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The Struggle over the Decision of Nicea

For the participants at the Council of Nicea, the issues to be settled were far from petty. They seemed to be issues of life and death and stirred up not just theologians but often the whole population of Christians. Especially through a rapid succession of emperors who either supported one side or the other, the decision of Nicea was often threatened. There was, however, one theologian, Athanasius (ca. 298–373), who unwaveringly stood up for that decision and who often felt the consequences when he was either sent into exile or fled to escape his persecutors.

Athanasius, the Defender of the *Homoousios*

In Alexandria Athanasius had become the successor of the deceased bishop Alexander. Once Constantine was convinced that Arius had agreed to the decision of Nicea he told Athanasius in no uncertain terms to readmit Arius into the church, saying: “For if I learn that you have hindered or excluded any who claim to be admitted into communion with the Church, I will immediately send some one who shall depose you by my command, and shall remove you from your place.” And yet Athanasius wrote and endeavored to convince the emperor

that this anti-Christian heresy had no communion with the church. Evidently the emperor realized that he could not so easily depose Athanasius and therefore assured him “that he was a man of God.”¹ Arius was then again anathematized by the emperor, and his writings were to be condemned to the flames. But nothing came of this. Those leaning toward Arius gained the upper hand, and the emperor, sensing the orthodox Athanasius was actually the troublemaker, called a synod meeting at Tyre in 335 and had him deposed and eventually exiled to Treveri, the imperial residence on the Mosel River. The charge against him, however, was not theological: he had allegedly threatened to stop the grain ships to Constantinople that regularly left Alexandria every autumn!² Arius was then reinstituted by the same synod into the church, though he had died a year earlier.

When Constantine died in 337, his empire was divided among Constantine II (337–340), Constans (337–350), and Constantius II (337–361). This division of the empire also did away with a unified church. Though Athanasius returned to Alexandria after a little more than a year in Treveri, his stay in Alexandria was brief and full of problems. Eusebius of Nicomedia had convinced Emperor Constantius that the restoration of the bishops exiled in 337, especially that of Athanasius, was against all ecclesial law. The emperor sent a letter of complaint to Athanasius but did little else. The unrest in Alexandria got out of hand once the opposing party ended up appointing a new bishop to succeed Athanasius. Since his persecutors pursued him even at night, he had to escape from Alexandria and made his way to Rome, where he stayed from 339 to 346.

Athanasius’s stay in the West, first in Treveri and then in Rome, may have had a decisive influence on him.³ While he hardly used the term *homoousios* before 350 and even made use of *homoios* (“like” or “similar”), he became a staunch defender of the *homoousios*. While this may have been the result of his attempt to prevent the emperor from undoing the decision of Nicea, something else may also have had an important influence on Athanasius. In the West he learned the Latin nomenclature of *unius substantiae* (“of one substance”) concerning Father and Son and equated it with the *homoousios*. It might even be that the influence of Hosius of Cordoba led to the adoption of the *homoousios* at Nicea

1. Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 59, 62 (NPNF² 4:132–33).

2. See Adolf Martin Ritter, “Dogma und Lehre in der Alten Kirche,” in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, ed. Carl Andresen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 1:173n31.

3. For the following see *ibid.*, 1:181.

and all its subsequent problems. It was a term thought out in Latin (*unius substantiae*) but expressed in Greek (*homoousios*).

At the instigation of Pope Julius I, the Roman emperors Constans and Constantius II called a council at Serdica (now Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria) in 342 to resolve the increasing tensions between the Christian East and West. Both Athanasius and Marcell of Ancyra had been deposed from their bishop's seats, since they had vehemently opposed Arianism and had sought refuge in Rome. Yet the Eastern bishops, under the leadership of Eusebius of Nicomedia, thought that the West had acted wrongly, since the bishops from the East (Athanasius and others), who had been excommunicated, were accepted. The Western party alleged that the Eastern bishops had fallen away from the decisions of Nicea and had become Arians. The bishops from the East in turn refused to sit together with their Western counterparts and were also weary of Rome seeming to have the final say. Finally, the two factions excommunicated each other. The Eastern party withdrew, and the Western faction drew up a strong anti-Arian statement, which was favored by Emperor Constans. He also urged Constantius II to restore the exiled bishops. The latter canceled his severe measures against the Nicene party and in a public letter forebode any further persecution of the Athanasians in Alexandria. Finally, "when Gregory [the bishop who was selected to replace Athanasius] died about ten months later, he [emperor Constantius II] sends for Athanasius with every mark of honor, writing to him no less than three times a very friendly letter, in which he exhorted him to take courage and come."⁴ Athanasius then returned to Alexandria in 346.

When emperor Constans was assassinated in 350 by dissatisfied soldiers, his brother Constantius II became the sole ruler of the empire. This also brought a change in his approach toward the Arians. Constantius II wanted to unify the church by turning away from Nicea, since this creed did not bring unanimity to the church or to the empire. Therefore he forbade the term *ousia* ("essence") and also the term *homoousios* ("same essence") and replaced it with *homoios* ("like" or "similar"), saying in a creed of 559: "But whereas the term 'essence,' has been adopted by the Fathers in simplicity, and gives offence as being misconceived by the people, and is not contained in the Scriptures, it has seemed good to remove it, that it be never in any case used of God again, because the divine Scriptures nowhere use it of

4. Athanasius, *History of the Arians* 21 (NPNF² 4:277).

Father and Son. But we say that the Son is like the Father in all things, as also the Holy Scripture say and teach.”⁵ But the banishment of the *homoousios* did not bring lasting peace either, especially after the emperor died in 361. It strengthened the Arian wing of the church but also brought together those who did not want to have the Nicene Creed annulled. Already in 356 the situation for Athanasius had become so dangerous that he had to escape from the city and most likely hid himself in the cell of one of the monks in the Nitrian desert, where he was safe and also close enough to be kept informed of the events in the church. How disliked he had become by the Emperor Constantius II became clear a year earlier from a conversation with Pope Liberius, a fearless supporter of Athanasius, in which the emperor declares about Athanasius: “Not one of the victories which I have gained, not even excepting those over Magnentius and Silvanus, equals the ejection of this vile man from the government of the Church.”⁶

With Julian Apostata as emperor (361–363), the old Roman religion was supposed to be reinstituted, and therefore the church was to be free from government involvement. All the bishops banished by Constantius II were called back from exile, including Athanasius. In 362 he called together a council in Alexandria that set the tone for other councils to be held: the *homoios* was rejected, and Nicea was reaffirmed. The instigators of Arianism, of course, could not be accepted back into the church. But those who had formerly compromised themselves and now repented were received back. As Jerome (ca. 347–420) tells us: “The West assented to this decision, and it was through this conclusion, which the necessities of the times demanded, that the world was snatched from the jaws of Satan.”⁷ Athanasius was not out for revenge but sought reconciliation and church unity. Emperor Julian did not like such a strengthening of the church. The emperor wanted to ban him from the city and from all of Egypt, so Athanasius reacted quickly on his own and left Alexandria in 362 once more so that the ban could not be handed to him. He also deluded his pursuers and “returned secretly to Alexandria; and there he remained concealed until the persecution was at an end.”⁸ Yet the danger was not completely over. Once more in 365 Athanasius had to flee under the reign of Emperor Valens (328–378). But he was recalled the following spring when a revolt in

5. As quoted by Athanasius, *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 8 (NPNF² 4:454).

6. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.13 (NPNF² 3:78).

7. Jerome, *The Dialogue against the Luciferians* 20 (NPNF² 6:330).

8. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.14 (NPNF² 2:86).

the empire had broken out and the emperor needed all the support he could get, including that of Athanasius. From that point until his death in 373, Athanasius could finally live in relative peace.

What made Athanasius such a defender of the *homoousios*, or rather such an enemy of the Arians, who asserted that there is an ontological distinction between God the Father and the Son? Again we must remember that for him salvation was at stake: demigods or heroes abounded in Greek mythology. They were often helpful in many respects, but sooner or later their power of influence came to an end. They were not in total control. Only a supreme God who was in total control could change our fate and save us. According to Athanasius, if Jesus Christ was not like this one supreme God but just in the slightest way different from him, then our salvation was in jeopardy. Jesus Christ had to be fully God. And this true God came to us through the incarnation. Athanasius was very much concerned about the Godhead of Christ. But he also paid attention to the Spirit, since through him we can become one with God the Father, as Athanasius affirms:

For since the Word is in the Father, and the Spirit is given from the Word, He wills that we should receive the Spirit, that, when we receive It, thus having the Spirit of the Word which is in the Father, we too may be found on account of the Spirit to become One in the Word, and through Him in the Father. . . . It is the Spirit then which is in God, and not we viewed in our own selves; and as we are sons and gods because of the Word in us, so we shall be in the Son and in the Father, and we shall be accounted to have become one in Son and in Father, because that Spirit is in us, which is in the Word which is in the Father.⁹

In typically Eastern fashion, the Spirit is given from the Son (the Word), who is in the Father. Athanasius therefore can affirm with Nicea the Holy Triad and the one Godhead, in contrast to the Arians, who thought of the Holy Spirit as being a creature who “came into being as a thing made by the Son.”¹⁰ Yet Athanasius alone could not bring the church at large to agree to the decision of Nicea. As we have noted, he was not just the unyielding defender of the *homoousios* but also conciliatory toward those who advocated the *homoiousios*. He wrote:

Those, however, who accept everything else that was defined at Nicaea, and doubt only about the Coessential [*homoousios*], must not be treated as

9. Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3.25 (NPNF² 4:407).

10. So Athanasius, *Letter 56: To Jovian* (NPNF² 4:567–68).

enemies; nor do we here attack them as Ariomaniacs, nor as opponents of the Fathers, but we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers, who mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word. For, confessing that the Son is from the essence of the Father, and not from other subsistence, and that He is not a creature nor work, but His genuine and natural offspring, and that He is eternally with the Father as being His Word and Wisdom, they are not far from accepting even the phrase “Coessential.”¹¹

Such a positive acknowledgement of the position of those who advocated the *homoios*, but at the same time a clear condemnation of the idea that the Son was a creature, opened the way for an alliance against the actual Arians, or better neo-Arians.

Approaching the Trinitarian Settlement in Constantinople

The neo-Arian movement gained special prominence through Aetios of Antioch (d. 367), who worked as a goldsmith in Antioch to support his widowed mother, studied philosophy, and later became a deacon. He and his disciple Eunomius (d. ca. 395) claimed that God is unbegotten and therefore totally unequal with the Son. According to Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 331/40–ca. 395) who occupied the bishop seat in Nyssa (in present-day south-central Turkey), Eunomius avoided using the term *Father* in order that the Son might not be included in the eternity of the Father. He also avoided the term *Son* so that there would be no natural affinity between the Son and the Father.¹² Similarly, he avoided using the term *Holy Spirit*, since the word *holy* is also used for God the Father and would move the Spirit too close to Father and Son. So, for Eunomius, instead of a Triune God there is total dissimilarity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Up to this point the Holy Spirit had received little attention even by, for example, Athanasius. But with the neo-Arian party the so-called Pneumatomachians (i.e., combaters against the Spirit) came to the fore, claiming that the Holy Spirit should not be given equal rank with the Father and the Son. They also said that the Holy Spirit was a creation of the Son and a servant to both Father and Son.¹³ The founder of this movement was Macedonius—thus their name the Macedonians—who was introduced into the See of Constantinople by the

11. Athanasius, *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 41 (NPNF² 4:472).

12. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 2.14 (NPNF² 5:128).

13. See Basil, *Letter to the Church of Antioch* 140.2 (NPNF² 8:204).

Arians in 342 and enthroned there by Emperor Constantius II. He was deposed by the same emperor in 360 for having caused too much bloodshed and died in 364. As the church historian Socrates relates: "Such were the exploits of Macedonius on behalf of Christianity, consisting of murders, battles, incarceration, and civil wars."¹⁴ As the many examples of such misdeeds cited by Socrates show, theological disputes often became actual wars having little to do with the spirit of the founder of Christianity.

Such an extremist position only furthered the attempt to achieve an understanding between those who rallied around Athanasius and those who advocated the *homoiousios*. Yet in the back of their minds was still the position of Sabellius, a priest presumably from Libya in North Africa. He lived most likely around the year 200 in Rome, and we know about him only through those who condemned his modalist teachings. He taught that God was single and indivisible, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being three modes or manifestations of the one divine Person. Athanasius claimed that Sabellius taught "that the Same becomes at one time Father, at another His own Son."¹⁵ A Sabellian modalist would say that the one God "successively" revealed himself to humanity through time as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Spirit in sanctification and regeneration. Basil the Great, the older brother of Gregory of Nyssa and since 370 bishop of Caesarea and metropolitan of Cappadocia, explains the position of Sabellius and his followers more precisely, saying that Sabellius "affirms that God is one by hypostasis, but is described by Scripture in different Persons, according to the requirements of each individual case; sometimes under the name of Father, when there is occasion for this Person; sometimes under the name of Son when there is a descent to human interests or any of the operations of the oeconomy [of salvation]; and sometimes under the Person of the Spirit when the occasion demands such phraseology."¹⁶

Basil then explains his own position, saying

that *ousia* has the same relation to hypostasis as the common has to the particular. Every one of us both shares in existence by the common term of *essence* (*ousia*) and by his own properties is such a one and such a one. In the same manner, in the matter in question, the term *ousia* is common, like goodness, or Godhead, or any similar attribute; while hyposta-

14. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.38 (NPNF² 2:67).

15. Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 3.4 (NPNF² 4:395).

16. Basil, *Letter to Count Terentius* (Letter 214) (NPNF² 8:254).

sis is contemplated in the special property of Fatherhood, Sonship, or the power to sanctify. If then they describe the Persons as being without hypostasis, the statement is per se absurd; but if they concede that the Persons exist in real hypostasis, as they acknowledge, let them so reckon them that the principle of the *homoousion* may be preserved in the unity of the Godhead and that the doctrine preached may be the recognition of true religion, of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in the perfect and complete hypostasis of each of the Persons named.¹⁷

There is only one essence (*ousia*) that signifies the Godhead, but there are three special properties (hypostases). All three share in common the one essence, but the individual hypostasis is peculiar to each one. Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzus (329/330–390), who became patriarch of Constantinople, defines as the special property of the Father the “unbegottenness,” the special property of the Son the “generation” from the Father, and the special property of the Spirit the “procession” from the Father, according to John 15:26.¹⁸ Different from what Eunomius taught, unbegottenness, generation, and procession are not part of the essence of God but show how the essence manifests itself in the three persons. “The Three are One in Godhead, and the One Three in properties.”¹⁹ Gregory makes it clear that though we call the Father first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third, there is no deficiency or subjection of essence. According to their common essence, all three are equal, while in peculiarity they are different but again not unequal. There is just one nature and one dignity of the Godhead.

The three Cappadocians (also called the Cappadocian Fathers, named after the Cappadocian region in present-day Turkey)—Basil the Great, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—pursued to a greater extent the issue of the Trinity, including the differentiation between the three persons. In his *Fifth Theological Oration* Gregory of Nazianzus elaborates on the doctrine of the Trinity and poses the question of whether one should even inquire into the Holy Spirit, since he is “this strange God of Whom Scripture is silent.”²⁰ His answer is in the affirmative and is well argued, with ample scriptural references. He admits that “the Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among

17. Ibid.

18. Gregory Nazianzen, *The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit* 8 (NPNF² 7:320).

19. Ibid., 9 (NPNF² 7:320).

20. Ibid., 1 (NPNF² 7:318).

us, and supplies us with a clear demonstration of Himself.”²¹ Then Gregory proceeds to show how the Spirit was involved in the ministry of Jesus. This moves him to argue that we should “worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, Three Persons, One Godhead, undivided in honor and glory and substance and kingdom.”²²

Once the full deity of the Spirit is asserted, the question of tritheism emerges: Are there now actually three gods? Gregory responds in this way: “When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause—there are Three Whom we worship.”²³ There is a unity of the Godhead, which is differentiated in three persons. There is not simply a numerical distinction or one by name among the persons of the Trinity, but one that highlights the respective peculiarities of the persons.²⁴ Gregory is candid enough to admit that though he has looked everywhere for analogies, he has been unable “to discover anything on earth with which to compare the nature of the Godhead.”²⁵ The Triune God is so unique that it has no comparison.

While the Holy Spirit so far had almost been a peripheral issue, Basil the Great wrote in 375 a whole book *On the Holy Spirit*. The reason for this was that the so-called Macedonians or Pneumatomachians denied the divinity of the Spirit. Basil argues for a new form of the doxology, which he rephrases: “Glory to God the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit.”²⁶ Some Macedonians preferred the wording “glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit,” since they claimed that this shows the essential difference between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But Basil demonstrated that his doxology affirms the Spirit’s equality with the Father and the Son in power and dignity. The church is able to participate in the saving work of Christ through the Spirit, since that Spirit is “the giver of life,” as will be suggested by the Council of Constantinople. The Spirit is said to renew the image of God

21. Ibid., 26 (NPNF² 7:326).

22. Ibid., 28 (NPNF² 7:327).

23. Ibid., 14 (NPNF² 7:322).

24. Gregory explains concerning the relationship between and the properties of the persons: “The very fact of being Unbegotten or Begotten, or Proceeding has given the name of Father to the First, of the Son to the Second, and of the Third, Him of Whom we are speaking, of the Holy Ghost that the distinction of the Three Persons may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead.” Ibid., 9 (NPNF² 7:320).

25. Ibid., 31 (NPNF² 7:328).

26. See Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* 1–2 (NPNF² 8:3–4), where he claims he was attacked because of this wording.

in believers by revealing the glory of the Son, who is the image of the invisible God. Since the Spirit connects believers with the Son and the Father in their redemptive work, it was important that the Spirit also be accorded true divinity.

The three Cappadocians decisively shaped the doctrine of the Trinity, at least for the Eastern Church, and unified those who to some degree could accept the decision of the Council of Nicea. By affirming the unity of the essence while admitting the distinction but not a difference in the respective hypostasis or person of the Trinity, they went beyond inequality of the persons, which Origen and his followers preferred. There was one Godhead with one will and one working, one being and one glory. This Godhead is of eternal nature and in a unified way is active as Father through the Son in the Spirit. But now it was necessary to consider Christology officially in the context of the Trinity. This came rather quickly with the ascent of Theodosius.

Emperor Valens (328–378) died in battle with the Goths, and Theodosius the Great (347–395) ascended to the throne of the eastern empire. On February 27, 380, he issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which states:

It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation, should continue to profess that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it has been preserved by faithful tradition, and which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity.²⁷

The suggestion is that whoever follows this creed is a catholic Christian, and all others are heretics and will undergo divine and worldly judgment. The church was of prime concern to the emperor, and Nicene Christianity had become the state religion.

The Decision of Constantinople (381)

The emperor then called together a council at Constantinople, which again consisted mainly of bishops from the eastern empire. Among other items, the council reaffirmed the Nicene Creed and expanded it with reference to the Holy Spirit. Now it affirmed that the Spirit was

27. Codex Theodosianus 16.1.2, www.sevencouncils.com/an-orthodox-journey/the-edict-of-thessalonica, accessed April 8, 2016.

involved in the incarnational process by saying that Jesus Christ “was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.” Also the Holy Spirit is referred to as “the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, who spoke through the prophets.” Most of these insertions reflect scriptural precedents: “incarnate from the Holy Spirit” in Luke 1:25, the Holy Spirit as “Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:17, as life giver in John 6:63, and as “proceeding from the Father” in John 15:26. The phrase “who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified,” however, is not expressly mentioned in Scripture. We find a resemblance to this phrase when Athanasius says that the Spirit “is glorified with the Father and the Son.”²⁸ Also, a letter sent by Basil states that “the Son is confessed to be of one substance with the Father, and the Holy Ghost is ranked and worshiped as of equal honor.”²⁹ Though the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed essentially claims the *homoousia* of the Spirit, it scrupulously avoids the term so as not to alienate those who did not want to elevate the Spirit to the status of God.³⁰ With regard to the created beings and the Creator, the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly on the side of the latter, but the creed avoided speaking of the Godhead of the Spirit and his unity of being with Father and Son.

In the Nicene Creed we read that Jesus Christ is “of one substance with the Father,” but it does not say such of the Holy Spirit. The enlarged third article in the creed from Constantinople now reads that “and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. [We believe] in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Concerning Jesus Christ we now read that he “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary.”

Though we customarily now speak of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, we hardly hear of it until the Council of Chalcedon (451), and except for minor variations it is already contained in the *Ancoratus* (“the well-anchored person”), one of the earliest works of Epiphanius

28. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion Concerning the Holy Spirit* 1.31, in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 230.

29. Basil the Great, *Letter* 90.2 (NPNF² 8:176).

30. See the extensive comments by J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 342–43.

(310/320–403), bishop of Salamis. Nevertheless, we know, also in the light of the preceding controversies, that the synod members affirmed the faith of Nicea and, through the influence of the Cappadocian Fathers, also wanted to strengthen the position of the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what this creed accomplished.

The following year Emperor Theodosius summoned another synod in Constantinople, while simultaneously another synod met in Rome, with Pope Damasus presiding. From the meeting in Constantinople a synodical letter was sent to the synod in Rome, which showed that in Constantinople they were steadfast in the Nicene faith by writing:

This is the faith which ought to be sufficient for you, for us, for all who wrest not the word of the true faith; for it is the ancient faith; it is the faith of our baptism; it is the faith that teaches us to believe in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: According to this faith there is one Godhead, Power and Substance of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; the dignity being equal, and the majesty being equal in three perfect essences [*hypostases*] and three perfect persons.³¹

The letter also included the canons of the synod of Antioch (341) and the tome of the preceding synod in Constantinople. This showed that in both East and West the Nicene faith had supervened, especially since Theodosius sanctioned this faith by law and rejected Arianism as heretical.

A Parting of Ways

Officially the Arian version of how to think about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was rejected. This meant the unity of the Christian faith was preserved. The terms with which Christians confessed the doctrine of the Trinity both in the East and in the West became in many ways settled from the fifth century onward. But there was still the division of language, Greek and Latin, though Greek was slowly making way for Latin as the new *lingua franca*, the common language of the Roman Empire. We should also not forget that the decisive steps with regard to the Trinity were made in the East under the influence of Greek terminology and Greek thought patterns. Even the Western representation at Nicea and Constantinople was rather sparse. It is true that the West had affirmed the decisions of these councils, but many Germanic

31. Council of Constantinople, AD 382, *The Synodical Letter* (NPNF² 14:189); and Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.9 (NPNF² 3:138).

tribes, notably the Goths and the Vandals, had adopted Arianism and only from the sixth century onward were they converted to the faith of Nicea. The Third Council of Toledo in 589 marks the change of the Visigoths, who ruled southern France and then Spain, from the Arian to the Nicene faith. But this council also affirmed in canon 2 the *filioque*, in an anti-Arian move, to tie the Spirit closer to Father and Son. Eventually this unilateral change of the creed became a point of contention between East and West. But we are getting ahead of the story. Therefore we turn once more to the East, where Trinitarian thinking soon became standardized by John of Damascus.

John of Damascus

John of Damascus (675/76–749?), a monk and polymath whose fields of interest and contribution included law, theology, philosophy, and music, was not an original theologian but rendered the orthodox faith in a way that still today is exemplary for the East. He starts out with the assertion “that God is One, that is to say, one essence [*ousia*]; and that He is known, and has His being in three subsistences, in Father, I say, and Son and Holy Spirit; and that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in all respects, except in that of not being begotten, that of being begotten, and that of procession.”³² One reason he does not start with the Trinity but with the belief in one God and then works himself up to the Word, the Son of God, and then to the Holy Spirit is that he depends very much on the *Catechetical Oration* of Gregory of Nyssa.³³

Once John has established that there is a God and this God is one and not many, he then gives a “reasoned proof” that this one and only God is not Wordless. For there was never a time when God was not Word. Then he continues to show that “the Word must also possess Spirit.”³⁴ The one God, who is the fountain of all that is, is of “one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, made known in three perfect subsistences and adored with one adoration, believed in and ministered to by all rational creation, united without confusion and divided without separation.”³⁵

32. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.2 (NPNF² 9:1–2).

33. See Andrew Louth, “Late Patristic Developments on the Trinity in the East,” in *Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147, who also points out this dependence on Gregory of Nyssa.

34. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.7 (NPNF² 9:5).

The three subsistences or hypostases are not like three persons, since in terms of their external efficacy they are indistinguishable. But they are internally distinguished. John explains:

So then in the first sense of the word the three absolutely divine subsistences of the Holy Godhead agree: for they exist as one in essence and uncreated. But with the second signification it is quite otherwise. For the Father alone is ingenerate, no other subsistence having given Him being. And the Son alone is generate, for He was begotten of the Father's essence without beginning and without time. And only the Holy Spirit proceedeth from the Father's essence, not having been generated but simply proceeding.³⁶

John then admits that the nature of the generation and of the procession is quite beyond our comprehension. Yet according to John, Fatherhood, Sonship, and Procession are no human constructs but are communicated to us by the Godhead; they are the result of God's self-disclosure. Though Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equals, John is somewhat defensive, saying, "if we say that the Father is the origin of the Son and greater than the Son, we do not suggest any precedence in time or superiority in nature of the Father over the Son . . . or superiority in any other respect save causation."³⁷ While John rejects any subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) under the Father, the latter is the cause of both Son and Spirit, as John concedes. While affirming generation and procession and defending their difference, he admits that he is unable to understand their difference. This means we arrive at creedal affirmations that had lost their experiential anchor. But the West did not fare much better.

Hilary of Poitiers

Very little is known about Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367/68), who is sometimes called the Athanasius of the West. But he wrote a major treatise on the Trinity and was instrumental in bridging the gap between the Western theologians who favored the *homoousia* of Father and Son and the Eastern theologians who preferred the *homoiousia* of Father and Son. After the synod of Biterrae (present-day Béziers in southern France) in 356, he was sent into exile because of his insis-

35. Ibid., 1.8 (NPNF² 9:6).

36. Ibid., 1.8 (NPNF² 9:8).

37. Ibid.

tence on the decisions of Nicea and spent four years in what is now central Anatolia in Turkey. His twelve-book *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), composed in 359/60, was mainly directed against the Arians and was concerned with the unity of the Son with the Father. He argues, for instance, that since “the Spirit of God is also the Spirit of Christ” and since “the Spirit of truth proceedeth from the Father and is sent from the Father by the Son,” there is no subordination of the Son under the Father but a unity in nature.³⁸ Regardless of whether we hear of the Spirit of Christ or of the Spirit of God, there is just one Spirit. “Since what is of God is also of Christ, and what is of Christ is also of God, Christ cannot be anything different from what God is. Christ, therefore, is God, one Spirit with God.”³⁹

While Hilary attempts to show with ample Scripture references and logic the oneness and essential equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the end he concedes the insufficiency of humans to comprehend the Trinity. He writes:

But I cannot describe Him, Whose pleas for me I cannot describe. As in the revelation that Thy Only-begotten was born of Thee before times eternal, when we cease to struggle with ambiguities of language and difficulties of thought, the one certainty of His birth remains; so I hold fast in my consciousness the truth that Thy Holy Spirit is from Thee and through Him, although I cannot by my intellect comprehend it.⁴⁰

Finally he can do nothing but to affirm the faith in the Triune God, the faith into which he was baptized. Realizing the difficulties in expressing with words “the mystery of the Trinity,” he could be open to mediate between those who affirm the *homoousia* of Father and Son as well as those who would only want to concede the *homoiousia*. Yet logical thinking was not completely abandoned. As the Only-begotten from the Father, the Son has the same substance as the Father, while differing from the Father by being the Son.⁴¹ Hilary could therewith assert the similarity of Father and Son as well as their equality, sharing the same essence or substance. Since this substance was not thought of as some prior substance in which they shared but the substance of the Father, he held on to the full divinity of the Son, affirming with Athanasius the Nicene Creed and its essential oneness of Father and Son.

38. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 8.20–21 (NPNF² 9:143).

39. *Ibid.*, 8.27 (NPNF² 9:145).

40. *Ibid.*, 12.56 (NPNF² 9:233).

41. See Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Councils* 81.84 (NPNF² 9:25–26), where he explains the meaning of the *homoousion* at the Council of Nicea.

Augustine

Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo Regius (present-day Annaba in Algeria), was one of the most influential church fathers of the Western church. In his massive work *On the Trinity* he attempts to show “that the Trinity is the one and only and true God, and also how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are rightly said, believed, understood, to be of one and the same substance or essence.”⁴² He wants to do this “according to the authority of the Holy Scriptures” and with convincing logic. Revelation and reason are the two instruments by which he wants to lay out the doctrine of the Trinity. Most important for Augustine is the unity of the one God but also the Trinity.

The one God presents a unity, “because the will of the Father and the Son is one, and their working indivisible . . . the Holy Spirit certainly not being thence excluded,” as Augustine talks about the incarnation.⁴³ Though we name the individual persons of the Trinity when we speak of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, nevertheless “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly.”⁴⁴ We distinguish in the Trinity three persons, but we cannot talk about the Trinity in a plural sense, since the divine substance is one. This divinity makes up their unity, as Augustine explains: “The effect of the same substance in Father and Son and Holy Spirit is, that whatsoever is said of each in respect to themselves, is to be taken of them, not in the plural in sum, but in the singular. For as the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, which no one doubts to be said in respect to substance, yet we do not say that the very supreme Trinity itself is three Gods, but one God.”⁴⁵ There is not qualitative differentiation in the Godhead, since “nothing may hinder us from confessing the absolute equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶ Having said this, he compares the three persons of the Trinity to human qualities: “It is I that remember, I that understand, I that love, who am neither memory, nor understanding, nor love, but who have them. These things, then, can be said by a single person, which has these three, but is not these three. But in the simplicity of that Highest Nature, which is God, although there is one God, there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ Father,

42. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.2.4 (NPNF¹ 3:19).

43. *Ibid.*, 2.5.9 (NPNF¹ 3:41).

44. *Ibid.*, 1.4.7 (NPNF¹ 3:20).

45. *Ibid.*, 5.8.9 (NPNF¹ 3:91).

46. *Ibid.*, 6.9.10 (NPNF¹ 3:102).

Son, and Holy Spirit are not three distinct persons who fall under a certain species, such as divine, but each divine person is identical with the other, or rather with the whole divine substance. Therefore, Augustine states, “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together is not a greater essence than the Father alone or the Son alone; but these three substances or persons, if they must be so called, together are equal to each singly: which the natural man does not comprehend.”⁴⁸ Similar to Hilary, Augustine admits the insufficiency of the human intellect to understand the Trinity. Though the Trinity is beyond human comprehension, he, just as many others before and after him, did not desist from reflecting on the Trinity.

Augustine emphasized the unity of God while allowing for the individual activities of the persons of the Godhead, such as the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, or the forgiving of sins through the Holy Spirit yet in cooperation with the Father and the Son, or the creation of the world through the Father, yet again in cooperation with the other two persons. But he also concedes that the Trinity and the workings through the individual persons are beyond human comprehension. The scriptural references notwithstanding, the Trinity is not simply deduced from Scripture; it is “a speculative construct.”

From tradition Augustine inherited the notion of the three persons of the one Godhead. As we have seen, he does not agree to a qualitative or quantitative distinction between them. Augustine rules out that a distinction came about by accident, “because both the being called the Father, and the being called the Son, is eternal and unchangeable to them.” Yet the distinction between Father and Son cannot be according to substance, since their substance is the same and is not different. The distinction must be “according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable.”⁴⁹ The three persons are not in themselves something different, but only in their relation to one another and to the world. This relation is unchangeable and therewith eternal. Therefore the one God we encounter is never just the Father, or just the Son, or just the Holy Spirit. In the one being of God, the other two relations are always implied, even if we encounter just one. The three persons are the undivided Godhead, yet each from a different perspective, for instance, the Father by begetting, the Son by

47. *Ibid.*, 15.22.42 (NPNF¹ 3:222).

48. *Ibid.*, 7.6.11 (NPNF¹ 3:113).

49. *Ibid.*, 5.5.6 (NPNF¹ 3:89).

being begotten. With the Spirit it is somewhat more difficult, since the Holy Spirit is

a certain unutterable communion of the Father and the Son; and on that account, perhaps, He is so called, because the same name is suitable to both the Father and the Son. For He Himself is called specially that which they are called in common; because both the Father is a spirit and the Son a spirit, both the Father is holy and the Son holy. In order, therefore, that the communion of both may be signified from a name which is suitable to both, the Holy Spirit is called the gift of both.⁵⁰

All three are at work in relation to the world. Yet the Holy Spirit comes from both Father and Son. Here something is enunciated that later on will officially split Christendom into an Eastern and a Western church. It is centered on the different perception of how the Holy Spirit comes forth: in the East it was said to have been from the Father through the Son, in the West from the Father and the Son. But more later about this issue referred to as the *filioque*, that is, “and the Son.”

Since Augustine wrote in Latin, the Greek terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* were of little use to him. He explains that the Greek writers

use also the word *hypostasis*; but they intend to put a difference, I know not what, between *ousia* and *hypostasis*: so that most of ourselves who treat these things in the Greek language, are accustomed to say *mian ousian, treis hypostaseis*, or, in Latin, one essence, three substances. But because with us the usage has already obtained, that by essence we understand the same thing which is understood by substance; we do not dare to say one essence, three substances, but one essence or substance and three persons.⁵¹

While emphasizing the relational character of the Trinity, the term *person* certainly fits better than the impersonal *hypostasis*. Augustine admits the poverty of human language to express appropriately the being and activity of the Trinity. We need to speak about it in the face of “the errors of the heretics,” and “it must be devoutly believed, as most certainly known from the Scriptures.”⁵² Yet there is human weakness to utter in speech these things. Augustine expresses a certain uneasiness with talking about three persons, though he feels bound to it by Scripture and tradition.

50. Ibid., 5.11.12 (NPNF¹ 3:93).

51. Ibid., 5.8–9.10 (NPNF¹ 3:92).

52. Ibid., 7.5.9 (NPNF¹ 3:110).

In order to illustrate the relations suggested in the Trinity, Augustine uses different metaphors, some taken from the human mind or psyche. The reason he resorts to the human mind is that humans are created in the image of God, “and His image must be found in it.”⁵³ The human mind mirrors for Augustine something of the relations suggested by the divine Trinity. For instance, he uses the concept of love: there is myself, and that which I love, and love itself. “For I do not love, except I love a lover; for there is not love where nothing is loved. Therefore there are three things—he who loves, and that which is loved, and love.” Then he uses the metaphor of the mind and love, saying: “There are two things, the mind and the love of it, when it loves itself; so there are two things, the mind and the knowledge of it, when it knows itself. Therefore the mind itself, and the love of it, and the knowledge of it, are three things, and these three are one; and when they are perfect they are equal.”⁵⁴ Another triad that Augustine uses to illustrate the Trinity is memory, understanding, and will. He writes: “My will also embraces my whole understanding and my whole memory, whilst I use the whole that I understand and remember. And, therefore, while all are mutually comprehended by each, and as wholes, each as a whole is equal to each as a whole, and each as a whole at the same time to all as wholes; and these three are one, one life, one mind, one essence.”⁵⁵

Augustine ends his work on the Trinity addressing God: “O Lord, our God, we believe in Thee, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the Truth would not say, Go, baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; unless Thou wast a Trinity.”⁵⁶ Then he asks to be set free from the multitude of speech, well knowing that his attempt to “describe” the Trinity is futile. We hear nothing here of three persons but of the “one God, God the Trinity.”

While the errors concerning perception of the Trinity are rejected, the positive elaboration of the doctrine is still not accomplished. Reinhold Seeberg (1859–1935) therefore concludes: “The whole procedure is a freely suspended speculation which moves in the heights of the immanent life of the Godhead bare of any relationship to the reality of divine revelation. It is therefore ultimately just a logical exercise in which persons are vaporized to relations and the threefoldness is in

53. *Ibid.*, 14.8.11 (*NPNF*¹ 3:189).

54. *Ibid.*, 9.2.2–4.4 (*NPNF*¹ 3:126–27).

55. *Ibid.*, 10.11.18 (*NPNF*¹ 3:143).

56. *Ibid.*, 15.28.51 (*NPNF*¹ 3:227).

the end nothing but the perception of the one God under various viewpoints.”⁵⁷ Though this evaluation may be somewhat exaggerated, two items remain clear for Augustine: there is a unity of the one God, and there are three divine entities, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is also warranted by the New Testament witness.

The *Filioque*

As mentioned above, Augustine considered the Spirit as proceeding from the Father and the Son. Yet this was contrary to the Nicene Creed, expanded in 381 in Constantinople, which states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. Tertullian already earlier mentioned that on the one hand “I believe the Spirit *to proceed* from no other source than from the Father through the Son,” and yet on the other hand that “the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son.”⁵⁸ This means that as a Western theologian he saw no contradiction in affirming the traditional conception that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, and the idea that the Spirit is a third from Father and Son. When we come to Bishop Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340–397), who was influential on Augustine, we read: “The Holy Spirit also, when He proceeds from the Father and the Son, is not separated from the Father nor separated from the Son.”⁵⁹ The Athanasian Creed again affirms the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son.

The reason the West insisted on the *filioque*, the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, becomes clear when we read in Ratramnus (d. ca. 868), a Benedictine monk in the abbey of Corbie in France, that the Greek theologians represent Arianism in matters of the Holy Spirit by “making levels in the Godhead” and “want the Holy Spirit to be inferior to the Father and the Son.”⁶⁰ We remember that in 381 the *homoousia* of the Spirit was not affirmed, while the West evidently favored such a move, as we can see from the *filioque*. Orthodox theologians maintained the original wording of the Nicene Creed as agreed on in 381, while Rome reluctantly agreed to the *filioque*. This change in the creed was first introduced by Charlemagne (747/48–814) at a local synod of Aachen in 809 for his empire and finally accepted since 1014 by Rome for liturgical use. As the practice of chanting the

57. Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 6th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965), 2:162–63.

58. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 4, 8 (ANF 3:599, 603).

59. Ambrose, *On the Holy Trinity* 1.11.120 (NPNF¹ 10:109).

60. Ratramnus, *Against Greek Opposition* 1.3 (PL 121:220).

Latin creed at Mass spread in the West, the *filioque* became a part of the liturgy. This practice was adopted in Charlemagne's court in 798 and spread throughout his empire. This led to the alienation of the East from the West, since the Orthodox Church claimed that one cannot unilaterally change a creed that was adopted by the whole church. There was still another matter, as Patriarch Photios I of Constantinople (ca. 810–893/94) explains: if the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, then this leads to two divine principles, and the unity of the Godhead is dissolved in favor of a twofoldness. Photios called this a return to “atheism,” since it repeated the unholy “dogma of polytheism.”⁶¹

The different arguments of Photios against the *filioque* provided enough ammunition against the West that in 1054 it finally came to a break between East and West and the excommunication of each by the other. A large part of the dissension was due to the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople and the assertion of the primacy of Rome over the whole church. Nevertheless, the disagreement over the *filioque* has played an important role until the present. The Second Council of Lyons pronounced in 1274: “We condemn and disprove those who presume to deny that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from Father and Son.”⁶² Yet the Roman Catholic Church has in recent times moved beyond this condemnation. The Vatican Declaration *Dominus Iesus* of 2000 no longer mentions the *filioque*, and in commemoration of the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the Council of Constantinople in 1981, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) made the *filioque* in the Roman liturgy optional. But now we have jumped ahead of the story.

61. Photius, *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* 11 (PG 102:291). See also the extensive treatment of the *filioque* by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 183–200.

62. Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 282.

