

# Unitarianism Defined\*

Lecture One: The Unity of God — The Trinity

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If any doctrine can be called fundamental to Revealed Religion, it must be that of the strict, simple, unqualified Unity of God. I take this to be universally admitted, nay, insisted on. There is not a more obvious truth in the Scriptures; none more coincident with their whole tenor and drift, or with their most express and positive declarations. Rightly interpreted, rightly understood, there is not even an intimation or hint of anything else. The language of the Bible upon this point is everywhere plain and explicit. The declaration recorded in the fourth verse of the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, then so solemnly made to the people of Israel through Moses; and afterwards in the coming in of the new and better dispensation, quoted and so emphatically affirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ in the twenty-ninth verse of the twelfth chapter of St. Mark's Gospel — "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One Lord" — is clear and indisputable. Unitarians, therefore, not only without hesitation, but in perfect harmony with the unambiguous language of Scripture, and on the express authority of Christ himself, affirm that *God is One*; in the strictest meaning of the word, *One*; One Person, One Being, One intelligent, conscious Mind. There are seventeen texts in the New Testament alone in which He is expressly called the One or Only God. In thirteen hundred passages the word God occurs; in not one of them is there any necessary implication, but directly the contrary, of a plurality of Persons in the

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Godhead. In but very few of them has it ever been pretended that such a plurality is even implied.

Indeed, I know not, had the sacred writers proposed to guard against any different belief from that of the simple Unity of God, how their testimony on this point could have been more express. Besides the citation just made from one of the Gospels, St. Paul, in the eighth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians, having declared that “there is none other God but One,” in the same breath adds, “to us there is One God, the Father” — to *us*, Christians, that One God is the Father. So in the fourth chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians he says: “There is One God and Father of all, who is above all.” In perfect correspondence with all this, we find in the nineteenth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel that our Lord, when a man addressed him with the words “*Good Master*,” declined the epithet; saying: “Why callest thou me good? There is none Good but One, that is, God.”

Thus clearly is the fact that God is One, strictly and only One, stated in Scripture. But that this One God is the Father — in other words, that the Father, and the Father only, is this One God, is just as clear. The beloved apostle John has recorded at length a most remarkable prayer, offered by our Lord when he was about to leave the world. If he would ever have spoken simply, unequivocally, according to his convictions, nay, his knowledge, it must have been at that solemn hour in that most solemn act. Hear him, then, addressing the *Father*: “This is Life Eternal, that they might know *Thee*, the *Only True God* — and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Could any language be more explicit than this?

Omniscience is an attribute essential to Supreme Deity; but to this, Christ not only makes no pretensions, he disclaims it in an emphatic manner when he says: “Of that day and that hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels who are in heaven; neither the Son; but the Father” (Mark 13:32). In the parallel passage in Matthew (24:36) he says most expressly, “but my Father *only*.” No resort can here be had, as has been attempted by Trinitarians, to their favorite hypothesis — that merest hypothesis, that shallowest assumption, as I hope hereafter to show — namely, the Double Nature, or, as it is technically and theologically called, the Hypostatic Union; according to which Christ is both God and man. Whenever attempted, the conclusion has been only the more palpably impotent. The obvious difficulty of the text, on the supposition of the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity, cannot be overcome “by

supposing that our Lord spake of himself here only as a man.” For as the *orthodox* Macknight says:

The name *Father* following that of *Son*, shows that he spake of himself as the Son of God, and not as the Son of man. Besides, the gradation in the sentence seems to forbid this solution. For the Son being mentioned after the angels, and immediately before the Father, is thereby declared to be more excellent than they, which he is not in respect of his human nature; and therefore he cannot be supposed to speak of himself in that nature.<sup>1</sup>

Macknight here recognizes the ordinary Trinitarian idea that the phrase or title “Son of God” implies the Divine Nature of our Lord, as “Son of Man” his Human Nature. Suppose, then, that our Lord was conscious of being possessed of this Double Nature; and that he actually meant what Trinitarians say he meant, that as “Son of God” he was God the Son, the second Person of the Godhead, and that as “Son of Man” he was indeed “*the man*,” preeminently the man, but nevertheless man only, having, as they often allege, a human body and a human soul; how stands the case? Assuredly, his language, as recorded by St. Mark, must then be understood to admit, nay, with emphasis to declare his ignorance both as man and as God, both in his human and in his divine nature, “of that day and hour.” If ignorant in that respect, if ignorant on any one, and but one point, he was not Omniscient. And I cannot help adding, though not discussing that topic now, that if in his divine nature, if as God the Son, he was not Omniscient, then that divine nature was not the highest; then, as God the Son he was not the Supreme; he was God only in an inferior and subordinate sense, or as he himself, on another occasion, expressed it, as being one “to whom the word of God came” (John 10:35).

The argument is not weakened by reading “*no one*” instead of “*no man*” in the first clause, as the Greek might at least with equal correctness be rendered. For the words “the Son” are still there; they still stand in full force, used by Christ himself to distinguish himself from the Father, whom he describes as “the *only true God*”; while the expression “no one” is so sweeping of itself as to carry with it all other beings, even if none of them were specified, and unless some were excepted. One glorious exception, as we have seen, *is* made — “the Father only.” The Father alone being Omniscient, is God alone and supreme.

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<sup>1</sup> *Harmony*, Sec. 123.

The frequency with which God is called or described as “the Father” is also in this connection to be borne in mind. In the New Testament He is called simply “the Father” in no less than one hundred and twenty-two passages; in nineteen, “God the Father”; in various places, “God our Father,” “Our Father,” “God, even our Father,” “Father of Mercies” or merciful Father, “Father of Glory” or glorious Father. He is declared in express terms to be “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”; while our Lord himself described Him as “your Father which is in heaven,” “thy Father,” “your Heavenly Father,” “your Father”; and after his Resurrection, directed Mary to say to his disciples: “I ascend unto my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Never in Scripture, not in one solitary instance, is there the phrase God the Son — which is so familiar to our ears that its profanity passes unnoticed.

Then the Father is the only object of supreme religious worship. Christ worshipped and prayed to the Father; and when asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, begins the form which he gave them with the invocation — “Our Father who art in Heaven.” To the woman of Samaria he declared — mark the words — “The hour cometh and now is, when *the true worshippers* shall worship the Father.” His precepts and his example were uniform and harmonious on this point. He always directed his followers to “pray to the Father,” as he always himself prayed. Alluding to the time when he should be taken from them and go to the Father, he expressly forbids them from praying to himself, and points them to the Father. “In that day ye shall ask *me* nothing: verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall *ask of the Father* in my name, He will give it you” (John 16:23). One might almost suppose the Saviour had in view that gross corruption of Christian worship in which he, and not *the* Father — *his* Father — is the Deity adored. Hence the constant practice of the apostles, as may be seen throughout the book of Acts and the epistles. Nowhere do they pray, or teach to pray, to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Now, in direct opposition to this great, fundamental doctrine of the simple Unity of God, the vast majority of the Christian church accepts, and for long centuries has accepted, the mysterious, irrational, unscriptural dogma of a Trinity of Persons in the Godhead. But not only is the dogma unscriptural, which is our cardinal objection to it, the very term “Trinity” is not of scriptural derivation; and, as all who are familiar with the Scriptures know, is not to be found there, nor any word or term

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Eph. 3:14; 5:20; Col. 1:3.

corresponding to it. The word first occurs in its Greek form (τριάς) in the writings of Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, near the close of the second century; but even there it is not in the ecclesiastical sense in which the word was afterwards and is now used.<sup>3</sup> In its Latin form (*Trinitas*), with a more comprehensive doctrinal import, it is first found in Tertullian, a Presbyter of Carthage in Africa, who flourished about the same time; and from whom it seems to have been at once adopted by his pupil Cyprian and by Novatian.<sup>4</sup>

To justify the epithets which I have applied to the Doctrine, let us look at some of the popular statements and expositions of it. I beg especial attention to the fact, not simply how various and often astounding in themselves are these statements and expositions, but how dissimilar to the language of Scripture — that Scripture which those churches and divines who make them, hold to be plenary inspired; and, so far as they are Protestants, to be the sufficient rule of faith as well as practice. One would think that a scriptural doctrine or truth could be expressed in the language of Scripture; a Christian doctrine or truth, in the language of the Christian Scripture, “the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” To do this with the Trinity is simply impossible, and therefore never attempted. Recourse must of necessity be had, not to “words which the Holy Ghost but which man’s wisdom teacheth.”

Turn then to the liturgy of the Episcopal Church. In its first “Article of Religion” it declares: “In unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”<sup>5</sup>

And then the Presbyterian Church. In the third article of the second chapter of its Confession, it says: “In unity of the Godhead, there be three

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<sup>3</sup> Theophilus, *ad Auto\**. ii. 15, cited by Hagenbach, *History of Doctrines*, Buch’s translation, i. 128, note 2; Muenschler *Dogm. Hist.*, Murdoch’s translation, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Hagenbach, *ibid.*, note 3.

<sup>5</sup> The Episcopal Church in this country did not attain uniformity of worship till seven years after the war of the Revolution. Just two years after the Treaty of Paris, by which our national independence was secured, the first convention of that church was held in Philadelphia, in September, 1785. Besides other omissions and alterations from the liturgy of the English Established Church, to which the churches represented in this Convention had of course belonged, it reduced the number of the “Articles of Religion” from thirty-nine to twenty; struck out entire the Nicene and the Athanasian, and the clause, “He descended into Hell,” from the Apostles’ Creed; and, by a Special Committee, published the Prayer-Book in this form. This was a remarkable testimony to the then state of feeling and opinion in that church, honestly and openly given. For although no essential difference may be detected as to points

persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.” In its “Larger Catechism” it says more fully: “There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory, although distinguished by their personal properties.”

But aside of these statements of the doctrine by leading Protestant churches amongst us, and which are only average specimens of the statements made by all orthodox churches, how is the doctrine stated or expounded by eminent orthodox writers?

Richard Baxter, the eminent English non-conformist, says: “The Three Persons, are God understanding Himself, God understood by Himself, and God loving Himself.” Doolittle, commenting on the Assembly’s Catechism, says: “My admiring thoughts of God are of one single essence, yet Three in subsistence; of Three, that One cannot be the others, yet all Three are One; that are really distinct, yet really are the same.” But the famous Robert South says: “There is One, infinite, eternal Mind, and three *some things* that are not distinct minds.” While Bishop Sherlock says: “The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, are as really distinct persons as Peter, James, and John — each of which is God. We must allow each person to be a God. These three infinite minds are

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of faith between the twenty and the thirty-nine articles, there must have been some good reason for such a marked departure from the liturgy of the Church of England as the rejection of two of its three creeds; retaining the one which has so very little in it to be objected to — except its *name*, and that is not *in* it but *of* it, giving the false impression that it is the work of the apostles, which notoriously it is not. That it was the apostles’ was never claimed by any till the time of Ambrose of Milan, in the fourth century; although substantially but in various forms, all admit its very high antiquity. That the Episcopal Church then in its first attempt at independent organization, should have retained only this creed which, as regards the Godhead, is plainly and purely Unitarian, and not Trinitarian, is remarkable; and that in one year afterwards it should have unanimously admitted the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, though by a majority it still persisted in keeping out the Athanasian, is only to be accounted for by the *in terrorem* letter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he said: “Whether we can consecrate any (Bishop) or not, must yet depend on the answers we may receive to what we have written.” The last convention had repeated their request to the English hierarchy “to confer the Episcopal character on such persons as shall be chosen and recommended to them for that purpose, from the Conventions of their Church in their several States”; and for this immense boon, and to satisfy that hierarchy, through which the apostolic succession must be had unbroken (Heaven save the mark!), no appeal to the Gospel record, no stand on impregnable Scripture and right reason was taken; but so far, at least, submission was made before the implied if not express threat of an English Archbishop. In the

distinguished just as three created minds are by self-consciousness. And by mutual consciousness, each person of these has the *whole* wisdom, power, and goodness of the other two.”

Dr. Wallis of the English Church holds that “The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, are no more three distinct intelligent persons than the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, is three Gods; the three Persons are only three external relations of God to his creatures, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” But Dr. South says: “The three Persons are internal relations of the Deity to itself.” Dr. Hopkins warns us that “It must be carefully observed, that when the word Person is applied to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as three distinct persons, it does not import the same distinction as when applied to men.” While on the other hand, Bishop Waterland calls them “proper, distinct persons, entirely equal to, and independent of, each other; yet making up one and the same being.” Archbishop Secker says: “Since there is not a plurality of Gods, and yet the Son and Spirit are each of them God no less than the Father, it plainly follows, that they are in a manner, by us inconceivable, so united to Him, that these Three are One; but still in a manner equally inconceivable, so distinguished from Him, that no one of them is the other.” Bishop Burnet’s statement is this:

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same way it happened that the obnoxious clause in the Apostles’ Creed — “He descended into hell” — which on the best of grounds had been struck from the creed by the first convention, was restored. But how restored? It appears, indeed, in the body of the creed; but a rubric is prefixed to the creed, in which we read: “Any churches *may omit* the words, ‘He descended into hell’; or may, instead of them, use the words, ‘He went into the place of departed spirits,’ which are considered as words of the same meaning in the Creed.” This seems a good deal like child’s play. The English Archbishops and Bishops in their letter had informed their American brethren that the article “was thought necessary to be inserted, with a view to a particular heresy, in the *very early* age of the Church.” But even if so, the article is not found in the primitive or *earliest* forms of the creed, which doubtless best expressed the faith of the *earliest* age, that nearest the apostolic age of the church; and the very permission to omit the article concedes its unimportance, let it mean what it may. No unimportant article of faith should have place in any creed, especially one to be constantly recited in public worship “by the Minister and the people.” And a creed which is professed either as apostolic, or especially and *par excellence*, “the Apostles’,” should at least have the merit of being an exact transcript of its expression in the highest Christian antiquity where it is found. I have given this matter the more space, because I take “the Apostles’ Creed” so called, in its oldest form extant, to be the most Christian creed extant; and what is even more important in this connection, utterly and emphatically anti-Trinitarian, and so far entirely unobjectionable.

If I say the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be three, and every one distinctly God, it is true; but if I say, they be three, and every one a distinct God, it is false. I may say, the divine persons are distinct in the divine nature; but I cannot say, the divine nature is divided into the divine persons. I may say, God the Father is one God — and the Son is God — and the Holy Ghost is God; but I cannot say, the Father is one God — the Son another God — and the Holy Ghost a third God. I may say, the Father begat another, who is God; yet I cannot say, he begat another God. And from the Father and the Son proceedeth another, who is God; yet I cannot say, from the Father and the Son proceedeth another God.

Bishop Gastrell takes the ground that “The three names of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, must denote a threefold difference or distinction belonging to God, but such as is consistent with the unity and simplicity of the divine nature: for each of these includes the whole idea of God, and something more.” Upon which it has been well remarked that, according to this view, “the Father includes the whole idea of God, and something more — the Son includes the whole idea of God, and something more — the Holy Ghost includes the whole idea of God, and something more; while altogether the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, make one entire God, and no more!” Bishop Burgess insists that “The Father is a Person, but not a Being; the Son, a Person, but not a Being; the Holy Ghost, a Person, but not a Being. And these three non-entities (!) make one perfect Being.” The celebrated Bishop Heber, one of the most brilliant members of the English hierarchy, discovered that “The Father is the First Person in the Trinity; the Archangel Michael, the Second; and the Angel Gabriel, the Third.” The learned Barrow goes a trifle more into details, and says:

There is one divine nature or essence common to the Three Persons, incomprehensibly united and ineffably distinguished, united in essential attributes — distinguished by peculiar relations; all equally infinite in every divine perfection; each different from the others in order and manner of subsistence. There is a mutual existence of one in all, and all in one; a communication, without any deprivation or domination in the communicant; an eternal generation and an eternal procession, without proper causality or dependence; a Father imparting His own — the Son receiving the Father’s life — and a Spirit issuing from both, without any division or multiplication of essence. These are notions which may well puzzle our reason, in conceiving how they agree; but should not stagger our faith in asserting that they are true.



And, to close my citations of statements and expositions by eminent men of this great dogma, let me place on record in these pages the words of Henry Ward Beecher: "My God? Christ Jesus is his name. All that there is of God to me is bound up in that name. A dim and shadowy effluence rises from Christ, and that I am taught to call the Father. A yet more tenuous and invisible film of thought arises, and that is the Holy Spirit. But neither are to me aught tangible, restful, accessible." While Dr. Nehemiah Adams, of Boston, says: "'Do you worship three?' is often asked. Surely we do, nor do we strive to make them appear like one. They have specific offices; we have specific wants, which lead us appropriately to worship, now one, now another, now the third."

I stop not to analyze any of these various and utterly contradictory opinions. But I ask whether the various and contradictory ways in which the doctrine is stated and expounded do not raise a strong presumption at the outset against the doctrine itself? One thing must be granted — all of them cannot be true, for they make essentially different and inconsistent doctrines. And if so, surely it is possible that even admitting the Trinity to be a scriptural doctrine, the true, the only true, the *absolutely orthodox* mode of receiving and holding the doctrine remains to this hour unknown, since every one of all that has been ventured may be false. Is it, then, to be believed that such a doctrine, known in reality only by its name, can be an essential, fundamental doctrine of Revelation? Would God, such a God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" is represented to be in the gospel, have left a doctrine of that character — on the belief of which it used to be said, and is even now said in some quarters, that the salvation of the soul depends — so obscurely set forth in His revealed word? Forty particulars have been noted by one writer, in which learned Trinitarians differ among themselves on this subject. I do not wonder that a mind so thoughtful, active, and free as Mr. Beecher's should have been driven from its moorings on any of the accepted expositions of the Trinity; even though it brought up on one which, while to all intents and purposes nullifying the doctrine itself, fixes him in a form of Unitarianism of his own devising, but leaves him at direct war with the plain teachings of our Lord: or that in the distraction of thought which Trinitarian worship must, in such a mind, engender, he should prefer to worship *one God*, whose distinctive "name is Christ Jesus." Especially, too, if "all that there is of God to him" is really "bound up in that name"; if the tremendous alternative in his mind was — no God, except Christ

be He! But I do exceedingly wonder that to one who has so diligently studied the full and blessed words of our Lord, the all-endeared, all-glorious, all-attractive Revelation of the *Father* which they declare, so rich in comfort, so inspiring by the light it throws on the Divine Purposes and Government, should seem to send up but “a dim and shadowy effluence”! Rob me of anything but this great, most precious faith in an ever-present, all-gracious, personal Father in heaven! I can better afford to part with any other article of my religious belief than this of the Divine Paternity, the All-Perfect Fatherhood of God. Without it I am orphaned indeed. Providence seems an inexplicable enigma. Life a dark and stern problem. Human suffering and death stand in man’s path to torture or to mock him. It is of no consequence to tell me that Mr. Beecher’s Christ comprises all to him which the Father does to me. For if so, it is by exalting Christ into a place to which his fidelity and his humility alike forbade him to aspire;<sup>6</sup> the place of that Being whom, in the very and most solemn act of prayer, he not only addressed as “Holy Father,” but testified to be “the *only true God*”!

But it is “a Mystery,” this great doctrine of the Trinity! This is the easy and constant resort of its advocates. From the days of Tertullian, who exclaimed, “*Credo quia impossibile est*” — *I believe because it is impossible* — to our own, it has been their refuge, nay, even their ground of glorifying. “I ever did, and ever shall,” says Bishop Beveridge,

look upon those apprehensions of God to be the truest, whereby we apprehend Him to be the most incomprehensible; and that to be the most true of God, which seems most impossible unto us. Upon this ground, therefore, it is that the mysteries of the Gospel, which I am less able to conceive, I think myself the more obliged to believe — especially this mystery of mysteries, the Trinity in Unity, and Unity in Trinity, which I am so far from being able to comprehend, or indeed to apprehend, that I cannot set myself seriously to think of it, or to screw up my thoughts

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<sup>6</sup> See Philippians 2:6 and John 17. If any marvel that I cite the first of these texts here, let them remember the comment of Ambrose: “*He did not assert, or arrogate to himself, equality with God; so that he might show us an example of humility; but subjected himself, that he might be exalted by the Father.*” The late Professor Stuart, in his letters to Dr. Channing on this passage, admits that “our version seems to render nugatory, or at least irrelevant, a part of the Apostle’s reasoning in the passage. He is enforcing the principle of Christian (Christ-like) humility upon the Philippians. But how was it any proof or example of humility that *he did not think it robbery to be equal with God?*”

a little concerning it, but I lose myself as in a trance, or ecstasy: that God the Father should be one perfect God of himself, God the Son one perfect God of himself, and God the Holy Ghost one perfect God of himself; and yet, that these three should be but one perfect God of himself, so that one should be perfectly three, and three perfectly one; that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, should be Three, and yet but One — but One, and yet Three! O heart-amazing, thought-devouring, inconceivable mystery!

exclaims the good Bishop in a glow of exceeding transport, “who cannot believe it to be true of the glorious Deity?”

Here let me remark that the fact that a doctrine is above the grasp of unaided human reason, is not alone a sufficient argument against its truth. It is not, therefore, merely that the Trinity is mysterious, that Unitarians reject it, but — leaving the purely scriptural argument out of the question for the moment — because it is self-contradictory, opposed to all right reason, positively absurd. Trinitarians themselves have over and over again admitted this. Bishop Hurd admits that “Reason stands aghast, and Faith herself is half-confounded” at the manner in which, on the Trinitarian scheme, “the grace of God was at length manifested.” South says of the Trinity in its logical results: “Were it not to be adored as a mystery, it would be exploded as a contradiction.” If we are provoked to a smile at such extravagance in Protestants, who thus put themselves at the mercy of Romish critics without the slightest means of defense, we admire the bold and consistent stand which has always been taken by Romanists on church authority. It well becomes them to say, nay, to argue, and however unnecessary labor that may seem to us, set themselves to prove, as they have done, that, in the words of one of them, “the Trinity is opposed to human reason.” He says expressly, “My belief in the Trinity is based on the authority of the Church; no other authority is sufficient;” and then proceeds to show that “the Athanasian Creed” — as, doubtless, the best statement of the Trinity — “and Scripture are opposed to one another.” All this is well enough — what we might expect — in a man or a church, making from the start an utter surrender of Reason before the authority of ecclesiastical tradition. Not so in a Protestant; for only by the exercise of his Reason has he become a Protestant, or can he as a Protestant maintain his position. To us a doctrine might be mysterious, and yet be entirely reasonable, and harmonize with itself. We are surrounded by, we live amidst, we constantly act upon, things mysterious. What more mysterious than God! But who of us doubts His Being and great

attributes? Who does not feel, mysterious though He be, infinitely removed from our comprehension, that it is far more reasonable to “believe that He is,” than to deny it; nay, that to deny it, in the midst of all this design and contrivance, this wondrous order, variety, and beauty, this fitness of means to ends, these intuitions and aspirations of the soul, would be the height of folly or stupidity? We may, we do, we often must, believe what we cannot comprehend; but never a contradiction or an absurdity.

But whence came this doctrine of the Trinity, or, in other words, what was its origin? Its origin was clearly Platonic. It was brought into the Christian church by those of the early Fathers who admired and had adopted the philosophic views of the later Platonists. I say advisedly, the *later* Platonists; because, in the words of Prof. Norton: “Nothing resembling the doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in the writings of Plato himself. But there is no question that, in different forms, it was a favorite doctrine of the later Platonists, equally of those who were not Christians as of those who were.”<sup>7</sup> There is an obvious distinction to be borne in mind between what is positively taught by the Athenian Philosopher, and what belongs to the Platonic philosophy as held and expounded by Philo Judaeus, a contemporary of our Lord, who has been styled the Jewish Plato, and by the Fathers, or Christian writers of the first four centuries. The most eminent of these men, especially those of Alexandria, the birthplace of Philo, and the scene of his labors, had in general embraced this philosophy to a greater or less extent; and they carried its modes of conception and reasoning into the faith to which they were converted. It was, as Mosheim admits, “the impure source of a great number of errors, and most preposterous opinions”; but of them all, none is more marked than this very doctrine of the Trinity, which Mosheim himself accepted. Basnage, in his *History of the Jews*, remarks that these Fathers almost made Plato to have been a Christian before Christianity was introduced; in allusion to some of their efforts to show that Plato himself taught the doctrine. Cudworth, who in his “Intellectual System” has exhausted the ancient learning on this subject, says that “the generality of the Christian Fathers, before and after the Nicene Council, represent the genuine Platonic Trinity as really the same thing with the Christian, or as approaching so near it, that they differed chiefly in circumstances, or the

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<sup>7</sup> *Statement of Reasons*, 96.

manner of expression”;<sup>8</sup> and declares that, “therefore does Athanasius send the Arians to school to the Platonists.”<sup>9</sup> Bishop Horsley, too, in his thirteenth letter to Dr. Priestley, says:

The advocates of the Catholic faith in modern times, have been too apt to take alarm at the charge of Platonism. I rejoice and glory in the opprobrium; I not only confess, but I maintain, not a perfect agreement, but such a similitude as speaks a common origin, and affords an argument in confirmation of the Catholic doctrine (of the Trinity), from its conformity to the most ancient and universal traditions.

In one of his charges to his clergy, he says:

It must be acknowledged, that the first converts from the Platonic school took advantage of the resemblance between the Evangelic and Platonic doctrine on the subject of the Godhead, to apply the principles of their old philosophy to the explication and confirmation of the articles of their faith. They defended it by arguments drawn from Platonic principles; they even propounded it in Platonic language.

It were easy to multiply, from Trinitarian authorities, proofs which must strike every thoughtful and candid inquirer, of the Platonic origin of the doctrine under consideration. Milman, writing of “the Trinitarian controversy” at the beginning of the fourth century, has significant words, with which I close my remarks on this point. Having said, “This Platonism, if it may be so called, was universal” — and to a degree confirmatory of the words before quoted from Prof. Norton — that “It differed, indeed, widely in most systems from the original philosophy of the Athenian sage; it had acquired a more oriental and imaginative cast”; he adds: “This Platonism had gradually absorbed all the more intellectual class; it hovered over, as it were, and gathered under its wings all the religions of the world. Alexandria” — it will be remembered that this was the birthplace of the distinguished Jewish Platonist, Philo, the influence of whose writings is, as I have already hinted, so obvious on the early Fathers — “Alexandria, the fatal and prolific soil of speculative controversy, where speculative controversy was most likely to madden into furious and lasting hostility, gave birth to this new element of disunion

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<sup>8</sup> Cudworth, *Intellectual System*, Ed. Lond., 1845, Vol. 2, 458.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

in the Christian world.”<sup>10</sup> He alludes to the great Arian Controversy, which had its germ in the anathema and expulsion from Alexandria of Arius, one of its presbyters, by Alexander, the Patriarch of that metropolitan see, for what he was pleased to style, “blasphemies against the divine Redeemer.” Arius held the Father to be alone the self-existent, unoriginated God, and the Son to be “the Only-begotten, the image of the Father, the Vicegerent of the Divine Power, the intermediate Agent in all the long subsequent work of Creation.” This controversy, in the judgment of the Trinitarian Milman, turned upon a “question which led to all the evils of human strife — hatred, persecution, bloodshed.” “From this period we may date,” he says, “the introduction of rigorous articles of belief, which required the submissive assent of the mind to every word and letter of an established creed, and which raised the slightest heresy of opinion into a more fatal offense against God, and a more odious crime in the estimation of man, than the worst moral delinquency, or the most flagrant deviation from the spirit of Christianity.”

But although the doctrine of the Trinity had a Platonic origin, it is not to be understood that it assumed at once its modern form. It advanced towards that by measured steps. Previous to the Council of Nice, A.D. 325, the nearest approach to the modern doctrine of the Trinity was that the Father alone was Supreme God, and the Son and Holy Ghost beings created by and subordinate to Him, each called God, but in a lower sense. In the Nicene Creed, so called because *voted in* by the Council above referred to — a mode of rather doubtful propriety for establishing what is Revealed Truth — “the Father” is alone described as “Almighty,” and alone in the absolute sense called “One God.” But “Jesus Christ” is described as “One Lord,” “the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds.” Could any language more plainly mark derivation? and if in such a case derivation were rightly predicable, it of necessity made the derived being, “the Son,” inferior and subordinate to the Being from whom he was derived — “the Father Almighty.” “The Holy Ghost” is not even called “God” in any sense. Beyond this the church had not yet gone. The Council of Nice “established as the inviolable doctrine of the Catholic Church, that the Son is of the *same essence* with the Father; but sustains to Him the relation in which that which is begotten stands to that which begets.”<sup>11</sup> It decided nothing as

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<sup>10</sup> *History of Christianity*, Book 3, Ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Hagenbach’s *History of Doctrines*, i. 268.

respects the nature of the Holy Spirit. It contented itself with simply saying, "and in One Holy Ghost." In this unsettled state the doctrine remained for more than fifty years, as we shall by and by see, before another step towards modern Trinitarianism was taken.

Before closing this lecture, I may remark that the word "Persons" applied to the "Sacred Three" is not in general admitted by Trinitarians to be used in its strictly etymological, just, or accustomed sense. Some, indeed, so use and understand it, and accept all the legitimate consequences; and so long as the word is used at all in connection with this subject, we have a right to hold all the advocates of the doctrine there. They are not to take shelter under any plea of mystery, where the mystery is of their own making. No word in our language has a more obvious and simple significance. The late Prof. Stuart of Andover lamented that it should have ever crept into the symbols of the churches, and preferred "distinctions," much as Dr. South did "somethings"; while the late Pres. Dwight of Yale College says he does not know *what* the word means, but yet thinks it "a convenient term." Convenient! for what? when confessedly it is, in the connection used, so ambiguous as to be utterly unintelligible!