

Christianity and Mysticism

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Abstract

Doctrine concerning the trinitarian nature of the Christian God has developed for more than fifteen-hundred years and has a deep and rich history. Of the many theologians across history who have written about this, Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote their own works concerning the Trinity in the 6th century. Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius both affirm the trinitarian nature of God, however each goes about vastly different ways of describing that specific attribute of God. Boethius' systematically builds upon plurality, philosophy of forms, and matter with logical rational. Whereas Pseudo-Dionysius on the other hand starts with positive and negative theology that "ascends" into 'post-reason' or 'post-language' understanding. This essay will briefly explore the arguments of each, then offer a defense of Boethius' view. Mysticism resorts to inexpressible ways of understanding the Trinity. This Mystic theology is reminiscent of the heresy that Paul the Apostle attacked in his letter Galatians, which is canonized in Protestantism and Catholicism. The Boethian framework however, builds upon the Aristotelean foundations of logic and epistemology which have dictated scientific and logical thought since the 3rd century BCE. Therefore, the Boethian method must be superior to the Mystical method, regarding Trinitarian theology.

Historical Development of Trinity Theology

To many, it seems that the concept of the Christian triune God has been around since the death of Jesus. However, this is not necessarily the case. Although doctrine of the Trinity has been around for nearly two millennia, it was not likely until 100-110 CE when elements of Trinity theology started emerging.¹ This is seen in Ignatius of Antioch's *Epistle to the Magnesians*, likely written sometime near his death in 110 CE.² In chapter 13 he says, "Be subject to the bishop, and to one another, as Jesus Christ to the Father, according to the flesh, and the apostles *to Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit*; that so there may be a union both fleshly and spiritual."³ This mention, "to Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit", is the implicit beginning of Trinity development.

In the Council of Nicaea, Trinity theology implicitly becomes canon, because the deity of Jesus Christ is affirmed.⁴ However, it is in the Council of Constantinople the deity of the Holy Spirit is officially addressed, 56 years later in 381 CE.⁵ It is only finally in the Athanasian Creed, likely written in the 5th century,⁶ where the word *Trinity* is used to explicitly affirm the equal unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.⁷ Shortly after this, Boethius writes *On the Trinity* in 512 CE,⁸ and Pseudo-Dionysius writes his *The Mystical Theology* circa 500 CE.⁹ While both theologians affirm the triune nature of God, each go about their

¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Church History (Book III)" 1:iii.36 § 3-5.

² Ibid.; Bieler, "St. Ignatius of Antioch" <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Ignatius-of-Antioch>.

³ Ignatius of Antioch, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians" 1:Ch. 15.

⁴ Leclercq, "The First Council of Nicaea" 11:¶ 5

⁵ Shahan, "First Council of Constantinople" ¶ 5.

⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Athanasian Creed," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Athanasian-Creed>.

⁷ Sullivan, "The Athanasian Creed"

⁸ David Bradshaw, "The Opuscula Sacra: Boethius and Theology," 105.

⁹ Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, "John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the *Areopagite*" 9.

own vastly different way of describing it and explaining how we can know it. Boethius ultimately argues that God is singular in his multi-faceted ‘being’¹⁰, which is what most Protestants and Catholics affirm. Pseudo-Dionysius on the other hand argues that before we can *truly affirm* the Trinity, we must enter the “mystical darkness of unknowing”¹¹

Boethius on the Trinity

In his five-part theological treatise *Opuscula Sacra*, Boethius discusses the Trinity in *On the Trinity*. However, it is thought that the full name is in fact *Trinitas unus deus ac non tres dii* which translates to “the Trinity is one God and not three Gods”.¹² Boethius builds upon the work of Augustine¹³ and Aristotle’s *Categories*. We see this in his launching discussion concerning plurality. Boethius says that the aspects of entities are compared using either genus, species, or number.¹⁴ However, these aspects are ultimately because of an entity’s attributes, their accidents.¹⁵

Boethius says that accidents serve to describe form and matter, however God cannot have matter, only form.¹⁶ Thus, God is only His essence, a simplicity of the divine characteristic of Augustine.¹⁷ This leads to an understanding of God as a singular entity; however, it seems contradictory that it Boethius seem to both deny and recognize plurality in God. Boethius recognizes this and contends that, because all three aspects of God are self-contingent there is no plurality because codependency is absent in those form(s).¹⁸

¹⁰ Boethius, “On the Trinity” 140.

¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Mystical Theology” 143.

¹² Bradshaw, “The Opuscula Sacra” 106.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 107

¹⁴ Boethius, “On the Trinity” 139.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

¹⁷ Bradshaw, “The Opuscula Sacra” 108.

¹⁸ Boethius, “On the Trinity” 140.; Thom, “The Logic of the Trinity”, 60-61

Pseudo-Dionysius on the Trinity

(Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite, a pseudonym referencing the Athenian convert of Paul the Apostle,¹⁹ discusses what they believe to be the correct way in which we can truly know the triune God.²⁰ They do affirm that they believe the Christian God to be in fact a Trinity. In Jones' analysis, he even argues that Pseudo-Dionysius may have possibly believed in a emphasized singular being of the Trinity, similar to that of Boethius.²¹ The key aspect of Pseudo-Dionysius' epistemology is that we must ascend, like Moses on Mt. Sinai, to see the place where God is.²² Pseudo-Dionysius says that by abandoning "all cognitive apprehensions", we will come to know God "superintellectually", viz. beyond language and logic.²³

Although I do not agree with Pseudo-Dionysius' epistemology, I do greatly admire that in their argument, for a post-logical understanding of God, that their premises do follow each other in a logical manner. The greatest example of this is when they describe their methodology of why abandoning knowledge must be done for the ascension to higher knowledge of God. They argue abandonment of positive theology must precede negative theology, because negative theology must be abandoned to obtain "initiation".²⁴ It is in this initiation where we find true knowledge of the triune God. However, this true knowledge of God is inexpressible.²⁵

¹⁹ Acts 17:34 *ESV*

²⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Mystical Theology" 142-143.

²¹ Jones, "An Absolutely Simple God?" 405-406.

²² *Ibid.*, 143

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-143

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144

A Defense for Boethius

Although I appreciate and admire the arguments presented in Pseudo-Dionysius, and their contributions to the development of Western and Eastern Orthodoxy theology,²⁶ I ultimately believe that Boethius' understanding of the Trinity is superior to that of Pseudo-Dionysius. Although understanding of God could be beyond our knowledge, because our consciousness is so fundamentally different. This being as it is constricted to a single stream of phenomena in the phenomenological sense. However, Pseudo-Dionysius promotes an inexpressible super-intellectual, viz. beyond cognition, knowledge of God. This notion is quite contrary to what Paul the Apostle writes in Galatians: that there is one Christ that the Apostles teach, and none other than it.²⁷

However, Boethius builds an argument for the knowledge of God as triune with logic and rationale as well. The key difference is that Boethius says through logical reasoning we can discern all that can be known about the Trinity. He emphasizes that we should be putting a focus on the singularity of God, and not on His 'plurality'. For God really isn't three-in-one, He is just one-in-one, viz. God. Furthermore, Boethius never seems to promote using presuppositional evidence to support his view (e.g., God's existence must be argued using *X* scripture, because *X* scripture affirms God's existence). However, Pseudo-Dionysius appears to assume that because God is divine, nothing belonging to humans, such as language or reasoning, can be used to know God at all.

²⁶ Jones, "An Absolutely Simple God?" 371.

²⁷ Galatians 1:6-10 *ESV*

Discussion

Although this paper is brief, because it is supposed to be, it is my hope that I have done the following well. (1) Given a brief and fair treatment of the historical development of Trinity theology. (2) Presented both Boethius' and Pseudo-Dionysius' arguments sufficiently. (3) Given my short argument as to why I personally believe Boethius' method to be superior to Pseudo-Dionysius'. I want to emphasize that Pseudo-Dionysius' methodology has great value, especially to theological development in both Western and Eastern traditions. However, in the end, I do believe that Boethius' is more right than Pseudo-Dionysius' is regarding how we can know God due to his persistence in Aristotelian epistemology and logic/rationale.

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