



The Trinity Dogma Finally Emerges

I think it is fair to say that the Trinity dogma is a cornerstone of Christianity. This dogma finally emerged at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 with heavy state influence, roughly about 350 years after the death of Jesus. This is enough reason for critical questions, not to mention the fact that the Church used violent coercion until 1826 to support this dogma.

1 Biblical Content and Context

- There is fairly wide consensus among New Testament scholars that the 4 Gospels were written between 70 and 110 CE, after the letters of Paul. They were not written by illiterate Aramaic speaking fishermen (like Jesus' disciples), but by well-educated people writing in good Greek. These authors were not eye-witnesses, but did their writing more than a generation later. This means that when you read about "The Son of God" in the New Testament, that is already a formulation/interpretation by a next generation, who did not know Jesus personally [1]
- There is only 1 single passage in the Bible which seems to explicitly support the Trinity dogma, I John 5:7-8. These verses (the so-called "Johannine Comma") were not included in any of the older, authentic Greek manuscripts. It was only added in the 16th century with the publication of Desiderius Erasmus' Greek New Testament, which was subsequently used as basis the English King James Version in 1611 [2].

2 Arianism and the Lead-up to Constantinople

- Arius (250 - 336) was an Alexandrian priest who did not regard Jesus as of the same substance as God the Father, but maintained that he was not "co-eternal" with the Father and was created by the Father. This view became known as Arianism and gained a large following in Asia Minor and among the Germanic tribes [3] [4]
- Emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which legalized Christianity. In 325 he called the Council of Nicea to create a standardized dogma for Christianity, as he saw potential in the religion playing a unifying role in his empire [5]. They
 - Accepted the Nicene Creed [6][7], in which the divinity of Jesus was accepted as official church dogma
 - Denounced Arianism as a heresy, despite 22 bishops supporting Arius. However, Arianism remained influential
- On 27 Feb 380 Emperor Theodosius I, with the 2 other Emperors of the time, issued the Edict of Thessalonica [8]. See this Historic Moments article for more info:
[Christianity becomes the Official Religion of the Roman Empire - The CSF](#). This Edict
 - Decreed Christianity to be the official and compulsory State religion of the Roman Empire, based on the Nicene Creed of 325
 - Proclaimed the dogma of the Trinity, before it was officially accepted by the Church: "According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity"

- Coined the derogatory term “heretics” and threatened them with persecution by the state.

The Nicene Creed (325): "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten (γεννηθέντα), not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον, consubstantialem) with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them." [7]

3 The First Council of Constantinople

- Theodosius I then proceeded to call the First Council of Constantinople in 381 [9][10][11]
 - This Council was held from May to July 381 in Constantinople
 - Arianism had strong support in Constantinople, but the Council prevented 36 Semi-Arians to attend
 - Arianism was condemned and the Nicene Creed reconfirmed
- It also added the following clause to the Nicene Creed: “And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*”
 - This clause explicitly made it clear that they regarded the Holy Ghost as one with the Father and the Son. The Trinity became official Church dogma
 - Pope Damasus I did not attend this Council, but approved this change to the Nicene Creed.

The Constantinople Creed (aka the Nicene Creed 381): "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will

have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen." [12]

Please note:

1. The so-called Filioque clause is shown in brackets after "... from the Father": **[and the Son]**. This was not part of the Constantinople Creed and was only added by the Catholic Church in the 6th century. It is accepted today by the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Protestant Churches, but not by the Orthodox Church
2. This Constantinople Creed (with the Filioque clause) is often recited by different churches today, while they call it the Nicene Creed. This is historically incorrect on two counts.



Statue of Constantine I in York, England (Image credit: Dreamstime)

4 The Role of the State

Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, in which he decreed the Trinity dogma as compulsory for his entire empire, before it was official Church dogma

The role of the Roman Emperors in the formation of standardized Church dogma, and especially the Trinity dogma, is quite interesting

- Emperor Constantine I
 - Called the Council of Nicea in 325 and intervened in it
 - Exiled Arius and ordered his writings to be burned
- Emperor Theodosius I
 - Issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, in which he decreed the Trinity dogma as compulsory for his entire empire, before it was official Church dogma. He also threatened persecution for pagans and heretics
 - Expelled Patriarch Demophilus of Constantinople in Nov 380, when he refused to affirm the Nicene Creed
 - Called the First Council of Constantinople in 381 with an agenda to counter Arianism and establish the Nicene Creed. He actively influenced this Council
 - Ratified all 7 the Council's canons by imperial edicts on 31 July 381
 - Gave orders after the Council that Arians had to be exiled and excommunicated, and that the writings of Arius be confiscated and burned.



An ancient Roman coin with the image of Theodosius I [Image credit: Dreamstime]

5 Enforcing the Trinity dogma with persecution

Violent coercion and persecution played a conspicuous role in the establishment of the Trinity dogma after the First Council of Constantinople

- Arianism was condemned as a heresy, and from 385 - 1826 heretics were executed, often by burning them at the stake. See this Historical Moments article for more information:
[Christianity starts its 1,500 years of Persecution - The CSF](#)
- Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and Christian theologian who escaped the Spanish Inquisition, was burnt at the stake in Geneva on 27 Oct 1553 as a heretic because he disagreed with the doctrine of the Trinity on Biblical grounds. John Calvin requested his initial arrest in Geneva, was active in his trial and advocated the death penalty for him [13]
- Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake on 17 Feb 1600 and is often regarded as the first martyr for science. Although he was a scientist, he was burned at the stake for heresy, including the denial of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus [14]
- A Spanish school teacher in Valencia (Cayetano Ripoll) was the very last person executed by the Spanish Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition appointed a Board of Faith in Valencia which found him guilty of heresy (you guessed it, for not believing in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus) and convicted him to be burned at the stake on 30 March 1826. They then handed him over to a civil court, which reviewed his case without letting him testify. They executed him by hanging on 27 July 1826, instead of burning him at the stake [15]
- In recent centuries, Christians who did not accept the Trinity dogma were broadly classified as Unitarians. Christians rejecting the Trinity doctrine were only granted freedom of religion in Britain (for example) with the Unitarians Relief Act of 1813 [16].

6 Conclusion

- Just like it is unlikely that Christianity would have become a major world religion without Theodosius I, it is also unlikely that the Trinity dogma would have prevailed without him (and the subsequent persecutions of the theological opponents of this dogma)
 - At least 2 other Emperors (Constantius and Valens) were supporters of Arianism and under their rule Arianism gained popularity
 - If Theodosius happened to be an Arian too, Trinitarianism likely would have been as unknown today as Arianism now is
- Politics, power and random historical events had a clear impact on the fate and direction of Christianity
- It is odd that a cornerstone dogma of Christianity, like the Trinity, has little explicit Biblical support, took 350 years to emerge (and then only with strong state influence), and that they had to brutally persecute the theological opponents of this dogma over many centuries.

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The next Historic Moments article:

The Catholic Church accepts Freedom of Religion by JJ Brits (scheduled for 7 Dec 2022)

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