
Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England

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Paul Lim's study presents an erudite analysis of the Trinitarian controversies in 17th-century England. In addition to grappling with the large number of contemporary texts, the book also delves into the patristic texts employed to defend the various positions they set forth. While addressing the expected salvos unleashed by the leading English Socinians Paul Best and John Biddle, as well as the vigorous defences of the doctrine of the Trinity by orthodox defenders, Lim establishes that the matter was not a mere sideshow to the major ecclesiological disputes of mid 17th-century England. Instead, the book demonstrates – as the title suggests – that the doctrine of the Trinity represented one front in a broader contest over the issue of mystery in the Christian faith and the extent to which authority over admittedly incomprehensible matters could be demanded by ecclesiastical authorities.

Logically, the study begins with the Socinians Best and Biddle, who overtly denied the doctrine of the Trinity. After giving biographical outlines of their lives and offering reasonable accounts of how these two Englishmen came to adopt their anti-Trinitarian positions, Lim makes the first of his fundamental claims. Counter to traditional assertions, set out by Hugh Trevor-Roper and others, that Best and Biddle represent the roots of Enlightenment rationalism and humanist rejections of religion, Lim asserts that the position adopted by English Socinians rested in an extreme commitment to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and the eradication of what they identified as the three heresies of Tradition, Transubstantiation and the Trinity. Whereas Martin Luther and John Calvin had dispatched with the first two, Socinians argued the vestiges of

Roman corruption persisted in Protestant commitments to the unfounded, untenable and thoroughly Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. Essentially the error represented an affront to logic and reason, the result of the corrupting influence of Platonic philosophy in the Church. The error, for Biddle, represented the grossest sort. He claimed it crept in and was enshrined in doctrine at the council of Nicaea – a point contested throughout Trinitarian debates in the 17th century. As such, Biddle rejected the divinity of Christ on the grounds that three persons could not be incorporated into a singular deity without the sophistry of philosophical wrangling. Though this fundamentally denied the Trinity, Biddle still held that Christ could be worshipped due to the elevated status granted to the human Jesus by God.

Socinians of the Best and Biddle variety denied the Trinity on the grounds it represented a logical impossibility and asserted the otherness and transcendence of God -– distinct from a human Jesus and a subordinate Spirit. However, another important aspect of the Trinitarian controversies developed among radical groups who advocated a process of *theosis* (or deification), espoused panentheism or claimed themselves to be equally divine with God. Although proponents of such ideas, manifest among the Ranters and others, did not directly engage in discrediting the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity, their claims obliquely undermined it. The outworking of such ideas ranged from Antinomianism to claims of divinity. Though such perspectives certainly caused the authorities difficulties, demanded orthodox theological rebukes and – if they led to public disturbances – had to be punished, Lim argues that such manifestations did not cause the authorities the depth of concern that they felt at Biddle's theological unpicking of this core doctrine of the Christian faith. While the case of James Naylor – whose re-enactment of Palm Sunday in the city of Bristol led to a trial for blasphemy and to being publicly whipped and branded -– proved much more sensational, Biddle's theology raised a far greater and lingering challenge: what degree of toleration ought to be extended to those with tender or dissenting consciences if they live peaceably? In Biddle's case, authorities feared that tampering with the fundamental doctrine of Western Christianity threatened to undercut all the foundations for a godly society and threatened divine displeasure with the nation. This resulted in multiple imprisonments for Biddle and confinement to the Isles of Scilly.

Denunciations of anti-Trinitarians came from a number of corners and Lim skilfully draws out the nuanced arguments employed by a widely representative spectrum. Thomas White, the Catholic priest who supported the Interregnum government, held Biddle up as the 'most learned and most rationall, among the enemies of the *Roman Church*', before using this as a means to lambast the inherent shortcoming of *sola Scriptura* (p. 129). In so doing, White presented a critique levelled at all Protestants, placing them on the same slippery slope as the Socinians. Lim insightfully notes that Laudian bishops took a similar line. While not critiquing the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* they did rebuke Biddle's reductionist framing of the doctrine and his belittling of episcopal heritage from Nicaea. Peter Gunning reasserted the place of tradition and conciliar judgements in determining right doctrine. The predominant position taken by the Socinians' Calvinist detractors, especially the heresiographer Thomas Edwards, was to link anti-Trinitarianism and Antinomianism together as two sides to the same coin. As such, proponents of Presbyterianism, such as Francis Cheynell, advocated the essential role of the Christian magistrate to deal with heterodoxy. Others, like John Owen, presented their defence of the Trinity in liturgical terms with a strong emphasis on the mystery Biddle had ridiculed. Rather than emphasising the mystery of the Trinity to be one that the rational mind must accept exists beyond the grasp of reason, Owen turns to the allegorical union depicted in the Song of Songs to stress that the mystery can only be experienced in the believer's union with Christ. Ironically, as Lim suggests, it was Owen's support of a 'Calvinist, mystical union with Christ', which smacked of the enthusiastic excesses of the Interregnum, that raised the ire of Restoration bishops and prompted William Sherlock's scathing attack on Owen's own orthodoxy.

Much of the dispute about the doctrine of the Trinity centred on the use of patristic sources and identifying at what point Platonic thought infiltrated the early church and perverted its theology. Biddle emphasised the distinction between ante-Nicene and post-Nicene fathers, asserting, as Lim pithily summarises, that the ante-Nicenes were anti-Nicene. The demarcation of pre- and post-Nicaea became an important delineation. Although Stephen Nye and the Huguenot Jacques Souverain eventually argued the corruption took place before the composition of the Gospel of John -– perhaps the most important text in disputes over the doctrine

– opponents of Trinitarian theology generally viewed the breach to have occurred at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Lim demonstrates that this took on a new relevance at the Restoration, as it resonated with many who had espoused religious liberty during the Interregnum and found the Restoration bishops despotic and oppressive. For instance, Lim explores the ideological formulations of Thomas Hobbes, Richard Baxter and Andrew Marvell, who subsequently have all been associated in varying degrees with Unitarianism, tolerance-minded descendants of English Socinianism. Rather than being dyed-in-the-wool anti-Trinitarians, Lim demonstrates that through similar arguments they asserted the ecumenical councils (particularly Nicaea) represented the rise of bishops who – having duped the imperial authority of emperors – aggrandised themselves through heavy-handed politics within the councils by employing Platonised theology to create orthodoxy, demonise their opponents and subjugate simple people incapable of comprehending their complex formulations. While arguing for 'Simple Christianity', their hostility towards Trinitarian formulations' underpinning of hierarchical authority drew Baxter, Hobbes and Marvell into the doctrinal dispute.

This book is a deeply impressive undertaking in which Lim eloquently explores the issues that fuelled debates over the Trinity in 17th-century England, traces the continental influences that shaped the discourse, and adeptly engages with the polemical use of patristic sources. He demonstrates the essential challenge that mystery presented in the face of anticlericalism, anti-Catholic sentiments and rational Biblicism. Importantly, this study undercuts the simplistic thesis that Trinitarianism waned in the face of Humanist rationalism, a sort of precursor to the Enlightenment. Rather, Lim reinforces the radical Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* as the driving force of early English Socinianism, noting that the doctrine 'heralded among the Protestants in the Reformation as the cure-all as a methodological principle for all theological discourse, did not provide the requisite framework for solving even the exegetical debates of the Gospel of John' (p. 319). While the Trinitarian crisis may have highlighted the shortcomings of *sola Scriptura*, as Thomas White had charged, the *prima causa* was the challenge posed by mystery and who had the right to interpret it – and what greater mystery is there in the Christian faith than the Trinity?

Since dealing with mystery is so essential to Lim's argument, it is a little surprising he gives no in-depth attention to Quakers. Though Friends are mentioned in passing, nothing is said regarding their Trinitarian thinking. It might be argued that this is due to the lack of uniformity in early Quaker theology, but this in itself is a very important issue. As Sally Bruynell and others have noted, Quakers maintained a Trinitarian vocabulary, but their doctrine of the Inner Light and the imminence of the resurrected Christ led to a malleable, if not perhaps a little confused, economy of the Trinity.(1) However, within their theological tractability Quakers experienced the Trinity in a manner akin to the union proposed by Owen; they freed themselves from the need for the conciliar traditions railed against by Baxter, Hobbes and Marvell, and found a novel way of coming to terms with the Protestant *sola Scriptura* by espousing the idea that the Spirit which inspired scripture was the very same one that dwelt within them. Surely a discussion of the Quaker theological approach to mystery would have offered a comparative model to contrast against the politically-charged theological nit-picking of the discourses assessed in this volume. Apart from this, the scope, quality and presentation of the book are excellent. It will surely stand the test of time.

Notes

1. Sally Bruyneel, *Margaret Fell and the End of Time: The Theology of the Mother of Quakerism* (Waco, TX, 2010).Back to (1)

The author is most grateful for the engaging and substantive review offered here and does not wish to comment further.

Links
[1] http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/61973