

# THE NICENE IDEA OF GOD

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*The current opinion as to the doctrine of the trinity seems to be such as to leave it very little religious significance. It has become for most of us a metaphysical mystery about which speculation and investigation promise little help. Yet any real student of church history knows that the organization of the trinitarian doctrine was the response of the Graeco-Roman mind to deep religious needs. It is therefore well worth reconsidering from that point of view.*

Three men sat in the library of their club—a Priest, a Lawyer, and a Captain of Infantry home on leave. As they looked into the fire billowing up from logs on the hearth the captain broke the silence.

“Peculiar thing, Parson, the absolute religious faith of our boys over there, coupled with comparative disregard for churches and creeds. The world is fast becoming a huge revival meeting. The men in the trenches have stood for one, two, or three years in the anteroom of God. Many times a day a comrade’s name is called and he has marched through the door. They live always in the Presence. No wonder they are changed.

“What a mental explosion must have taken place to have broken down Anglo-Saxon reserve and produced such diaries and letters as we are getting from the men in the trenches.

“They are storming heaven; but they are doing without the official guides. I tell you this new religion is more dangerous to your churches than the old-time agnosticism. A man with an idea is a dangerous character.

“I feel just as the rest do about your theology; yet in a way I regret that you

cannot adapt the old teachings to this new spirit. For I tell you that, unless someone brings bottles, this new wine is going to be drunk to intoxication, or else allowed to run away and be lost.”

“Where would you begin your reconstruction?” inquired the Priest.

“Right at the beginning,” said the Soldier. “Do away with such a contradiction in terms as a Trinity. The God for me is an Invisible King, a Captain of the Host, not an Abstraction. I think Wells has shown the absurdity of any other concept.”

“Mr. Wells would be more convincing,” replied the Priest, “if he appeared to understand what the doctrine of the Trinity really means. We have never understood it to mean what he says it means. But passing that, it seems to me that Mr. Wells is much nearer to the Christian theology than he knows, for the God of whom he conceives is in fact none other than the Second Person of the Trinity. The trouble with Mr. Wells is that he became so impressed with his discovery that he has entirely overlooked the other two persons. His conception of the nature of God is therefore one-sided. The three elements are

essential to a well-balanced idea of the Deity."<sup>1</sup>

"Aren't you rather severe on the gentleman for what you call his misconception of the Nicene dogma of the Trinity?" replied the Soldier. "If he has misconceived it, aren't you theologians to blame? Who knows what it means, anyhow? I will confess that I have had much the same idea about it as Wells."

"Then," said the Priest, "neither you nor Wells should condemn it until you have informed yourselves as to what it really is."

"Where would you have me go," replied the Soldier, "to find that out? I have delved into ancient tomes and sat through modern sermons, and the purport of them all is something like this: 'God is three persons and one being; three natures and one God. What this means we do not know, and it is impious to inquire. The Trinity is a mystery; but so is the constitution of matter, so is the nature of life, so is the law of gravitation. Since we cannot know, we must believe.'

"Such a statement," continued the Soldier, "contains several fallacies. In the first place, the assertion that one equals three and three equals one is not a 'mystery.' It is plain untruth. It is the negation of a fundamental axiom of logic, that the whole is greater than a part. Accepted, all logic is turned topsy-turvy and all intellection becomes at once impossible. Secondly, the statement that 'since we cannot know, we must believe,' while right enough within limits, is not applicable to this proposi-

tion. We cannot, must not, believe the incredible; and I submit that God does not ask it of us. We cannot reason about the unreasonable. In short, *faith* is not the antithesis of *knowledge*, but its complement. *Faith* is not opposed to *reason*. A mystery is beyond knowledge; but it is not beyond reason; much less is it contrary to reason. Faith is not, as the little girl in the story said, believing something that you know is not so.

"To put it differently, our present sciences are disjointed segments of a curve, not yet complete enough to enable us to plot the curve in entirety, but sufficient to enable us to surmise its bearing in a general way. We can say which of several curves may contain these segments, or, rather, which curves cannot contain them. The function of the sciences is to extend these segments. The function of philosophy and theology is to construct the hypothetical curves which will contain these segments; not to evolve new curves out of thin air. As the sciences push out into the hitherto unknown, the hypothetical curves are tending, it is fair to assume, toward an ever closer approximation to reality. Knowledge and reason are not, in the main, faulty, but merely incomplete.

"It follows that the dogma of the Trinity, while not wholly comprehensible, ought not to be incredible or unreasonable."

"I will grant you all this," said the Priest, "but, really, the dogma of the Trinity is neither incredible nor unreasonable. You must not be led to condemn it by isolated utterances of preachers."

<sup>1</sup>See "The Meaning of Mr. Wells's New Religion," by Very Rev. Bernard Iddings Bell, *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1917.

"As to that, I appeal unto Caesar," returned the Soldier. "We will pass over the utterances of preachers, who, I grant you, are not always theologians. I will rest my case on the Quicunque Vult, the so-called Athanasian Creed. If that does not, in effect, affirm that one equals three and three equals one, then I lose. Or I will take the famous analogy of the trefoil, ascribed to Saint Patrick—I submit that this analogy portrays God as a sort of spiritual Siamese triplet."

"No, no," interjected the Priest, "the church does not undertake to define the manner of union; it simply affirms the tri-unity and authorizes the believer to theorize about it as he likes."

"If that be true, it is a severe indictment," rejoined the Soldier. "It means that the church propounds a riddle and refuses to give the faithful the key. It requires them to keep their minds a vacuum on this dogma which lies at the very basis of Christian theology. Nature abhors a vacuum. The mind soon fills with all sorts of grotesque concepts. The church is in duty bound, if it has a rational idea of the Trinity, to make it known."

"You do the rank and file of Christians an injustice," said the Priest. "Their idea of the Trinity is neither grotesque nor vacuous."

"Is it not, then?" replied the Soldier. "I affirm that my idea of the dogma is grotesque; and you insist that Wells's is. Both of us, I submit, are men of fair intelligence. But do not stop with us. Go out and inquire at random of a dozen of your flock. Ask them what they make of the Quicunque Vult. Then ask them what, if any, inspiration they gain from it.

"This ought not so to be. Christianity boasts that, unlike the ancient philosophies and heathen cults, its tenets furnish inspiration and practical aid in good living. If the best that can be said for a dogma is that it is harmless, then why cumbereth it the ground? Get rid of it."

During all this the Lawyer had been sitting on the edge of his chair, trying in vain to get the floor. At last he broke in.

"You are right that the dogma should be got rid of, if it is grotesque or meaningless. But I judge that the Parson has found it to be neither. Yet I grant you that he has done nothing to define the relations between the persons of the Trinity; and unless that is done, no matter how greatly the dogma may appeal to the sympathies, it cannot gain acceptance. Perhaps he feels that it would not become his cloth to engage in such a controversy; or perhaps he has himself been content not to think the problem through to the end. I believe, however, that the church must think it through and must define the interrelation of the persons in terms of modern thought. I was at first inclined to believe, with you, Captain, that this could not be done. But further study has convinced me, not only that the dogma may be reasonably defined, but that, as originally promulgated, it was essentially reasonable, and that the unreasonable elements were imported into it later. If you like, I will explain myself."

The others settled themselves in their chairs and allowed the Lawyer free rein.

"In construing a statute, or a decree of a court," he began, "the jurist

observes two fundamental canons. First, he must interpret the language in the light of the particular facts in the controversy or situation which it is framed to meet. Secondly, he must give to the words employed their accepted and usual meaning at the time and place of the pronouncement. Let us apply these canons here.

"The germs of the concepts of the First and Third Persons are found in the Old Testament. The normal Hebrew idea of God corresponded to the First Person, but was anthropomorphic. The Hebrews, consequently, thought that when He sought to enter the human soul He must needs attenuate Himself, that is, become a spirit (*ruach*, *πνεῦμα* = *spiritus*, 'breeze'). Thus the prophets, in speaking of a theophany, say, 'The Lord appeared unto me'; but in speaking of an inspiration they say, 'The spirit of the Lord [i.e., the Lord in spiritual form] came upon me.' There does not appear to have been any tendency to hypostatize this concept of the spirit of the Lord.

"The Logos concept originated among the Alexandrine Jews. It was introduced to relieve the Creator of responsibility for a sinful world. The creative act was conceived of as performed by or through the Logos, who was an emanation from God and 'of like substance.' The three concepts thus existed in embryo at the time of Christ.

"When the early Christians were making a formula to express the relationship between the divine nature of Jesus and the Godhead, they made use of this Logos concept. They also brought over the concept of the Holy Spirit.

"A dispute now arose among them as to the interrelation of the concepts of Father, Word, and Spirit, in particular of the two former. The undeniable fact that Jesus had had a human nature distinct from Deity tended subconsciously to make for a concept of the Word as a Being separate from the Father, and inclined the Arians to the pre-Christian dogma of distinctness, if not disparity, between the two.

"On the other hand, the Athanasians argued, and rightly, that such a doctrine destroyed the idea of the unity of God and tended toward the vagaries of Gnosticism and the grossness of polytheism.

"Modern Unitarians, and with them Mr. Wells, assume that the Arians affirmed the unity of God by denying the divinity of Jesus. As a matter of fact the Arian controversy had nothing whatever to do with the nature of Jesus. Both parties affirmed that Jesus was divine. The Arians claimed that Deity consisted of three 'like' entities; that is, that the three were distinct, but that all partook of the nature of Deity. The Athanasians contended that Deity is one. It is to the eternal credit of Athanasius that the Christian religion is not tritheistic.

"Viewed, then, in the light of history, the chief concern of the Council of Nicaea was evidently the affirmation of the unity of the Deity; and its language, if ambiguous, should be so construed.

"Turn now to the words themselves. That portion of the creed formulated by the Council (the Nicene Creed as we now have it is the result of modifications made at the Council of Constantinople some half a century later) which has to

do with the relation between the First and Second Persons reads as follows: 'And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is to say of the *being* [οὐσίας] of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, *One-in-being* [ὁμοουσίον] with the Father, Creator of all things both in heaven and on earth. . . . But those who say, "There was when He was not" and "Before He was begotten He was not," and that "He came into existence from nonexistence," or who profess that the Son of God is of different *substance* or *being*, [ἕτερας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας, ex alia *subsistentia* aut *substantia*], or that He is created, or changeable, or variable, are anathematized by the Catholic church.'

"The two key words are ὑπόστασις and οὐσία. Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* defines ὑπόστασις as follows: 'Foundation; substance; in philosophy and theology it denotes actual existence, as opposed to semblance, the real nature of a thing as opposed to its outward form (the *Ding an Sich*), sometimes used as practically synonymous with οὐσία; in later theology it was limited in sense to the special characteristic nature of a person or thing, directly opposite to οὐσία (generic nature), and it was so used to translate the Latin *persona*.'

"The word οὐσία is defined by the same authority as: 'Being; existence, in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle the word signifies essence, true nature, also *being* as opposed to *not being*; in later Greek scientific works, a primary substance, an element.'

"The two words were, then, at the time of the Nicene Council, practically

synonymous; and they appear to have been so used in the last clause of the Creed, which I have quoted. Indeed ὑπόστασις, which was later employed to translate the Latin *persona*, is etymologically the same word as *substantia*, which is the Latin equivalent for οὐσία. The word ὑπόστασις did not mean *persona* at the time of the Council of Niceae, much less did it correspond to the English word *person*.

"Viewed, then, in the light both of history and linguistics, the Nicene Creed is concerned solely with affirming the unity of the Godhead. It presupposes, to be sure, that the Godhead is complex; but it does not affirm the complexity, much less undertake to define it. In fact, the Athanasians were at once accused by the Arians of Sabellianism, that is, of denying that the Godhead is complex.

"It was probably to defend themselves against this accusation that the later Athanasians formulated their idea of the nature of the complexity of the Godhead. This step was first taken by the Latin, not the Greek, fathers not long after the Council of Niceae. They gave utterance to the formula that God is of three *personae*.

"Now, this word *persona* meant originally an actor's mask (from *per-sonans*). In the fourth century, and before, the word was employed in legal terminology to denote 'an aggregate of legal rights and duties.' Thus, a corporation had a *persona*; but a slave had none. A citizen might have several *personae*, for example, as *tutor* (guardian), *fiduciarius* (trustee), and so on. The use of the word in the fourth century was restricted to this legal sense, and it very rarely had

any other connotation. It was this legal term which the Fathers used in defining the complexity of the nature of Deity. Very evidently the great truth which they were struggling to express was that the nature of Deity, while essentially one, is complex, three-sided, in function. God in essence is one; but in his revelation of himself he has three aspects, manifestations, capacities, or functionalities—as Father, as Son, as Holy Spirit. In the concept of God as Father we have the aspect of transcendence; in the concept of God as Holy Spirit, the aspect of immanence. In the concept of God as Son we have God on the humanistic, or spiritually anthropomorphic, side; we have, that is to say, the aspect of God which is capable of adumbration in terms of the human personality.”

At this point the Soldier broke in: “That is a very pretty theory; but I can quote you commentators who are dead against it, and who state with the assurance of authority that the distinction of Persons is far more fundamental than this.”

“I grant you that,” retorted the Lawyer. “On the other hand, many of the more thoughtful of the orthodox authorities are in substantial accord with this theory. But I take it that the Catholic church derives its dogmas from councils, not from commentators.”

“The corruption in the interpretation of the dogma crept in like this,” continued the Lawyer. “The Greeks cast about for a word to translate *persona*. Unfortunately, they chose *ὑπόστασις*, which up to that time had had the meaning of *substance*. How they came to employ this word I will not

undertake to say. We know that Arianism had its principal strength in the East, and that many easterners, who after the Council of Nicaea conformed outwardly, remained at heart Arians or semi-Arians. Perhaps they contrived in this way to accomplish their ends by indirection. At any rate, the word, which before had been the synonym of *οὐσία*, now became its antonym. But, like all adopted children, the word did not altogether lose its early traits. It connoted something far more fundamental than *persona*. The Greek word, in turn, reacted upon and modified the Latin concept.

“When the mediaeval English theologians came to write the dogma in English, they did it yet worse disservice. They made no attempt to find equivalent words, but merely transliterated the Latin words. *Substantia* became *substance*; *persona* became *person*. God, so the translation runs, is one substance and three persons. *Substance* is bad enough; it has a material connotation, and has traveled far from the Greek *οὐσία* (being). But *person* is a mere parody on the original. It denotes in English a distinct, individual, sentient being, a meaning which the Latin word never had so long as Latin was a spoken language. English-speaking Christendom should rid itself of this fantastic verbal incubus.”

“With all this,” said the Soldier, “I can quite agree. But have you not, in effect, evacuated your trenches to the Unitarians, leaving only dummies and Quaker guns to conceal your retreat?”

“Not so fast,” rejoined the Lawyer. “It is true that I have, like the Unitarians, emphasized the Unity of the Deity, but by a totally different process.

They have come at Unity by hacking away two elements in the divine nature, the transcendent and the anthropomorphic, leaving the immanent only. I have arrived at Unity—rather, I believe, I have brought out what the Catholic faith has always implied—by retaining all three elements, but compacting them, making the distinction of Persons one of functioning rather than of being.”

“But why do you limit the number of Persons to three?” rejoined the Priest. “God acts in an infinite variety of ways; and if the distinction be one of function, you should have an infinite number of Persons.”

“That does not follow at all,” answered the Lawyer. “The distinction of Persons is not a distinction of functions, but of modes of functioning. The distinction is fundamental, since the three modes are, to a large extent, incongruous. A God who is immanent only might function in a variety of ways and still be but simple in nature. But a God who is at once immanent, transcendent, and humanistic, simultaneously and eternally, cannot be other than complex.

“Now, this solution of the problem accords with modern modes of thought in all spheres. We see our universe no longer as static, but as kinetic. The evolutionary viewpoint, which found place first in biology, has taken possession of the fields of psychology, history, sociology, economics, philosophy; in short, of every field of thought. We have come to see that nothing is static, everything is in flux. When, for purposes of analysis, we study a thing without reference to its past or future, or its interrelation

with the whole universe, we are mere anatomists, poring over a cadaver. We have discovered that it is neither so easy nor so profitable as we once thought it to know what a thing ‘is.’ We realize that all we need to know of a thing, perhaps all we can know, is how it acts. We are consequently taking less and less interest in ontology and more and more interest in function.

“So, in theology, it is the way in which God deals with his universe which is, after all, of importance. In that respect man has always instinctively thought of God in three aspects, and always will. God acts transcendently; he is above and beyond nature; he creates and rules it. God acts also immanently; he is in nature, and most of all in the heart of man, if man will but seek him there. God acts, also, anthropomorphically, in a spiritual sense. That is to say, the divine mind is comparable to the human mind. We feel sure that the attributes of the human mind, such as love, mercy, justice, are to be found in perfection in the divine mind. In this aspect God is capable of expression in terms of perfect humanity.

“Contradictory though they appear to be, these three ideas of God have entered willy-nilly into the theologic thinking of every race and creed since the beginning. Sometimes, to be sure, one or other of these ideas has been magnified so as to eclipse the others; but the eclipse is never quite total, and, such as it is, the result is achieved by sophisticated reasoning, not by instinctive feeling.

“Conceive a God of but one Person, one mode of functioning, and you will see how distorted the picture is.

“Picture God as transcendent only. He sits in majesty above the heaven of heavens. He formed the material universe and set it spinning, as a clock-maker makes a clock and winds it up. He is not immanent; if he interferes at all, it is to frustrate and annul the processes of nature. He is not humanistic; he cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; the homely virtues of our human nature are not for him. He is the German Thor, the God of the destroyers of Belgium.

“Picture God as immanent only. Not being transcendent, he (or shall I say It?) is caught in the toils of matter as a fish in a net. Not being humanistic, he is impersonal. He doeth good; he also doeth evil, since he is All. Evil, indeed, is but an undeveloped good. His ethic is quietism; his reward, Nirvana. He is the God of Buddha.

“Picture God as humanistic only. Such is the God of Mr. Wells. He is strong, but not almighty; good, but not perfect; wise, but not omniscient. We may love, respect, and pity him; we

cannot fear him. He is not the Lord of men and angels; he holds not the keys of heaven and hell. Above him stands the Veiled One. He is Zeus prostrate before Ananké.

“An adequate idea of God demands the three concepts. In all well-balanced theologies they exist, at least implicitly. It is the peculiar glory of Christianity that it formulated what was before implicit, and has succeeded fairly well in maintaining a balance between the three.

“Yet Christianity is failing today to bring this truth home to the masses by shrouding it in the verbiage of a past age and permitting, if not fostering, an obscurantist interpretation repellent to the modern mind.

“Instead of the trefoil let us picture our idea of God by that other symbol, the triangle. So understood, the idea ceases to be grotesque or meaningless and becomes the formulation of age-old truth, implicit in the very foundation of theologic thinking, a mystery still, as it always will be, but a reasonable, nay a necessary, mystery.”