

**THE ORIGIN OF THE
DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY,
A POPULAR EXPOSITION**

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The origin of the doctrine of the Trinity, a popular exposition by Rendel Harris

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BY
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PREFACE.

I HAVE been asked more than once why I do not attempt to present in popular language the results which we claim to have reached in Christian Literature and in Christian Doctrine, according to which we establish the existence of a lost book of the first age of Christianity, made up out of quotations from the Old Testament, and also the existence of a lost Christian doctrine of the first century, according to which Jesus was defined as the "Wisdom of God".

It seems that there are Christian people who cannot follow an inquiry, such as that in the book called *Testimonies* (which is in course of production by my friend Vacher Burch and myself), because the argument frequently requires a close acquaintance with ecclesiastical writers in Greek, Latin and Syriac ; and the same thing is true of the little book on the *Origin of the Prologue to St John's Gospel*, which I recently published.

For some reasons I should have preferred to postpone any such popular treatment, until we had completed the discussion of *Testimonies* by publishing the second part of that work. But as I know the interest that is being provoked by these investigations is not limited to the erudite, I have consented to try and explain what is going on in the world of Christian thought, without any reference to Greek or Latin. Hence this little tract or lecture in the English speech.

PREFACE

It is a bold flight to remove the centre of gravity of Christian thought from its normal position in the fourth century to the first century, but perhaps it may turn out that the change of position will help us all to a better understanding of the one whose nature is the object of our enquiry, and to a more intimate fellowship with him, as a result of that better understanding.

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It has been suggested to me that I should say something to you on the subject of a discovery in Christian literature which lies chronologically behind those books which make up our New Testament. I suppose that we were many of us brought up in the belief that the New Testament is the beginning of the Christian literature, and if at any time the belief was shaken by the attachment of dates to any particular books of the New Testament, we were usually able to find an explanation for the fact that the New Testament did not begin quite as early as we had at first supposed it to do. I do not forget that there are still some people who are anxious to prove that the Gospels were written in part in the lifetime of our Lord. But these are usually belated examples of an unscientific spirit, and we do not need to pay attention to them until they come into the fold by the door, that is to say, by the correct scientific method. In the New Testament itself, we had our old-time ideas rudely shaken because we started from the natural idea that the books were produced in the order in which they are commonly printed and edited. And we did not naturally take to the thought that the Pauline Epistles were written before the Gospels, nor that the Gospel of Mark, which stands second amongst the four, was really the first in the order of production. But when we had made a preliminary reconstruction of the times when the books were written, and the order in

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which they stood, we found ourselves with an immense literary lacuna at the beginning of the Christian history. I am going to show you that it is unscientific to believe in the existence of such a lacuna, just as unscientific as it would be to make a map of the world with America undiscovered. The first attempt to fill the void was made by those people who spoke of the first Christian period as the period of oral tradition—which is very much like making an early map of America and labelling it *terra incognita*. I shall endeavour, without turning aside to minutiae, to recover for you one lost book and one lost doctrine of the time to which we refer. We will begin with a brief statement of the Christian belief in the Trinity.

I.

In the following pages, then, I am proposing to myself a task which I have never undertaken before, which might perhaps have been deemed unnecessary, and which may be productive of serious misunderstanding between Christian people. The task is the determination of the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity has been from almost the earliest days of the Christian Church a settled affair with a settled formula. Catholic Christianity expresses itself in the terms of this doctrine, and when we say "Catholic Christianity" we include Evangelical organisations as well as Anglican or Roman. Even if they do not all recite the Creeds—especially the Nicene Creed, and the Creeds of later Councils which amplify and explain the Nicene Creed—these Creeds are for the most part accepted by evangelical believers everywhere as an exact expression of the Christian conscience with regard to the most stupendous of Christian doctrines—the discovery

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that God exists in three persons, and is, nevertheless, one God.

The reason for this general acceptance lies in the fact that the doctrine is found in the New Testament itself, sometimes clearly stated in personal confessions, and in the doxologies of the visible or invisible Church (for it must be remembered that the Church doxologised before it defined, and that even the most rigid of dogmatic statements on the subject have been evolved out of the praises of the Church), and sometimes adumbrated by terms which, while they do not compel, may at least be said to invite the Trinitarian definition.

If, on the other hand, there are passages in the New Testament which seem to teach an opposite doctrine, and to express the relation of the Son to the Father in lower terms than co-existence from eternity, and consubstantiality, the ancient doctors of the Church have found ways to explain these inconsistencies, and the modern doctors, by calling for the aid of that magic word Evolution, have been able to express themselves without a shadow of a doubt as to the revelation which has been made, with regard to the Divine nature and the Divine attributes. What the modern exegetes do not appear to realise is, that when one appeals to evolution for the explanation of the history of a doctrine, one must go to evolution consistently, and not merely invoke the principle as an occasional witness to explain how the terms of the Trinitarian belief have been arrived at from the premises of the primitive confession.

However, something has been gained by the admission that evolution is really a factor in Christian belief, and we owe it to John Henry Newman that he liberated the Catholic mind for further investigation into Christian origins, and that, while requiring the belief that