| **Critical Essay**<br>Outline and comment on the development of the Trinity to the end of the Patristic era.<br><br>(Maximum 2500 words) |
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**Introduction**

The widespread doctrine of the Trinity is a well supported doctrine within the Christian faith. This was not always the case. The Trinity doctrine knows a turbulent history if it comes to establishment. The intention of this paper is to exert a closer look into the development of the Trinity doctrine.

The Trinity doctrine is rooted in a number of meaningful sources which go back to the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) Scriptures, as well to early liturgies, short credal statements, and worship practises. All these sources, and the overshadowing rule of faith within the early Church, handed the church fathers the necessary tools to contemplate the reality of God, who must exist as both a unity and a trinity (Hall and Olson 2002:15).

As the development of this doctrine will be discussed, the emphasis will be on a part of the patristic era (c.100-381AD). Within this exploration, comments and critical analyses will be given on different viewpoints on the matter.

**Modern opposition**

Different groups—mostly anti-trinitarian groups, such as the Mormons—argue that the main source of this doctrine can be found at the Nicene council in AD 325, with Emperor Constantine as its main patron. Hopkins, who advocates the Mormon's viewpoint on the Trinity, points out that the Trinity doctrine has its roots in a pagan tradition as that was very tempting in an overarching Greek thinking society. Furthermore, he states that the Romans threatened to destroy the Christians if they did not explain their theology in Greek terms (Hopkins 2006:81). This is a faulty representation of the facts, as will become apparent through the next paragraphs.

**Root of trinitarian thinking**

Trinitarian thinking was already latent in the early Church—attempts were made to link Christ's relation to the Father. Throughout the Scriptures one can discover several indications of the plurality of God (e.g. Genesis 1:1-2, 1:26-27, Isaiah 6:8). At the same time God is referred to as 'Father' twenty times in the OT. As the early Christians tried to understand this concept, they had to consider that it was God who said that he was one (e.g. Exodus 20:2-3).

According to Wright (2001:75), Theophilus (c.120-190AD) was the first recorded Christian writer who used the word '*trias*' (trinity) in reference to the deity. Wright states that

> "This account had undoubted apologetic value. Not only was the eternity of God's Reason-Word vindicated, but also no change or division in God was implied in his mind's being expressed or uttered as word in engagement with the cosmos."

However—although Wright is correctly assuming that Theophilus was the first (recorded) writer who used the word 'trinity'—Theophilus did not use this word in the same way modern theology would understand it. Theophilus contributed this word to God, his Word (*Logos*), and his Wisdom (*Sophia*)—Word and Wisdom represented God's hands during creation. He did not write of plurality within the Godhead, rather it was an attempt to explain (to his atheist friend, Autolycus) the role of the three (the Father, Christ, and the Spirit) through a metaphor taken from the creation account (cf. Theophilus 2012, Rogers 2000:71-80). Nevertheless, Theophilus' writings do show that the word

'*trias*' was already in use.

Rather than using the word 'trinity', early Christian writers tried to explain the rationale behind this rule of faith. Christians baptised converts in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19, cf. Didache 7:3). Not only this phrase but many others hints, which are to be found in the Gospels and letters (e.g. John 1:1-14, Hebrews 1:2-3), forced the Christians to formulate their beliefs. Many of these attempts came through letters, the author of 2 Clement (c.100AD) for example, writes in 1:1;

> "Brethren, it is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God..." (2 Clement 2012).

Another example can be found in the epistle of Barnabas (c.100-150AD), who implies in 5:5 that

Jesus is pre-existent:

> "...unto whom [Jesus] God said from the foundation of the world, Let us make man after our image and likeness..." (Barnabas 2012).

## Different understandings

The necessity of a coherent doctrine became more apparent during the third century. Because of a non-coherent doctrine, different ideas started to develop and spread among Christians.

### *Logos theologians*
A widespread teaching was that of the early Gentile Christian theologians. This group expounded on the concept of Christ as the *Logos*. Although completely legitimate to see Christ as the *Logos* (John 1:1-18), the proponents of this theory treated Christ as inferior (Subordinationism) to God. They saw Christ as an intermediary between God and creation. McGrath states that early Christians wanted to annotate the richness and profundity of their impressions and experiences of Christ. This could not be done in one simple term and thus the Christians might have used ideas from paganism. McGrath illustrates a situation, where Christians had to address to the Greek philosophy and ideas, in order to get the message across. He notes that the concept of 'Messiah' and 'the Son of God' already existed among the Jews—this made it easier to evangelise them. In the case of the Gentiles, the Christians just simply used the Gentiles' terminology to make the message more comprehensible (McGrath 1997:57-58).

This sounds a feasible assumption, but the question arises why this terminology was not used by the Jewish Christians. The concept of Christ as inferior to God was merely a misinterpretation in the Greek orientated minds of many Gentile Christians. The Greek philosophers basically stated that an intellectual system (*logos*) could explain how a transcendent supreme principle could relate to the material cosmos. Taken this in account, it was not solely an evangelistic tactic but a deeply rooted philosophy which came forth out of the Stoics as well as Platonists philosophers (cf. Freeman 2004:576-578).

### *Marcion*
Another doctrine was that of Marcion (c.110-160AD), the son of a bishop from Pontus. Marcion argued that the Gods of the OT and the NT were distinct—the God of the NT was superior to the

God of the OT. He came to this conclusion because the God of the OT seemed to be more violent than the God that Jesus preached. Furthermore, Marcion argued that the God of the OT was particularily committed to only one people, and in the NT, Jesus annotates a more approachable God. Marcion advocated a break between Judaism and Christianity. He did not only reject the law but he rejected the Hebrew Bible along with any connection between Judaism and Christianity.

It was Irenaeus (115-202AD) who strongly argued against Marcion, and in this Irenaeus did not stand alone: Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandra, and Origen, among others, wrote against Marcion and his followers. Marcion was excommunicated in 144 AD, but his ideas continued to be very influential (cf. Barton 2007:67-81).

*Dynamic and Modalistic Monarchianism*
In his work 'Against Praxeas', Tertullian (c.213AD) asserted the 'threeness' aspect of God, being the first to use the word 'Trinity'. However, he did not have a full and accurate understanding of the Trinity, his views being tinged with Subordinationism. Nonetheless, he was the first to develop the formula of 'one substance in three persons' (*treis Hypostases, Homoousios*). Tertullian was battling Monarchians who opted for the unity of God and denied Trinitarianism. Monarchianism existed in two forms, namely Dynamic Monarchianism (Adoptionism) and Modalistic Monarchianism (Sabellianism).

The first theory, developed by Paul of Samosata, viewed Jesus as a man who was given special power by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Paul of Samosata used the word '*homoousios*' different than Tertullian did. Paul of Samosata used the word in the sense of
> "a common substance out of which both Father and Son proceeded, or which it divided between them..." (Catholic Encyclopedia[a] 2009).

The church fathers condemned Paul of Samosata at the synods of Antioch in 264 and 268 AD for this heresy (Eusebius 1989:402).

The second theory was more influential—attempting not only to maintain the unity of God, but also the full deity of Christ by asserting that the Father became incarnated in the Son. In this attempt however, Modallists interpreted the biblical presentation of a multi-personal God completely as what they thought monotheism was—God as an undifferentiated uni-personal Being. Sabellius was a strong defender of Modalism. Schaff (1998:262) annotates that Sabellius taught successive or developmental Modalism, which teaches that God can manifest His 'modes' simultaneously.

If one takes this theory to its logical end, it is not comprehensible with the Bible. To who did Christ address his cry on the cross for example, or how could Jesus be 'forsaken' if he was the Father—did the Father suffer nothing because he left the physical body? (Tertullian 1998:30).

**Nicea council**
Around 318AD, Arius defended what he believed was the absolute unity and oneness of God. He separated the Son completely from the Father by stating that the Son was an exalted creature—raised above all that was created, but still a creature. This teaching led to a major controversy because it was contrary to the central teaching of Christian faith as received from the apostles. Alexander of Alexandria organised a council, which condemned Arius in 320AD. Arius fled to Palestine where he continued his teaching. He became friends with Eusebius of Nicomedia, who rejected the condemnation by Alexander's council, during a council in the east—as a result both

sides sought collaborators, which led to even more strife (Morris 2011:53).

Emperor Constantine tried to persuade Arius and Alexander to stop their strife, and to come to a compromise. He asked his advisor on ecclesiastical concerns, Hosius, the Bishop of Cordoba to end the battle. Hosius supervised a council in Antioch (324AD). It was this council that condemned Arius and his doctrines again. However, the outcome did not settle the question between Alexander and Arius. Constantine decided to call a council of all the bishops in his empire. The purpose of this council was to debate and to establish a universal statement of faith and thus restore the unity of the Church (Wand 1994:151-152).

The council of Nicea was attended by about 300 bishops. Throughout this council it was Athanasius, the deacon and personal secretary of Alexander of Alexandria, who contributed greatly in stating and defending the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. It was Eusebius of Nicomedia who set forth an Arian statement of faith. This was rejected by the majority of the council. Eusebius of Caecarea came forth with his own creed, which was quiet about the actual point of debate. His statements were very superficial, and thus unacceptable for the attending bishops.
To exclude Arianistic ideas, the bishops combined the definition of the Son with the phrases 'of the substance of the Father' and 'of one substance of the Father' (*homoousios*). Carter (2006:140) notes that it has been said that Constantine intervened on behalf of this term. Carter illustrates that if he did, it could not have been out of a firm theological understanding about the implication of this word. It was more likely that Constantine was more interested in unity and politics. The council concluded the creed with a warning of condemnation for Arianistic teachers. After this all bishops had to sign the creed. This was a new phenomenon and illustrates the importance of this debate.

Arians argued that the word '*homoousios*' can not be found in the Scriptures. This line of arguing still prevails:

> "If the Lord meant to convey the Nicene concept of God, He would certainly have used the word *homo-ousios* here [John 10:30]... He [Jesus] did not teach that He was *homo-ousios* (or co-substantial) with the Father" (Hopkins 2006:97, cf. Cave 1996:17-19).

This critic can be regarded as irrelevant because the word was never meant to be Scriptural—it was an attempt to expound the term, which was regarded as the best way to express the biblical description of the Father-Son relationship. The second problem Arians had was the fact that Paul of Samosata, and his usage of the word, got condemned in the council of Antioch. Although the Arians had a seemingly strong point with this objection, it did not hold. The word '*homoousios*' was not interpreted the same way as Paul of Samosata's definition, which derived from Aristotle's interpretation. Blaising annotates that it was

> "clear that the fathers at Nicea did not think of *homoousios* from the standpoint of Aristotle's category of primary *ousia*, in which *ousia* is condidered simply as an individual thing" (Blaising[a] 2001:574).


**The Conflict of 340-380**

Arius and his followers had been exiled by the council of Nicea and the matter seemed to be solved. However, Emperor Constantine later recalled this exile and gave Arius the chance to clear himself. Williams notes that Arius' party annotated that their faith was not different from that of the other bishops. In their statement, about the word '*homoousios*', they declared that they have examined the

implications and were committed to preserve the peace of the Church and avoid heresy. In fact, with this statement, they cleverly avoided to answer the question on acceptance of the word (Williams 2001:73).

The battle continued, and at the end of summer 328AD, Athanasius, who was now Bishop of Alexandria, ventured on an ecclesiastical battle. The Bithynian synod (328AD) did an appeal on Athanasius for Arius' restoration. Athanasius refused, even after several warnings by Emperor Constantine and Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was in high favour with the Emperor. After a slander campaign, organised by Eusebius, Constantine banished Athanasius to Gaul. On 22 May, 337 Constantine died, after having been baptised by Eusebius. Athanasius could come back from exile. The new emperor, Constantius, was strongly influenced by Eusebius, and as result spent much of his time in persecuting Athanasius (Catholic Encyclopedia[b] 2009).

The Council of Nicea had not clarified the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. After 360AD this became a topic of debate. Again it was Athanasius who maintained the deity of the Spirit in his letters which were sent to correct the heresy of Tropici, who taught that God created the Spirit out of nothing. This teaching appeared in the so-called '*Homoiousion*' Party (c.373AD). This group tried to compromise between Arianism and Nicene orthodoxy. *Homoiousion* means 'like the Father', but not in the sense of 'the same essence'. The Cappadocians opposed this teaching and taught the full deity and *homoousia* of the Spirit, who is not begotten but proceeds from the Father.

### Constantinople council 381AD

Theodosius became emperor in 379AD. Theodosius was, in contrast with his predecessor, in favour of Nicene Christianity. Theodosius expelled Bishop Demophilus of Constantinople, and commissioned Meletius Bishop of Antioch, and Gregory of Nazianzu Bishop of Constantinople. In May 381, Theodosius summoned an ecumenical council at Constantinople to repair the schism between East and West.

This Council marked the end of more than fifty years of the political and theological supremacy of Arianism. The developed pneumatology of Athanasius and the Cappadocians became, together with the reaffirmation of the Nicene orthodoxy, imperative to the Council of Constantinople. With this the Church completed the trinitarian doctrine (Blaising[b] 2001:191-192). Although Arianism was weakened, its influence is still visible in several modern groups like Mormonism and the Jehovah witnesses.

### Conclusion

Although the word 'trinity' (*trias*) can be found in early writings, the early church fathers (100-160AD) did not formulate any clear statements concerning the trinitarian theology as it is now. There were many writers who tried to expound on the rationale behind the praxis of worship within the Christian community, but the conclusions were still not homogeneous.

Different ideas developed which denied the deity of Christ. The Church did not tolerate this in whatever form, and universally condemned these doctrines (Dalcour 2005:149-150). These different viewpoints forced the church fathers to formulate their beliefs in sound credal statements.

Emperor Constantine, mostly concerned about unity within his empire, summoned the first ecumenical Council in Nicea. It was this Council which came to a universal creed on the Trinity.

Through politics and slander, the Arianistic party maintained their domination for many years, which came to an end during the second ecumenical Council at Constantinople, where the trinitarian doctrine was completed.

Opponents of trinitarian thinking regularly argue that this doctrine originated, strongly influenced by emperor Constantine, at the Council of Nicea. A more honest evaluation is to say that the early church fathers did their utmost best to protect the integrity of the Gospel (Morris 2011:47). The Church developed the basics of this doctrine long before Constantine, who, as it turns out, was in strong favour of Arianism.

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