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978-1-107-01330-8 - From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from
Pythagoras to Tertullian

Marian Hillar

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From Logos to Trinity
*The Evolution of Religious Beliefs
from Pythagoras to Tertullian*

This book presents a critical evaluation of the doctrine of the Trinity, tracing its development and investigating the intellectual, philosophical, and theological background that shaped this influential doctrine of Christianity. Despite the centrality of trinitarian thought to Christianity and its importance as one of the fundamental tenets that differentiates Christianity from Judaism and Islam, the doctrine is not fully formulated in the canon of Christian scriptural texts. Instead, it evolved through the conflation of selective pieces of scripture with philosophical and religious ideas of the ancient Hellenistic milieu. Marian Hillar analyzes the development of trinitarian thought during the formative years of Christianity from its roots in ancient Greek philosophical concepts and religious thinking in the Mediterranean region. He identifies several important sources of trinitarian thought heretofore largely ignored by scholars, including the Greek Middle Platonic philosophical writings of Numenius and Egyptian metaphysical writings and monuments representing divinity as a triune entity.

Marian Hillar is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies and of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Texas Southern University, where he is also Director of the Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies. His books include *Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant, Humanist, and Martyr* (2002) and *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511–1553) – The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience* (1997). He is also editor in chief of *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, a publication of the American Humanist Association, and (with Christopher A. Hoffman) is currently translating the major work of Servetus (*Christianismi restitutio*, 1553).

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*To my family
Janett, Annie, and Christopher*

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Though the Holy Scripture is authoritative, its authority can be assessed exclusively by the judgment of our reason. Because of this, the Holy Scripture cannot contradict reason, just as faith should not contradict reason. Indeed, faith follows the judgment of reason and believes that which reason judges worthy of belief.

Joachim Stegmann Sr., *De iudice et norma controversiarum fidei*

I implore you, Who in his sane mind could tolerate such logomachias without bursting into laughter? Not in the Talmud, nor in the Qur'an can one find such horrendous blasphemies. But we are accustomed to hear them to the point that nothing astonishes us. Future generations will judge them obscure. Indeed, they are obscure, much more than the diabolic inventions which Irenaeus attributed to the Valentinians.

Michael Servetus, *Christianismi restitutio, De Trinitate*

If you show me a single passage in which the Son was called the Word, I will admit my defeat.

Michael Servetus, *Christianismi restitutio, De Trinitate*

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Foreword

This book is one of those rare gems that deserves a thorough reading by all who are concerned with the history and practice of the Christian faith, particularly in relation to other great world religions. Marian Hillar has broken new ground in the detail of his work, although his foundational point is one made by significant predecessors in the history of the development of Christianity, such as Adolph Harnack and his student Friedrich Loofs.

This account of the development of doctrine “from Logos to Trinity” is critically important in our time because both scholars and the general public seem largely ignorant of the profound shifts in thinking that occurred when the essentially Jewish faith of New Testament times became severed from its roots and succumbed to the distorting influence of Neoplatonism.

The churches have in general turned a blind eye to the somewhat embarrassing fact that a very strong pagan Greek influence adversely affected the Christian faith as it emerged after apostolic times.

It is a strange paradox that it is only in the twenty-first century that a scholar well versed both in the two biblical Testaments and in the Greek philosophical schools of late antiquity has set his hand to provide us with just the information we need for an intelligent assessment of the pristine Christianity that preceded its remarkable deterioration from the second century. Hillar’s thesis has enormous implications for Jewish-Christian relations as well as for sensible dialogue between both those faiths and Islam.

Marian Hillar is perhaps the first to put his finger on the detail of just how biblical Christianity’s decline into a philosophical form of religion came about. He shows us that the Middle Platonist Numenius quite evidently exhibits an extraordinary affinity with the thinking of the second-century Christian Apologist Justin Martyr. The middle of the second century marks the transition, via a mishandling of John’s logos teaching, from one theological paradigm to a new and very different one. By stages, the unitary monotheism of Jesus and the apostles became the complex construction of the nature of God as Trinity. Now that this scholar has laid bare the evidence, we are all

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better able to reevaluate our own positions vis-à-vis Christianity as it originally stemmed from Jesus himself. Hillar adds a point to the reflection of Dr. Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary, who, in his remarkable *Ex Auditu* article, “Trinity and Incarnation” (vol. 7, 1991, p. 90), wonders “whether the thorny questions of later ages might have been avoided if the church fathers had not embarked on the language of the ‘eternal generation of the Son.’ How things might have been different if the fathers had kept strictly to the language of John’s prologue as their paradigm.”

Marian Hillar spells out the process by which that departure from John into the muddy waters of Greek philosophy took place. His work thus provides an important contribution to the contemporary debates over Christology. The necessary detective work has now been done. This is a trail-blazing endeavor. Though *From Logos to Trinity* may not be for the timid who cannot imagine that the status quo on the identity of the biblical Jesus could be askew from a biblical point of view, it challenges all those prepared to take a new look at how the Christian faith in all its forms arrived at its present condition. It may in fact lead to an almost complete rewriting of theological history. Although the author allies himself with none of the faith claims of any of the parties described by him, he follows hard on the heels of a hero of his, Michael Servetus, whose remarkably advanced *Restoration of Christianity* Marian Hillar and Christopher A. Hoffman have been the first to translate from Latin into English. That exercise was an ideal springboard to the present unveiling of the astonishing compromise, noted already by Servetus – a compromise made with Neoplatonism found in the early church fathers and largely hidden from the churchgoing public. Hillar’s thorough investigation is likely to have profound effects on the reader.

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Preface

This book is a result of a lifelong interest in studying the fundamentals of religious doctrines and their justification. Each religion has a set of basic characteristic postulates that religious leaders and thinkers use as premises, acceptable one way or another.

When I learned in my youth that there is only one god and that this god had three distinct persons, and that other people may have a different god or gods, I could not find anyone who was able to dispel my confusion and doubts or enlighten my youthful curiosity. I had the good fortune, however, to be given the wise advice to study the matter in order to satisfy my inquiry. Thus, there is a long list of people, who will remain unnamed, who contributed in various ways to this study, and I owe them a debt of gratitude for their knowledge and encouragement.

I am grateful to several libraries, especially the Fondren Library at Rice University in Houston and the library at the Free University of Amsterdam, without whose resources I could not have done the work. I want especially to express my thanks for the encouragement and support given me by Anthony Buzzard of Atlanta Bible College and Ángel Alcalá of the City University of New York. Professor Buzzard not only encouraged me during the years of writing this manuscript but also reviewed the entire text and gave me valuable advice on several points. I owe my thanks to the reviewers of the manuscript who introduced many constructive changes and to the Publishing Director at Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl, and to her Editorial Assistants, Amanda J. Smith and Emily Spangler, for their interest in getting my manuscript ready for publication. Finally, this book could not appear without the tireless work of Claire S. Stelter (formerly Allen), who corrected and revised my prose during the many months of writing and preparing the manuscript for publication.

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