Numenius and the Greek Philosophical Sources of the Central Christian Doctrine

Marian Hillar
Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies, Houston, TX

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the sources of the central Christian doctrine about the nature of deity. We can trace a continuous line of thought from the Greek philosophy to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The first Christian doctrine was developed by Justin Martyr (114-165 C.E.). He speculated on religious matters in philosophical terms of his time. He introduced new concepts and phrases not found in the synoptic Gospels and followed Philo's road to Hellenization of the Hebrew myth. The primary influence exerted on him was the writings of the Greek Middle Platonic philosopher Numenius of Apamea (fl. ca 150 C.E.). Numenius in turn followed the Platonic tradition *via* Xenocrates of Chalcedon (d. 314 B.C.E.).

1. Four patterns of Christianity

The central issue in the philosophy of religion is the concept and nature of deity.[1] In orthodox Christianity it is the issue of God as Triune since it is its central doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity was developed over centuries, and it seems that the evolution of Christianity can be analyzed in terms of four general patterns:

1. Jewish Messianism with the figure of the Messiah as a glorified man and the expected earthly Kingdom of God. This is the basic message of the early Christianity though one can distinguish here the Pauline and Gospel varieties. This pattern was revived in the doctrine of the Socinian Church in the XVIth century.[2]

2. Hellenistic Christianity in its two forms: in one the Messiah figure was transformed into the cosmic Greek Logos; in the other, the Gnostic in which the Logos is only one of many divine manifestations.

3. Trinitarian Christianity which tends to reemphasize the Unitarian character of the divinity, preserving the Greek philosophical triadic speculations, and incorporating especially the Egyptian triune doctrine.

4. Servetian Unitarian Christianity which interprets the divinity and its manifestations as a historical, modalistic process. This pattern found its modern expression in the so-called "process theology" of which Servetus was a precursor.[3]

The concept of the unity of God in the Trinity was developed slowly as a result of a long process of mixing various ideologies.[4] The purpose of this study is to explain the origin of the concept in Greek philosophical speculations.

2. Justin Martyr and the First Christian Doctrine

Justin Martyr (114-165 C.E) is the first Christian apologist who speculated on religious matters in philosophical terms of his time and attempted to build a coherent system of thought.[5] Due to his background in Greek schooling,[6] he introduced new concepts and phrases not found in the synoptic Gospels and followed Philo's road to Hellenization of the Hebrew myth. The primary influence exerted on him were the writings of Philo of Alexandria, whom he mentions by name three times in the *Dialogue with Trypho,*[7] and the Greek philosopher Numenius. Justin expands the concepts of Philo mixing them with the philosophical interpretations of Numenius and adapts such a mixture to the new Christian story recorded in the Gospels. Justin, in turn, influenced other Christian writers and was quoted by Tatian, his disciple, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea.

3. Numenius and the Greek Sources of the Justin Triadic Formula

When Justin mentions that Christians believe in the Triad – the Most true God who is the Father, the Second (God), and the Third (God) – he refers directly to the discussion among his contemporary Middle Platonists.[8] We have testimony of this discussion preserved in the fragments of the philosophical writings of Numenius of Apamea in Syria (fl. ca 150).[9] Johannes Laurentius Lydus (ca 410-465), a Byzantine philosopher, mentions his name with the sobriquet Roman which would indicate that Numenius stayed in Rome.[10]

The triadic speculations are nothing new. We find them in Greek philosophy, as well as in Egyptian religion.[11] Particularly striking is the agreement of the Numenius doctrine with that presented in the so-called *Chaldaean Oracles*.[12] The reason probably is because both Numenius and the *Chaldaean Oracles* have the same source, namely, the Platonic tradition via Xenocrates. This was the current theological doctrine of the second century. Numenius, in turn, influenced the Christian apologist, Justin, the Greek philosophers Plotinus and Porphyry, and later Eusebius of Caesarea.

4. Xenocrates of Chalcedon

Xenocrates of Chalcedon[13] (d. 314 B.C.E.) was the second successor of Plato in his Academy after Speusippus. We have only fragments of their writings and testimonies left by others about their doctrines. They both elaborated further on the existence of cosmic principles in Plato's *Philebus,*[14] already listed by Pythagoras. Eventually such speculations led to the abandonment of the theory of Ideas as separate entities and to postulating the Ideas as the thoughts of the divine intellect.

In his theology, Xenocrates[15] differentiated two cosmic principles as divinities – the monad (μονάς) and the dyad (δυάς). One was the masculine divinity, and, as such, had a role of the Father and ruled in heaven. He proclaimed it to be the one (singular) and the intellect. This was the supreme deity, the First God, immovable and unchanging, called Zeus. The other was the feminine divinity that had a role of the Mother of gods and ruled over the gods beneath the heaven – she was the Soul of the Universe. Clement of Alexandria ascribed to Xenocrates the distinction between Zeus the supreme God, the Father, and the other inferior God, the Son.

5. Numenius: the Immediate Source of Justin Theology

Numenius is most interesting among the Middle Platonists because he developed

further such concepts of Greek philosophical tradition (as One, Demiurge, Father, Logos, Mother, World Soul) into a theological system. He introduced explicitly a system of hierarchical cosmic entities, two or three Gods, interrelated by πρόσχρησις, a term which signifies a desired, loving dependence and provenance. Such a conception could have an appeal to the philosophically oriented early Christians who operated within the framework of biblical formulations. Moreover, Numenius was acquainted with the Hebrew and Christian scriptural tradition,[16] a fact which could have gained for him sympathy from the Christian side. There is a complete correlation between the two systems, that of Justin and that of Numenius. Justin was influenced by the triadic Middle Platonic solution of Numenius and adopted his cosmic ontological concepts to Christian historical records. Tertullian will develop it later into the trinitarian pattern.

The innovation which was introduced by Numenius to the Pythagorean-Platonic religious doctrines was the introduction of a second transcendental and noetic entity between the supreme being and the universe. He, undoubtedly influenced by Plato's statement about the three principles in the universe transmitted by Xenocrates, which we have already discussed, derived the concept of the three Gods from distinguishing "all things in their rank and order." First, after thorough analysis of the Platonic concepts of Being and Becoming, he establishes that, that which exists is incorporeal and intelligible, and has the name of Substance and Being.[17] Having established that Existing Substance and the Idea are intelligible and that the Mind is their cause, Numenius concludes that the Mind alone is Good.[18] Thus the First God is characterized as the First Mind, the Good-in-itself, Self-existence. He exists in himself, is simple and not divisible.[19] He does not create and remains idle from all the labors of the creation, as would a king.[20]

The Second God, the Creator, rules by passing through the heavens. On his passage, the mind is shed down to earth on all who are destined to participate. Whenever the divinity looks on any of us, life and animation of bodies is the result, and whenever the divinity turns himself toward himself, all animation is extinguished.[21]

The Second Divinity remains in a subordinate position to the First One. As the Creative Divinity he is the principle of Becoming (or generation), so must the Good be the principle of existing Substance. And the Creative Divinity is analogous to the First, so must be Becoming to Being (Substance), because he is his image and imitation.[22] The Second Divinity in this theory is the Demiurge who has a double character – either he participates in the First God, then he is called the Second God, or he turns himself to the matter and produces the World out of formless matter (since his nature is being Creator), then he is called the Third God and even may be regarded as the World. His essence (or substance) can be analyzed from two perspectives as well. First, the Second God is the principle of Becoming and inasmuch as he produces from himself his own Idea and the universe he is the Demiurge and intelligible. Second, if the substance (or essence) of the First supreme God who is intelligible is Intellect and he himself is the Good, then the Second God, the Demiurge, inasmuch as he is the Good of Becoming, must be the Good-in-itself co-natural or cognate to the substance of the First God. Thus, both share the same substance, though Numenius does not state this explicitly.

Thus Numenius classifies the Demiurge, the Second God, as analogous to the First God, his image and imitation. In conclusion to this reasoning, Numenius declares that there are four entities (πραγμάτα) with the following names: 1. The First God who is the Good-in-itself, pure Intellect; 2. The good Demiurge, God Creator, his imitator; 3. The one Substance (Essence) which is shared by the two – the First God, and the Second God; 4. The copy of this Substance (Essence), the beautiful (i.e., ordered) World which is beautified (i.e., ordered from disorder) by its participation in the Beauty.[23]

In this philosophy, since the First transcendental God was unknown to man, did not create, was impassible, and contented himself with contemplation, the Second God was needed as an agent of creation and animation. Moreover, if it was not necessary for the First God to create, then he could be considered the Father of the Second God, the Demiurge. And it was for reason of piety that Numenius denied the direct creative function to the First God. The Demiurge rules in heaven, and busies himself with both the intelligible and the sensible, through him happens all that happens.[24] Just as the pilot who sails at sea and looks to the sky to find his way, so does the Creator who is linked to matter by many connections, regulates its harmony through ideas. By looking up to God on high, he receives his critical judgment, but his impulsive motion he receives from the desire for Matter.[25]

The participatory relation between the First God and the Second God Numenius illustrates by using several analogies: that of a farmer and planter, that of donor and receiver, of a fire kindled from another fire, of knowledge partaken by the receiver from the donor.[26] This participation of the Second God in the First becomes still more pronounced as he receives his goodness from the First by a process of thought so that the Good is One. He really becomes one with the First God. This relation to the First God remains in complete accord with the Platonic paradigm of Ideas: just as humans and everything else are modeled on Ideas, so the Good which is the Idea of Good is the Idea of the Demiurge.[27] In another fragment Numenius is reported to teach a triad formulated by using another metaphor, namely that there are three Gods – the First whom he calls Father (πατέρα), the Second, whom he calls Creator (ποιητήν), and the Third – Creation (ποίημα). Thus the Creator would be two Gods – as the First and the Second. In addition, using poetic language, they could be described using terms of filial descendance as the Fore-Father (πάππον), Offspring or Son ('εγγονον), and Descendant or Grandson ('απόγονον).[28]

Bibliography

[1] Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger, Reason and Religious belief. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 11.

[2] Marian Hillar, "Laelius and Faustus Socinus: Founders of Socinianism, their lives and theology. " In *The Journal from the Radical Reformation. A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism.*" (Part I, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2002; Part II, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2002)

[3] Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553) - The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience,* (The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston N.Y., 1997). Marian Hillar with Claire Allen, *Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant, Humanist, and Martyr,* (University Press of America, Lanham, New

York, Oxford, 2002). Marian Hillar, "Process Theology and Process Thought in the Writings of Michael Servetus." Paper, Annual Meeting of Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, San Antonio, Texas, October 24-27, 2002.

[4]   Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity. Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*. (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1999). George Wesley Buchanan, *Jesus the King and His Kingdom.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

[5]   Leslie William Barnard, *Justin Martyr. His Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Erwin R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr. An Investigation into Conceptions of Early Christian Literature and its Hellenistic and Judaic Influences* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968; reprint of Jena, 1928). Giuseppe Girgenti, *Giustino Martire: il primo cristiano platonico con il appendice 'Atti del martirio di San Giustino.'* Presentazione di Claudio Moreschini (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1995). Cullen I.K. Story, *The Nature of Truth in 'The Gospel of Truth' and in the Writings of Justin Martyr; a Study of the Pattern of Orthodoxy in the Middle of the Second Christian Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970). Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition; Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Giorgio Otranto, *Esegesi biblica e storia in Giustino (Dial. 63-84)* (Bari: Istituto di letteratura cristiana, Università, 1979).

[6]   M. J. Edwards, "On the Platonic Schooling of Justin Martyr," in *J.T.S.* n.s., vol. 42, 1991, pp. 17-34.

[7]   Miroslav Marcovich, Edouardo Des Places, editors, *Justin Dialogus cum Tryphone* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997). cc. IX, X, XIII.

[8]   Clément d' Alexandrie, *Les Stromates* Introduction de Claude Mondésert. Traduction et notes de Marcel Caster (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 1951), Tome I. Introduction et notes de P. Th. Camelot, texte grec et traduction de Cl. Mondésert (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 1954), Tome II. T. I.22.150.4.

[9]   Numénius, *Fragments*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places (Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1973). *The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius.* Collected and translated from the Greek by Kenneth Guthrie with foreword by Michael Wagner (Lawrence, KS: Selene Books, reprint of 1987; first published in 1917).

[10]   Lydus, *De Mensib*. IV.80 in Numenius *Frag.* 57 (Des Places).

[11]   John Gwyn Griffiths, *Triads and Trinity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996).

[12]   Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy. Mysticism Magic and Platonism in theLater Roman Empire.* Nouvelle édition par Michel Tardieu (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978. First published in 1956). Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians.* Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor (London: Bertram Dubell and Reeves and Turner, 1895. First published in 1821).

[13]   Senocrate [Xenocrates], Ermodoro, *Frammenti* edizione, traduzione e commento a cura di Margherita Isnardi Parente (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1982).

[14]   Plato, *Philebus* cc. 23 c – 27 e.

[15]   Xenocrates, *op. cit., Frags* 213-230.

[16]   Edwards, M. J., *op. cit.,* p. 33.

[17]   Numenius, *Frags.* 20, 21, 22 (Guthrie); *Frags.* 6, 7, 8 (des Places).

[18]   Numenius, *Frag.* 25 (Guthrie); *Frag.* 16 (Des Places).

[19]   Numenius, *Frags.* 26, 31 (Guthrie), *Frag.* 11 (Des Places); *Frag.* 25 (Guthrie), *Frag.* 16 (Des Places); *Frag.* 31 (Guthrie), *Frag.* 17 (Des Places).

[20]   Numenius, *Frag.* 12 (Des Places); *Frag.* 27 a (Guthrie).

[21]   Numenius, *Frag.* 27 a (Guthrie); *Frag.* 12 (Des Places).

[22]   Numenius, *Frag.* 25 (Guthrie); *Frag.* 16 (Des Places).

[23]   Numenius, *Frag.* 16 (Des Places); *Frag.* 25 (Guthrie).

[24]   Numenius, *Frag.* 12 (Des Places); Frag. 27 a, b (Guthrie).

[25]   Numenius, *Frags.* 13,18 (Des Places); *Frags.* 28, 32 (Guthrie).

[26]   Numenius, *Frags.* 13, 14 (Des Places); *Frags.* 28, 29 (Guthrie).

[27]   Numenius, *Frags.* 19, 20 (Des Places); *Frags*. 33, 34 (Guthrie).

[28]   Numenius, *Frag.* 21 (Des Places); *Frag.* 36 (Guthrie).