

The Trinity and Its Symbolism

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Summary

Belief in a triune God, expressed in Christianity as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has pervaded major religions throughout history and in every part of the world. This article examines several trinities, representing theological and philosophical insights covering a period of four millennia, to identify common elements in their characteristics and symbolism.

Typically, there is a sense of sequential manifestation from some ineffable divine essence—although this essence is not necessarily identified as a Godhead. An important issue in the present study is how the three divine aspects manifest, relate to one another, and play their distinctive roles. On this basis alternative trinitarian models can be formulated. In one, the aspects emerge in a linear sequence, giving rise to the familiar notion of First, Second and Third Aspects or “Persons.” In the other emphasis duality emerges at a high level, lending itself to gender symbolism: Father and Mother. From that duality a “Son” is born.¹

The Trinity in Ancient Egypt

The pantheon of deities in Egyptian religion formed a hierarchy extending down from a high god: first the sun god Rā and later Amen, “the Hidden One.”² Many deities were grouped in threes. Even Rā was sometimes grouped with Khepera and Temu to form a solar trinity. Khepera represented the rising sun, Rā the midday sun, and Temu the setting sun. Sometimes groups of three gods were similarly grouped to produce *enneads*, or nine-fold deities, and at least one group of three enneads were formed to produce a composite of 27.³

By far the most enduring Egyptian trinity consisted of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Contrasting with Amen-Rā, the transcendent high god, Osiris (Hieroglyph: ) was the anthropomor-

phized god, the God-Man or Perfect Man. Osiris was the archetypal father and his sister-wife, Isis () the archetypal mother. The Greek writer Plutarch (c. 46–119 CE) provided a lengthy account of Osiris’ death and dismemberment at the hands of the evil Seth.⁴ Isis recovered his remains and brought him back to life. After Osiris’ resurrection Isis bore his son Horus, whose hieroglyph was a hawk (). In turn Horus had four sons, represented by the baboon, jackal, hawk, and man—comparable with the four beasts of Ezekiel, but more specifically symbolizing the kingdoms of nature.

Osiris and Isis were subordinate to Amen-Rā, in the hierarchical pantheon, but not his immediate progeny. According to legend, they were children of the goddess Nut who was also the mother of the Sun and Moon. The fact that Osiris and Isis were not only husband and wife but also siblings offends the modern consciousness, reminding us of the incestuous relationships common in pharaonic Egypt. But we can also interpret it as a strong affirmation of the gender equality between them. Indeed, Egyptian religion would seem to offer a worthy contrast to the patriarchal bias of more recent religions.

Osiris, Isis, and Horus provided a model for the Holy Family of Christianity, and artistic portrayals of Isis holding the infant Horus served as the prototype for the Madonna and child. However, Christian apologists rarely

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acknowledged these cultural debts, and in general Egyptian trinitarian beliefs had little influence on the development of Christian doctrine. Much greater influence came from Judaic religion and Greek philosophy.

Trinitarian Concepts in Greek Philosophy

Belief in a triune god was not prevalent in classical Greece. Plato (428–348 BCE) saw an essential “threeness” in all creation, but the notion of a triune God did not take definite form until the rise of Neoplatonism six centuries later. Plotinus of Alexandria (204–270 CE) formulated a trinity consisting of *Monad* (Greek: Μοναδος, “the One,” “Unity”), *Nous* (Νους, “Mind”), and *Psyche* (Ψυχη, “Soul”).

The three aspects of Plotinus’ trinity formed a cascading hierarchy of emanation: from Monad to Nous to Psyche. The Monad was considered ineffable and beyond comprehension or description: “The Unity is not a being... strictly no name is apt to it... [I]t eludes our knowledge, so that the nearer approach to it is through its offspring.”⁵ Nous is the divine intellect, “the Intellectual-Principle itself,” while Psyche, is the creator, the author of all living things. Thus descending emanation of divine essence continues into the created universe.

According to Plotinus, Psyche is twofold in its activity; one part looks up “in devotion” toward Spirit, while the other looks down to the created universe:

Psyche creates, then, on the model of the Ideas; for, what it has received from the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] it must pass on in turn. In sum, then, the Intellectual-Principle gives from itself to the Soul [Psyche]... [T]his again gives forth from itself to its next, illuminated and imprinted by it; and that secondary Soul at once begins to

create... (I)t overflows... and the image it gives forth, its last utterance towards the lower, will be the creative puissance.⁶

The Monad in Plotinus’ formulation is androgynous or presexual, synthesizing the masculine and the feminine. Nous, both grammatically and in terms of polarity, is masculine, while Psyche is feminine; indeed, Psyche was also the name of a Greek goddess. Gender balance was achieved in Plotinus’ trinity, although the feminine might seem to be lower than the masculine in the hierarchy of emanation. If Psyche is the mother of the created world, Nous could be considered its father, and the world the product of their union.

Meanwhile, the concept of the *Logos* (Greek: Λογος) had received considerable attention,

eventually to influence both Christian doctrine and modern Theosophical teachings.⁷ The Logos was first discussed by Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) who discerned in the universe a principle of reason corresponding to man’s rational faculty. In due course “Logos” came to signify not only

reason but principle, proportion, harmony, order and stability.⁸ The Stoics regarded the Logos as the soul of the universe, with the status of a deity. At times it was identified with Apollo. Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE) spoke of the Logos as the creator:

As therefore the city... was stamped solely in the mind of the workman, so in the same manner neither can the world which existed in ideas have had any other local position except the Logos which made them.”⁹

More generally, in Philo’s work and elsewhere, the Logos was considered to be the mediator between heaven and earth, as the soul is

the mediator between the human spirit and body.¹⁰

The Christian Trinity

Developing Trinitarian Doctrine

Interest in a trinity arose among early Christians even before Plotinus' time. Of the three divine aspects necessary to construct a trinity, two were readily available. The Judaic Tetragrammaton (Hebrew: יהוה)—rendered in English as Jehovah or Yahweh—became God the Father. And Jesus Christ was believed to be his Son.¹¹ In the *Gospel of John* Christ was identified with the Logos, which the editors of the King James Bible translated rather inadequately as “the Word.” Athenagoras (c.133–c.190 CE), a Platonist philosopher who converted to Christianity, described the relationship between the Father and Son:

[W]e acknowledge one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable... we acknowledge also a Son of God.... [T]he Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation; for after the pattern of Him and by Him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one.¹²

A third aspect was needed to complete the trinity, and considerable debate ensued before a definitive choice was made. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch (c. 117–c. 181 CE) defined the three aspects as *Theos* (Θεός, “God”), *Logos* and *Sophia* (Σοφία).¹³ The reference to *Sophia* is highly significant. “Sophia” was a direct translation of the Hebrew *Chokmah* (חכמה, “Wisdom”), the feminine principle explored at great length in the Wisdom Literature of late-biblical scripture and the apocrypha.¹⁴ Sophia also absorbed many characteristics of the *Shekinah* (שכינה): interpreted in the *Talmud* as the divine glory, God's presence in the world. “Shekinah” is another feminine noun, and in first-century esoteric Judaism and Gnostic Christianity the Shekinah-Chokmah-Sophia was fast gaining the status of a feminine divine hypostasis.¹⁵ Had Sophia been established as the third aspect, as Theophilus proposed, the Christian trinity would have had much in

common with the Egyptian one. But this was not to be. Sophia managed to survive in the East, although not always in association with the Third Person of the trinity.

In the West, attention shifted to the Holy Spirit. This term was frequently used in biblical Judaism to denote the spirit of God. Its Hebrew form was the feminine noun *Ruach* (רוח), which could mean either “spirit” or “breath.” The Gnostic teacher Valentinus (c. 105–c. 165 CE) identified the Holy Spirit as God the Mother, and efforts were even made to relate the virgin birth to a feminine Holy Spirit rather than to Mary.¹⁶ The third-century Iranian teacher, Mani, who founded the sect of Manichaeism, also was convinced that the Holy Spirit was feminine.¹⁷

Trinity in the Western Church

Any prospect that the Third Person might have feminine characteristics came to an end when Athenagoras identified the Holy Spirit with the Greek word *Pneuma* (Πνευμα). *Pneuma* may be a direct translation of *Ruach*, but it is a neuter rather than a feminine noun. As a result, the western Christian trinity crystallized into the combination of two obviously masculine aspects and one neuter aspect. The only vestige of the Third Person's sophianic origins was a vague awareness that wisdom—in its conventional sense—flows from the Holy Spirit.

It was Christian theologians who coined the term “persons” of the trinity. The Latin *persona*, related to the verb *personare*, meaning “to sound through,” or “speak through,” literally means the mask worn by an actor in a play. Accordingly, the persons of the trinity can be viewed as conduits through which aspects of the divine essence are expressed and perceived.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote no fewer than 15 books on the trinity. He rejected the Neoplatonic concept of a hierarchical trinity, asserting instead that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal. The Council of Nicea (325 CE) declared that Son, as his name implies, proceeded from the Father by a process of *filiation*:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten, generated of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, the same in nature with the Father by Whom all things were made.¹⁸

The church fathers had struggled with the identity of the Third Person of the trinity. They also struggled with its relationship to the First and Second Persons. Athenagoras stated: “The Holy Spirit [is] an effluence of God, flowing from Him, and returning back again like a beam of the sun.”¹⁹ The Gnostics said the same about the human soul.

The fathers agreed that the Holy Spirit proceeded by a process of *spiration*, a clear reference to Ruach or Pneuma interpreted as “Holy Breath.” But precisely what does that mean? “Spiration” is harder to understand than “birth,” as in the birth of Horus. But the absence of gender polarity between the first two persons precluded any appeal to procreation as an explanatory model.

The Latin and Greek branches of the church could not agree on whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or jointly from the Father and Son. What became known as the “Nicene Creed” was drafted by the Council of Nicea but amended by the Council of Toledo in 589 CE after trinitarian doctrine took more definite form. The amended version affirms:

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life: Who proceedeth from the Father *and the Son* (Latin: *Qui ex Patre, Filioque procedit*). Who together with the Father and Son is adored and glorified.²⁰

The eastern churches rejected the *Filioque* clause as ascriptural, insisting that God the Father alone was the source of both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

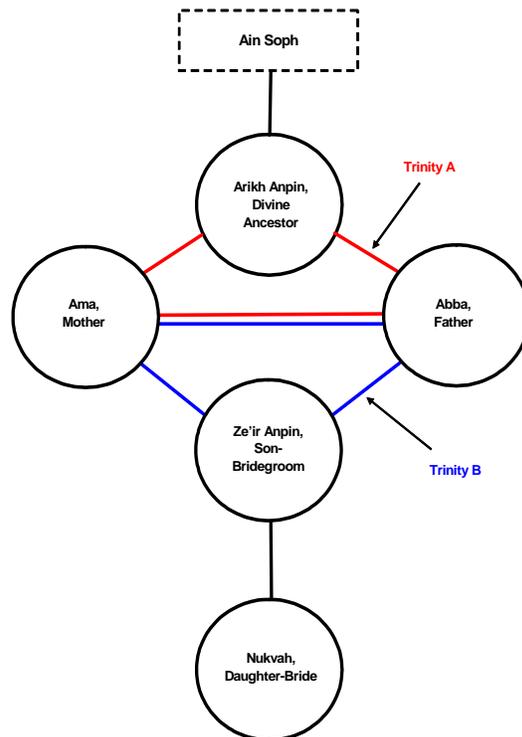
Christianity rejected Plotinus’ claim that the universe represented an extension of divine emanation. Indeed the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 asserted that the universe was not a divine emanation but was “created out of nothing” (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo sui*).²¹ Having

established that the universe was separate from God, only a small step was needed to conclude that it was evil. Christian doctrine also asserted that the work of creation could be traced to any one person of the trinity but was the collective work of all three; in Thomas Aquinas’s words, creation is *ex trinitate*.

Trinities in the Qabalah

Qabalistic teachings explicitly refer to an unmanifest Godhead, the *Ain Soph* (Hebrew: אין סוף, “Limitless”). From there the divine essence cascades down through a sequence of forms. These forms are most often represented by the *sephiroth* (singular: *sephirah*, ספירה, “number”),²² and we shall return to these shortly.

Figure 1. Trinities in the Partzufim.



The Partzufim

First it will be useful to examine the alternative but less known *partzufim* (singular *partzuf*, “face” or “persona”).²³ The five partzufim, akin to the “persons” of the Christian trinity,

form the pattern shown in Figure 1. Immediately below the Ain Soph is the *Arikh Anpin* (literally “long face”). Sometimes depicted as an old man, it may also be interpreted archetypally as the androgynous or presexual Divine Ancestor. At the next lower level, *Abba* (אבא) and *Ama* (אמא) are respectively the archetypal Father and Mother. Completing the pattern are the *Ze’ir Anpin* and *Nukvah*. The *Ze’ir Anpin* (“short face”) is identified as the Son, Bridegroom or “Holy One.”²⁴ *Nukvah*, the Daughter or Bride, is identified with the *Shekinah* who, along with fallen humanity, is lost in the wilderness, waiting to be reunited with the Holy One in a divine marriage.²⁵

Two trinities emerge from the partzufim. One, which we shall refer to as Qabalah Trinity A, involves the *Arikh Anpin* (the Ancestor), *Abba* and *Ama*. This trinity, shown by the red lines in Figure 1, depicts the emergence of duality from the primeval unity. The other, designated Trinity B, involves the *Abba*, *Ama* and the *Ze’ir Anpin* (the Bridegroom-Son). Shown by the blue lines in the figure, Trinity B emphasizes the birth of the Son from *Abba* and *Ama*—Father and Mother—just as Horus was born from Osiris and Isis. *Nukvah*, the Daughter-Bride, is excluded from the “trinitarian family” although esoteric Judaism envisioned a strong connection between her and *Ama*—often spoken of as the *supernal Shekinah*—as well as the anticipated nuptial bond between *Nukvah* and the *Ze’ir Anpin*.

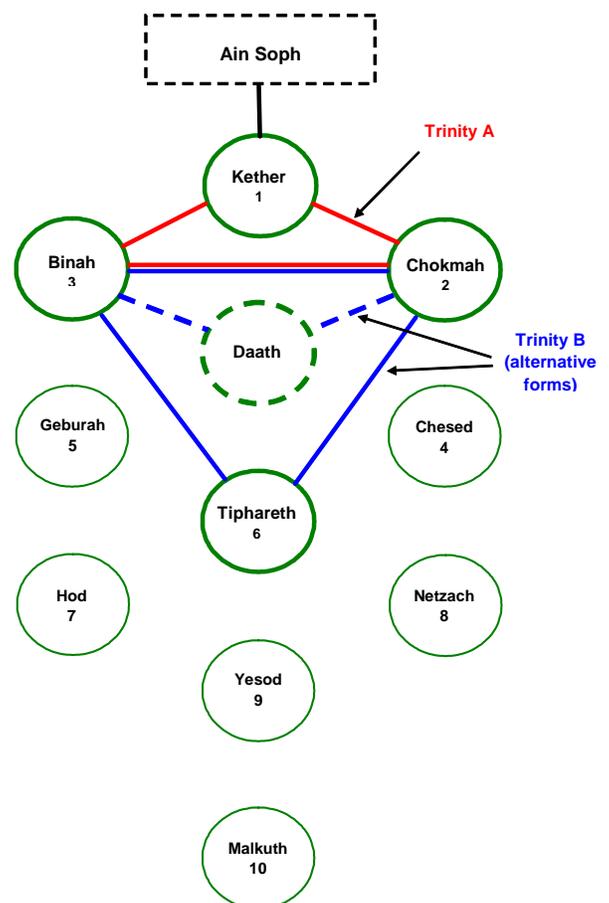
The Sephiroth

Compared to the obvious anthropomorphism of the partzufim, the sephiroth are more abstract in nature; being viewed either as differentiations of the divine essence or as the vessels into which it flows. In early formulations of the Qabalah there were ten sephiroth; but an additional one, *Daath* (דעת, “Knowledge”), was added in the late Middle Ages and has received increasing attention in more recent times. The sephiroth form the familiar configuration of the Tree of Life (Figure 2).²⁶

With ten (or eleven) sephiroth, it is not difficult to identify trinities to suit any given purpose, and standard descriptions of the Tree of Life refer to three “triangles” at different levels

of reality. The *supernal triangle* involves the first three sephiroth: *Kether* (Hebrew: כתר, “Crown”), *Chokmah* (חכמה, “Wisdom”) and *Binah* (בינה, “Understanding”). These three sephiroth correspond directly to the partzufim *Arikh Anpin*, *Abba* and *Ama*, so the supernal triangle is equivalent to what we have called Qabalah Trinity A. It is shown by the red lines in Figure 2. Many Christian Qabalists associate *Kether* with God the Father, *Chokmah* with the Son, and *Binah* with the Holy Spirit.

Figure 2. Trinities in the Tree of Life.



A contrasting viewpoint is that the trinity should consist of *Chokmah*, *Binah*, and either *Tiphareth* (תפארת, “Beauty” or “Harmony”) or the unnumbered “sephirah” *Daath*.²⁷ Corresponding to Trinity B, alternate forms are

shown by the blue lines in the figure. Kether, according to this viewpoint, remains part of the undifferentiated Godhead, overshadowing the trinity and the lower sephiroth.

Like Abba and Ama, Chokmah and Binah represent the first manifestation of duality, and they too came to be identified as the archetypal Father and Mother. They emerge in close succession, suggesting virtually equal status. Again there is a hypostatic duality at a high level, and the tension between them is resolved in a “birth”—not only of Daath and Tiphareth, either or both of which can be associated with “the Son,” but of all the lower sephiroth.

If the partzufim are superimposed on the Tree of Life, Nukvah (the Daughter-Bride) would obviously be located at Malkuth, which is also known as the Shekinah. The Ze’ir Anpin (the Son) could be located at either Daath or Tiphareth. The latter is particularly appropriate because Tiphareth lies at the center of a

hexagon or hexagram whose vertices are Daath, Chesed, Netzach, Yesod, Hod and Geburah—the sephiroth for which Ze’ir Anpin is considered the collective substitute. The hexagram has great significance in sacred geometry. We may recall that Tiphareth is assigned Number 6 in the classical Tree of Life; and numerologists consider six to be the number of perfected humanity, the number of the Christ.²⁸

To identify Chokmah with the archetypal Father—or as is common in Christian Qabalah, with God the Son—is not without difficulty. “Chokmah” is a feminine noun in Hebrew and was referred to as “she” throughout the Old Testament. Its direct Greek equivalent is Sophia. Nonetheless, Philo of Alexandria offered the terse solution: “[W]e do not concern ourselves with names, but simply declare God’s daughter, Wisdom, to be masculine.”²⁹

Neoplatonic philosophers and Christian theologians wrestled with the concept of scission at the divine level: how did the Second Aspect of the trinity emerge from the First? Their solution was to appeal to God’s self-consciousness: the unified God saw a reflection of itself in the mirror of its own mind or heard the echo of its own voice.

Whatever the justification, Chokmah was allowed to become the Qabalistic symbol of masculine potency, and it serves well in relationship to the receptivity and form-building capability of Binah.

The Trinity in Modern Esoteric Teachings

Notions of a triune God play a major role in modern Theosophical teachings. Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, listed the Godhead and its triune manifestation thus:

- (1) The Absolute; the *Parabrahm* of the Vedantins...
- (2) The first manifestation, the impersonal, and in philosophy... the “First Cause”...
- (3) Spirit-matter, Life; the “Spirit of the Universe,” the Purusha and Prakriti, or the *second Logos*.
- (4) Cosmic Ideation, Mahat or Intelligence, the Uni-

versal World-Soul; the Cosmic Noumenon of Matter, the basis of the intelligent operations in and of Nature...³⁰

The Theosophical definition of the Logos should be noted carefully. Whereas Christianity equates it with the Second Person of the trinity, Theosophical teachings regard the Logos as the manifest God, itself triune in nature. The components of the Logoic trinity are sometimes referred to as the First, Second and Third *Logoi*.³¹ But confusion can arise from this ambiguous usage of “Logos,” and the trinitarian components are referred to more often as the First, Second and Third *Aspects*. Alternatively, they are referred to by their qualities: Will or Power, Love–Wisdom and Active Intelligence.³²

Theosophical writers have provided valuable insight into how the trinitarian aspects manifest through the created universe and humankind. Charles Leadbeater identified three “outpourings” of the divine essence.³³ They occur in reverse order. The first outpouring, from the Third Aspect of the Logos, penetrates and vitalizes the “virgin matter” of seven planes of creation.³⁴ In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Nicene Creed referred to the Holy Spirit as the “giver of life.” Also, we see here a cosmic symbol of the Holy Spirit’s impregnation of the Virgin Mary. Theosophical descriptions of creation by the Third Aspect closely parallel Plotinus’ creation of the world by *Psyche*. Indeed, the very term “World Soul” appears in the above quotation from Blavatsky. They also parallel the depiction of the Qabalistic Binah-Ama as the creator of lower forms. Finally, the combination of the triune God and the seven planes of nature recalls the ten sephiroth of the Qabalah.³⁵

The second outpouring, from the Second Aspect of the trinity, builds forms from the vitalized matter of the planes. It descends to the physical plane and then begins an upward-sweeping arc, ensouling lives on successive planes and urging them forward on their evolutionary paths.

The third outpouring, emanating from the First Aspect, remains at a high level. But tension between it and the second outpouring provides an evolutionary urge unique to humanity. In Leadbeater’s words:

[The third outpouring] appears to be unable of itself to descend lower than the Buddhic plane, and there it hovers like a mighty cloud, waiting for an opportunity of effecting a junction with the second outpouring, which is slowly rising to meet it.³⁶

The third outpouring provides human entities with the potential for unlimited expansion of consciousness. People need only recognize and respond to the divinity within them and the beckoning divinity above. Theosophy views the Christ as the example, per excellence, of human evolution, and Leadbeater’s words recall Jesus’ remark: “I go to the Father.”³⁷

The outpourings operate on a much larger scale in the three solar systems described in Theosophical literature. Each solar system, we are told, brings to full expression one of the divine aspects. Our present solar system, the second, expresses the Second Aspect of Love–Wisdom, which embraces the notions of coherence and form-building. As the Tibetan Master notes:

The method employed by the Logos in this the second solar system is definitely the use of form for purposes of manifestation, as a medium of expression and as the vehicle whereby the indwelling life may grow, expand, experience and find itself.³⁸

He adds that this is true whether the form is an entire solar system, a human being, or a form constructed by a human being. The forms are built from undifferentiated matter, comparable with the *prakriti* of Hindu teachings, left over from the first solar system which expressed the Third Aspect of deity.³⁹

Emergence of the Trinitarian Aspects

The Process of Scission

If the Godhead is absolute, unified, eternal and unchanging, how did the process of differentiation necessary to produce a trinity ever get started? An analogous problem had already arisen in Egypto-Greek number theory. The ancient Egyptians—and much later the Qabalists—believed that numbers were not just symbolic counters but powerful potencies in their own right. Pythagoras, who probably acquired his numerical expertise from Egypt, inspired generations of Greek philosophers to similar beliefs. Particular attention was paid to the sequence of natural numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4... “1” was the monad: the primal unity from which all other numbers emerged; “2” represented duality. Once duality emerged, the rest of the series could be formed by addition: for example, three is equal to one plus two. But how did duality emerge from unity? How did the primeval *scission* come about?

Neoplatonic philosophers and Christian theologians wrestled with the concept of scission at

the divine level: how did the Second Aspect of the trinity emerge from the First? Their solution was to appeal to God's self-consciousness: the unified God saw a reflection of itself in the mirror of its own mind or heard the echo of its own voice. Plotinus referred to Nous, the Second Aspect of the Neoplatonic trinity, as the Monad's image of itself: "The Divine Mind in its mentation," he wrote, "thinks itself; the object of the thought is nothing external: Thinker and Thought are one; therefore in its thinking and knowing it possesses itself, observes itself and sees itself."⁴⁰ One thousand years later Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) came to a similar conclusion: "What is conceived in the intellect is a likeness of the thing understood... and so it seems to be a sort of offspring."⁴¹ For Aquinas, of course, this offspring was God the Son.

Equally important questions concern the impact that scission had on the unity and immutability of the Godhead. Was the primal divine unity destroyed by the emergence of the duality of the First and Second Aspects—and then by the triplicity of the Third Aspect? Or did primal unity survive at the level of the Godhead, while duality and triplicity emerged at a lower level? Could duality and triplicity be viewed as *manifestations* of the unmanifest unity? The trinities examined in this article can be categorized according to the answer to these questions.

Primal Unity Destroyed by Scission.

In the Neoplatonic and Christian trinities, it would seem that emergence of the Second Aspect destroys the primal unity of the First. Monad is now juxtaposed against Nous and the Father against the Son. The original unity now participates in the duality, with a correspondingly diminished status. Absolute unity had to give way to coexistence with something else.

The biblical Adam had to give up something—his rib—to produce Eve; his primordial completeness was lost. Similarly, Christianity's God the Father had to give up something to produce the Son. He may even have suffered a further loss when the Holy Spirit emerged. Christian doctrine stresses that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal, and one in substance. But this substance is not an overshadowing Godhead, comparable to Ain Soph of the Qabalah or the Hindu Brahman that overshadows the *trimurti*.⁴² When Peter Lombard (1095–1160) explored the notion of the Godhead, Joachim of Flore (1135–1202) accused him of trying to change the Trinity into a "quaternity." Joachim's position was supported by

Anthropomorphism is less evident in Theosophical teachings... but interesting conclusions are drawn from the Third Aspect's penetration of the "virgin-matter"... The biblical account of the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel tells Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee," is regarded as allegory of this process.

the Lateran Council of 1215.⁴³ By default God the Father uneasily serves two roles: as a *de-facto* Godhead and also as an anthropomorphized and knowable trinitarian hypostasis. This dual role almost inevitably ensures destruction of the primal unity by the filiation of the Second Person.

Plotinus tried to preserve the Monad as an androgynous, presexual aspect, but Christianity made the First Person of the trinity unashamedly masculine. Since no distinction was made between God the Father and the Godhead, it endorsed the notion of absolute masculine pre-eminence throughout the cosmos. The feminine—wherever it might be found, in the trinity or anywhere else—was unambiguously lower in status, a kind of afterthought. This was consistent with Augustine's opinion that women were not made in the image of God but were created to be helpmates to men.⁴⁴

An additional problem arises when we consider the numerological symbolism of the trinitarian aspects. The Greeks considered odd

numbers to be masculine: constantly thrusting forward into new territory, while even numbers, which restored harmony after each forward thrust, were feminine. Qabalists, Christian or otherwise, might be comfortable assigning number 1 to a godhead-like Monad, God the Father and Kether-Arikh Anpin, the First Aspects of their respective trinities. But Nous, the Son and Chokmah-Abba—all considered masculine—are assigned the “feminine” number, 2. And Psyche, a feminine noun and name of a goddess; the Holy Spirit that sometimes takes on feminine characteristics; and Binah, which is unambiguously feminine, are all assigned the masculine number 3.

Primal Unity Preserved.

In Qabalah Trinity B, scission produces the duality of Chokmah and Binah, Abba and Ama, masculine and feminine. But that duality emerges at a lower level of reality than the undifferentiated unity: the androgynous Kether-Arikh Anpin. In turn, Chokmah-Abba and Binah-Ama give birth to the Son, represented by Daath, Tiphareth or the Ze’ir Anpin, at a still lower level. In the Qabalistic model, the divine essence cascades from one level to the next, leaving all previous levels of emanation intact.

Kether-Arikh Anpin is not included in the trinity but forms an extension of the overshadowing Ain Soph. Thus, the Godhead is represented as having both an unmanifest and a partially manifest component—a kind of “vertical” duality, distinct from the “horizontal” duality of Chokmah-Abba and Binah-Ama. The unmanifest portion of the Godhead is eternal, unchangeable, and indeed *unchanged* by the emergence of the lower manifestations. Esoteric teachings predict that the partial and full manifestations will be reabsorbed into the Ain Soph at the end of the epoch. The simultaneous existence of Kether-Arikh Anpin and the three aspects of Qabalah Trinity B might allow Joachim of Flore to accuse us of the heresy of quaternity. But Joachim would have to deal with the issue that they are not additive but exist on different levels of reality. The trinity is an expression of the Godhead.

The foregoing is an elegant model of divine emanation. But the problem of numerical labels is no less serious than it was before. We would like to call the masculine aspect, like Osiris or Chokmah-Abba, number 1 and the feminine aspect, Isis or Binah-Ama, number 2. The Son—thrusting forward as the symbol of new creation—would appropriately be number 3.

Unfortunately, in the Qabalistic Tree of Life, Kether is the first sephirah, Chokmah is the second, and Binah the third. Perhaps the even number assigned to Chokmah can be traced to its biblical and grammatical feminine status, before it took on its character as the archetypal Father; but Binah, which paradoxically is assigned an odd number, has always been feminine. The problem could be solved by assigning zero to Kether; 1 to Chokmah, and 2 to Binah. However, zero was not known in the West until the late Middle Ages; it would have been incomprehensible to the early Qabalists who coined the term “sephirah,” which literally means “number” in the sense of the natural numbers. As far as the Son is concerned, Tiphareth is assigned Number 6 while Daath, a later addition to the Tree of Life, remains unnumbered.

The Aspects’ Order of Emergence

General Comments

The numbers assigned to the sephiroth denote the order in which they emanate from the Ain Soph. In the Neoplatonic trinity the sequence is from Monad to Nous to Psyche. Christianity specifically uses the terms First, Second and Third Persons of the trinity, reinforcing the notion of progression from the Father to the Son, to the Holy Spirit, leaving aside the issue of whether the Holy Spirit emerged from the Father or jointly from the Father and Son.⁴⁵

However, if God the Son is the Second Person of the trinity and the second to emerge, there is no possibility that the Third Person might be God the Mother. Mainstream western Christianity would not be overly concerned, since it rejects any notion of a divine feminine hypos-

tasis. However, it does insist that Jesus Christ—the incarnation of God the Son—was conceived by the Holy Spirit. To argue that only the human nature of Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit would smack of the Arianism condemned by the Council of Nicea.

If emphasis is placed on the birth of a Son from gender polarity, as it is in the Egyptian trinity and Qabalah Trinity B, it would seem that God the Mother should be the Second Aspect, and the Son the Third Aspect. That arrangement would also be compatible with the number symbolism, in which odd numbers are masculine and even numbers feminine.

Anthropomorphism is less evident in Theosophical teachings than in Christianity, but interesting conclusions are drawn from the Third Aspect's penetration of the "virgin-matter." Much is made of the etymological connections between "matter" and "mother" (Latin: *mater*). The biblical account of the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel tells Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee,"⁴⁶ is regarded as allegory of this process. For example:

The Holy Spirit, the One Who overshadows and Who implants the germ of life in the waiting acquiescent Virgin Mother or matter (causing her to awaken and to commence her great work of producing the divine incarnation) is a primary factor from the standpoint of the second solar system.⁴⁷

The Second Aspect is often portrayed as the mediator between the First and Third, besides being their arithmetic mean. The concept of the cosmic mediator goes back far in history. Thoth-Hermes-Mercury was the archetypal mediator between spirit and matter; philosophers from Heraclitus to Philo regarded the

Logos as the divine mediator, the bringer of harmony; and Christianity portrayed Christ as the mediator between God the Father and humanity. The Tibetan Master brings together several of these concepts in an interesting passage: "Mercury," he states, "is interchangeable for the Sun (Son) and stands for the Mediator or intermediary, between the Father and the Mother, between Spirit and Matter."⁴⁸ Interestingly, mediation is often considered a feminine characteristic, contrasting with masculine stereotypes of aggression and divisiveness; and in this respect a Second-Aspect mediator is appropriate. But then one wonders why this mediator is depicted as the Son rather than the *Daughter*? Actually, this possibility has been noted. The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich

Valuable insights have been gained into this symbolism as well as into the qualities of the trinitarian aspects, their sequence of manifestation, and the fundamental process by which a trinity could emerge from an unchanging, unified Godhead. The need for studies like this one is enhanced by the increasing crystallization of conventional beliefs, particularly concerning the Second Aspect of the Trinity.

attributed feminine characteristics to Jesus: "Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature."⁴⁹ In a recent article Bishop Allan Barnes refers to the Second Aspect as the "Mother in some teachings."⁵⁰ Qabalistic teachings acknowledge an archetypal Daughter in the parzufim,

but she is placed at a lower level than the Son.

Theosophical teachings preserve the traditional numeration of First, Second and Third Aspects of deity, although Leadbeater's "outpourings" of divine essence take place in reverse order: the first outpouring from the Third Aspect, and so forth. The same reversal is noted in the three solar systems: the Third Aspect was brought to full expression in the first solar system, while the Second Aspect is being expressed in the present, second solar system. The importance and relevance of the solar systems, in this context, becomes readily apparent when we recall that what Theosophy most of-

ten refers to as “God” is the Solar Logos, the great entity whose vehicles of express are the solar system and its associated lives. The Theosophical Logos is very much a manifest God.

Clearly a distinction is being made between the procession of the divine aspects themselves and their expression through creation. The divine aspects emerge in numerical sequence: First, Second and Third. However, their subsequent expression allows the Second Aspect to act upon the product of the Third, mediating and creating forms from its virgin matter. In a final stage the First Aspect will act on the product of the Second and Third.

Two Models

Based on the sequence of manifestation, two contrasting trinitarian models can be discerned. The first model depicts a linear sequence of emanation in which terms “First,” “Second” and “Third Aspect” (or “Person”) are particularly relevant. Qabalah Trinity A and the Theosophical trinity provide the most complete description of this model, setting it in the context of a larger reality that includes, on the one hand, an overshadowing Godhead, and on the other, the created universe. Here there is an intriguing and most important correspondence between the macrocosm and microcosm. Theosophy regards the trinity as a threefold expression of the Logos, while Greek philosophy viewed the Logos as the macrocosmic equivalent of the soul. We now know that the soul is a threefold entity juxtaposed between an overshadowing monad and the lower vehicles of the incarnate self.⁵¹

Difficulties arise when we try to reconcile terms like “First,” “Second” and “Third Aspect” with numerological symbolism. The Greeks considered two to be a feminine number, but the Second Aspect has been identified with the divine Son, even though it is also seen as the mediator between the First and Third Aspects, and mediation could be construed as a feminine activity. Three was considered a masculine number, and this accords well with the notion that the Third Aspect of the trinity impregnates and vitalizes “virgin matter.” But it conflicts with suggestions that the Third Aspect might have feminine characteristics. Per-

haps, following Plotinus, we must distinguish dual functions in the Third Aspect, one participating in the collective divinity and the other participating in creation. At the risk of exposing ourselves to the charge of “quarternitarianism,” albeit for different reasons than did Peter Lombard, we might solve the numerological problem by assigning both 3 and 4 to the “Third Aspect.” In a sense Christianity does this through the intimate relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary—who herself is often regarded esoterically as a personification of virgin matter.

The second trinitarian model emphasizes the emergence of duality at a high level. And in a real sense manifestation demands duality. This duality can easily be anthropomorphized as a masculine–feminine polarity with generative potential: the archetypal Father and Mother bear a Son—and along with him the created universe. Recognition of a feminine archetype at the same high level as the masculine, and their simultaneous or near-simultaneous emanation, provide a gender-balanced view of the divine. Qabalah Trinity B provides the best illustration of this model: the duality emerges from an androgynous, presexual Godhead—albeit with unmanifest and partially manifest components which might imply another kind of duality. Indeed, the whole structure of the Qabalistic Tree of Life emphasizes pairs of opposites representing contrasting differentiations of divine force. It is built not around the linear Lightning Strike but around the Pillars of Mercy and Severity, together with the central Pillar of Equilibrium.⁵²

The “duality” model of the trinity does not lend itself readily to the use of “First,” “Second” and “Third Aspect.” The archetypal Father and Mother would need to be regarded as the First and Second Aspects, and the Son the Third. This would conform to the notion of masculine odd numbers and feminine even numbers; but it would violate the traditional belief that the Second Aspect is God the Son. And, in the Qabalah, the conventional numeration of the sephiroth would have to be discarded in favor of a separate numeration of the trinitarian aspects.

The duality model accommodates more easily the preservation of the unity of an overshadowing Godhead despite manifestation of the trinitarian aspects. For example, in Qabalah Model B both the Ain Soph and Kether-Arieh Anpin remain aloof from the scission that produced Chokmah-Abba and Binah-Ama. And in the religion of ancient Egypt Amen-Rā reigns supreme above the trinity of Osiris, Isis and Horus. However, primal unity can also be preserved in the “linear” model if a proper distinction is made between the First Aspect and the Godhead. Qabalah Model A and modern Theosophical teachings do so. But Christianity confuses God the Father with the Godhead, eroding the unicity of God which Thomas Aquinas listed as an essential attribute of the divine nature.⁵³ The same confusion also implies an unfortunate masculine bias at the very highest level of reality.

Closing Remarks

The trinities we have examined present an evocative tapestry of insights into the nature of God as it can be known by the human mind. Deep convictions concerning the triune divine nature have survived the ages, uniting philosophical and theological systems that disagreed on most other matters. The symbolism used to describe the three aspects, or “persons,” varied according to the environments in which the trinities were formulated.

Valuable insights have been gained into trinitarian symbolism as well as into the qualities of the three aspects, their sequence of manifestation, and the fundamental process by which a trinity could emerge from an unchanging, unified Godhead. Somehow unity had to give way to duality, and duality had to be resolved in trinity.

The need for studies like this one is enhanced by the increasing crystallization of conventional beliefs, particularly concerning the Second Aspect of the trinity.⁵⁴ It would be unrealistic to suppose that definitive answers could suddenly be found to age-old problems or convincing proof that one view of the trinity is “right” and another “wrong.” The two models discussed here should be regarded not as mutually exclusive but as complementary views

that, one day, will be resolved into a larger truth. Humanity’s ability to grasp complex concepts is continually expanding.

Certainly, as countless religious teachers have warned, the human intellect may be incapable of formulating a completely satisfying model of the divine nature; but the intuition and still higher aspects of consciousness can carry us further than philosophical speculation. Meanwhile, whatever insights can be gained will help us develop a more comprehensive view of reality and a better understanding of our relationship with the divinity in whose image we were created.

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- ¹ This study extends the author’s work published six years ago. See: John Nash. “The Triune God.” *The Beacon*, May/June 1999, pp. 6-13.
 - ² Amen became the high god upon the establishment of the New Kingdom and the rise of Luxor as the seat of political power.
 - ³ E. A. Wallis Budge. *Egyptian Religion*. Citadel Press, 1900/1997, p. 115.
 - ⁴ Plutarch. *De Iside et Osiride* (“On Isis and Osiris”)
 - ⁵ Plotinus. *Sixth Ennead*, VI. (Transl: Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page.)
 - ⁶ *Ibid*, III.
 - ⁷ In this article “Theosophy” is taken to include all teachings in the tradition of Helena P. Blavatsky, including the work of Rudolf Steiner, Helena Roerich and Alice Bailey.
 - ⁸ John Fiderer. *Jesus Christ, Sun of God*. Quest Books, 1993.
 - ⁹ Philo of Alexandria. *On the Creation*, V, 20. (Transl: Charles D. Yonge.)
 - ¹⁰ John Nash. “Plato: A Forerunner.” *The Beacon*, July/August 2004, pp. 18-24.
 - ¹¹ More often Christ referred to himself as the “Son of Man,” a familiar term in Judaic tradition.
 - ¹² Athenagoras of Athens. *A Plea For the Christians*, X.
 - ¹³ Theophilus of Antioch. *Epistle to Autolychum*, II, 15. Theophilus is credited with coining the word “trinity.” He used the term *trias* (Greek: τριάς, “number three”), which was translated into the Latin *trinitas* and, in turn, into the English *trinity*. Theophilus of Antioch is not to be confused with the fourth-century patriarch of Alexandria of the same name.
 - ¹⁴ See for example: *Wisdom of Solomon* 8:2-5

- ¹⁵ See for example: Gershom Scholem. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*. Schocken Books, 1991, pp. 140ff.
- ¹⁶ Karen Armstrong attributes this teaching to Origen. See her: *A History of God*. Ballantine Books, 1993, p. 100.
- ¹⁷ Similar ideas persisted through the Middle Ages. Followers of Guglielma of Bohemia (d. 1281) believed she was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit.
- ¹⁸ A major concern of the Council of Nicea was to counter the “heresy” of Arianism which held that Christ was created by God and thus was subordinate to the Father. Clearly the Council disagreed with the Apostle Paul whose epistles strongly imply Christ’s subordinate status. Indeed, in John S. Spong’s words, “Paul was not a Tritinarian.” See: *Born of a Woman*. Harper-Collins, 1992, p. 25
- ¹⁹ Athenagoras of Athens. *A Plea for the Christians*, X.
- ²⁰ Emphasis added. The original Nicene Creed stated only “And in the holy Spirit.” (Trans: Norman P. Tanner (ed.). *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*.)
- ²¹ A few years after the Lateran Council Thomas Aquinas discussed creation *ex nihilo* in his *Summa Theologiae*, Question XLV. Modern Library, 1948, pp. 242-245.
- ²² The sephiroth were identified in the *Sepher Yetzirah*, or “Book of Formation,” a text that may date back to the 1st or 2nd century CE, and were discussed further in the *Sepher Zohar*, or “Book of Splendor,” compiled by the 13th-century Spanish Qabalist Moses de Leon. See for example: Arthur E. Waite. *The Holy Kabbalah*. Citadel, (undated, c. 1910). Also: Dion Fortune. *The Mystical Qabalah*. Weiser, 1935, 1998.
- ²³ The partzufim are discussed at length in the *Sepher Zohar*.
- ²⁴ Leonora Leet. *Secret Doctrine of the Kabbalah*. Inner Traditions, 1999, pp. 22-23, 28-29.
- ²⁵ Numerous accounts of the lost Shekinah appear in esoteric Jewish literature, particularly during the 16th-century Safed period. See for example: Moses Cordovero. *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. (Transl: R. J. Z. Werblowsky) Oxford University Press, 1962.
- ²⁶ The Tree of Life, showing the spatial relationships among the sephiroth, was developed by the early 17th-century scholars of the Safed community in Palestine.
- ²⁷ John Nash. *Quest for the Soul*. 1stBooks Library, 2004, pp. 157-158. The notion that God the Son should be identified with Daath was proposed by Arthur Waite. See: *The Holy Kabbalah*, p. 210.
- ²⁸ Six is a “perfect number,” equal to the sum of its own divisors. See for example: Anne Marie Schimmel. *The Mystery of Numbers*. Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 122ff.
- ²⁹ Philo of Alexandria. *De profugis*, 9. Quoted in: Scholem. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, p. 144.
- ³⁰ H. P. Blavatsky. *The Secret Doctrine*. Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888, p. 16. Some emphasis removed.
- ³¹ See for example: Annie Besant. *A Study in Consciousness*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1904, 3-7.
- ³² See for example: Alice A. Bailey. *Initiation: Human and Solar*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1922, p. xv.
- ³³ Charles W. Leadbeater. *Man Visible and Invisible*. Quest Books, 1902/1975, pp. 21-46.
- ³⁴ The seven planes—to use modern terminology—are the physical, sentient (“astral”), mental, buddhic, atmic, monadic and logocic.
- ³⁵ An even closer correspondence with the ten sephiroth is provided by the trinity and the seven rays that emanate from them. Detailed descriptions of the seven rays are given in the books of Alice Bailey.
- ³⁶ Leadbeater. *Man Visible and Invisible*, p. 48. The buddhic plane lies immediately “above” the mental plane.
- ³⁷ *John 16:16-17, 28*. (KJV).
- ³⁸ Bailey. *Letters on Occult Meditation*, p. 141.
- ³⁹ Annie W. Besant. *Avatars*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1899, p. 48.
- ⁴⁰ Plotinus. *Second Ennead*, II.
- ⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas. *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 39. (Transl: Cyril Vollert.) Sophia Institute Press, 1273/1993, p. 37.
- ⁴² The Hindu *trimurti*, literally “One with three forms,” consists of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- ⁴³ Source: “Peter Lombard.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Interestingly, Joachim himself was criticized by the Lateran Council for his theory of “world ages.”
- ⁴⁴ See for example: Barbara Robinson. “Reconsidering the Doctrine of St. Augustine.” *Venture Inward*, Nov./Dec. 2004, pp. 12-16.
- ⁴⁵ The patriarchs of the Eastern churches evidently chose to ignore the Pythagorean precept that triplicity is formed from the addition of unity and duality.
- ⁴⁶ *Luke 1:35* (KJV).

- ⁴⁷ Alice A. Bailey. *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. Lucis, 1925, p. 916.
- ⁴⁸ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Astrology*. Lucis, 1951, p. 263.
- ⁴⁹ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, ch. 59. (Transl: Edmund Colledge and James Walsh.) Paulist Press, 1978, p. 276.
- ⁵⁰ Allan B. Barns. "An Esoteric Approach to the Trinity." *Esoteric Christianity*, October 2004.
- ⁵¹ John Nash. *The Soul and its Destiny*. Authorhouse, 2004, ch. 5.
- ⁵² The Lightning Strike represents the descent of divine essence through the sephiroth in numerical order. See for example: Fortune. *The Mystical Qabalah*, pp. 49-55.
- ⁵³ Thomas Aquinas. *Compendium theologiae*, chs. 75ff. The doctrine of God's unicity was confirmed by the First Vatican Council in 1870.
- ⁵⁴ See for example: Alice A. Bailey. *Discipleship in the New Age*, II. Lucis, date, p. 403.