

## Christian Perspective of Understanding the Divinity of God

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### ABSTRACT

There are different kinds of people in the world and these people follow different religions. They worship different gods and goddesses. Some believe that God exists in many which is popularly known as polytheism while others especially the Christians, Muslims and Jews believe there exist only one god which is known as Monotheism. Muslims and Jews strongly identify God as monotheistic existing in single nature while the Christians who also believe in Monotheism understand the divinity of God in a different manner which is far distinctive to that of the belief of Muslims and Jews. Christians understand God to be three members in one single entity. The one entity emphasizes monotheism whereas the three members emphasizes trinitarianism. This trinitarianism finally led to the concept of the famous “Trinity”. The history and concept of trinity is briefly described in this article. Apart from this, the perspective of how Christianity sees and worship God is also described in this article.

**Keywords:** Trinity, Godhead, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, nature, Divinity, Transcendental, Hypostases, Homoousis, Omnipotent, Omniscient.

### INTRODUCTION

The Christian doctrine of the word Trinity is derived from the Latin word “Trinitas” which means “Triad” which itself is derived from another Latin word “trinus” meaning “threefold”. The doctrine of Trinity is the most fundamental premise of the Christian doctrine of God. Even though it does not appear explicitly in the Bible, it is the result of the church’s reflection upon the biblical testimony in the face of various distorted interpretations.

<sup>1</sup>The word “Trinity” is misunderstood by the people and various doctrines were developed to give an understanding about the three persons of the Godhead.

### HISTORY OF THE TRINITY

The doctrine of Trinity was first formulated among the fathers of the early church as early Christians attempted to understand the relationship between Jesus and God the father in their scriptural documents and prior traditions.<sup>2</sup> Heretical teachings developed as the church was seeking meaning and interpretation of the truths of faith such as incarnation and trinity. Polemicists such as Irenaeus tried to meet the challenge of false teaching by the heretics with condemnation. They were more concerned to prepare practical answers to the questions developed by the heretics.

### Before the Council of Nicea

Tertullian was the first to use the term “Trinity” and to formulate the doctrine, but his formulation involved subordination of Son to the Father making the Son less superior to the Father. This formulation made Son not equal with the Father. Origen went even further to the formulation of Tertullian by teaching that the Son is subordinate to the Father in respect to essence, and the Holy Spirit is subordinate even to the Son. This formulation made all the three to be unequal. Since, it breaks the supremacy of power and unity of the three persons of the Godhead. The basic heresy which had influence on Christianity was Gnosticism.

According to one of the interpretation of Gnosticism, Jesus was an ordinary man and on the day of his baptism, the Christ the divine descended upon him and with him Jesus was able to preach and perform miracles. When Jesus was crucified, Christ the divine left him. Other interpretation explained that Christ did not have a physical body. Jesus had only a phantom – ghost like existence, which appeared to be. And further stated that the appearance is not real but only a representation of the real. The Arians on the other hand denied the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit by representing the Son as the first creature of the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the first creature of the Son.

This created a ranking among the three persons of the Godhead. Monarchianism regarded the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three modes of manifestation. Some misunderstood this as “Tritheism” believing that there are three gods.

Moralism and Adoptionism totally denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. Moralism emphasized that Jesus Christ was only a human being, who was a unique moral person who inspired people while Adoptionism emphasized that Jesus Christ was human person adopted by God.

According to Paul of Samosata, Jesus Christ and Logos are two different beings rather than one. He further told that the Logos that dwells in Jesus is not Jesus himself. By this he meant that Logos is from above and Jesus is man from below and superior to humans since born of the Spirit. St. Irenaeus proved Paul of Samosata’s heresy false by saying if Logos and Christ are different then Christ could never give salvation to humans because this denies the divinity of Jesus as Christ without being divine could never be the saviour of humanity. Apollinarianism was another heresy which tried to prove Adoptionism false by explaining how eternal Logos became man. But it denied the total humanity of Jesus Christ by proving that the Son is only divine and not human.

### The Council of Nicaea

In 325 A.D., the First council of Nicaea declared the basic doctrinal theology for all Christological development. It was affirmed in the council that Jesus Christ is one substance (homoousios) with Father, which means that He is fully divine. The council further affirmed the reality and completeness of the humanity of Christ. Thus, the council affirmed that Christ was completely divine and completely human. The Council adopted the Nicene Creed which described Christ as, “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, and the Holy Ghost as the one by which was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”.<sup>3</sup> About the Father and the Son, the Creed used the term “homoousios”. This homoousios later developed into the formula of “three persons, one being”.

Then, the doctrine of divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit were further developed by Athanasius in his final days before his death in 373 A.D. through his letters. His polemical Trinitarian arguments in his letters to Arianism imply that, “the Holy Spirit is eternal, uncreated,

united to the Son, and worthy of worship.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Council of Constantinople

The Nicene Creed said little about the Holy Spirit as the council of Nicaea focused all the attention on the relationship between the Father and the Son, without making any similar statement about the Holy Spirit. This paved way for the extension of the Nicene Creed at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., by stating that the Holy Spirit is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son. The council also suggested that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and the Son, by releasing the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The Creed states:

We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, ... And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeded from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who is spoken by the prophets...<sup>5</sup>

### The Cappadocian Fathers

St. Basil of Caesarea, his younger brother St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory of Nazianzus became the famous Cappadocian Fathers. St. Basil opposed heresies of the early Christian church and supported Nicene Creed and also wrote commentaries on scriptures and treatises on the Holy Spirit. Basil’s brother St. Gregory of Nyssa contributed to the Council of Constantinople by stressing the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son while St. Gregory of Nazianzus contributed to a great extent for the development of Trinitarian theology.

Thus, by the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., under the leadership of the Cappadocian Fathers, the doctrine of trinity reached its current form that is being used this day.

## GOD AS TRINITY IN UNION

### Three in One & One in Three

The term Trinity of God as a technical term in theology refer to a trinity in unity, and to a trinity that is Trinal.<sup>6</sup> In Trinitarian doctrine, God exists as hypostases or three persons but is one being, having a single divine nature. “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” are not

names for different parts of God, but one name for God because three persons exist in God as one entity. These three persons cannot be separated from one another because each person is understood as having the identical essence or nature, not merely similar nature. The members of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal, one in essence, power, action, and will.

The Triune God also possess personality which is different from that of the personality of Man. According to Louis Berkhof, “The outstanding difference between the two is that man is uni-personal, while Triune God is tri-personal. And this tri-personal existence is a necessity in the Divine Being, and not in the tri-personal form.”<sup>7</sup> The Father has all his meaning in His Son. The Father can never stand alone as a self-existing being or person. The Word (Christ) perfectly leads mankind to the Father and makes it possible for humans to become God’s children. In this history of salvation the Father through His Word incarnate, just as the Trinitarian Father, has His personhood in His Son. But, the Spirit could not become the incarnate Word that would speak to us about the Father even though He proceeds from the source, the Father. The Spirit is the binding love between the Father and the Son. The same Spirit is the binding love that unites humans to Jesus and the Father.<sup>8</sup> All members of the trinity are equal in essence but they do not have the same roles.

### Divinity of the Father

God the Father is the title given to one of the members of the Godhead. In Christianity, God the Father is regarded as the first person of the Trinity. The title God the Father signifies God’s role as the life-giver, the authority, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and transcendental God. He has infinite power that goes beyond human understanding of knowledge. He is called Father because he created the world which means in that sense he “fathered” the world. He maintains a special father-child relationship with the people living in the world for he created them in his own image and his own likeness.

The Father is presented in the scriptures as the Source (origin), Sender, and Planner of Salvation.

### Divinity of the Son

On the other hand, God the Son is the second person of the trinity in Christianity. According to the doctrine of Trinity, Jesus Christ (the Son) is the incarnation of God. He is united in

essence with the Father but distinct in person. In the New Testament of the holy bible, Jesus Christ is often mentioned as the “Son of God” for he came from God the Father. The name “Son of God” is given to Jesus also in a view of the fact that He owed His birth to the paternity of God by not born because of Human Father. The place of the Son in the economic Trinity is noted as the order of existence in the essential Trinity. If all things are out of the Father, they are through the Son. If God the Father is represented as the absolute cause of all things then God the Son stands out clearly as the mediating cause. This gives a clear understanding that all things are created and maintained through God the Son. The attributes of wisdom, power, mercy and grace are ascribed to the functions of the Son. The Son also possess every attribute belonging to the Father. According to Louis Berkhof: “The term “Logos” in Scripture points out the Son. This term is applied to the Son, not in the first place to express his relation to the world, but to indicate the intimate relation in which He stands to the Father, a relation like that of a word to the Speaker.”<sup>9</sup> In distinction from philosophy, the Bible identifies Logos as personal and identifies him with Son of God. The Son is said to possess the very image of God in Colossians 1:15; Hebrew 1:3. This shows that if the Son is the very image of God then the Son too must be a person in the Godhead.

The role of the Son is that He is the Means, Sent One and Achiever of Salvation. The Father sent the Son to save the world. The Father planned the salvation and the Son accomplished it on the cross. The Son is eternally begotten or generated from the Father but not created by anyone.

### Divinity of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the name or title given to the Third person of the Trinity. He is the Creator Spirit, present before the creation of the universe and through His power everything was made in Jesus Christ, by God the Father. The Holy Spirit is considered to be co-equal, co-eternal with God the Father and God the Son. He is different from the Father and the Son for He proceeds from the Father and given to humans by the Son who received it from the Father as referred in Acts 2:33.

In New Testament, Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also descended on Jesus as a dove, at the time of his baptism. The Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier of Souls, the

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Helper and the Comforter who dwells in human beings to lead their souls to the Father and the Son.

Thus, the function of the members of the Trinity is that the Father is the Planner, the Son is the Accomplisher and the Holy Spirit is the Applier of Salvation to the believers.

### TRINITARIAN FORMULA

The Trinitarian formula is the phrase “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” which refers to the three persons of the Godhead. It is often followed by “Amen”. The Trinitarian formula is given based on the command given by Jesus Christ in the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” in Gospel of Matthew 28:19.

### TRINITARIAN BAPTISM

The early church Fathers in the beginning only baptised in the name of Jesus. But later, the baptismal formula was changed from baptizing in the name of Christ to the phrase “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” by the Catholic Church in second century<sup>10</sup>. The change was done after referring and considering the Gospel of Matthew 28:29 and also to the writings of the Didache which states:

After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living (running) water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you have are not able in cold, then in warm. If you neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Before baptism, let the one baptizing and the one to be baptized fast, as also any others who are able – Didache 7:1 (A.D. 70)

According to the doctrines of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and most forms of Protestantism, a baptism is invalid if the Trinitarian formula is not used in the administration of the sacrament. Trinitarians identify Trinitarian baptism with Christian faith into which baptism is an initiation of joining the Christian community faith.

Apart from baptism, the Trinitarian formula is also used in other prayers, rites, sacraments and

liturgies. The Roman Catholics & Anglicans make the sign of the cross while reciting the formula.

### TRINITY SUNDAY

Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Pentecost, and eight weeks after Easter Sunday in the Western liturgical churches such as Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and the Sunday of Pentecost in Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches.

Trinity Sunday celebrates and honours the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the three persons of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> On Trinity Sunday, the Christian Churches remembers and give thanks to the members of the Godhead for providing salvation to humans.

### CONCLUSION

God is fullness, an inexhaustible source of love that seeks continuously to share His very being with human beings. But, God seeks to reveal himself as Trinity and as one to the nature of the universe. The entire Christian revelation consists in the power of Jesus Christ as light, coming in the darkened world, and leading mankind through His Spirit to the Source of all reality, the Father. Christ is the image of the Father and human beings are made according to His likeness. Christ came to reveal that all reality, the created world, has come out of the family of God, a tri-unity of three persons in one nature.

All human beings are called to live in this reality of the loving presence of the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

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