

## **The Trinity and Contextualization**

by Ralph Allan Smith

In this brief paper, we wish to consider the question of whether or not the early church employed a method that might be called contextualization in its formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. First, we must ask what contextualization means. Then, we will be able to investigate the process by which the church formulated its doctrine to see if it might be legitimately called “contextualization.”

### **What is Contextualization?**

The word “contextualization” is as ambiguous as it is clumsy. As one might expect, this unattractive term was apparently invented by linguists in the 20th century as a technical term, “By contextualization is here meant, not only the recognition of the various phonetic contexts in which the phonemes occur, but the further identification of phonemes by determining their lexical and grammatical functions.”<sup>1</sup> It soon came to be used by scholars from various fields with a remarkable diversity of meaning. Among theologians, the term came into popular use after it appeared in *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (1970-77).<sup>2</sup>

As Hesselgrave and Rommen make clear, the origin of the application of this term in theological circles was “rooted in dissatisfaction with traditional models of theological education.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, leaders in the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement sought to address the “widespread crisis of faith” as well as “issues of social justice and human development”.<sup>4</sup> What this meant, among other things, was the development of a “contextual or experiential” approach to theology which, in the words of Nikos A. Nissiotis, director of the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, “gives preference, as the point of departure for systematic theological thinking, to the contemporary historical scene over against the biblical tradition . . . .”<sup>5</sup>

The crisis of faith referred to was not something new. For leaders in the WCC and their member churches, the Bible’s authority had long been questioned due to the application of the “historical critical method” of study, or, in other words, the study of the Scripture in terms of the presuppositions of the Enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> Without the authority of God being clearly expressed in

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. Firth quoted in *The Oxford English Dictionary on Compact Disk for the Apple Macintosh*, ver. 1.0d (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 28. Hereinafter, references to the “Third Mandate Programme” will be abbreviated TMP.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from TMP in *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30-31.

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the Bible as a transcultural norm, the locus of authority shifted to man, and the culture and language of the people to whom the Gospel was to be communicated began to be taken as normative. Stephen Knapp in an unpublished paper suggested that the whole notion of contextualization was less an attempt to communicate than to contain the Gospel. Referring to the TMP, he wrote, “One cannot escape the impression that contextualization as it is now widely understood is merely the latest in a string of accommodations of the Gospel to contemporary thought-forms, in this case historicist and secularist (and in the case of some of the expressions of the theology of liberation, Marxist) ones. One cannot escape the impression that the hermeneutical approaches and their underlying philosophy of mission are rooted in part in an over accommodation to secular critiques of the alienating function of Christianity traditionally understood as well as a pervasive cultural devaluation of distinctiveness and distaste of proselytism.”<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, evangelical Christians found contextualization as defined by the TMP unacceptable. They did not, however, abandon the term. Rather, with some notable exceptions,<sup>8</sup> they were “enamored”<sup>9</sup> with the word *contextualization*. So, the word had to be redefined. Hesselgrave and Rommen select three early representative proposals.

1. ‘We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation’ (Byang H. Kato).
2. ‘[Contextualization is] the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal forms meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situations’ (Bruce J. Nicholls).
3. ‘Contextualization properly applied means to discover the *legitimate implications* of the gospel in a given situation. It goes deeper than application. Application I can make or need not make without doing injustice to the text. Implication is *demand*ed by a proper exegesis of the text’ (George W. Peters).<sup>10</sup>

Early evangelical definitions fit the notion of contextualization into their concern for effective communication of the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> Harvie Conn objects to this understanding of contextualization and urges something deeper. To begin with, according to Conn, Christians must allow the Scripture to judge their own enculturated interpretations and lifestyles — a process he calls “de-contextualization.”<sup>12</sup> As he explains,

In that sense, the demand for de-contextualization, ignored largely by both liberation theologian and evangelical, becomes as important as contextualization. It does not

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Marion Luther McFarland, “Culture, Contextualization, and the Kingdom of God” in James B. Jordan ed. *Christianity and Civilization*, no. 4, 1985, The Reconstruction of the Church (Tyler, Tx: Geneva Press, 1985), pp. 329-30.

<sup>8</sup> Hesselgrave and Rommen refer to James O. Buswell and Bruce C. E. Flemming. *Op. Cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Conn also makes this observation. *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 179-84, esp. p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Conn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 258. Cf. Also, Hesselgrave and Rommen, p. 34.

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take up the questions of culture without evaluating the legitimacy of the questions themselves.<sup>13</sup>

According to Conn, we must subject the “presuppositional framework” itself to the “judgment of the Word of God.”<sup>14</sup> To contextualize the message of the Gospel into the language of another culture, we must first remove from our Gospel preaching those elements that are the results of our own cultural bias. For we, too, are parts of a cultural matrix that includes anti-Christian elements that inhibit the ministry of the Gospel to other peoples.

What we have, then, is three important views on contextualization, one of them being an aspect or prerequisite for contextualization. First, there is the theologically liberal view of contextualization, which sees the culture as a standard into which the “truth” of the Gospel must be made to fit. This may be labeled for the purposes of this paper as “syncretistic contextualization.” The idea in this view is that the teaching of the Gospel must be modified in order to fit with the worldview of the peoples to whom we preach. This model assumes that the Bible itself is a cultural product and that we can distinguish between the cultural accidents and the essential elements of the Christian message. Second, there is the view of conservatives who wish to keep the word “contextualization,” but change the definition from that originally suggested by the TMP. This may be described as “linguistic contextualization.” On this view, contextualization is merely an effort to communicate effectively to people who speak different languages and view the world in a different manner from those with a European cultural background. This may include restating basic Biblical truths in language that sounds odd to the Western ear, but there is neither an attempt to change nor an approval of any who basically change the message of the Christian Gospel itself. Third, a prerequisite to any real contextualization according to Harvie Conn is de-contextualization. This means taking the Bible as the standard not only for the answers to our questions but as a judge of the questions we ask. In other words, questioning the basic notions of our own or any other culture in terms of the Biblical worldview. Since neither the syncretistic nor the linguistic model necessarily stipulates this as an aspect of the process, it is important to state this as a separate point.

In terms of the questions we wish to consider in this paper, this overly simplistic categorization of the subject of contextualization will suffice. What we must first do is ask whether the Trinitarian theology of the early Church fits the model of syncretistic Contextualization, as suggested, for example, by John Hick, or whether it is simply a matter of linguistic contextualization, which is quite frequently opined. We also need to consider the matter of de-contextualization. Is it a notion that may be applied in any way to the work of the early Church?

We must keep in mind how very significant the issue itself is, for if the idea of contextualization is that Truth with a capital “T” cannot be expressed in any one language since each language includes the limitations of a particular culture, then contextualization necessarily presupposes some sort of pluralism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Conn, *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Though he denies that his view implies any such conclusion, the notion of contextualization proffered by Charles Kraft at least drifts in that direction. Carl F. H. Henry’s critique of Kraft unmasks hidden and destructive assumptions in his view of culture and communication. See: “The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation” in *Trinity Journal*, 1:1, Fall, 1980, pp. 153-64. The fundamental problem in Kraft’s whole approach is the exaltation of culture above Scripture.

## **Trinity Contextualized?**

Apparently, it is rather commonly held that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is an example of contextualization, with the result that it is an especially Greek formulation. This notion appears in various forms, the most extreme of which is stated rather saucily by John Hick.

The “Son of God” title, which was to become standard in the church’s theology, probably began in the Old Testament and wider ancient Near Eastern usage in which it signified a special servant of God. In this sense, kings, emperors, pharaohs, great philosophers, miracles workers, and other holy men were commonly called son of God. But as the gospel went out beyond its Hebraic setting into the gentile world of the Roman Empire, this poetry was transformed into prose and the living metaphor congealed into a rigid and literal dogma. It was to accommodate this resulting metaphysical sonship that the church, after some three centuries of clashing debates, settled upon the theory that Jesus had two natures, one divine and the other human, being in one nature of one substance with God the Father and in the other human, being of one substance with humanity — a philosophical construction far removed from the thought world and teaching of Jesus Himself as is the in some ways parallel Mayahana [sic] Buddhist doctrine of the Trikaya from that of the historical Gautama.<sup>16</sup>

On this view, the contextualization of the doctrine meant a complete distortion of the original teaching of Jesus and the apostles, a syncretizing of the teaching of the Bible with the philosophical presuppositions of the ancient world. Others take a more moderate view. Ogbonnaya believes that Tertullian’s African communal perspective has been neglected because Christian theology has been dominated by a Eurocentric worldview in which Greek metaphysical and hierarchical thought combined Roman juri-pragmatic thought to produce an inadequate Trinitarianism.<sup>17</sup> For Miyahira, Tertullian, Augustine, and Barth employed “their own culturally loaded concepts to make the Trinity intelligible to those in their own cultural contexts.”<sup>18</sup> Lee suggests that the change in our cultural context requires new statements of the doctrine of the Trinity that supplement the ancient creeds so that the doctrine will be meaningful for modern Christians, especially those who live outside the Western world.<sup>19</sup> The Greek statement of the doctrine was good for the ancient Church and is still useful, perhaps, in the context of Western Christianity, but, in Lee’s words, “People in the Third World also seek the meaning of the Trinity in their own context.”<sup>20</sup>

In other words, for Miyahira and Lee, at least, modern theologians in Africa or Asia may be thought of as following the example of the early Church when they seek formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity that conform to their own particular time and culture. Before we can consider the question of whether or not this is a legitimate enterprise, we must answer historical questions like: Did the early Church state the doctrine of the Trinity in the language of Greek philosophy? Was it the intention of the Church fathers to communicate Biblical truth in

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<sup>16</sup> John Hick, op cit., p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ogbonnaya, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>18</sup> Miyahira, op cit., p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, op cit., pp. 14 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Op cit., p. 17.

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contemporary philosophical language to facilitate communication? Did the church fathers, as Hick asserts, actually construct the doctrine of the Trinity in Greek philosophical terms in such a manner that they also fundamentally changed the worldview meaning of Biblical language? To state these questions differently, we are asking whether or not there was contextualization and, if there was, what sort of contextualization it was. A third question, whether or not the early Church engaged in anything that might be called de-contextualization, must also be considered.

To properly evaluate John Hick's charge might require an entire volume — assertions are easier to make than to appraise! Briefly, however, consider his first assertion, the title son of God comes from the world of the Old Testament in which kings, prophets, and holy men are “commonly” called “son of God.” We can only say that this usage is not “common” in the Old Testament, but even if it were, it would not necessarily mean that Jesus' use of the expression was not significantly different. When we consider the New Testament, for example, it is clear that the Jewish leaders understood him to be saying something more than “I am a prophet,” or “I am a holy man.” John reports,

But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:17-18)

Clearly, his own contemporaries understood Jesus to be making a peculiar claim, one with unmistakable metaphysical implications, which they considered to be blasphemous. Indeed, it was this claim by Christ that gave the Jewish leaders the excuse they needed to put Him to death.

But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. (Mat. 26:63-66)

We could multiply passages in which Jesus made claims about Himself or His special relationship to the Father which further emphasize the fact that even if we should grant that “son of God” also had a broader meaning in the ancient world, Jesus made extraordinary use of the expression. Nor are we reading into the expression some “Western” or “Gentile” meaning, since His own contemporaries — Jews all of them, both friends and enemies — understood Him to be “making Himself equal with God.”

The apostle Paul — though his preaching to Gentiles may disqualify him in the eyes of some modern thinkers — made the same sort of assertions about Christ. Statements such as those which claim that Jesus created the world (Col 1:16-17) and that He is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), or the application to Jesus of Old Testament passages which refer clearly to Jehovah (Phil 2:9-11; etc.), all point to the fact that the apostle Paul — a first century Jew who had no intention of replacing the worldview of the Bible with an alien and “rigid literal dogma” — preached an ontologically pregnant Gospel. If there are no metaphysical implications intended, what can Paul mean, for example, when he declares, “For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:10)?

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What is even more unusual about Hick's view is that he focused on the doctrine of Christ's two natures. Now certainly, unless the early Church believed that Jesus were both God and man, they would not have come up with the Chalcedonian creed. But here, one would think, Hick might point out that as a matter of fact, it was common for men in the ancient world, Near East, Far East, and West alike, to believe in some sort of amalgamation of God and man. The pharaoh was the son of Ra, half god and half man. The emperor of Japan, too, was considered half god and half man until the end of World War II, when he had to de-divinize himself. A related prevalent idea in the ancient world was the notion of salvation as metaphysical promotion to some sort of divine, or at least, superhuman status.

If the early Church fathers had asserted that Jesus was the child of a god and a woman, a half-god appearing in the form of a man, they would have been offering us a typical ancient notion, and to contend that that they were guilty of a syncretistic contextualization would be reasonable. But Hick has charged them with changing metaphor into dogma in the very area in which the dogma is contrary to the entire world of their day. Claims of cosmic significance for Apollo, Athena, Dionysius, Hermes, Heracles, Isis, and Mithras can all be found.<sup>21</sup> What made the doctrine of the early Church unique was the fact that Christ's Sonship was proclaimed in the alien religious and philosophical context of Hebraic and Biblical thought, not at all in conformity to the Gentile philosophy of the day. It was, rather, the opponents of the early Church whose doctrines were crude literal dogmas constructed to comply with the reigning cosmologies. For example, the Arian view that Jesus was created by God in the beginning and stood as a sort of metaphysical mediator between the transcendent Spirit and the world of matter clearly fits the ancient philosophical frame.<sup>22</sup> But the idea of a Person who is both God and man, but in whom the divine and the human are emphatically unmixed, uncompounded, and uncomposed, in which the two natures are separate and distinct, though united in the Person — this idea is unparalleled. The political and philosophical implications of this view, moreover, flew in the face of the mainstream movements of the day. For if Jesus is the one and only Person in whom deity and humanity unite, then the emperors, kings, and holy men of the day were mere creatures, under His supreme authority. This also implied that the revelation of the Word of God in Christ and in Scripture stands above all men.<sup>23</sup> This is hardly the kind of philosophy that enchants intellectuals or emperors!

But the early Church did borrow the language of the philosophers, did it not? Terms like *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *substantia*, *persona*, *homoousian*, and the like are not found in the Bible. Does not the use of this sort of unbiblical language indicate a syncretistic contextualization, a combination of the worldview of the Bible with the worldview of the Greeks? This question

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<sup>21</sup> See: Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 114-23.

<sup>22</sup> It is also an example of heretics being less able to handle the metaphorical language of Scripture, according to R. P. C. Hanson, who writes, "[W]hen all else is said and done, it must be conceded that the Arians are less inclined to use allegory than the pro-Nicenes. This is not because their respective theologies drove them in that direction, but because the Arians were, with some exceptions such as Palladius and the author of the *Opus Imperfectum*, less intellectual and less sophisticated than the pro-Nicenes. We have seen this already in the case of the Macedonians requiring Scriptural proof. Prestige is near the mark when he says that the Arians had fallen into the pitfall of 'mistaking anthropomorphic language or physical metaphors for more than what they purported to be.'" *The Search for the Christian God: the Arian Controversy*, 318-381 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 830.

<sup>23</sup> See the extended discussion of the significance of the Chalcedonian creed in R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968).

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might seem obvious, but Hanson notes that until recent times, the influence of Greek philosophy on the ancient Church was not considered important. Only with the work of the English scholar E. Hatch and the German A. von Harnack did this matter become a “burning issue.”<sup>24</sup> On this question, there has been no scholarly consensus. Both extremes — that Greek philosophy had virtually no influence, and that Greek philosophical notions controlled the discussion of doctrine so thoroughly that they corrupted original Christianity — have been maintained.

According to Hanson, there have been two important breakthroughs in scholarship that shed light on the whole issue. First, the newly discovered Nag Hammadi documents and other studies in Gnosticism show that “though Christianity in the second and third centuries was not uninfluenced by Gnosticism, either by reaction or by absorption of some of its features, by the fourth century the Gnostic threat to the Christian faith was over and none of the many diverse forms of thought or belief which that term covers figured seriously as an influence on Christian thinking.”<sup>25</sup>

The other factor mentioned by Hanson is the growth of our knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy in the third to fifth centuries A.D. In contrast to the scholars of the 19th and early 20th century, who were thoroughly familiar with the works of Plato and Aristotle, the early Christians of the third and fourth centuries lived at a time when it would have been rare to be so well acquainted with these Greek giants. Aristotle was still read, Hanson tells us, but “Aristotelianism as such scarcely existed.” As for Plato, “Even the most intellectual theologians . . . are most unlikely to have read right through Plato, though all of them would probably have read the *Timaeus* and the *Symposium* at least.”<sup>26</sup> With our present knowledge of the world of the early Church, it should be clear that the kind of wholesale syncretistic contextualization suggested by Hick is simply not true — if for not other reason simply because there is nothing so simple about the whole issue. For example, the influence of philosophy changes over time. Hanson notes that Origen synthesized Christian doctrine and Middle Platonic philosophy, mixed with some Stoicism. But, he adds, “There were no Origenes in the fourth century and references to him were usually polite and wary rather than enthusiastic, except for those few who attacked him like Methodius, Eustathius of Antioch, and Epiphanius, and at the very end of the century, Jerome (that burnt child who dreaded the fire).”<sup>27</sup> Before the Cappadocians, Hanson reports, there are only two clear examples of theologians being “deeply influenced by Greek philosophy” but neither of them had any significant impact on Christian thought.<sup>28</sup> Also, these early theologians are not equally influenced or influenced in the same ways by the surrounding worldviews. Nor were they uncritical. Thus the more philosophically sophisticated theologians such as the Cappadocians who were relatively well-educated in Greek philosophy, though not uninfluenced, were critical of many basic Greek ideas and, on occasion, even belittled philosophy.

Concerning the growth of Christian doctrine in the early centuries, Hanson concludes that, “It is equally incorrect to see this process as one of an Hellenization of an originally simple Christian gospel. The theologians of the fourth century were compelled by the very necessity of

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<sup>24</sup> Op cit., p. 856. Hatch published *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* in 1890 and just a few years prior to Harnack’s famous *History of Dogma*.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 856.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 857.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 859-60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 862-63.

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doing theology at all to use the terminology of Greek philosophy. We have seen that the truth gradually dawned upon the most intelligent of them (though it was never accepted by the Homoian Arians) that it is impossible to interpret the Bible simply in the words of the Bible. This being so, no alternative vocabulary was open to them than that of the late Greek philosophy. They used this vocabulary with a fine disregard for consistency and an eclectic method which ensured that they were wholly absorbed or captured by no single system, but used the materials provided by all. . . . Only if we define Christianity in such simplistic terms as those to which Harnack thought it should be reduced can we see the process as one of Hellenization.”<sup>29</sup>

Hanson, thus specifically repudiates the syncretistic contextualization sort of interpretation asserted by John Hick, suggesting, rather, a process that more accords with what we have called “linguistic contextualization.” The questions being treated, the opposition of heretical ideas, the quest for understanding all combined to produce a new theological vocabulary which included words borrowed from the philosophical vocabulary of the day. But, as Hanson concludes, “the pro-Nicene theologians were responding properly and honestly, as properly and honestly as the circumstances of their age would allow, to a genuine compulsion. In spite of inadequate equipment for understanding the Bible, in spite of much semantic confusion which required protracted and elaborate clearing up, in spite of being compelled to work with philosophical terms and concepts widely different from those of the Bible, they found a satisfactory answer to the great question which had fired the search for the Christian doctrine of God . . .”<sup>30</sup>

There is more, however, that needs to be said. The development of orthodox Christian Trinitarianism involved the rejection of the “traditional, centuries-old, much-used, one can almost say Catholic, concept of the pre-existent Christ as the link between an impassible Father and a transitory world, that which made of him a convenient philosophical device, the Logos-doctrine dear to the heart of many orthodox theologians in the past, was abandoned.”<sup>31</sup> The pro-Nicene theologians, in other words, changed the doctrine of the Church and changed it radically.

The Apologists of the second century, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus all believed and taught that, though the Son or *Logos* was eternally within the being of the Father, he only became distinct or prolated or borne forth at a particular point for the purposes of creation, revelation and redemption. The result of the great controversy of the fourth century was to reject this doctrine as heretical.<sup>32</sup>

To place this in the language of contextualization, we may say that the Apologists of the second century were in fact guilty of a degree of syncretistic contextualization. They had imbibed to a degree the dualistic ways of thought characteristic of the ancient world in general. Through the process of theological discussion and controversy, the Church pruned this false growth. The compromised *Logos* doctrine was eliminated. As T. F. Torrance explains, the Nicene fathers “realised that if they allowed the dualist ways of thought in the prevailing culture to cut the bond of being between Christ and God the Father, then the whole substance of the Christian Gospel would be lost.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the borrowed vocabulary of Greek philosophy,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 870-71. Note the similarity to John Hick.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 875.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 872.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 872.

<sup>33</sup> The Trinitarian Faith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 7.



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having been transplanted into the soil of the Biblical worldview, bore new fruit. According to Torrance,

It was through thinking out the inner relation of the incarnation to the creation that early Christian theology so transformed the foundations of Greek philosophy, science and culture, that it laid the original basis on which the great enterprise of empirico-theoretical science now rests.<sup>34</sup>

With regard to the use of the philosophical term *ousia*, Torrance affirms that the Greek Fathers used it in a way very different way that of Greek philosophy. Athanasius did not “operate with a preconceived idea or definition of being in speaking of God’s Being, but drew his understanding of the Being of God from the ever-living God himself as he speaks to us personally in his Word and reveals himself in his creative and saving activity.”<sup>35</sup> One result of this utterly different approach to questions of being was the development of a new understanding of personhood also. The three Persons of the Trinity were understood to relate to one another in covenantal love. One God in Three Persons, thus, meant that “there developed out of the doctrine of the Trinity the new concept of person, unknown in human thought until then, according to which the relations between persons belong to what persons are.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian doctrine of God as Three Persons existing in a relationship of covenant love involved a “radical transformation of the Greek concept of being (*ousia*), when used of God, from a pre-Christian impersonal to a profoundly personal sense.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion**

More could be added, I believe, but what we have seen so far is that the early Fathers were so far from adopting wholesale the Hellenistic worldview around them, so far from transforming Biblical metaphor into rigid and literal dogma according to Greek modes of thought that what they actually did was to redefine Greek terms to make them serviceable to the expression of the Biblical worldview.<sup>38</sup> In the process, they carefully rejected non-Biblical elements that had inadvertently been introduced into the Church’s tradition and laid the foundations for a much broader and fuller expression of the Biblical worldview. This kind of activity goes beyond the notion of linguistic contextualization. We can see in the Church Fathers the kind of self-examination and self-judgment that Conn refers to as de-contextualization. They purged themselves of anti-Christian elements in their thought and created a whole new theological language out of borrowed words.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 116.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 103. It should be noted that I have placed more emphasis here on the concept of the covenant than Torrance does, though it is by no means absent from his discussion. See, for example, pp. 120 ff. and 131 ff.

<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that there was no compromise with Hellenistic thought in the Church’s doctrine of God. The point is that the Trinity cannot rightly be called a syncretistic transformation of the Gospel into the forms of Greek thought. Other ideas about God, such as the denial that God can have feelings, are indeed overly influenced by ancient thought. However, no one recommends this sort of compromise as an example of theological wisdom!

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Thus the Trinitarian theology of the early Church does offer us a theological model. We may say that there is an element of linguistic contextualization, though the term is not altogether appropriate since it is not at all evident that communication was the central concern of the theologians of the early centuries. They seem far more occupied with stating the truth accurately than with questions of communicating to Greco-Roman culture. But they clearly engaged in the kind of deep cultural criticism that involved a re-examination of the tradition of the Church and the rejection of elements that were found not to accord with Scripture. They consciously sought to eliminate the pernicious influences of the culture around them so that they could faithfully express the Truth of God's word. That was their example for us: faithfulness to the truth, not strict adherence to a particular vocabulary. As Torrance points out concerning Athanasius,

Here as elsewhere he retained his freedom to vary the sense of these words in accordance with the nature of the realities which they were intended to signify so that they might be allowed to show through the language being used. That is why Athanasius hesitated to commit himself to a fixed formalization of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* for all contexts which would have gone against his conviction that it is not the words themselves that mattered so much as the truths of divine revelation which they were meant to serve and indicate.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 128-29. Torrance's books on the Trinity contain many other statements to the same effect, giving substantial emphasis to the fact that the work of the Nicene fathers was set firmly against the dualism of the Hellenistic world.