

EDITORIAL

The Bampton Lectures for 1818 were said to have been “full of abuse, bigotry and dogmatism, rudeness, misunderstanding and ignorance.” They were delivered as a response to a growing protest by unitarians. The official Church replied to this anti-Trinitarian argument in its annual lecture with “The Doctrines of Unitarians Examined and Opposed to the Church of England.”

It is well to remember the tragic fact that until 1612 objectors to the state Church’s doctrine that God is Three in One were liable to be burned at the stake and until the end of that century they risked being hanged for heresy. The pattern of hatred directed toward dissenters had begun when the Spanish doctor Michael Servetus was judicially murdered at the instigation of the reformer John Calvin, aided by the Inquisition. Servetus perished on October 27th, 1553 for refusing to confess that Jesus is “the Eternal Son of God.” He did of course believe that Jesus was the Son of the Eternal God. His confession was plainly unitarian.

The Bampton Lectures of 1976, 1980 and 1984 promoted, by contrast, a rather severe criticism of the difficulties of the concept of plurality in the Godhead. They were unitarian in substance, as was the famous series of essays which appeared in Britain in *The Myth of God Incarnate* in 1977.

The Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Geoffrey Lampe, gave us a penetrating analysis of orthodox Trinitarianism in *God as Spirit*. He labeled the traditional picture of Jesus as God the Son, assuming a timeless human nature, antichrist. “Jesus Christ has not after all really ‘come in the flesh.’”¹ Dr. A.E. Harvey delivered the celebrated lecture for 1980, arguing that the one thing impossible for Jesus was to have deviated from the unitary monotheism of his Jewish heritage.² And then in 1984 the posthumous work of Dr. John A.T. Robinson as the Bampton Lecture of that year demolished, in the section on “Preexistence and Incarnation,” the traditional portrait of Jesus as the eternal Son who put on flesh in Mary.³

This is an amazing shift of attitude towards the central doctrine of the Christian faith. The shift is obscured by the fact that recent Bampton Lecturers have not generally chosen to use the adjective “unitarian” to describe their theology. Nor have they acknowledged the biblical unitarian tradition which preceded them. But their arguments show a close affinity with the age-old unitarian point of view. Geoffrey Lampe subsequently delivered a lecture at Cambridge in which he asked, “What Future for the Trinity?” His answer was “not much.”

¹ SCM Press, 1977, 144.

² *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, Duckworth, 1982.

³ *The Priority of John*, SCM Press, 1985.

J.A.T. Robinson's extensive work on Christology (*The Priority of John*) expressed objections to orthodox Christology which were exactly those of the unitarian Racovian Catechism produced by the 16th-century Polish Unitarians. Robinson pointed out that "John is as undeviating a witness to unitary monotheism as any New Testament writer." He was referring to John 5:44 and 17:3.

The martyrdom of Servetus at the hands of a bigoted and tradition-bound Church was not in vain. There followed a resolve never to think of killing other students of the Bible over doctrine. Four hundred and fifty years later in 2003 there are no less than four commemorations of the heroic death of Servetus, in England, Switzerland, Spain, and France.

At the same time, the Association for Christian Development, a fellowship mainly of ex-Worldwide Church of God members, has just completed its second One God Conference, held in Tyler, Texas. The first one was organized in Seattle in April, 2002. Presenters argued in detail the view that the God of the Bible is unipersonal and that Jesus is His uniquely begotten Son.

The Socinian, unitarian view of Jesus as the supernaturally begotten Son of God (not God the Son) is making progress little by little. Thankfully exponents of anti-Trinitarian views are now permitted to meet without fear of government or ecclesiastical intervention, enjoying all the benefits of free speech and open theological discussion. Remarkably such meetings reflect the trend already introduced by the Bampton Lectures of 1976, 1980 and 1984. This suggests that the Trinitarian doctrine is again under pressure from sophisticated biblical exegetes. Modern studies in the Jewish background of Jesus make it more and more impossible to imagine Jesus espousing any creed but that of the strict unitary monotheism of Israel. In Mark 12:28ff Jesus went on record as both affirming his Jewish heritage and making the same creed the cornerstone of biblical Christianity.

If Jesus was not a Trinitarian, why should his followers subscribe to God as Triune?

What enormous issues are at stake here. At present the religious world of Christian, Jew and Muslim is sharply and (barring a tremendous revolution) permanently divided precisely over the question of who God is. Progress towards a common understanding of God cannot occur until the Trinitarian concept of God, so foreign to Jews and Muslims, gives way to the original unitary monotheism of Jesus and the Apostles. There are signs that such a reversal of ancient creedal tradition may be in progress. The light of the central doctrine of the Bible is returning.

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