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Is God a Trinity?

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Have you ever tried to understand how God can be one, yet three?

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* describes the doctrine of the Trinity as “the central doctrine of the Christian religion.” Yet it goes on to acknowledge that “in Scripture there is as yet no single term by which the Three Divine Persons are denoted together.”

The New Testament contains no explicit trinitarian doctrine... . Many Christian theologians and apologists seem to hold it [as] a deductive inference.”

DALE TUGGY, “TRINITY,” *STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY*

The encyclopedia explains that this most important tenet of mainstream Christianity—Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant alike—is a mystery, “a truth which we are not merely incapable of discovering apart from Divine Revelation, but which, even when revealed, remains ‘hidden by the veil of faith and enveloped, so to speak, by a kind of darkness.’”

Another source, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html>) (SEP), clarifies the church’s justification for maintaining this admittedly extrabiblical dogma: “Some Catholic apologists have argued that this doctrine shows the necessity of the teaching authority of the Church, this doctrine being constitutive of Christianity but underivable from the Bible apart from the Church’s guidance in interpreting it.” That is, the church says it has the authority to supersede the Scriptures when it believes it has come to a more complete understanding than can be derived from the *Word of God* (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/video-is-the-bible-relevant-65241.aspx>).

Other Christians admit that their preferred doctrine of the Trinity not only (1) can’t be inferred from the Bible alone, but also (2) that there’s inadequate or no evidence for it there, and even (3) that what is taught in the Bible is incompatible with the doctrine.”

DALE TUGGY, “TRINITY,” *STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY*

The question that arises is that if the concept of a three-in-one God is not found in the pages of the Bible, where did it come from? How did the Roman church come to name it Christianity's central doctrine and to incorporate it into its most fundamental creeds? Endless volumes have been written on the subject—whether chronicling the history of the idea, debating the dogma's theological and philosophical underpinnings, or simply trying to understand and explain it; thus one article can never hope to cover all aspects of what is, in effect, a long and continuing story. But perhaps even a brief overview will suffice to expose some critical issues.

TRACKING AN IDEA

The dogma of the Trinity may be summarized from the fifth- or sixth-century Athanasian Creed (which is considered authoritative not only in Roman Catholicism but also in some branches of Protestantism): “The person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another... . The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.”

Trinitarian thinking, of course, goes back further than this. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “the word *trias* (of which the Latin *trinitas* is a translation) is first found in Theophilus of Antioch about A.D. 180.” Sources point to Tertullian (ca. 160–225), called “the father of Latin Christianity,” as the first to use the word *trinitas* in connection with God. His contemporary, Origen, likewise viewed God as triune and heavily influenced others on the subject. But there was by no means a consensus among those calling themselves Christian. In fact, schisms and sects multiplied, each having developed its own unique views.

A century after Tertullian, Emperor [Constantine](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-constantine/165.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-constantine/165.aspx>) convened the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.). More than 300 bishops officially addressed the nature of God, producing the Nicene Creed during the course of the proceedings. But the creed didn't directly address the Trinity question in that it included only the briefest mention of the Holy Spirit, instead emphasizing—in contradiction to the teaching of the prominent Arian sect—that Jesus, as the Son of God, was not only God but the Father's coequal.

With the council having left the subject of the Holy Spirit virtually untouched, wrangling over the nature of the Godhead persisted. Fourth-century church fathers such as Athanasius of Alexandria (called “the father of orthodoxy”), Ambrose and others entered the fray, each arguing persuasively for further refinements in what was to become the orthodox view of God.

But reaching agreement on the details was no easy feat. Church historian Levi Leonard Paine, in his *Critical History of the Evolution of Trinitarianism*, remarks that “the Nicene theology was the product of three centuries of controversy and growth. But,” he notes, “this evolution, in its further history, suffered one great break. A radically new epoch in the development of the trinitarian dogma was begun by the North African Augustine ... [who] had a singular influence upon the whole course of Western theology.”

Regarding the nature of [Augustine's](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx>) influence, the *SEP* says: “One of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition was the eventually widespread merging of the Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions. Augustine [354–430] is one of the main figures through and by whom this merging was accomplished.”

Church historians concur that this syncretizing of religious and philosophical traditions had a profound effect on the still-developing orthodoxy within Christianity, including its trinitarian dogma. But as is often the case, separating the various threads that make up the fabric of Christian beliefs—in this case, belief in the Trinity—is a difficult task. Clearly the Christian dogma of the Trinity was not absorbed directly from Greek philosophy. So what is the connection?

GOD AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

From Pythagoras in the sixth century B.C.E., to Plato and Aristotle in the fourth, to Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus in the third and fourth centuries of the current era, Greek philosophers sought to understand the concept and nature of “being” (ontology). Realizing that not all could be explained in terms of the physical or the material, Aristotle delved into that which lay beyond the physical. “Metaphysics, or alternatively ontology,” explains the *SEP*, “is that branch of philosophy whose special concern is to answer the question ‘What is there?’” It “studies the ways in which *anything* that is can be said or thought to be.”

Like the pagan traditions of other ancient civilizations, various Greek philosophic schools understood the gods in terms of sacred trios or triads—groups of three, or three facets of being or existence. One such school, Neoplatonism, can be described as a monotheistic pagan religion that began to take shape in the third century under such philosophers as Plotinus and Porphyry. In their triadic view of god, he could be delineated as the One, the Mind or Intellect, and the Soul. According to British philosopher Anthony Kenny, “Plotinus’ theology continued to be taught, with modifications, until Western [i.e., Hellenistic] pagan philosophy came to an end

with the closure of the school of Athens. But his influence lived on, and lives on, unacknowledged, through the ideas that were absorbed and transmitted by his first Christian readers. Most important of these was Augustine, who read him as a young man in the translation of [Neoplatonic philosopher] Marius Victorinus. The reading set him on the course which led to his conversion to Christianity, and his *Confessions* and *On the Trinity* contain echoes of Plotinus on many a page” (*A New History of Western Philosophy*).

Origen had been trained in Platonic philosophy and was much influenced by it... . He also developed a doctrine of the Trinity which is very similar, both in conception and in vocabulary, to the theory of his younger contemporary Plotinus.”

GERALD BRAY, *THE DOCTRINE OF GOD*

Eight hundred years later, the writings of Augustine and other church fathers came into the hands of Thomas Aquinas. By then the concept of the Trinity was well established in the Christian churches, though still not uniform in all its details. Europe was on the cusp of the Renaissance, a period when classical Greek ideas enjoyed a rebirth, and Aquinas was an avid proponent of the classical Greek approach to knowledge and of Aristotle’s philosophy in particular. And it was he, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, from whom the doctrine of the Trinity (in Western Christianity) “received its final and classical form.” These two facts are not unrelated. In the words of American philosopher and theologian Marian Hillar, “the entire

discourse of Thomas is concerned with the meaning of words found in the scripture taken out of their Hebrew cultural context and read literally as describing the divine reality in the sense of Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics. His discursive approach is exactly the same as that of the Hellenistic philosophers in their metaphysics” (*From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian*, 2012).

It was the metaphysical terminology and approach to the enigmas of “being” and “existence” that Thomas Aquinas and the church fathers adopted and adapted—terms translated to English as *substance, essence, form, matter, nature, person, soul* and so on. Because the world in which the early fathers grew up was immersed in the Hellenistic approach, it was all they knew. But that’s where they went wrong. They, along with the medieval theologians after them, tried to come to an understanding of God within a framework built by the Greek philosophers, using *their* philosophical tools. They took the Scriptures and squeezed them into that framework and, not surprisingly, came up with some very unscriptural answers to their questions about God.

BACK TO THE BIBLE

Just what do (or don’t) the Scriptures say about the Trinity? In trying to establish a biblical basis for the dogma, churches often point to three passages. The first and seemingly strongest is 1 John 5:7–8: “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.” But as scholars now universally acknowledge, the entire middle section of this passage (from “in heaven” through “on earth”) is spurious, having been added to the Greek text most likely in the 14th century.

The second passage is Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in [or “into”] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” While this verse may seem to provide a basis for trinitarian thinking, most serious Bible scholars agree that such is not its purpose. This verse appears to have been first used as a proof text or justification for the doctrine in 381 C.E.—more than three centuries after the Gospel was written. So what *did* Jesus mean?

The first chapter of Mark records Jesus’ baptism. The Father spoke from heaven, and the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) descended on the baptized Jesus (Mark 1:9–11; Matthew records the event in similar terms in Matthew 3:16–17). The early Church understood that the result of baptism was the receiving of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:5, 2:38, 8:14–17, 19:5–6,

etc.). Anglican scholar John Nolland writes that Matthew's Gospel "has been about the action of the Father through the Son and *by means of* the Holy Spirit. And that is what the baptised are joined to" (*The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, emphasis added). Baptism marked the beginning of a personal relationship with the Father and the Son *through the Holy Spirit*—the power of God. In no way does this verse prove anything about the nature or makeup of God.

A third scripture often used to justify the Trinity dogma is 2 Corinthians 13:14: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion [or fellowship] of the Holy Spirit be with you all." It's curious that, if this is indeed a trinitarian statement, Paul would name the Son before the Father. Again, however, there is no indication that Paul was making a statement about the nature of the Godhead. In fact, in the salutations of not only Paul's epistles but those written by fellow Church leaders, reference to the Holy Spirit is conspicuously absent: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7; see also 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3, James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:2; 2 John 3, etc.). If the Holy Spirit were a third person in the Godhead, would this not constitute a grave oversight?

The reality is that the [New Testament \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx\)](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx) offers overwhelming evidence of Jesus Christ being God just as the Father is God (see, for example, John 1:1–15; 20:27–29; Colossians 2:9); the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is not spoken of in those terms. The Father and the Word *are* Spirit, and that Spirit is a spirit of power, of love, of a sound mind, of holiness, and of truth (2 Timothy 1:7; Romans 1:4; John 14:17).

Origen begins his treatise *On First Principles* by establishing, in typical Platonic fashion, a divine hierarchical triad; but instead of calling these principles by typical Platonic terms like monad, dyad, and world-soul, he calls them ‘Father,’ ‘Christ,’ and ‘Holy Spirit,’ though he does describe these principles using Platonic language.”

EDWARD MOORE, “ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA (185–254 C.E.),” *INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY* (2005)

References to the Holy Spirit are often confusing, however, because most translators (who support the mainstream trinitarian view of God) have opted to use the masculine pronoun *he* in verses referring to the Spirit. Yet, while nouns and pronouns for the Father and the Son are invariably masculine in the Greek text, words relating to the Spirit are usually neuter (including the pronoun, which would more accurately be translated “it”), and in the Old Testament the word for “Spirit” is actually feminine (for example, in Genesis 1:2). How can the Spirit be referred to in such an uneven manner if it is a third person in the Godhead?

In fact, the Bible doesn’t directly address the personhood of the Spirit, whereas it clearly speaks of the Father and the Son as distinct personal Beings. (This does not justify binitarianism, however, which also has its basis in metaphysics.) In John’s Gospel, Jesus does portray the Spirit as a Helper and a Comforter. However, such personification is found

elsewhere in the Scriptures as well: Solomon used the same literary device when he depicted wisdom as a woman (Proverbs 9:1–6); Paul painted the law as a tutor (Galatians 3:24–25); and John personified the New Jerusalem as a bride (Revelation 21:2).

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED

What are we to make of the absence of a clear biblical basis for the Trinity dogma? Did later church leaders have the authority to adopt this new idea about the nature of God and designate it “the central doctrine of the Christian Church?” These questions are not insignificant in light of what the first disciples taught about “contending earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Throughout the history of Christianity, from second- and third-century church fathers to today’s Bible scholars, the dogma has been the subject of endless philosophical debate and reinterpretation. But with each attempt to explain “the mystery of the Trinity,” objections arise from those who see it differently.

Whether arithmetically, ontologically, existentially, mythologically, or schematically defined, the triad defies definition, and the very multiplicity of its manifestations is a sign of its ungraspability.”

POLYMNIA ATHANASSIADI, “THE CHALDAEAN ORACLES: THEOLOGY AND THEURGY” IN *PAGAN MONOTHEISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY*

The apostle Paul issued a strong warning to [followers of Christ in the first century](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>) who were being influenced by Greek philosophers: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8, English Standard Version). The New Living Translation puts it this way: “Don’t let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ.”

If the Scriptures—by scholars’ own admission—don’t describe God as one Being comprising three persons, then should we rely on ancient pagan or philosophical ideas to reinterpret Him in those terms? It is true that the full nature of God is a mystery to us as humans and probably will be until the time when He reveals Himself to us completely (1 John 3:2). But borrowing ideas from ancient belief systems that often were in direct opposition to the God of the Bible does nothing to shed light on that mystery.