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## Boethius and the Trinity

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BOETHIUS AND THE TRINITY

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This paper was written under the  
direction of

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(Rev) Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. HIS PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY	
A. Last of the Romans	
1. Confrontation of pagan and Christian Hellenism .....	3
2. Boethius' life and work.....	5
B. A Founder of the Middle Ages	
1. Transmission of Greek culture to the barbarian West.....	9
2. The heritage received by the West.....	11
C. First of the Scholastics	
1. The Carolingian Renaissance.....	12
2. Method of the Pre-Scholastics.....	13
3. The debate about universals.....	16
II. HIS EFFECT UPON TRINITARIAN THOUGHT	
A. Its Previous History	
1. Terminological confusion.....	18
2. Augustine and the Trinity.....	22
B. Boethius' Theological Tractates	
1. His approach.....	24
2. His new use of "relation".....	25
3. "Nature" and "person".....	26
C. The Medieval Theologians' Use of Boethius' Tracts	
1. Early commentators.....	28
2. Thomas Aquinas.....	31
CONCLUSION.....	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	36

## INTRODUCTION

Who is Boethius? Ask the average theology student today and you are almost sure to draw a blank. But go back with me to the past and ask King Alfréd or Chaucer. They will tell you that he is the author of the great classic, the Consolation of Philosophy. Ask the scholastics of the thirteenth century and they will tell you that he was an ancient Roman who applied logic to theology. Ask Theodoric the Ostrogoth and he might have mixed feelings, for Boethius was an industrius collaborator in the revival of Greek culture in sixth century Rome, but Theodoric turned against him before his work was done and beheaded him. He was a philosopher, a logician, a humanist and patrician of ancient Rome. Was he a real theologian also? In fact, was he a Christian at all? The people of Pavia venerate him as a Christian martyr; others wonder about the Christianity of a man whose references to God, to say nothing of Christ, are almost completely couched in philosophical terms in his prison literature, written as he faced death. This paper will not answer many questions but it will set Boethius into his place in history and touch upon the highlights of his work on the Trinity.

In preparing this paper, I have made numerous extensive forays into territory hitherto unknown to me. In addition to investigating Boethius' own life and work, particularly his theological tractates, I sought his sources and thus surveyed antiquity; and in tracing his influence I have climbed to the peak of the Middle Ages. The report that

I bring back is that there are giants living there! Above all, I shall always be indebted to Boethius for introducing me to the De Trinitate of Augustine. That magnificent theology-in-prayer made the entire project well worthwhile.

## I. HIS PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY

### A. LAST OF THE ROMANS

#### 1. Relation between pagan culture and Christianity

Toward the end of the fourth century, Macrobius, a Latin writer, probably from Africa, wrote a philosophical symposium, the Saturnalia, in order to pass on to his son the lore of antiquity. His teacher had been Porphyry (ca. 233-305), disciple of Plotinus (205-270), great enemy of Christians, and Macrobius became the most brilliant representative of pagan Hellenism's last "flower," Neoplatonism. He marked the end of a homogeneous pagan culture in Rome.

In Alexandria earlier, Origen (d.ca. 254) had conceived the possibility of an adaptation of Hellenistic thought to Christian dogma and had studied Scripture in the light of the theories of such philosophers as Plato and Aristotle. When Rufinus' translation of Origen's De Principiis reached the West at the beginning of the fifth century, it aroused considerable feeling.<sup>1</sup> Jerome (345-420), though he had received a Greek as well as a Roman education, had only contempt for pagan culture and the evolution of human thought. He refused to use pagan philosophy, but he did use pagan literature in the service of his exegetical and ascetical works, and he was urged by Augustine to translate the Greek commentaries on Scripture. For him, Scripture was the only authority; he felt that

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Courcelle, Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources, trans. by H. E. Wedeck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 413, 418.

Aristotle's dialectic served the Arian cause. As for Porphyry, Jerome planned to refute his tract Against Christians.<sup>2</sup>

The fifth century monks of Gaul, especially around Lerins, also scorned Greek culture and philosophy, but they studied Rufinus' translation of the ascetical work of a Libyan monk, Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), whose reports on the ascetical life in Egypt reflected Neoplatonism. While John Cassian (d. 435), a leader among the Gallic monks, made extensive use of Evagrius' work, he avoided the Greek language like a plague.<sup>3</sup> There was also a Latin grammarian among the monks, Consentius, who systematically opposed the introduction of Greek grammar in Gaul. An exception seems to be Claudius Mamertinus (d.ca. 474), a monk of Lyons, who studied dialectic and Aristotle's Categories, showing intense interest in pagan philosophy and Greek literature.<sup>4</sup>

In Rome at that time, many became alarmed when there was a revival, through Porphyry's writings, of the seven liberal arts and the application of dialectic to rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> By 450 A.D., Romans had little esteem for Greek culture, and the Greek language was known by only a few, such as those who had to engage in the theological disputes. Leo I (d. 461), bishop of Rome, tried to assemble a whole dossier of the Greek Fathers but had difficulty finding translators. Latin grammar and rhetoric were deficient, but the Latin chauvinists were strong. Christians,

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<sup>2</sup>Courcelle, pp. 126, 229.

<sup>3</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, p. 349.

<sup>4</sup>Courcelle, pp. 238-9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 147ff.



therefore, learning of pagan Hellenism from Macrobius and his successors, and Christian Hellenism from Jerome, and seeing the opposition among scholars, would have seen the two traditions as mutually impenetrable.<sup>6</sup>

But as fifth century Hellenism declined, the works of Marius Victorinus (c. 300-363), a Roman rhetorician and convert to Christianity, and of Manlius Theodorus, one of the greatest Roman philosophers of his age, led to a confrontation of pagan philosophy with the Greek Fathers, producing a new culture. Victorinus had applied the philosophical methods of Porphyry to the exegesis of Scripture and the study of Arian theology, trying to reconcile the data of faith and reason. He had also translated a number of the monuments of antiquity. Manlius Theodorus introduced Augustine (d. 430) to some of the Neoplatonist works and thereby influenced indirectly the following centuries of scholarship, especially theology, in the West.

Around the early sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius too, steeped in the philosophy taught by Proclus, was submitting Porphyrian philosophy to the control of faith, and writing a work on The Divine Names that would also greatly influence the Western theology. His source was Scripture, but his method was a via negativa. Another Easterner, Leontius of Byzantium (c. 490-544) was reviving the use of Aristotelian terms and distinctions in the battles against Nestorius and Eutyches. The confrontation had begun.

## 2. Boethius' Life and work

From 476 A.D., the emperor of the West was replaced by a Gothic

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<sup>6</sup>Courcelle, p. 127.

chieftain as king, but the senatorial aristocracy of Italy remained in office. Though the barbarians were Arian while the Italians were loyal to the Nicene Creed, the reign of Theodoric the Ostrogoth from 495 to 526 was marked by collaboration between the two groups, for the most part.

Into that setting came Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, born around 480 A.D. of a very ancient and wealthy family, the Anicians, who were known for their great faith. Orphaned at an early age, according to the sketchy records we possess, he became the protégé of another distinguished patrician and Christian, Symmachus, head of the Senate. He later married Symmachus' daughter and in 510 A.D. was named consul. In 522 A.D. both of his sons were consuls, an unusual arrangement that showed the favor shown him by the Eastern emperor, Justin I, since usually one consul was named by the East, the other by the West. At about that time he was made Master of the Offices by Theodoric, comparable to a modern Minister of Foreign Affairs, Home Secretary, Postmaster-General and head of civil service! That meant leaving Rome for Ravenna, where the king resided.

But Boethius' main interest was his studies. Pierre Courcelle,<sup>7</sup> after extensive research, has concluded that Boethius studied at one time in Alexandria under Ammonius, a disciple of Proclus. There he would have mastered Greek speculative thought, being indoctrinated in Porphyrian philosophy. Theodoric, an admirer of Greco-Roman culture and perhaps thinking of Plato's philosopher-king, desired to revive Greek culture in decadent Italy, and it was to Symmachus, Boethius, John the Deacon and Cassiodorus

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<sup>7</sup>Courcelle, pp. 316-318.

(ca. 485-580) especially that he seems to have turned for help. Cassiodorus, formerly the king's chancellor, had been asked to draw up a course in philosophy, which influenced the king,<sup>8</sup> but it seems to be Boethius who was "the real artisan of the renaissance in literature and science."<sup>9</sup>

An early work was a paraphrase of a Greek Arithmetic as one way to acquaint the Latins with the riches of Greek literature. He later wrote on music, geometry and astronomy, the other three disciplines of the Quadrivium as found in Porphyry's arrangement of the liberal arts. He also decided to translate all of Aristotle's work, covering logic, ethics and physics, and also all of Plato, and eventually to show that there is no essential difference between the two schools. He was unable to complete this ambitious program, but he wrote a commentary on Porphyry's Introduction to the Categories of Aristotle (Isagoge), which was concerned with the nature and method of reasoning and the problem of cognition. With this work Porphyry had created a stream of commentators, who interpreted Aristotle in light of Neoplatonic theories. Boethius used Marius Victorinus' translation, but later made a new translation and another commentary. He seems often to have taken exception to Victorinus' work. In his own careful work he contributed a new vocabulary to philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

He considered the liberal arts the foundation for Greek philosophy,

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<sup>8</sup>Courcelle, p. 274.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>10</sup>E. K. Rand, Founders of the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 144.

and through them he and his collaborators hoped to establish a Latin scholasticism similar to that of the East. He was much influenced also by Cicero, whose successor he claimed to be, and he wrote a comparison of Cicero and Aristotle on the subject of the Topics. But his most considerable work seems to have been in the field of dialectic or logic.

Toward the latter part of his life, he turned to theology, writing five tracts, two of which we shall discuss further on, since they are central to the topic of this paper. The five are entitled "How the Trinity is One God Not Three Gods," "Whether Father, Son and Holy Spirit May Be Substantially Predicated of the Divinity," "How Substances Can Be Good in Virtue of Their Existence without Being Absolute Goods," "On the Catholic Faith" and "A Treatise Against Eutyches and Nestorius."

His was a bold attempt to restore culture at Rome with the aid of Alexandrian philosophy. He explained that he was introducing Greek methods, even into the study of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the sciences, dialectic and philosophy. He claimed that his was the first Latin treatment of the hypothetical syllogism.

But the reunion of Constantinople and the bishop of Rome in 519 A.D., which made for good relations between the Eastern emperor and such Roman Catholics as Symmachus and Boethius, paved the way for alienation between the Byzantines and the Arians. Theodoric, hearing rumors of impending persecution of the Arians by Justin I, sent the bishop of Rome to Constantinople to negotiate. Hearing of the warm reception he received, and becoming suspicious of treasonable plots among his own senators in complicity with the Byzantines, he prosecuted one of the senators. When Boethius spoke in his behalf, Theodoric clapped Boethius himself into

prison. There he wrote his last and greatest work, The Consolation of Philosophy, and was then executed, around the year 524 A.D. near Pavia. There, today, his remains, along with those of Augustine, are venerated in the cathedral, and since 1883 Rome has recognized his cult by the Pavians, to whom he is St. Severinus. There is a legend that after he was beheaded, Boethius carried his head in his hands for some distance. As we shall see, this was rather symbolic! The work of his great mind lived on and was widely disseminated.

## B. A FOUNDER OF THE MIDDLE AGES

### 1. Transmission of Greek Culture to the Barbarian West

The cultural revival in Italy ended soon after Boethius' death. Symmachus was executed the following year; and not long afterward the Ostrogothic war and the Byzantine invasion of northern Italy ended Theodoric's project.<sup>11</sup> The political center of gravity shifted to north of the Alps, and since the East was anti-German, the division between Greek and Latin traditions grew, until by about 800 A.D. the political break was complete.

For the most part, knowledge of the Greek language was lost before much of the Greek science had been translated. In the monastery sponsored by Cassiodorus, where the work of collecting and translating Greek works had been taking place, few if any after Cassiodorus' death knew Greek; so the monks, while they remained, contented themselves with copying the translations and the Latin classics he had collected.<sup>12</sup> To the abbey of

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<sup>11</sup>J. C. Ayer, A Source Book for Ancient Church History (New York: AMS Press, 1970), pp. 590ff.

<sup>12</sup>Courcelle, pp. 390-96.

Monte Cassino they sent the Greek works on medicine, and as a result, this became the only Hellenistic discipline with a continuous tradition, for the Vivarium was later destroyed. In other disciplines, including theology, it was necessary for the West to make an almost completely new start.

For that reason, there was a thirst, especially in the monasteries, for works of the past. From Cassiodorus' Vivarium his treasures were dispersed. Some reached Bobbio, where the Irish monk, Columbanus, located himself. Many went to the Lateran library, a most fortunate move. From the Lateran popes disseminated them to such centers as Cologne in Germany, Jarrow in Britain, and Laon in France. Gregory of Tours (ca. 538-594), a bishop on intimate terms with the Frankish rulers, was convinced of the centrality of the Church for human progress<sup>13</sup> and worked to bring to his countrymen the knowledge of Christian patristic antiquity. Bede (673-735) in Britain worked with his fellow monks to the same end. Gregory I (d. 604), bishop of Rome, was a most enthusiastic supporter of such efforts. As national groups within the Western empire worked individually to improve their own culture, Rome gradually became a center for disseminating the treasures of antiquity, and by the eighth century Rome had become the model for cultural development.

During the early part of the ninth century, Pope Leo XIII, for instance, sent material on the Trinity, taken from Cassiodorus' collection, to Cologne. That gave even the order in which Cassiodorus thought one

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<sup>13</sup>F. Cayré, Manual of Patrology and History of Theology, p. 272; H.G.J. Beck, "St. Gregory of Tours," New Catholic Encyclopedia, VI, p. 798.

should read the Fathers on the subject. When a bishop in Laon wanted to obtain similar material, he applied first to York, near Bede's monastery, but then turned to Rome for it. Lupus, teacher of Alcuin, is known to have received manuscripts from the Lateran library, also. At that period, then, all roads seemed to lead from Rome, and Boethius' works were among those sent out for the eager scholars to study.

## 2. The heritage received by the West

Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636), one of the most famous compilers of the time, considered pagan writers as authorities, and compiled sentences and anthologies from their works. He produced an invaluable encyclopedia of all the available knowledge, religious and secular, at the king's request. In 589 A.D. the Visigoths in Spain had renounced Arianism, and efforts were being made to give the clergy a good education. The Council of Toledo (633), over which he presided, decreed a college for each diocese, for this purpose.

Martianus Capella, thought to be an African of the early fifth century and a pagan, wrote a Latin work describing the seven liberal arts. He, along with Cassiodorus' Institutiones, which presented the liberal arts as preparation for theology, provided very useful guides for the curriculum of the schools. The works passed on by Cassiodorus seem to have been more Christian than secular and included the monastic writings of the East. He had also collected as many works of the Greek Fathers as possible, though a number of them remained untranslated when the work stopped.

The Gallic monks used the classics, in translation or in commentaries, as a means of studying Latin culture and Latin language, which by

the sixth century had become impoverished. In Porphyry's work, however, they also found his method of exegesis and Aristotle's program study, which they found useful. The writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, in which Gregory I took an interest, also preserved the memory of pagan Hellenism even after the Neoplatonic school disappeared, as Pseudo-Dionysius had received Platonism through Maximus the Confessor. From the eighth century, his work acted like a leaven in the West.<sup>14</sup> Boethius had translated Plato's Timaeus also. But the parts of Aristotle that Boethius did not pass on seem to have remained unknown until about 1150 A.D.

For theological writings, the West depended heavily upon the Latin Fathers, along with the Greek Fathers who had been translated. Augustine's were by far the most influential in Western theology, determining its form and content for many centuries.<sup>15</sup> In the fifth century, though Tertullian, Jerome and Hilary were read, Augustine was predominant. But other seeds were now sown. By means of a kind of "creative exegesis" there was taking place, from the fourth to the eighth century, a melding of antiquity, Christianity and Germanism.

### C. FIRST OF THE SCHOLASTICS

#### 1. The Carolingian Renaissance

The popes and the Anglo-Saxons, toward the end of the eighth century, initiated projects to raise the level of culture in the West, particularly among the clergy. Charlemagne, an admirer of Theodoric, willingly

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<sup>14</sup>Courcelle, p. 420; Cayré, p. 308.

<sup>15</sup>Pelikan, p. 293; Courcelle, p. 413.



cooperated. It was Alcuin (d. 804) who spearheaded the renaissance, in his capacity as Charlemagne's minister of education (not unlike the position of Cassiodorus). He had studied in the monasteries of Britain and had read Boethius' translation of Aristotle. In France he brought about the establishment of episcopal and monastic schools and the gradual revival of the trivium and quadrivium. He also wrote a Dialectica, which took its place beside the earlier manuals and helped to build a "new Athens."<sup>16</sup> For the most part, however, he was content to duplicate the past rather than to be creative.

## 2. Method of the Pre-Scholastics

The superficial imitation of the Greeks was the forerunner of the "method of authority," which looked to the ancients as the source of knowledge. Thus it was that Boethius, as both translator and author, attained great stature in the Middle Ages. To the text of an "authority" the early scholars added glosses, which were later replaced by commentaries. Boethius' works, especially perhaps his Consolation of Philosophy and his theological tractates, became grist for their mills. In fact, the former was translated by no less than King Alfred, Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I.

In antiquity, the Fathers had been both theologians and witnesses to the ancient faith. Now there came into use anthologies of their works, the texts being grouped according to scriptural topics, and the whole being called sacra pagina. The Fathers were the "authorities," the "holy doctors," and the early method was to read the Scriptures and then expound

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<sup>16</sup>I. C. Brady, "Medieval Scholasticism," New Catholic Encyclopedia XIV, pp. 1154-8.

them through comments from the Fathers. In that way the faith of the Ancients was picked up in the barbarian West and theology had its frail roots in tradition. When the liberal arts were revived, the art of grammar was also applied to this study. In addition, men such as Lupus, exposed to the logica vetus of Aristotle, began using dialectic and logic. This was a very different approach from that of the Neoplatonic tradition that had been Christianized and passed on by Augustine.

Dialectic had been for Plato a means to arrive at the knowledge of the absolute good. With Aristotle, it was rather a method of disputation or analysis, moving the discussion into the realm of the abstract from a starting point in the material world. Boethius had not only placed theology among the speculative sciences but he stressed logic for all disciplines, and had used it in theology himself, especially for the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology. It had become a tool of "sacred science." Had all of Aristotle reached the West at the same time, he would have become known as more than a great logician, but this is the aspect brought out by Boethius' works. When the entire world-view of Aristotle was later discovered, its irreconcilability with Neoplatonism was much more evident.

During the "dark ages" of the tenth century, the cathedral school of Chartres, among others, was nurturing future humanists, schooled, like Augustine, in rhetoric, which uses language as an art. The rhetoricians were the high priests of the cult of antiquity, and imitation had become their focus. By the mid-eleventh century, they were actively opposing the new trend to use dialectic and even logic in theology. They held that the only acceptable method was to cite the authorities; they stressed

the role of faith in theology; and they tried to preserve the place of Scripture as well, in the monastic tradition. Platonists themselves, they charged that the Aristotelians were rationalists, disputing and questioning about divine things instead of confining these tools to liberal arts, and using philosophical terms instead of biblical ones. By the mid-twelfth century, St. Bernard (d. 1153) represented the extremes of this opposition, centered in the monastic schools. He wanted no merely academic use of dialectics in theology.

The Aristotelians, on the other hand, considered the language of the Platonists impure: it was too literary, too poetic. To elaborate sacred doctrine into a science, they claimed, the techniques of reason had to be used. Thus reason could assist faith. Some, however, began to rely entirely upon predicates and categories of logic, even to analyze the Godhead, as Boethius had done in his theological tractates.<sup>17</sup> The extreme was reached by Peter Abelard (d. 1142), who became dissatisfied with the exaggerated reliance on authorities as taught at Laon. By his day, the entire Organon of Aristotle had become available and he decided to try the dialectical method of reconciling opposing authorities, thus contributing a new element to theological method. Gilbert de la Porrée (d. 1154) developed this further, though he was not so extreme.

Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), "the father of Scholasticism," sought to use reason to understand faith, but he did not envision the excesses that this could bring about. At St. Victor near Paris, a school was set up aimed at effecting a synthesis of the conflicting schools.

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<sup>17</sup>"How the Trinity is One God Not Three Gods."

Though Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) tried to draw the best from both, as did Richard (d. 1173), they leaned toward the monastic, antidialectical approach. Hugh was very interested in Boethius' version of the program of study and his classification of the sciences, however, and he even accepted his theory of abstraction, though he was a lover of Augustine's theology. Richard, whose method was more contemplative, wrote a De Trinitate, among other things.

It took Peter Lombard (d. 1160) to achieve a juncture of the two methods, stressing the sources of belief as a firm basis of theology and only then applying the categories of dialectic. He used his method in his Sententiae, systematizing the authorities. Thus he balanced authority and speculation, faith and reason. His book was a basic text for Thomas Aquinas.

### 3. The debate about universals

For Plato, dialectic achieves knowledge of Forms. For Aristotle, Forms serve as the principles of natural things and are abstracted from reality, matter. For him the basic category, therefore, is substance, not Form, and the concrete individual is the first sense of substance. In trying to combine Plato and Aristotle, Boethius hoped to do what Augustine had found impossible. He was working from two different understandings of reality: idealism and a kind of realism. The concepts drawn from material things resembled Plato's ideals, which are universals, and real. Dialecticians of the Middle Ages, using Boethius' works, began to ask themselves if the abstract forms he used were universals, too, having reality in themselves, outside the mind.

Roscelin (1050-1125), of Compiègne, declared that in nature only

the individual subsists and that genera and species are just verbal expressions having no reality. With this view, he fathered Nominalism. Here was a hornet's nest composed of Aristotle's logic, Porphyry's genera and species, stirred up by Boethius and baked into theology (to mix metaphors!). In introducing his discussion of the Trinity, Boethius had stated that theology is done "intellectualiter."<sup>18</sup> The forms used are produced by the mind, abstracted from but based in reality. For an idealist, reality is rather a dimension of the mind. It is not surprising, then, that those schooled in Plato took the "universals" of the Boethian Aristotle as purely mental, for they were operating on a different level of being.

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<sup>18</sup>De Trinitate II.

## II. HIS EFFECT UPON TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

### A. ITS PREVIOUS HISTORY

#### 1. Terminological confusion

In his Christological tract, Against Eutyches and Nestorius, Boethius explains the terminological confusion that reigned in Greek and Latin theology. The apologists, drawing upon Scriptures, had approached the Trinity from the manner in which we experience it through revelation, in its threeness; but they tried to maintain the delicate balance between this truth and God's oneness. The Gnostics, however, taught a hierarchy of beings, and early theology was forced to combat the resulting subordinationism. Irenaeus (d.c. 210) was able to keep monotheism and yet the distinction of missions in the "economic trinity" without using philosophical terms. Hippolytus (d. 235) of Rome, who also wrote in Greek, related the multiplicity in God to the saving event and used the word prosopon to designate the Three.

When Tertullian (d. after 220), the first to express the doctrine in Latin, wrote against modalism, he chose the word persona. Prosopon and persona were carried into conciliar formulas, and these are among the words discussed by Boethius, since their meaning in each language was of great importance in the misunderstandings between East and West.

Tertullian stressed the distinctio or distributio among the personae, as a plurality of expression or form. It was he also who taught

that the Son is "of one substantia with the Father."<sup>19</sup> Novatian (c. 250), however, taught that the Son had his own substantia (an exact translation of hypostasis, which some of the Greeks used in this way). He located the distinctions within the Trinity, viewing them apart from the salvation event.

The West, therefore, was developing the truth of the monarchia in God. But the East saw that the threat of Sabellianism called for a more sophisticated response than any Western theologian had offered. On the other hand, the philosophical tendency of a Tertullian was frowned upon by some in the West, even bishops of Rome, for they feared the result would be a separation of Christ from the Father. They were not up against Modalism to the same extent as he.

In Origen's time (d. 253-4) the terms ousia, physis, hypostasis and prosopon were all in use by various teachers in speaking of the Three. Various philosophies were at work. Clement of Alexandria had expressed Christian orthodoxy in Platonic speech. Origen synthesized Christian faith and Middle Platonic thought. (Sloyan<sup>20</sup> compares his accomplishment to that of Aquinas, who synthesized Christian faith and Aristotelianism.) Origen could thus speak of three hypostaseis, a distinctive feature of his trinitarianism: the Three were not just verbally distinguishable but numerically. He did not quite succeed, however, in maintaining the equality of the Three.

Hypostasis, like ousia and physis, when applied to the Three,

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<sup>19</sup>Adversus Praxean Liber 2.

<sup>20</sup>Sloyan, The Three Persons in One God (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 47.

seems to break up the Godhead into three gods. Prosopon, on the other hand, seems too transient and therefore Satellian. Compounding the problem, the first three terms were also used for the Oneness. When the controversy moved into Latin, translation further complicated the issue. As Boethius explains,<sup>21</sup> the Greeks supply exact equivalents for essentia (ousia), subsistentia (ousiosis), substantia (hypostasis) and persona (prosopon). But the Greeks use hypostasis and prosopon for individual substances, in the sense of substance or person. Man, says Boethius, is essence, subsistence, substance and person. God, however, is essence, to whom belongs subsistence and substance. Boethius concludes that there is one essence or subsistence in God but three substances (hypostaseis), because God supplies all things with subsistence. But he submits to the Church, which had by then made conciliar decisions about Trinitarian terms and ruled out substance for the Three.

Dionysius had said that Father and Son were distinct according to ousia, the term Origen had chosen for each of the Three; whereas Tertullian had taught that the Son is of one substance (literally, hypostasis) with the Father. This latter, translated by homoousios in Greek, meant "identity" to the Eastern mind.

The adoptionists understood that term as meaning that Father and Son were not truly distinct, that there is only one ousia. There was no room in Tertullian's system for plurality in the Godhead. When Arius said "three hypostaseis" he also meant one incommunicable ousia with two subordinate beings. The West heard three hypostaseis as three divinities,

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<sup>21</sup>Against Eutyches III.



and its insistence upon consubstantiality (homoousios) won out at Nicaea in 325 A.D. There seemed no other way to reach an agreement but to use this non-scriptural term.

As Latin began to penetrate the upper classes in Rome and later in Africa, Rufinus had translated some of the trinitarian discussion from Greek to Latin and he chose subsistentia for Origen's hypostasis, since it was close to the notion of substance in his frame of reference, yet it had to be differentiated from that term when applied to the Three.

The Cappadocian Fathers had made a substantial contribution to the vocabulary and to the development of concepts. Firmly committed to the homoousios of Holy Spirit as well as Son with the Father, Basil clearly distinguished between ousia and hypostasis on the basis of Stoic presuppositions, that of a genus thrice realized. By analogy, they arrived at the concept of one ousia realized in three hypostaseis. Thanks to Gregory of Nazianzen not only was the term hypostasis settled upon, but an incipient notion of relation within the Trinity was contributed to theology.

Nicaea's decisions took time to "take," but a transplanting of Hilary and Athanasius into one another's territory by way of exile resulted in a better mutual comprehension of trinitarian terminology, and by 381 A.D., at the time of the First Council of Constantinople, both men could agree to the compromise formula of Basil of Ancyra, "like in all things, including ousia." Hilary was the first Latin writer to acquaint Western theologians with the work of the East, and he coined new expressions as he relayed their thought. The main interest in the West, however, was not terminological but biblical: every text had to be interpreted in

the light of the analogy of faith.

Chalcedon (451 A.D.), capping off the Christological controversy that had raged since Nicaea, adopted both the subsistentia (hypostasis) and persona (prosopon) for the One in Christ, but did not consider it necessary to define its terms, since its work was done in the context of faith. Its use of abstract terms like these, however, spurred theological reflection in order to precise their meaning by way of the philosophical content of such concepts and terms. Their concrete implications could not be simply assumed for long.

For example, if each ousia in Christ keeps what makes it a hypostasis, viz. its properties or idiotes, as the Cappadocians had explained it in Trinitarian terms, how could there be only one hypostasis in Christ? A different metaphysical basis was needed for hypostasis and prosopon.

The concept of nature also needed clarification, particularly in relation to that of hypostasis. Some, like Cyril, had seen Christ's unity in his nature; the other view saw unity of person, limited by distinction of natures. John Philoponus (d. 565), an Alexandrian, tried to solve this with the Aristotelian system, but failed to distinguish adequately between nature and person. He applied nature to each person in the Trinity, uniting them only on an intellectual level.

## 2. Augustine and the Trinity

A common word, "person," had come to contain ideas not found in Scripture or the early Fathers, and the same had happened to scientific words chosen by the councils to express biblical faith. By the time Augustine began to write about the Trinity, all this terminological history was involved.

When he started out, he was not sufficiently acquainted with the Greek language to base his work upon the earlier Fathers, however, so he depended heavily upon Hilary, who had been exposed to the Greek mentality, especially that of the Cappadocians. His treatise was aimed not at argument but at plumbing the depths of the mystery, starting from the divine ousia or essentia. For him, the only distinction is in persons, and these are equal and act as "one principle," a marked change from the view of distinction of missions, based on Scripture. For him, tres personae meant that God "subsists relatively." It was a common philosophical notion that the creature needs subsistence in order to stand in relation to another. For God, esse is subsistere,<sup>22</sup> so he tended to reject substantia for the One in God; He had no accidents. This approach gave a new direction to future Western theology of the Trinity. It was Rufinus, according to Lagrange,<sup>23</sup> that derived the word subsistentia from subsistere.

Tertullian had imported into substantia a materialistic overtone that was misleading. He had ousia in mind, but he was more of an orator than a philosopher. Nevertheless, many of his expressions are reflected in the Tome of Leo that provided a basis for the Chalcedonian formulas.

But Augustine, converted to Neoplatonism and Christianity almost simultaneously, approached the divine essence as the Alexandrians did, in relation to the absoluteness and impassibility of God. Ipsium esse and essentia were equivalents of substantia. But he saw God as sovereign,

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<sup>22</sup>De Trinitate VI.4.9.

<sup>23</sup>R. Garigou-Lagrange, The Trinity and God the Creator (St. Louis: Herder, 1952), p. 157.

unlike the Neoplatonists. His was a Christian Neoplatonism.

## B. BOETHIUS' THEOLOGICAL TRACTATES

### 1. His approach

Boethius read Augustine's De Trinitate and then wrote his tractate, "The Trinity is One God Not Three Gods," a problem he had long pondered, he says, and which he presents to Symmachus so that he might "examine whether the seeds sown in my mind by St. Augustine's writings have borne fruit."<sup>24</sup> He "set it forth in logical order and cast it into literary form," using brevity and wrapping up the ideas that he drew from the deep questionings of philosophy in "new and unaccustomed words" meant for Symmachus alone.

Ambrose and Hilary had proceeded only according to authority; Augustine added the use of reasoned arguments. But Boethius explains that in theology he believes that one should proceed "intellectualiter,"<sup>25</sup> though he recognizes that in any liberal art "some limit is set beyond which reason may not reach."<sup>26</sup>

Augustine used logic in his first part, consulting the Categories of Aristotle for help, and this is the aspect that appealed to Boethius, rather than the second half in which he used various analogies to apply to the Trinity. For Boethius, his subject matter was "pure Form,"<sup>27</sup> and

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<sup>24</sup>De Trinitate, Intro.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., II.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Intro.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., II.

his goal was to grasp it by way of logical analogies. He dealt, therefore, in abstract concepts, quite unlike Augustine, who contemplated the living God, whom he periodically addressed in the course of his speculation.

To the premises laid down by authority, by which Boethius was willing to be limited, he added an elaborate array of premises drawn from philosophy and logic. There was no exegesis in his work, but many historians believe that here, as in his Consolation of Philosophy, Christian faith is operative though mainly implicit. There are those, however, who question his Christianity.

## 2. His new use of "relation"

Reasoning to the conclusion that we can predicate of God only what is identical with substance, he examines the category of relation, which Augustine had used. It does not refer to substance, he says, since it makes no substantial change, but neither is it an accident. In God, therefore,--to oversimplify the argument--it is a relation of identicals.

Recalling that relation can be within a subject as well as outside, he concludes that "the manifoldness of the Trinity is secured through the category of relation, and the Unity is maintained through the fact that there is no difference of substance, or operation, or generally of any substantial predicate. So, then, the divine substance preserves the Unity, the divine relations bring about the Trinity."<sup>28</sup> This conclusion was to be the basis for an untold amount of speculation later.

He had no new doctrinal insight, to be sure, but he expressed the

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<sup>28</sup>De Trinitate, VI.

thoughts of Augustine in more thoroughly Aristotelian terms, and future dialecticians fascinated with logic would tune in more readily to his work for that reason, perhaps. He explored the Trinity a bit more in his second tract, but that did not have the repercussions that the first one had.

### 3. "Nature and "person"

Another theological controversy took hold of his analytical mind when he sat in on a discussion about the via media between the errors of Eutyches and Nestorius.<sup>29</sup> Boethius was appalled not so much at the ignorance of those discussing it, for he shared in that, but in the fact that they saw no problem. Catholics held that Christ is from two natures and in two natures. The Roman theologians or bishops called together by the bishop saw no reason, for example, why the Eutycheans could not accept both of those statements.

Intrigued, Boethius went off and chewed his cud, as he expressed it, until "at last the door opened to my insistent knocking, and the truth which I found cleared out of the way all the clouds of the Eutychian error."<sup>30</sup> Eager to share his findings with his friend and "father," John the Deacon, but prevented by business, he wrote it out in a tract, "Against Eutyches." He set about to "clear away the extreme and self-contradictory errors of Nestorius and Eutyches" and then "by God's help" to "temperately set forth the middle way of the Christian faith."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Stewart and Rand, in their edition of his tracts, set the date at 512 A.D. when Rome received an inquiry from the East.

<sup>30</sup>Contra Eutyches., Intro.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

He saw the crux of the problem in the relationship between "person" and "nature." "Person," he remarked, is very difficult to define,<sup>32</sup> and "difference of persons" in the Trinity is "a phrase which aims at interpreting what we can hardly understand."<sup>33</sup> He began by explaining the various meanings of "nature." From one point of view, nature is a substrate of person; so person cannot be predicated apart from nature. Person belongs to substance alone, rational substance. Further, every nature is a substance, existing not in universals but in individuals. Through reasoning along these lines, he arrived at the classic definition of person, "The individual substance of a rational nature."<sup>34</sup> Scholars of the Middle Ages would chew on that cud for a long time.

He then explained the terminological confusion described above (to which this paper may have contributed something for our own century) in the context of Trinitarian theology. He was then able to refute Nestorius<sup>35</sup> and Eutyches<sup>36</sup> and finally to propose the middle way for Christology, adding a few further considerations at the end of his tract.

Though there were others, as we have seen, who were using Aristotle in Trinitarian theology, Boethius made the important distinctions needed to give his formulations an aura of orthodoxy. Although, for example, he was able to use "substance" for either the One or the Three, he reserved it for the One, in view of the official formulas, and even then

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<sup>32</sup>Contra Eutyches, II.

<sup>33</sup>De Trinitate, V.

<sup>34</sup>Contra Eutyches, III.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., IV.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., V, VI.

he called it a "supersubstance," to distinguish it from all others. He saw, too, that man is predicated as a subject, but God is existence itself. His later commentators were not always as careful of these distinctions as he was.

Was he trying to dispel the paradoxes in the basic dogmas, or was he trying to demonstrate that Trinity in Unity is not a contradiction? Did he see it as a logical paradox or a real one or both? We cannot know exactly why he used the method of logical analysis, but the result of his work was to pave the way for more of the same, applied to other doctrines as well, but in schools that for some centuries found themselves at odds with the Neoplatonic approach of his mentor, Augustine.

### C. THE MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIANS' USE OF BOETHIUS' TRACTS

#### 1. Early commentators

The earliest known commentary on Boethius' theological tracts is that of John Scotus Erigena (810-877), born in Ireland, died in England, and studied near Laon in Gaul.<sup>37</sup> A humanist, he continued the work begun by Alcuin. In the twelfth century his commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate was much circulated and commented upon in its turn. His work, however, was not as successful as Boethius' in avoiding a confusion of faith and reason. Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841-908), trained like Erigena in the method of Laon and working in the humanist renaissance, also commented upon Boethius' work, as did Clarenbald of Arras later.

Abelard and Roscelin wrote on the Trinity, applying their nominalist

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<sup>37</sup>Alcuin is thought by some to have written one also.



tenets to it, but they were attacked for it by St. Bernard. Their temptation was to apply Boethius' definition of person to the divine persons without qualification. Finding themselves with three substances, in the sense of divine essences, they reduced the divine persons to modes of being, distinguishing them only in a logical way, not a real way.<sup>38</sup>

In the twelfth century, a commentary that was to become famous was that of Gilbert de la Porrée. He was familiar with the work of Hilary and Augustine, but using the method of Laon he amplified Boethius' tract by the use of dialectic, making distinctions and subdistinctions. He reduced the De Trinitate, and the other tracts as well, to the statement and solution of a particular "quaestio." Applying the principles of grammar, he reached the conclusion that the three persons had to be external to the Godhead if they were not to be considered accidents of the divine substance. Denounced for this kind of trinitarian teaching, he was prosecuted at the Council of Rheims in 1148, at which the pope and Bernard of Clairvaux were among those who took part personally.

Gilbert's trial has many interesting features to it. The prosecution had only a sheet of extracts from Boethius to work from, so to overcome their bafflement they demanded a copy of the full text. Gilbert refused, claiming that they would not understand it! His side was armed not only with Boethius but with the Church Fathers as well. He was acquitted, but that was probably because the pope had to stand up to Bernard, who seems to have used the case to challenge the Roman Curia. As a result of his trial, "the Christian world had at last become a more

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<sup>38</sup>G. Sloyan, pp. 85-6.

suitable place for the speculations of scholarship...The final nail was driven into the coffin of the earlier medieval obscurantism."<sup>39</sup> From then on, Boethius' work served as a framework for a theologian's own trinitarian work.

Anselm, in his Monologium,<sup>40</sup> addressed himself to the difficulty presented by Boethius' definition of person, expressing it thus: "In the supreme Being, just as there are not more substances than one, so there are not more persons than one." He prefers the word "essence" for the One, but allows for "substances" as applied to the Three. Later, Thomas Aquinas clarified by pointing out that this had to mean first substances, as he believed it did for Boethius.<sup>41</sup>

Richard of St. Victor delivered the question from the "Boethian impasse"<sup>42</sup> by defining person as "incommunicable existence of divine nature." Undoubtedly, this contribution was of more value to future theologians than the rhetoric of the thoroughly antidialectic Bernard.

The twelfth century finally achieved an officially approved trinitarian theology in that of Peter Lombard, though first he had to be cleared of the suspicion of rationalism. He depended heavily upon Augustine, rather than Boethius, but in the acts of the IV Lateran Council of 1215, Boethius' influence can be detected: "...what is proper to the three persons is that res which is substance, essence or divine nature...

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<sup>39</sup>R. Lloyd, The Golden Middle Age, pp. 171-2; cf. also N. M. Haring, "Gilbert de la Porrée," New Catholic Encyclopedia, VI, pp. 478-9.

<sup>40</sup>p. 78. Cf. Sloyan, pp. 86-7.

<sup>41</sup>Sloyan, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

the distinctions are in the persons and the unity is in the nature."<sup>43</sup>

A decided influence on thirteenth century theology was William of Auxerre (1145-1231), who used a wide range of authorities along with Aristotle. W. H. Principe, who has done a study of his theology of the hypostatic union, writes:

In theological questions involving philosophy of being, essence, nature, form, substance, individual and person, it is above all Boethius . . . who furnishes William his main concepts, and this either directly or through the twelfth-century expositors of his opuscula. Those theologians in particular who were strongly influenced by the commentaries of Gilbert . . . seem to be the ones whose paths William follows for these philosophical concepts.<sup>44</sup>

This helps trace the influence of Boethius in the golden age of scholasticism, an influence that has perhaps become more indirect as time passes.

## 2. Thomas Aquinas

Our trail ends with the great doctor, Thomas Aquinas. In 1256-58 he wrote a commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate, probably at the start of his Paris career. In it he set forth a philosophy of human knowledge, using Boethius' words<sup>45</sup> as a springboard. This work of Aquinas had great influence, and therefore made Boethius famous, although it far surpasses his work in length alone. As a matter of fact, Aquinas went only as far as the second chapter of the original, quoting it in sections, proposing questions drawn from it and then answering them in the scholastic method. Boethius' contribution lies in the questions he raises, explicitly and

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 88-9.

<sup>44</sup>William of Auxerre's Theology of the Hypostatic Union, pp. 132-33.

<sup>45</sup>Intro.

implicitly, and the division of the material. He sets up the problems upon which the great mind of Aquinas goes to work.

Aquinas treats Boethius as an authority, but supplements his text with material from many other authorities, especially Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and, of course, Aristotle. By then, Aristotle had made his third entry into the West and it was becoming possible to distinguish between the real Aristotle and the adulterated versions that had come by way of the Arabian philosophers. In his systematization, and with his distinctions, Aquinas makes Boethius more manageable. A famous distinction is that which he made between essence and existence, one for which neither Augustine's nor Boethius' world was ready.<sup>46</sup>

Boethius' influence is also very evident in the treatment of the Trinity in the Summa Theologica, written a decade later. Many of the questions posited by Aquinas are directly inspired by Boethius' theological tracts. Ia,q.29,a.1, for example, is chiefly a defence of Boethius' definition of person. One argument in its favor is that Boethius is an authority and his definition has found acceptance. G. Lagrange<sup>47</sup> holds that the complexity of the following article, "whether 'person' is the same as hypostasis, subsistence, and essence?" is due to Aquinas' effort to place a favorable interpretation upon Boethius' statements regarding subsistence and substance. He (Lagrange) claims that Boethius misunderstood Rufinus' use of subsistence, and that this is what

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<sup>46</sup>A table comparing the contents of the treatises of Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas is given by Sr. R. E. Brennan in The Trinity and the Unicity of the Intellect by St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup>R. Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 158.

caused the trouble that ensued.

Aquinas also addressed himself to the question of relations in Ia,q.40. He concluded that it is better to say that the persons are distinguished by relation rather than by origin, since relation constitutes the Father, but this cannot be said of origin, since he is unbegotten. Thomas also used Boethius in his Christological section of the Summa (IIIa) and even his anthropological section (Ia,qq.75-102). His use of abstraction, a key process in Aristotelian method, is probably traceable to Boethius' work, though he went directly to Aristotle in many cases. For Thomas, of course, the relations in the Trinity were real, though rooted in the understanding of the identity of God's mind with His activity. Out of an Augustinian framework, then, Aquinas was able to move toward an understanding of relations that was inaccessible to Boethius' metaphysical approach. Thus both traditions merged in Thomas' new system, though his main accomplishment was probably to Christianize Aristotle.

## CONCLUSION

The traditional treatise on the Trinity owes much to Aquinas, and he in turn took his cue from Boethius. That treatise has occupied a rather isolated position in the total dogmatic system and seems to have little to do with Christian life or the other aspects of dogma.

Boethius' theological tractates, however, also framed the questions for Aquinas' work on man's way of knowing God; and they furnished a distinction between "person" and "nature" that affected much subsequent theological discussion.

In addition, the new philosophical approach that Boethius introduced into Western theology played a rather large part in the Reformation. Since then philosophies have multiplied, man embraces varied value systems and his acts of knowing are now seen to be multiple in character. As a result, not only can there be no one worldview that includes all the values perceived by men, but, according to Karl Rahner,<sup>48</sup> we must accept an irreducible pluralism in theology. Is it coincidence or a logical consequence that it was in the context of discussions of Heidegger's distinction between (human) person and nature, and of the inability of man to fully understand God at the level of concrete human knowing that Rahner reached this conclusion? The foregoing research leads

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<sup>48</sup>K. Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," TI 1, pp. 368-9, cited by P. S. Keane, "Pluralism in the Works of Karl Rahner with Applications to Religious Life," Review for Religious 32 (1973), p. 225.

me to state that Boethius not only initiated this theological pluralism but even framed the questions that point to the irreducible quality of that pluralism today.

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