

# The Racovian Catechism and Socinian Christology

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The current Christological debate sometimes proceeds as if its questioning of “orthodox” positions were a brand new phenomenon. It is important that we recognize the historical roots of the modern departures from orthodox formulation in Christology. By far the most thorough attempt to redefine the doctrine of Christ in biblical terms is provided by the Racovian Catechism which represented the concerted effort of sixteenth-century European dissenters to defend their position against mainstream Christianity. This paper examines the work of the Polish brethren at Rakow and surveys their arguments for a definition of Christ different from that of the Church Councils.

## I. THE ROOTS OF ANTI-TRINITARIANISM IN POLAND

Poland, at the height of its power and prosperity in the 16th century, offered a unique religious-political environment for reformers and radicals alike. The Polish nobility enjoyed certain rights which made their homes and estates inviolable even to the king. Religious radicals could find safety and toleration on the estate of a sympathetic noble.<sup>1</sup> Under these conditions the Reformed Church, the unwilling parent of the Socinians, flourished.

<sup>1</sup>Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*, New York: Penguin Books, 1964, 199.

Anti-trinitarian tendencies were not unknown to Poland before the advent of the Minor Reformed Church. Early in the 16th century, Cardinal Hugo had questioned the validity of prayer to the Holy Spirit. In 1539, Katherine Weigel, the wife of a Polish businessman, was executed for holding unorthodox beliefs concerning the Trinity. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Jews were carrying out active propaganda for their faith in Russia and Poland.<sup>2</sup> In 1546, a Flemish Anti-trinitarian (possibly Adam Pastor) visited Cracow,<sup>3</sup> where he is thought to have disseminated his views among some of the leading citizens of that city.

These anti-trinitarian tendencies also invaded the Reformed Church. At a Reformed synod in Secemin in 1556, an individual known as Gonesius sought admission to its membership. On examination, the synod found that he rejected the Trinity and the Athanasian creed, and he asserted that God was God the Father, and that Christ was of separate substance and less than the Father.<sup>4</sup> Not unexpectedly, the synod rejected him. Thus, Gonesius, though he did not become one of the leaders of Anti-trinitarianism in Poland, was one of its first outspoken representatives. The thinking of some was stirred by the witness of Gonesius. A most notable example is Gregory Paulus, who later became the leader of the cause in Little Poland.<sup>5</sup>

It is ironic that the most destruction suffered by the Nicene faith was precipitated by the activity of the ultra-orthodox theologian Francesco Stancaro. Stancaro was accused, not unjustly, of propagating a form of modalistic Sabellianism.<sup>6</sup> In defending the orthodox position against Stancaro, some in the Polish Reformed Church were unwittingly led down the road to tritheism.<sup>7</sup> This same road would lead others to ditheism and even unitarianism. George Blandrata, one spokesman for the Reformed opposition to Stancaro and a member of the Italian diaspora, proposed a form of tritheism to counter Stancaro.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that other members of the Italian diaspora were present during this

<sup>2</sup>E. M. Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947, 283-284.

<sup>3</sup>G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962, 416.

<sup>4</sup>Wilbur, 286.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>6</sup>Williams, 669.

<sup>7</sup>Wilbur, 311.

<sup>8</sup>Williams, 658.

protracted controversy. John Paul Alciati, Bernardine Ochino, and John Gentile as well as Blandrata were suspected of being less than devoted to the orthodox understanding of the Trinity.

To summarize, two factions developed in this controversy in the Polish Reformed Church. The conservative wing or orthodox Calvinists were led by Stanislas Sarnicki. The liberals and those who could be defined as Anti-trinitarians were led by the previously mentioned Gregory Paulus.

In 1565, an attempt was made at reconciliation. However, the two camps were found to be irreconcilable. In 1565, at the synod of Brzeziny, the liberals met together as a separate body. This is considered to be the beginning of organized unitarianism.<sup>9</sup> The liberal wing came to be known as the Minor Reformed Church.

## II. FAUSTUS SOCINUS

Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) was born in Siena to a family of famed jurists. Of significance in Faustus' theological development was his uncle Laelius Socinus (1525-1562). After the death of his uncle, Socinus inherited his books, writings, and notes. Faustus shared a number of beliefs in common with the Minor Reformed Church. Consequently, he applied for membership at the synod of Rakow in 1580. His request was denied chiefly because he refused to see the necessity of baptism which the Minor Church required. Even though Socinus was to spend the rest of his life in Poland, residing mainly in Cracow, and even though he was intimately involved with the Minor Church until his death, it is believed that he was never admitted, officially, to its membership or participated in the sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Socinus' independence from the Minor Church, his significance lies in the powerful influence he exercised over its theology. His impact was so great that we know the Minor Reformed Church by his name today. Through his writings, his preaching at synods and official gatherings, and his communication to individuals either by word or letter, Socinus harmonized differences, promoted final agreement, and established a model for much of subsequent Anti-trinitarianism.<sup>11</sup> Socinus was

able to "bring over nearly the whole body to his own sentiments concerning the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the importance of Socinus is found in his ability to consolidate and unify the Minor Reformed Church of Poland

## III. THE ZENITH AND NADIR OF SOCINIANISM IN POLAND

The vitality of the Socinians is embodied in their settlement at Rakow. Rakow was founded in 1569 under the auspices of a sympathetic nobleman. In time, Rakow came to be considered the capital of unitarianism in Poland.<sup>13</sup> The publishing house for the movement came to be located in Rakow. It produced books and tracts in a number of different languages. A school was established at Rakow in 1602. At one time, the school had an attendance of over 1000 students (one third of noble families).<sup>14</sup> From 1603-37, an annual synod of delegates met at Rakow. The congregations in Poland numbered as many as three hundred.

A change of political fortunes signaled an end to that movement in Poland. In 1638, the school at Rakow was suppressed, the Socinians deprived of their church and printing press, and the teachers and preachers of the movement outlawed. Again, in 1658, the Diet of Warsaw prohibited the confession and propagation of "Arianism" on the pain of death. The Socinian reaction was migration to Hungary, Germany, England, and the Netherlands. Others responded by rejoining the Roman Church. Nevertheless, others continued to meet secretly in Poland.

## IV. THE RACOVIAN CATECHISM

In 1574, George Schomann, the pastor of the Minor Reformed Church in Cracow, published a catechism. It was a landmark in the development of unitarian doctrine since it was the first attempt of the Anti-trinitarians in Poland to express their doctrine in detail.<sup>15</sup>

The work of revising the catechism fell partly to Socinus himself. However, at the time of his death in 1604, the work was incomplete. The

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<sup>9</sup>Wilbur, 331.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 395.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 395, 405.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Rees, *The Racovian Catechism*, Lexington, KY: The American Theological Library, 1962, 30 (Translator's Introduction).

<sup>13</sup>Wilbur, 358.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 360.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 342.

catechism was finished, on the basis of Socinus' notes, by Valentin Schmalz, Hieronymus Moskorzowski, and Johann Volkel. It was first published in Polish in 1605, with other language translations following.

The two distinguishing marks of the catechism, apart from the doctrines themselves, are the appeal to right reason<sup>16</sup> and the extensive use and dependence on the Scriptures in the formulation of doctrine.

The Catechism became the chief mark of the Socinians. It "is not a catechism in the sense of being a book for religious instruction of the young, so much as a manual of doctrines in question and answer form, tended largely for purposes of propaganda and defense."<sup>17</sup>

#### V. THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE RACOVIAN CATECHISM

Is Jesus God? The Socinians answer, "... there cannot be more beings than one who possesses supreme dominion over all things."<sup>18</sup> This one supreme being is the Father of Jesus Christ. God the Father is the one true God. The Holy Spirit is the power of God.

Not unexpectedly, the Socinians reject the traditional description of God as a Trinity. To worship the Trinity is polytheism and is contrary to the way of salvation.<sup>19</sup> The writers of the catechism find error in the doctrine that "there is in God only one essence, but three persons."<sup>20</sup> Instead, it is asserted that "the essence of God is one, not in kind but in number . . . it cannot contain a plurality of persons, since a person is nothing else than an individual essence."<sup>21</sup>

Though the Socinians reject the doctrine that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, they acknowledge that Jesus is rightly called "God" in the Scriptures. He can be called God in the sense that he has received from that one God superior authority "in heaven and earth among men, power superior to all things human, or authority to sit in judgement upon other men."<sup>22</sup> Jesus, therefore, can be called God in some sense, but he is separate from and totally dependent on the one true God.

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<sup>16</sup>Rees, 103, 105 (Introduction to Catechism).

<sup>17</sup>Wilbur, 416.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Rees, *The Racovian Catechism*, 26.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

#### VI. THE ORIGIN OF CHRIST

If Jesus is not God in the orthodox sense, what kind of creature is he? The catechism states "that by nature he was truly man."<sup>23</sup> He was "a mortal man while he lived on earth."<sup>24</sup> Though Jesus was a man, he was not a "mere" man. He was truly unique.

Though by nature he was a man, he was, nevertheless, at the same time and even from his earliest origin, the only begotten Son of God. For being conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of a virgin, without the intervention of any human being, he had properly no father besides God: though considered in another light, simply according to the flesh, without respect to the Holy Spirit, of which he was conceived, and with which he was anointed, he had David for his father, and was therefore his son.<sup>25</sup>

The Socinians therefore were able to claim Jesus as being truly a man while, at the same time, preserving his supernatural conception and origin.

One question hotly debated among the early Anti-trinitarians concerned the preexistence of Jesus. Even if he were truly man, did he exist before his birth? The catechism reads, ". . . since he had necessarily a human nature, he could not be God, nor, indeed, have existed antecedently to his birth."<sup>26</sup>

Though Jesus was thought to be a man, it should not be assumed that the Socinians de-emphasized his uniqueness. In Socinian thought, as displayed in the catechism, Jesus' existence and work was the plan of God. Though Jesus was a man, he was different from all other men. He was "distinguished by the perfect holiness of his life, endued with divine wisdom and power, and was sent by the Father, with supreme authority on an embassy to mankind."<sup>27</sup> The catechism also states, "he is made to resemble, or, indeed, to equal God . . . he was not merely the *only-begotten* Son of God, but also a God on account of the divine power he displayed."<sup>28</sup> Though Christ had all things in his power, it was understood that the one

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 149 (also 92).

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

God was excepted. As a result of these beliefs, Christ was considered worthy of both worship and adoration.<sup>29</sup>

#### VII. CHRIST'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MAN

Though the offices of Christ are threefold (prophet, priest, and king), the purpose of Christ while he was on earth was that of the first. God, as the Socinians believed, was speaking and communicating his will to mankind through Christ.

Christ, as a human person, was prepared for this purpose. The titles “the image of God,” “the express image of God’s person,” and “the brightness of the glory of God” are “applied to Christ because God has made him the most like himself by the communication of the divine nature and glory.”<sup>30</sup>

The catechism teaches that an event early in the ministry of Jesus prepared him for his prophetic office. The translator of the catechism, Rees, writes in 1818, “The Polish Socinians held . . . that Jesus, after his baptism, was conveyed to heaven in order to receive the necessary instructions previously to his entering the duties of his sacred office.”<sup>31</sup> The Socinians themselves write:

By ascending into heaven, where he beheld his Father, and that life and happiness which he was to announce to us, where also he heard from the Father all those things which it would behoove him to teach, and being afterwards sent by him from heaven to the earth, he was most largely endowed with the Holy Spirit, through whose inspiration he proclaimed what he had learnt from the Father.<sup>32</sup>

Jesus, then, in Socinian theology, was God’s distinguished ambassador to mankind. His office as prophet consisted of “perfectly manifesting to us, confirming, and establishing the hidden will of God.”<sup>33</sup>

#### VIII. JESUS' ROLE IN SALVATION/ATONEMENT

The theology of the catechism denies that Christ died on the cross actually to purchase salvation or pay the debt of sin.<sup>34</sup> The Socinians insist

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 67 (translator’s fn. k.).

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

that “the Scriptures everywhere testify that God forgives men freely . . . but to a free forgiveness nothing is more opposite than . . . the payment of an equivalent price . . . where the creditor is satisfied . . . it cannot with truth be said that he freely forgives the debt.”<sup>35</sup>

In Socinian theology, Christ did not die in the place or in the stead of sinners, but he died on account of our offences.<sup>36</sup> In other words, “our sins were the cause of the death of Christ”<sup>37</sup> though he himself was guiltless. Jesus was the victim of the rage and fury of sin.

As a result of Christ’s obedience even to the cross, God made it the ground for forgiveness and the remission of sins.<sup>38</sup> In the Racovian Catechism, God forgives freely. He does not require satisfaction.<sup>39</sup> He could have any mode of forgiveness. He chose to make His acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice as the basis of forgiveness.

The practical results of Christ’s death, as the catechism teaches, is “that all sinners might be incited and drawn to Christ, seeking salvation in and by him alone who died for them.”<sup>40</sup> Also, that “God might in this manner testify his boundless love to the human race and might fully reconcile them to himself.”<sup>41</sup> For the Socinians, the death of Christ was in some measure part of the fulfillment of his prophetic office in that his death communicated God’s will to humankind and sought its response through it.

#### IX. THE PRESENT AND ESCHATOLOGICAL WORK OF CHRIST

Christ as the High Priest, as taught in the Minor Reformed Church, presently works in the Church and in the believer. Three points can summarize the work of Christ as High Priest in heaven. First, as a result of the efficacy of his death and his continual presence before God, he keeps his own from the guilt and punishment of sin.<sup>42</sup> Second, he continually protects us, and by his intercession averts the wrath of God from us.<sup>43</sup> Third, he delivers us from the servitude of sins by binding us

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 304-305.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 310-311.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 351.

to obedience, by acting as our example as one who submits to the will of God, and by working as the supreme overseer in the worship and service of God on earth.<sup>44</sup>

The kingly office of Christ, as reported by the catechism, has both a present and eschatological emphasis. God has raised him from the dead, taken him up into heaven, seated him at his right hand, and has put all things in his power.

“with the subjection of all things under his feet, and his supreme dominion and authority over all men and all things which excels in this, that Christ has absolute authority over our bodies and souls, and rules not only over men but also over angels, good and bad, and over death as well.”<sup>45</sup>

As king he governs, protects, and eternally saves those who believe in him.<sup>46</sup>

As for the eschatological work of Christ as King, the catechism reads, “He is constituted the judge of the quick and the dead.”<sup>47</sup> Further, “these words of Christ . . . teach, not only that the good shall be raised to life, but also the wicked shall be raised to condemnation and punishment.”<sup>48</sup> At an indefinite point in the future, Christ as king will judge all of humankind.

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 366-367.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 367, fn. 67