

Adam Pastor, Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptist

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In 1546 an unnamed Flemish anti-Trinitarian visited the colony of radical Anabaptists who had taken refuge in Poland. G.H. Williams¹ surmises that this may well have been the unitarian Mennonite, Adam Pastor (b. ca. 1510). Pastor, who on joining the Anabaptists had changed his name from Rudolph Martens, was a former Roman Catholic priest. He had thrown in his lot with the Anabaptists in 1533, probably in Munster. He was ordained as an evangelist and soon distinguished himself by opposing the spiritualism of David Joris. At this stage of his career Pastor worked closely with Menno Simons and Dietrich Philips. In 1547, however, it became apparent that Pastor differed sharply from the Melchiorite Christology of Menno. The Melchiorites believed that even the flesh of Christ was not derived from Mary, but had descended from heaven. For Pastor this belief seemed plainly to threaten the humanity of Christ. Pastor declared himself a unitarian, holding that Christ did not exist as the Son of God before his conception, and that his divinity was derived from the fact that God dwelt in him, not because of an “eternal generation.” A meeting to discuss these differences was held at Emden in 1547, and the following year, at Goch, Simons and Philips officially excommunicated Pastor for his unorthodox Christology.

Dietrich Philips himself held to a form of subordinationist Christology with his belief that the Son had been given a body by the Word sometime before the birth of Christ. Pastor rejected the notion of personal preexistence in any form and espoused what Raymond Brown² appropriately

calls “conception Christology.” It should be noted that G.H. Williams’ reference to Pastor’s Christology as “adoptionism”³ is not strictly accurate. Adoptionism, as generally defined, posits that Christ *became* the Son of God at his baptism. “Conception Christology” describes the belief that Jesus’ miraculous conception in Mary brought him into being as Son of God. It therefore rejects as unscriptural the Chalcedonian and Athanasian belief in the “eternal generation” and preexistence of the Son.

The “conception Christology” of Adam Pastor corresponds with what Raymond Brown maintains is the Christology of Matthew and Luke:

In the commentary [*The Birth of the Messiah*] I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God’s Son.⁴

It appears, then, that Pastor’s view of Christ not only coincided with that of Matthew and Luke but anticipated the modern admission that “conception Christology” is, in fact, the Christology of the Synoptic gospels: Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah because of the virginal conception. He preexisted “ideally” in God’s plan but was not literally alive before his birth (as a Second Divine Being in the Trinity).

Adam Pastor was “earnest and critical, but remained mild, reverent and comprehensive in his arguments against the Nicene formulation.”⁵ His influence spread to Cracow where many of the same Scriptural arguments reappear amongst the Polish unitarian Anabaptists. *The Racovian Catechism* of 1574 acknowledges the importance of Pastor’s work in the following note:

Another antitrinitarian of this period was Adam Pastor, a man of great learning, who had previously borne the name of Rudolphus Martin. He belonged to the Anabaptists of Frisia, from whose society he was excluded about 1546, on account of his sentiments concerning the Trinity, having before held a public disputation at Goch in the Duchy of Cleves, with Theodore Philips and Menno Simonis. He maintained that the Father alone was the true God. . . . In the year 1546, a native of Holland, who went by the name of Spiritus, but who is supposed on good grounds to have been Adam

¹ *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962, 416.

² *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Chapman, 1977, 141.

1994, A Journal from the Radical Reformation, Spring 1994, Vol. 3, No. 3.

³ *The Radical Reformation*, 492.

⁴ 331, fn. 17. See also *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 1990, 1358.

⁵ *Radical Reformation*, 493.

Pastor, already noticed above, settled at Cracow. Being one day in the library of John Tricessius, a person of high celebrity in that city, distinguished for his literary acquirements, who had invited him to meet some of the most eminent men of the place, he took down by accident a book wherein he observed prayers addressed to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He immediately exclaimed—“What! Have you then three Gods?” The conversation to which this question led made a deep impression on the minds of all the party, but especially on that of Andrew Fricius Modrevius, the king’s secretary, who shortly afterwards, in consequence of prosecuting his inquiries upon the subject, abandoned the doctrine of the Trinity, and appeared as the open advocate of Unitarianism in a work which he published under the title of *Sylvae*. This proved an important event to the new settlers, and greatly contributed to the spread and establishment of their new opinions.⁶

Sources of information on Adam Pastor are limited. We continue to build our picture of him by adding the observations of H.E. Dosker. He starts by noting that Pastor’s mind was:

too clear, his eye too sharp, his thoughts too profound to be deceived or attracted by the vagaries of David Joris’ theology.⁷

Adam Pastor was:

unquestionably the most brilliant man and scholar in the entire Dutch Anabaptist community of his day. In him we find all the boldness, all the self-assertiveness of the later Dutch “Moderns,” and a forecast of many of their doctrines. . . . He was totally averse to the Munster spirit, evidently a man of clean life and kindly disposition. He sided with the other anabaptists in the rejection of infant baptism; but was against the overvaluation of adult baptism on faith.⁸

Pastor’s reputation survived for many years. As late as 1628 some Flemings, the “Contra-house-buyers,” are mentioned as adherents of Arius and Adam Pastor.⁹ (It should be noted that Pastor was not an Arian.

⁶ *The Racovian Catechism* of 1574, trans. Thomas Rees, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818, viii, xix.

⁷ *The Dutch Anabaptists*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Arius believed that Christ preexisted as a created spirit. Pastor’s “conception Christology” placed the beginning of the Son of God at his conception.)

The fullest account of Adam Pastor’s work is given by A.H. Newman in a paper read to the American Society of Church History, on December 28, 1914. Newman notes that:

many of the most conscientious and profoundly religious thinkers of the 16th century [were led to] reject simultaneously the baptism of infants and the traditional doctrine of the Trinity . . . The doctrine of the tripersonality of God as set forth in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, involving the coeternity and consubstantiality of the Son with the Father and the personality of the Holy Spirit, they subjected to searching and fundamental criticism.¹⁰

This trend may be a continuation of the Christology of the earlier medieval Paulicians who in turn were linked with the “Antiochene” Christology of the third-century Paul of Samosata, a “heretical” bishop of Antioch. Certainly, the rejection of the doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son in favor of Luke’s simpler Christology (Luke 1:32-35) was attractive as an answer to the semi-Eutychian Christology of Luther and the Melchiorite Christology, both of which threatened the humanity of the Savior. The doctrine of “conditional immortality,” the belief that the dead are asleep in their graves until the resurrection at the Parousia, tended to accompany the revised Christology.¹¹

Adam Pastor, who was born in Dorpen, Westphalia ca. 1510, was “among the most learned, the most Scriptural, the most logical and the most devout” of those who rejected orthodox views of the two natures in Christ.¹² Dr. F. Pijper of Leyden describes Pastor’s exegesis and insight into the Bible as:

sound, honorable and unprejudiced in a degree rarely met in the sixteenth century, as, though learned, absolutely free from the slightest suggestion of scholasticism and dogmatism, as well as

¹⁰ *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, 2nd Series, Vol. V, 75.

¹¹ It still does, in groups like the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith). This denomination is pleased to note that some Lutherans are now speaking in favor of conditional immortality. It is a little known fact that the doctrine of “soul-sleep” which caused Calvin such consternation was also held by both Wycliffe and Tyndale.

¹² *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, 2nd Series, Vol. V, 78.

from sharpness and arrogance in polemics, as warm and devotional, as well as vital, fresh and original in thought.¹³

There is no doubt that Pastor was taken with Erasmus' advocacy of freedom of exploration in all matters of doctrine. This pursuit of truth led him to reject much of the teaching traditionally connected with the faith.

After his excommunication at the hands of Menno Simons in 1547, several of the anti-paedobaptist congregations sided with Adam Pastor and from this time onwards he was regarded as the head of an Anabaptist sect known as "Adam Pastorians" or "Adamites." A number of these congregations persisted until the early seventeenth century when:

a large proportion of the Mennonites under Socinian influence became anti-Trinitarian in sentiment. . . . Johannes Anastasius in 1554 places Pastor side by side with Menno as the head of an Anabaptist party. A year later Cassander wrote, "Two outstanding leaders of the Anabaptists today, Menno Simons and Adam Pastor, are as it were in a state of civil war with each other."¹⁴

Pastor's only written work, of which a single copy survives, is his *Underscheit tusschen rechte unde valsche leer der twistigen articulen, de hyr vor angetenkt sind: dorch A.P.*¹⁵ The *Underscheit* consists of 156 large octavo pages in the *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*. The work is supplemented by a shorter *Disputation on the Deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

The *Underscheit* deals with thirteen different doctrinal topics: God, Christ, the atonement, forgiveness and salvation, mediation and intercession, the time of grace, God-sent and self-running preachers, repentance, faith, baptism, the Supper, human institutions and divine institutions, true and false brethren, and true and false books. There follows an appeal to administrative authorities to permit a complete liberty of conscience.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82, 83.

¹⁵ *The Difference Between True and False Teaching on the Controversial Topics Given Here in Summary: by A.P.* This writer's ability to read Dutch is limited to his knowledge of German, so that only the gist of the section on Christology can be described. The material is so familiar to his own tradition that it is easy to follow the anti-Trinitarian case made by Pastor.

It is doubtful whether Roger Williams, nearly a hundred years later, presented the Scriptural argument for liberty of conscience more clearly than we have it in the work before us.¹⁶

Pastor argues that if God wants to punish people for erroneous teaching He does not require the aid of human beings.

Adam Pastor brings together an exhaustive array of biblical texts which teach the oneness and soleness of God, and those which explicitly distinguish Jesus Christ from God. John 17:3 is a favorite verse, as always amongst evangelical unitarians: "This is eternal life: that they may know Thee [the Father], the only true God, and him whom Thou didst send, Jesus Christ." He adds I Cor. 8:6 and I Tim. 2:5 which likewise expressly define the Father as the One God as distinct from Jesus who is the "man Messiah." He insists that Jesus and the Holy Spirit cannot be regarded as divine personalities in the same sense as the Father. God is a single person. Obviously, with his stress on the humanity of Jesus, Pastor disagrees with Menno Simons' "Eutychiean" view that Christ's body was a "human body" but not "the body of a man." Further, Pastor objects to the notion that the eternal Logos, conceived of as a Person of the Trinity, could have been changed into flesh. How could He, as God, have died? How could He have been tempted? Pastor wants us to believe that only the Father has immortality inherent within Himself and that Jesus was foreknown before his birth (I Pet. 1:20), preexisting "notionally" or "ideally" rather than actually.

Pastor was a convinced anti-paedobaptist. He remarked that the baptism of infants years before they can act on their faith is as problematic as if Jesus had given bread to the disciples and asked them to delay eating it until ten years later. Newman is full of praise for Pastor's handling of this subject:

No modern discussion of this sort with which the present writer is familiar handles the matter anything like so ably and exhaustively.¹⁷

Pastor's dominant concern, however, is with the Oneness of God. His Christology is akin to that of Paul of Samosata and Servetus before him, the whole Socinian school in Poland, documented in *The Racovian*

¹⁶ Newman, 84.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

Catechism, and the present-day Christadelphians and Church of God (Abrahamic Faith). The latter denominations arose in the mid-nineteenth century, apparently without knowledge of Pastor's work. John Biddle and Joseph Priestley in England advanced precisely the same arguments as Pastor, as did later many congregationalist unitarians in New England.

Pastor's treatment of biblical passages inevitably warms the heart of those whose spiritual pilgrimage has led them away from traditional Nicene formulations about the nature of God. Striking is the fact, as H. E. Dosker notes, that:

when we read Pastor, we have to rub our eyes to see whether we are awake or dreaming. What he has to say is so startlingly modern that it bewilders the reader.¹⁸

Pastor's work is a very remarkable anticipation of the modern debates over Christology. James Dunn's *Christology in the Making* and J.A.T. Robinson's *The Human Face of God* and *The Priority of John* arrive at conclusions similar to Pastor's: that Scripture, read without the benefit of Nicene presuppositions, does not lead us to Trinitarianism, but to the "Jewish" unitary monotheism unmistakably confirmed by Jesus himself in Mark 12:29ff. Pastor's Christology is followed by the contemporary Dutch theologians, Hendrikus Berkhof (*The Christian Faith*) and Ellen Flesseman (*Believing Today*). Under this system, the humanity of Jesus is rescued from the abstractions of traditional Christology, while none of his authority as God's divine agent, in whom the fulness of Deity dwells, is lost.

In the light of Pastor's protest against traditional views of the person of Christ, it may be that the remarkable observation of Maurice Wiles should gain a wider hearing:

Christological doctrine has never in practice been derived simply by way of logical inference from the statements of Scripture. . . . *The Church has not usually in practice (whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory) based its Christology exclusively on the witness of the New Testament.*¹⁹

¹⁸ *The Dutch Anabaptists*, 165.

¹⁹ *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM Press, 1974, 54, 55, emphasis added.

We are reminded of the admission of a prominent Trinitarian theologian, who noted that the Bible supports unitarianism and not Trinitarianism:

[In the debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] the unitarians as well as their opponents accepted the Bible as containing revelation given in the form of propositions. . . . On the basis of the argument which both sides held in common, the unitarians had the better case.²⁰

Adam Pastor was one of many Anabaptists who were not afraid to question the substance of "received" doctrine. He represents a well-defined tradition, emerging at significant junctures of church history, which laments the tendency of the Church to read into the Bible the tradition of the "Fathers." Pastor's witness calls the Church in every generation to a reexamination of the nature of God and Jesus in Scripture. He demonstrates a healthy independence characteristic of Anabaptism and a determination to restore truth which he believed had been buried by dogma.

²⁰ Hodgson, Leonard, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Scribner, 1944, 220, 223. For a discussion of the Trinity in the Bible, see Anthony Buzzard's "The Problem of Pre-existence in John in Relation to Traditional Christology: An Exegetical and Historical Examination," March, 1990 (available from Atlanta Bible College).