

# **Social Trinitarianism and the Trinitarian Thinking of the Church Fathers**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers some aspects of the Trinitarian thinking of the Fathers in order to evaluate its relevance to contemporary social Trinitarianism. An understanding of the Trinitarian language is essential for understanding the social Trinitarian argument. Therefore, without attempting a detailed exposition of the history of doctrine, this paper makes an overview of the emergence of the Trinitarian language in the Cappadocian vis-à-vis the Augustinian language. The second part of the paper goes beyond the Trinitarian language of the Fathers, to consider their use of the „social analogy in Trinitarian context.

## **Keywords**

Trinity, social, Church Fathers, Augustine, doctrine

## **Introduction**

Social Trinitarianism is a trend of thought in Christian Trinitarianism that conceives God as a divine society of three Persons: Father, Son and Spirit, perfectly united in their love relationship. Contemporary

social Trinitarian theologians find support for this view in the Trinitarian thinking of the Cappadocian Fathers oftentimes set in contrast with Augustinian theology. This paper considers some aspects of the Trinitarian thinking of the Fathers in order to evaluate its relevance to contemporary social Trinitarianism. An understanding of the Trinitarian language is essential for understanding the social Trinitarian argument. Therefore, without attempting a detailed exposition of the history of doctrine, this paper makes an overview of the emergence of the Trinitarian language in the Cappadocian vis-à-vis the Augustinian language. The second part of the paper goes beyond the Trinitarian language of the Fathers, to consider their use of the „social analogy in Trinitarian context. The paper will conclude with some observations regarding the relevance of these developments for contemporary social Trinitarian formulations.

## **The Trinitarian Grammar of the Fathers**

In his impressive study of the emergence of the Trinitarian doctrine in the context of the Arian controversy R. P. C. Hanson makes the following observation about the context of the emergence of the Trinitarian doctrine:

[I]t was not a history of the defense of an agreed and settled orthodoxy against the assaults of open heresy. On the subject which was primarily under discussion there was not as yet any orthodox doctrine.... This is not the story of a defense of orthodoxy, but of a search for orthodoxy, a search conducted by the method of trial and error.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), xviii-xx. Hanson's position appears somewhat overstated. In the New Testament there is a clear sense of orthodoxy and error. In searching

One could observe that in the context of the third and fourth centuries the issue under discussion was the same as in the first Christian century: the identity of Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:13-16). However, this time the Jewish context and the background of the New Testament were replaced by the social and intellectual context of the Roman Empire.

In this new context the question of the identity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was posed by Arius in terms of 'generated-ungenerated'. The underlying question was if the Son is eternal/divine (thus, generated from the Father), or he is but one (the first) of God's creations. To preserve the soteriological principle that Jesus can save only if he is divine, the Fathers of the fourth century affirmed the eternal generation of the Son from the very essence of God the Father. Implicitly another problem arose, namely how to think and speak about God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and still one God. Alongside rival positions that emerged in this debate it was the merit of the three great Cappadocians in the East to have adopted the same theological language, to use it consistently, and to insist on its correctness, thus bringing some uniformity to the theological expression of orthodoxy. The language of the Cappadocians was the language of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, two words that in the early stage of the debate were used as synonyms.

The word *hypostasis* had been used in a non-philosophical sense by Hippocrates (V-IV BC), Polybius (II BC), Diodorus Siculus (I BC) and others.<sup>2</sup> It had various meanings such as substantial nature, essence, ac-

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for a relevant way to express the doctrine of the Trinity the Fathers acted with the deep conviction that they were laboring to preserve "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

<sup>2</sup> W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early*

tual being, reality, situation, condition, frame of mind, and realization. Philosophical uses of this term emerged in Stoic philosophy, as well as in Neo-Platonism. For Stoics, each thing counted as nonexistent before its realization, whereas for Neo-Platonists the ground of the existence of each thing before its realization is "more than existing."<sup>3</sup> Provided the knowledge of their different contexts, for both Stoics and Neo-Platonists *hypostasis* meant "realization turning into appearance." In the LXX *hypostasis* occurs twenty times, with the single theological use in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*, where it refers to God's 'being'.<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament the word occurs five times, in 2 Corinthians 9:4, 11:17, Hebrews 1:3, 3:14, and 11:1. The only theological use of the word is in Hebrews 1:3. Different translators render this expression differently as "the express image of his (God's) *person*" (KJV), or "the exact representation of his *nature*" (NAS), or "the perfect representation of His *being*" (Williams).

The word *ousia* had had longer a philosophical usage, being found in both Plato and Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> It had various meanings, such as existence, category or status, substance, stuff or material, form, and definition. The word does not occur in the Bible, and for this reason some of the Patristics hesitated to use it. Stead observed that the difficulty to un-

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*Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s. v. *hypostasis*.

<sup>3</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 182.

<sup>4</sup> Other references are in Deut. 1:12, 11:6, Jud. 6:4, Ruth 1:12, 1 Sam. 13:21, 23, 14:4, Job 22:20, Ps. 39:6, 69:3, 89:48, 139:15, Jer. 10:17, 23:22, Ezek. 19:5, 26:11, 43:11, Nahum 2:8.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed analysis of the use of *ousia* can be found in C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

derstand its usage comes not only from the variety encountered from writer to writer, but also from “the complexity of a generally accepted pattern, modified in some cases by the assumptions of Platonism or Stoicism, but seldom controlled by conscious analysis.”<sup>6</sup> Initially *homoousios*, a compound of *ousia* (*homos* = like, similar) received wider usage. However, the term was not used in Trinitarian context until the second half of the third century, when it was adopted to show the relationship of the Son to the Father. Both *hypostasis* and *ousia* appear together in the creed of Nicaea that runs as follows:

We believe in one God Father Almighty Maker of all things, seen and unseen:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only-begotten of the Father, that is of the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead:

And the Holy Spirit

But those who say, “there was a time when he did not exist”, and “Before being begotten he did not exist”, and that he came into being from nonexistence, or who allege that the Son of God is of another hypostasis or *ousia*, or is alterable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church condemns.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stead, *Divine Substance*, 131.

<sup>7</sup> This is the Creed of Nicaea as reconstructed by G. L. Dossetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicaea e di Constantinople*, (Rome, 1967), 226-41 and translated in Hanson, *The Search*, 163.

In the three instances when *ousia* is used in this creed the main concern was to defend the divinity of the Son. These statements demonstrate that the sonship of the Son is by nature not by adoption. This was done for soteriological concerns vis-à-vis the Arian teaching that the Son is the first of God's creations. There is no intention here to show how there are three in the Godhead, and how each one relates to the others. Belief in the Holy Spirit is only briefly mentioned. In the single instance in which both *hypostasis* and *ousia* are used together in this creed they are used synonymously.<sup>8</sup> It was by the intense activity of the Cappadocians that *ousia* became consecrated to express the unity of the Godhead and *hypostasis* each of the three in the Godhead. By using the Trinitarian language thus adopted the Cappadocian Fathers tried to distance themselves from the Sabellians who "confused the persons" and the Arians who "divide nature".<sup>9</sup> Their primary concern in this formulation was to preserve the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, as a *sine qua non* soteriological condition.

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<sup>8</sup> In one of his letters addressed to Maximus the Philosopher Basil of Caesarea criticized Dionysius of Alexandria, the head of the Catechetical School and bishop between 274-276, for making a difference of both *hypostasis* and *ousia* in the Godhead. However, it appears obvious that Dionysius made this difference exactly because initially the two terms were used synonymously. For the original text see Basil of Caesarea, *Letter IX*, 2. The same is true about the controversy against Apollinaris. In *Letter CXXV*, 1, Basil attempted to use this creed to attribute the difference between *hypostasis* and *ousia* to the fathers of Nicaea, while Apollinaris used the same text to show that the two terms were identical.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Holy Spirit*, 30. All further quotations from the Father are from Philip Schaff. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

If we turn our attention now to the developments in the Latin West it should be mentioned that technically speaking the Trinitarian language was inaugurated in Latin theology prior to the Cappadocians. The first to use the phrase *una substantia in tribus personis* referring to the Trinity was Tertullian in his treatise *Adversus Praxean Liber* (213 AD). The Latin *persona* and *substantia* were not defined better than the Greek *hypostasis* and *ousia*, as formal philosophical concepts, therefore they also did not have a generally accepted precision of meaning. Of the two, *persona* was less clearly defined, but soon it surpassed *substantia* in importance in the Trinitarian discourse. Although it is not entirely certain, *persona* seems to come from the verb *personare*, “to sound through”, and it was used to translate the Greek *prosopon*, face, in the sense of the actor’s mask. Etymologically it is linked with the Etruscan *persu*, which was found written beside a representation of two masked figures.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that there was no direct correspondence between the Greek and the Latin terminology further complicates the issue. Originally both *hypostasis* and *ousia* were rendered as *substantia* in Latin. The correspondence of Trinitarian language between Greek and Latin was adopted alongside the process of defining the language and the doctrine itself. Gregory of Nazianzus was aware of some complications regarding the parallel formulation of the doctrine in each of the two languages. He argued that even if the Latin *persona* is the equivalent of the Greek *prosopon*, and not *hypostasis*, what the Latins mean by “one *substantia* in

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<sup>10</sup>. Karl Rahner et. al. eds., *Sacramentum Mundi. An Encyclopedia of Theology*, Vol. 4, (Basle, Montreal: Herder and Herder), s. v. ‘Person’, by Eberhard Simons.

three *personae*” is the same with what the Greeks mean by “one *ousia* in three *hypostases*”:

We use in an orthodox sense the terms one essence and three hypostases, the one to denote the nature of the Godhead, the other the properties of the Three; the Italians mean the same, but, owing to the scantiness of their vocabulary, and its poverty of terms, they are unable to distinguish between essence and hypostases, and therefore introduce the term persons (*prosopon*), to avoid being understood to assert three essences. The result, were it not piteous, would be laughable.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine, in turn, was aware of the difficulty of adopting the language of *hypostasis* and *ousia* because the two words were synonyms:

I give the name essence to what the Greek call *ousia*, but which we more generally designate as substance. They indeed also call it *hypostasis*, but I do not know what different meaning they wish to give to *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Certain of our writers, who discuss these questions in the Greek language, are wont to say *mian ousian, treis hypostaseis*, which in Latin means one essence, and three substances.<sup>12</sup>

The question whether the Latin and Greek formulations are absolutely identical as well as the terminological equivalency is still open for discussion, but it is important to observe the awareness of the church Fathers themselves regarding this issue and how they approached it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11.</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration XXI*, 35. See also Gregoire de Nazianze, *Discourse 20-23*, (Paris: Les editions du cerf, 1980) for its valuable critical comments.

<sup>12.</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, 5, 8, 10, trans. Stephen McKenna in *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 187.

<sup>13.</sup> For a recent restatement of the problem and a comparison between the Orthodox and the Catholic views see: André de Halleux, “Personnalisme ou

In a letter addressed by Pope Damasus to the Oriental Fathers in 382 the vocabulary of the Cappadocians was accepted as appropriate and equivalent to its Latin counterpart.<sup>14</sup> As at the beginning of the formulation of the Christian Trinitarian doctrine, issues of language have continued to re-emerge in the Trinitarian debate to this day.

### **The Social Image of the Trinity in the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine**

Just as important as the terminology adopted to express the Trinitarian doctrine was the imagery used to explain it. In the Trinitarian debate of the fourth Christian century the analogy of the family of Adam, Eve, and Seth was used by the Cappadocians to defend the consubstantiality of the Father, Son and Spirit, and the distinction between the Son and the Spirit in their relationships to the Father. The question was raised regarding about how can it be possible that both the Son and the Spirit come from God and are divine, and there is still, one God.

The argument brought by the Cappadocians was that as both Eve and Seth derived their beings from Adam in different ways, so the Son and the Spirit are consubstantial with the Father, but they derive their beings from the Father in different ways. The Son's relationship to the Father is one of eternal *generation*, and the Spirit's relationship is one of eternal *procession*. The Father, therefore, is the unbegotten source of divine life. The unity between the three divine *hypostases* was seen in

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essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens? Une mauvaise controverse," *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 17 (1986):129-155.

<sup>14</sup> Bertrand de Margerie, S. J., *The Christian Trinity in History*, (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), 106-7.

terms of “a certain communion indissoluble and continuous”, in such a way that there is no “vacuum or interval, void of subsistence, which can make a break in the mutual harmony of the divine essence, and solve the continuity by the interjection of emptiness.”<sup>15</sup> This unity manifests itself in the fact that there is no division of will or power in God. The Godhead is “undivided in separate persons”:

To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are They divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons; and there is one mingling of Light, as it were of three suns joined to each other. When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause – there are Three Whom we worship.<sup>16</sup>

The limitations of what is now called the “social” analogy of the Trinity was recognized in Gregory of Nyssa’s answer to Ablabius who questioned this analogy by showing that since we refer to Peter, John and James as to three men, if we apply the same reasoning when we speak about the Father, Son and Spirit, we imply that there are three Gods. Operating within a Platonic framework, Gregory of Nyssa answered that there is only one human nature, therefore strictly speaking we should use ‘man’ only in singular and identify each of the three by

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<sup>15</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Letter XXXVIII*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Fifth Theological Oration. On the Holy Spirit*, 14.

name.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Gregory underlined the contrast between human and divine natures. Unlike humans, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are undivided in their operations. John Leroy Gresham Jr. has pointed out the major difference between the Cappadocians and contemporary social Trinitarian theologians in the use of the social analogy of the Trinity. "The unity envisioned by the Cappadocians, whether divine or human, is not social or communal, but metaphysical or substantial. Thus, while the Cappadocians use the social analogy to illustrate divine trinity, they do not develop a social concept of divine unity."<sup>18</sup>

Unlike in the East, the Western theologians of the first Christian centuries avoided the use of the social analogy of the Trinity. Although Tertullian employed analogies from the corporeal world in his attempt to illustrate the Trinity, his preference was for images such as root-branch-fruit, source-river-rivulet, sun-ray-tip of the ray.<sup>19</sup> Augustine was the one who evaluated the social analogy of the family of Adam, Eve and Set.<sup>20</sup> However, this image seemed offensive to him by "arousing thoughts of corporeal conceptions and births" with respect to the Divinity.

It is generally affirmed that unlike the Cappadocians who developed their Trinitarian doctrine by starting with the three divine persons

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<sup>17.</sup> This issue is discussed in detail by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 221-5.

<sup>18.</sup> John Leroy Gresham Jr., *The Social Model of the Trinity in the Theologies of Leonard Hodgson, Jürgen Moltmann, and Joseph Bracken*, (Ph. D. Dissertation, Baylor University, 1991), 20.

<sup>19.</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean Liber*, VII, 5-7.

<sup>20.</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, 12.5, *The Fathers of the Church*, 346.

and asking how they are one, Augustine started with the nature of the one God and asked how he is three.<sup>21</sup> He rejected the social analogy of the Trinity in favor of the analogy of subject, object and relation, applied to the human soul. The result was the psychological analogy of “mind, knowledge of the self by the mind, and love with which the mind loves both itself and its own knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> However, this analogy does not satisfactorily answer the question of how the three in the Godhead are different. Augustine attempted a further exploration of the issue by pointing to the different relationships in the Trinitarian life. Nevertheless, he did not produce a formal definition of the notion of person. It was Boethius who, building on Augustine’s methodology, produced the first formal definition of ‘person’ as *rationalis naturae individua substantia* (the individual substance of rational nature).<sup>23</sup> The psychological analogy of the Trinity continued to be perfected in the West, especially by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, while in the East, in his synthesis of Patristic theology John of Damascus did not hesitate to reiterate the Cappadocian use of family imagery to illustrate the two different ways in which the Son and the Spirit originate in the Father.

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<sup>21</sup> In the article “Augustine in Contemporary Theology” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995):237-50 Michael Rene Barnes challenges this interpretation of Augustine on the basis that it is based on the one hundred years old interpretative paradigm of Theodore de Regnon, and it fails to pay close enough attention to *all* of Augustine’s works.

<sup>22</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, (London: S. P. C. K., 1952), 235.

<sup>23</sup> Michael O’Carrol, *Trinitas. A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 55. s. v. ‘Boethius’.

## Conclusion

This survey of the Trinitarian language and the use of the social imagery in the Church Fathers allows us to make some observations regarding their relationship between Patristic and contemporary social Trinitarian thinking. Thus, it is necessary to underline that the Trinitarian language of the Fathers is technical language, adapted and charged with original and specific meanings by the Fathers themselves for the purpose of expressing their thinking about God. Therefore, to use their terms and concepts properly means to read them in the context of their thinking. Their thinking was in metaphysical, substantive terms, not in social terms. Consequently, we have to be careful when we attribute the notions used by the Fathers a modern meaning. The most obvious case in point is that of the concept of „person.“ The Fathers did not think about *persona* in social terms, neither did they understand *persona* as a center of consciousness. *Persona* in Latin does not include the connotations of the modern concept of „person.“ Therefore, it is improper to affirm that social Trinitarianism derives from the theology of the Fathers on the basis of the Father’s Trinitarian language.

The same applies to the use of the so-called “social analogy” by the Church Fathers. The “social analogy” does not function socially in their thinking, but substantively. The only thing that was illustrated by them with this analogy was how from one being two can derive their existence in different ways, thus showing how from the Father the Son and the Spirit emerge in different ways. In this sense, and only in this sense, the analogy was accepted by both the Cappadocians and Augustine.

The unity of the Godhead/Trinity in their thinking was unity of substance not social unity.

Making the above affirmations does not mean that the contemporary doctrine of the Trinity cannot be developed in social terms. While it is not the intent of this paper to address the validity of a contemporary social doctrine of the Trinity, it is our intention to affirm that such development does not have its grounds in the doctrine of the Fathers, as it is often affirmed. The issue becomes even more complicated if divine sociality is paralleled to human sociality. By their very nature human beings are embodied beings, while in the Trinity only one, the Son, is embodied / incarnate. Therefore, the best contemporary social Trinitarian theologians can accomplish in relating social Trinitarianism to Patristic doctrine is to show that contemporary social Trinitarianism is congruent with, or not in contradiction with Patristic doctrine, not that it is based on Patristic doctrine.

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MATEI, Eugen / *Jurnal teologic* Vol 12, Nr 1 (2013): 5-20.

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