

Adoring the Holy Trinity by a Pictorial Language: The Ways and Manners in which the Christians of the Early Centuries Expressed Their Faith in the Triune God - Part 1

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Abstract

The article presents a survey over the early (2nd to 6th century) representations of the Holy Trinity in pictorial form in relation to its debate in sermon and theological writing.

Keywords:

Christian theology, trinity, history of dogma, sacred art

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die Geschichte der Trinität in bildlicher Form im Vergleich mit seiner Diskussion in Predigt und theologischem Schrifttum während der frühen christlichen Jahrhunderte (2.-6. Jahrhundert.).

Schlüsselwörter:

Christliche Theologie, Trinität, Dogmengeschichte, sakrale Kunst

Preamble

It is very interesting to observe that although the belief in the Trinitarian Godhead constitutes the fundamental basis of the Christian faith, there is yet, only one sole passage where the bible explicitly speaks of God as Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit¹. Indeed, it is interesting to observe in this context that for the particular case of the Holy Spirit, even if strong insinuations are made in that sense, the biblical scriptures avoid to refer to this as divine openly. This reluctance seems to have had been principally due to the fact that first the evangelists and the apostles and later the great Christian authors and apologists of the apostolic and patristic period felt that hereby they might risk making open assumptions about the substance of God's deity, something that according to the norms of the Old Testament² equalled the greatest blasphemy. For this reason, in absence of any adequate theological vocabulary (indeed such a terminology in reference to the Holy Spirit in its feature as the third divine person of the Trinity will only begin to evolve after the 360's) the Christian believers preferred to express their faith into the Trinitarian Godhead mainly through various paradigmatic images and analogies. It is also interesting to observe in this context that although during the period we are studying here (2nd to the early 6th century) we find a real thriving of the most various Trinitarian typologies in the Christian predication, there is, however, a quasi general absence of any religious icon that depicted the Holy Trinity as such. A paradox, that was mainly due to the fact that especially Latin Christian art did not know of any visible symbol by which the person of the Father could be validly characterised; and to the fact that many Christians continued until the 6th and even 7th century having doubts if Jesus on the cross represented really the second person of the Trinity, even if the bible affirmed Him to be the Son of God³ and the first ecumenical council of Nicaea had officially affirmed the divine consubstantiality between Father and Son. [...]

About the author:

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¹ "Go therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

² Exod. 3:14-15; Deut. 6:4-5.

³ "The centurion, together with the other guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place and they were terrified and said: In truth, this man was the son of God" (Matt. 27:54).