The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most fundamental and complex components of Christian theology. Defining God is a difficult task in itself, but the New Testament adds to this challenge by introducing ambiguous terms, such as Father, Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah, Christ, and Holy Spirit. These terms are essential to the Christian language, but their meanings are arguable. The Bible fails to offer a clear message. Furthermore, a written and unchangeable scripture that is handled by an ever-evolving world is subject to different interpretations. First, history played a most decisive role: If there is one thing we can know about the origin of Christianity is that it derived from Judaism, which was monotheistic in the strictest sense. Indeed, the Christian Bible incorporates not just its New Testament but the Hebrew Scriptures as well. But the New Testament offers not only a new covenant, but a new challenge to a religion rooted in Judaism. Dunzl states the challenge Jesus presents by saying, the “very persistence in the confession of the one and only God of Israel confronted the early church with the task of clarifying how to define the relationship between Jesus the Son of God, in whom Christians saw more than a mere man, and this one and only God” (9). The concept of the Trinity is unprecedented *because* it includes monotheism in its doctrine. Tasked with making sense of the idea that three must somehow equal one, it is no wonder the early church fathers disagreed on several occasions. And it is no wonder that the debate still goes on.

Since the death of Jesus, apostles, philosophers and theologians have been at work deciphering the Trinitarian puzzle. Believers were faced with the challenge to uphold monotheism, while maintaining the divinity of Jesus. What did divinity mean to them? What makes God distinct? What temporal or non-temporal realm can only God exist in? Can three different entities be composed of the same God substance? These questions forced theologians to assess where the line between monotheism and polytheism was drawn. And the ensuing arguments are a result of their efforts to honor their belief in one God while examining the role Jesus plays in salvation. As noted above, there was no precedent for this kind conceptualization; the early Christians’ theological musings were groundbreaking.

One of the first issues these early theologians had to deal with was defining what God is. Arius of Alexandria proposed the first theological challenge to the church when he argued that “everything that is not God in the real sense has a cause or a beginning” (43). To solve the problem of incorporating Jesus into monotheism, he argued that God, who is eternal, existed alone before “begetting, creating or setting up” the Son (43). This belief became known as Arianism: God is at the top, the only eternal true God; Jesus is begotten by God, the first of all creatures and therefore endowed with a special status. But Jesus is inherently subordinate to the Father. Arius’ belief countered that of the Bishop of Alexandria, who contended that “the Son is in truth *God’s* Logos and *God’s* wisdom and therefore also *in his being* the Son of God; he is begotten *of the Father* – not from nothing! – and his divinity is quite indisputable” (45). This becomes the basis of all further arguments the church fathers engage in. Undoubtedly, these men were on a quest for truth, but there was an inevitable element of politics involved. Arius and the Bishop of Alexandria formed coalitions of other bishops and presbyters who held their views, creating divisions within the church.

When Constantine I took power over the Roman Empire, his mission to discover that “truth” was colored entirely by a desire to placate the God on whom the state’s success depended. He wanted unity within the church so that God would look upon him and his state favorably. Thus, he convened the first Council of Nicaea to settle the dispute between Arians and followers of the Bishop of Alexandria. This council led to the formation of the first draft of the Nicene Creed, which reveals that Bishop of Alexandria won the battle against Arius. The Nicene Creed established that “the Son is begotten from the Father and did not come into being from nothing. … He has always existed; however, he is not unbegotten but – according to the biblical writings – Son begotten in truth and in the real sense, and also unchangeable and unalterable in his being” (51). Those who did not sign the new creed were excommunicated from the church.

The first Council of Nicaea offers a telling example of the kind of ambiguities and challenges the church fathers addressed. The council brings key concepts to the fore, which continued to be contentious throughout the development of Christianity. The Greek term *ousia,* or substance, becomes integral to the language of Christian theology: there is a battle among theologians regarding whether Jesus is *homoousia,* of the same substance of God, or *homoiousia*, of a similar substance to God. Furthermore, *ousia* is left undefined; it is unclear what the “substance” of God really is. Nonetheless, each council thereafter addressed the question of Jesus’ substance in relation to God and from that drew conclusions about his position as equal to, same as, subordinate to, and/or distinct from God. The Holy Spirit is hardly addressed until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (124). There, the council fathers revise the creed to include belief in the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father; who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified” (125). In this creed, the Holy Spirit is finally recognized as “Lord” but is restricted to procession from the Father. Later, the Roman church added “and the Son,” which, Dunzl writes, “even now separates the Eastern and Western churches.”

The problem with the Nicene Creed, in all its stages of evolution, is that it does not define certain terms – such as substance or true God. These are terms that have stuck, without enough of a challenge to force the church to define them. In a sense, Christianity has yet to pick up where it left off at the first ecumenical council in Constantinople, 325. There are still questions as to what it means to be of the same substance while being three separate entities. It is no surprise, then, that different denominations have created their own different meanings for the Trinity. But despite the differences within Christianity as to the minute details of it, the Trinity is *the* doctrine that separates Christianity from other monotheistic religions. It is, indeed, the key to salvation, according to Christians. In other words, today the Trinity serves as both a unifier and a divider.

The problem with the Nicene Creed, which I stated above, is the result of a deeper problem that most Christians have largely ignored. Dunzl’s last chapter addresses the biggest challenge to all ancient religions: history. History is multifaceted, and it is written by people who lived in specific circumstances. The doctrine of the Trinity evolved not in a vacuum, as Dunzl writes, but within the context of a power struggle. In the simultaneous quest for “truth” and power, power often takes first priority because it is an immediate need. As in the case of the first Council of Nicaea under Emperor Constantine, power and politics provided his motivation to find “truth.” Dunzl provides examples of the times when power heavily influenced the making of doctrine:

“Did the stubborn efforts of his son Constantius to achieve a theological compromise aim at the lowest common denominator on which the parties in dispute were to agree? Wasn’t it mere chance that because of a military emergency, rule in the East of the empire fell to the Spanish Theodosius, who was oriented on Nicaea, so that he had the opportunity also to realize his church-political goal there? Does the Neo-Nicene faith thus represent just a further and last variant of the power-play of theological ideas – a variant which was able to establish itself for political reasons?” (134)

It is also worth noting, that the “winning side” of each argument was not blameless: both sides used deceit and politics in the attempt to make their arguments into established doctrine. Today, much of what Christians are left with are the byproducts of an ancient power struggle. This constitutes a careful analysis of the scripture and perhaps a re-evaluation of what the Trinity means. There is no doubt, though, that a reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity would be created within the context of modern politics and mindsets. But as Dunzl writes, “that the history of revelation is not played out untouched by external influence as it were in a ‘vacuum’ in the history of ideas is not a defect but a touchstone of the monotheistic view of the world” (135). Hermeneutics is part and parcel of religion. There are no ecumenical councils anymore that dictate the practices and beliefs of all Christians. Christianity is far too divided for one church to revise a theology that has been established for over a millennium. It would require each individual denomination to re-evaluate the doctrine of the Trinity.

If this were to happen, perhaps it would be beneficial to re-evaluate both sides of the ancient argument – to ignore the political strings pulling at the council fathers, but to look at their theological arguments as if they are in a vacuum. Ancient politics are irrelevant to our modern interpretation. Christianity is a religion of tradition, and ancient traditions must be taken into account when deciphering the meaning of the Trinity. But there should be a holistic analysis of the scripture and the history behind it. And, furthermore, if Jesus is to be the cornerstone of Christianity, it is important to understand him within a realistic, historic context. Who did *he* think he was in relation to God the Father? Attempting to answer this question could provide insight into the meaning of the Trinity by going to its very root. The gospels offer the most “historic” account of Jesus, while other books within the New Testament are merely interpretations of and commentary about Jesus’ life and message. Due to previous research, I am convinced that Jesus thought himself to be no more than a kind of viceroy to God. In his book *The Historical Context of* Jesus, E. Sanders explains the meaning of the terms “Son of God,” “Son of Man,” and “Messiah” in their first-century context. None of these titles convey that Jesus is consubstantial with God. Biblical scholars Bart Ehrman[[1]](#footnote-1) and Sanders[[2]](#footnote-2) agree that Jesus did not consider himself holy or divine. Looking at Jesus through more historic lenses reveals that the “antagonist” Arius may have had a valid argument. His idea that Jesus belongs “on another level of being than the only true God, the Father,” but is elevated above humans in some way, seems to coincide with what Ehrman and Sanders contend Jesus believed about himself. For Arius, Jesus was the mediator between God and creation, a “unique creature” (45).

No one – inside or outside the religion – understands the Christian doctrine of the Trinity because of its attempt to combine three divine entities and monotheism. Arius’ theology strives to solve this problem by devaluing Jesus to a human level. His opponent, Bishop of Alexandria, argues that Jesus was begotten by God in a way inconceivable to humans. This is, indeed, a division that can never be resolved – the division between those who strive to understand and those who understand they cannot. This is a leitmotif in all monotheistic religions: can we comprehend God, or must we just accept the mystery? Catholic and orthodox traditions tend to adhere to the latter: For them, it is about having faith in what can’t be known; it is the spiritual experience that matters most.

But no matter what has given us the doctrine of the Trinity we have today – whether that is the history of politics and power play or divine revelation – we have it, and it has become so ingrained in the Christian identity. Indeed, in the global religious setting, it is what keeps Christianity separate from Judaism and Islam. All the Abrahamic faiths acknowledge the Holy Spirit of God; therefore this is not the point of contention. What distinguishes Christianity from Judaism and Islam is the belief in Jesus’ divinity. How *can* a religion be monotheistic when it gives the title “God” to two separate entities? There is no realistic nor metaphorical means of understanding this concept. Judaism and Islam are practical in their approach to religion: they are religions that dictate every aspect of life on earth so that a believer may see heaven in the afterlife. Christianity is inherently more esoteric. This may explain why there is a decline in believers in the developed world and a rise of believers in Islam. Christianity is hard to make sense of; and it can often only appeal to those who are willing to suspend rationality.

In a global setting, will Christians begin to question their own monotheism? Or will they hold tighter to their doctrine of the Trinity as a way to maintain their distinct identity in a shrinking world? If each denomination re-evaluates the doctrine of the Trinity, will Christianity become further divided and thus lose the one thing that unifies them – believe in the divinity of Jesus? Before Christians even attempt to reassess the doctrine of the Trinity, they must be prepared to reassess their doctrine of salvation. Are they willing and prepared to do that? Will they even find it necessary? These are questions time will reveal the answers to, and Christians may answer these questions differently depending on their native regions. Europe is witnessing the demise of Christianity and the rise of atheism and Islam. Around the world, Islam is the fastest growing religion. But in the U.S., Evangelical Christians are increasing in number alongside a growing non-religious population. There is a religious quake shaking up the world, and we are certainly in the midst of great changes.

As in the past, the doctrine of the Trinity will continue to present profound challenges to Christians in search of the truth. More and more people, too, are joining the discussion as more and more people become educated and free to speak. It is doubtful that a re-evaluation of the Trinity will be as influenced by politics as it was in the fourth and fifth centuries, but it will naturally evolve within the cultural context of the twenty-first century. This does not demerit it; it merely reveals that religion is not placed in a cultural vacuum by God. Religion grapples with reality every day, and this is what gives it life. Globalization, information technology, liberalism and multilateralism comprise the atmosphere of today; and that is what will define Christianity today and shape the way Christians understand the Trinity.

1. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1999. eBook. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus.* London, England: Penguin Group, 1993. eBook. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)