius saw these actions of the Father as being basically one and the same. On a deeper level, however, what was subtly at work here was a distrust of change or alteration wherever it happens. Whatever is subject to change is by that very fact imperfect. What is perfect does not change since by change is normally meant a falling away from an original perfection. There was apparently among the ancients little or no expectation that from change could come further perfection, hence, that change could be for the better rather than for the worse. Furthermore, as Ivor Leclerc pointed out some years ago, this distinction between God as perfect and immutable and the world of creation as imperfect and subject to change is still alive today in the minds of many Christians, having been carried over from the ancient world first into the medieval period and then into the modern era.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Council of Nicaea*

In any event, noting the considerable unease among bishops and even lay people in the church of the Eastern Mediterranean, Emperor Constantine convened in 325 an ecumenical council of bishops at Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey, so as to secure doctrinal orthodoxy on the matter and restore calm to the empire. More than three hundred bishops participated and drew up the Nicene Creed, which reaffirms that Jesus Christ is divine, the only Son of God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.<sup>20</sup> What remained unclear in the term "of the same substance," however, was whether or not the Father and the Son shared numerically one and the same divine substance or whether they shared generically the same divine substance (just as two human beings share generically

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ivor Leclerc, *The Nature of Physical Existence* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 59–69.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 231–37.

the same human nature). All that was really clear was that there was no physical division of the divine substance between the Father and the Son because that would mean change or alteration in the nature of God. Emperor Constantine had achieved peace within the empire but only at the price of an ambiguous definition of the divinity of Christ, which was immediately interpreted differently by different groups within the church.

As Gerard Sloyan points out, Arius's sympathizers did not give up easily.<sup>21</sup> The expression *homoousios* was not to be found in Scripture. Can strictly philosophical non-Scriptural terms be used to clarify Christian belief? Furthermore, even from a philosophical perspective, Arius's position was simpler and easier to understand. By definition God is self-sufficient and autonomous. Why then does God need the Son and the Spirit in order to be God? Behind this complaint, of course, was the assumption that human as well as divine perfection consisted in being or becoming self-sufficient, not depending on others to achieve one's goals in life. The alternate ideal of relationality and intersubjectivity, harmonious existence in community with others as the goal of human striving, was apparently not much in vogue at that time.

### *Semi-Arianism*

In due time, the term *homoousios*, of the same substance, was replaced in the minds of many bishops and lay people with a new term, *homoiousios*, of like substance. Thus was born what has been called Semi-Arianism. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem used *homoiousios* to speak of the Father and the Son as Two who are both God because they have the same will and operation. Others, however, used the new term in a more strictly Arian sense to indicate that the Son was indeed a creature but bore a moral resemblance to the Father.<sup>22</sup> Saint Athanasius, who was secretary to the bishop of Alexandria at the Council of Nicaea and who later became bishop of that see himself, became the chief advocate for retention of the term *homoousios* to avoid all ambiguity about the divinity of Christ. He argued that, if the Son is like the Father in all things, then the Son is also like the Father in substance or essence and thus equally divine with the Father.

<sup>21</sup> Sloyan, *The Three Persons in One God*, 62–65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Similarly, Hilary of Poitiers (in southern France) urged in *On the Trinity* that the term *homoiousios* was just as unscriptural as *homoousios*. So why not use *homoouosios* rather than *homoiousios* to make clear that one is not secretly an Arian, one who thinks of Christ as the creature of the Father?<sup>23</sup> Ironically, both Athanasius and Hilary were persecuted and exiled from their dioceses for their efforts to defend the divinity of Christ. Yet, inasmuch as in their time of exile they lived in different parts of the Mediterranean world (Athanasius in Rome, Hilary in Asia Minor), they learned from their enforced exile the different thought patterns of Christians in the Western and Eastern Mediterranean. Thus they were better able afterward to offer a suitable compromise position that bridged these linguistic differences and kept the church of one mind about the divinity of Christ.

### *The Divinity of the Holy Spirit*

Eventually the focus of attention for Christians of the fourth century shifted from Christ to the Spirit. The Arians, of course, claimed that the Spirit was as different from the Son as the Son was different in substance from the Father. But even orthodox believers were unsure how to describe the status of the Spirit within the life of the Trinity. Was the Spirit perhaps a second Son of the Father or only a personification of the common spirit or mind-set between the Father and the Son? The Nicene Creed had simply affirmed the divinity of the Spirit without further qualification. What was needed was further theological reflection on the relations between the divine persons and an expanded definition of the work of the Spirit in salvation history, which eventually came at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

As might be expected, Athanasius was just as staunch in his defense of the divinity of the Holy Spirit as in his defense of the divinity of the Son: "Athanasius argues from effect to cause: since the Spirit makes us holy with the holiness of God by dwelling in us as in a temple (1 Cor 3:16ff.), he must be divine. He therefore shares one and the same substance with the Father and Son."<sup>24</sup> Athanasius likewise describes the joint activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in creation and the work of redemption as follows: the Father accomplishes all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit. As we will see in chapter 2, this became the canonized phrase

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

for the Eastern Orthodox churches in their struggle with the church in the West over the way in which the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. But at the time not everyone agreed with Athanasius and Cyril of Jerusalem in their strong defense of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. A group of Christians called the Macedonians or Pneumatomachians (“Spirit-fighters”) challenged the divinity of the Spirit but were rebuffed, first by more orthodox theologians and then by the decrees of the Council of Constantinople. Chief among those orthodox theologians were the Cappadocian Fathers: Saints Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianz. We will take up their important contribution to the standard Eastern Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the next chapter.

### *Conclusion*

We can bring to a close this first chapter on the development of the doctrine of the Trinity by noting how important theology was to the lives of the early Christians. Bishops, theologians, and even ordinary people engaged in intense debate about the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Whether in cafes over something to drink or at the marketplace in search of food for dinner, Christians got into heated arguments over theological issues. As noted above, Emperor Constantine personally called the Council of Nicaea so as to settle these theological issues, given their strong political overtones that threatened the peace and harmony of the empire. Likewise, in the medieval and early modern periods of Western history, religion and politics were closely aligned. Only in recent centuries here in the West has religion become largely a private affair, not to be discussed except occasionally with close friends. There are political advantages, to be sure, in separating church and state, as in the United States at present. But there are also disadvantages in the ways in which we sometimes fail to give witness to our deepest convictions. In any event, the controversies over the doctrine of the Trinity in the first four centuries of the church’s existence are among the most colorful in its long history. Moreover, as we shall see in the course of this book, most of the basic positions that one can assume with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity were already in place by the end of the fourth century: subordinationism or implicit tritheism, on the one hand; modalism or adoptionism, on the other hand.

## Chapter Two

# The Standoff between East and West in Medieval Christianity

After the Council of Constantinople in 381, the focus of debate among bishops, theologians, and interested laypeople within the ancient Christian world shifted from the doctrine of the Trinity to the person of Christ. If Christ was truly divine as well as human, as the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople had defined, how is one to understand that dynamic union of divinity and humanity within the person of Christ so that neither is absorbed into the other? The Council at Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 dealt with these issues. Two different christologies or theoretical approaches to the person of Christ were involved: the one focusing on the divinity of Christ and promoted by Cyril of Alexandria, and the other focusing on the humanity of Christ and set forth by Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople. But how the fathers of the church resolved this question is the work of another volume in this series.<sup>1</sup> I mention it here only to make clear that the theological ferment generated by intense debate over the doctrine of the Trinity did not die out with the Council of Constantinople but simply shifted direction and focus. Theology was still a hot topic of conversation among educated people for many years to come.

In this chapter I will sketch how the doctrine of the Trinity underwent further development in the centuries after the Council of Constantinople,

<sup>1</sup> See Gerard S. Sloyan, *Jesus: Word Made Flesh*, Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).