CRISIS OF LANGUAGE: SEMANTICS IN GOD-DISCUSSION OF THE FATHERS

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ABSTRACT. The early Christian discussion on the doctrine of God occurred primarily within the Hellenistic culture. Christians borrowed both concepts and religious and philosophical vocabularies from the existing culture to appropriate their faith. These concepts and vocabularies have inherent meanings associated with them. Thus, a Hellenization of Christianity has been argued for in the existing literature. On the other hand, baptizing them into Christian usage also resulted in a dehellenization of the cultural concepts and vocabularies. This essay focuses on the linguistic aspect of the interaction of Christianity with culture during its early years. It argues that Patristic discussion on God and Godhead needs to be understood within the dynamics of the crisis of language and the semantic differences that accompanied patristic appropriation of the Christian faith.

Keywords: Culture, linguistic, logos, patristic, Trinity

In one of the earliest attempts to articulate the concept of the Trinity using vocabularies drawn from Indian culture, Keshab Chandra Sen, the nineteenth-century Indian theologian, stated: "In this plane figure of three lines you have the solution to a vast problem; The Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost … *Sat, Cit, Ananda*; Truth, Intelligence, Joy" (italics mine).[2] In Hinduism, *Parabrahman* (the supreme being) is indivisible, yet can be considered in terms of the inner relation of *sat* (being/truth) *cit* (reason) and *ananda* (bliss). The use of these Sanskrit words and the corresponding composite word *Saccidananda* has been both acclaimed as "more adequate than the Nicene Formula" and criticized as

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[2] Sunand Sumithra, *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1990), 50.

given to modalism and "diluting the distinction of the three persons in the Godhead".[3] A linguistic issue here is the value of adopting existing vocabularies from the culture to communicate religious ideas. This essay will attempt to let the wisdom of the Church fathers speak to this contemporary issue by analyzing how language played a key role in the God-discussion of the early church.[4] What were the original meanings inherent in the words used? How did the early Christians reconstruct their meaning? How was it received at the time?

Social studies since the mid-twentieth century have seen much importance given to the semantic study of language. The tendency is to address meanings at the level of words, phrases, sentences or discourses.[5] A key issue in linguistic studies has been the dynamics of language change, which has seen a shift in the way linguistic change is perceived. *Traditional grammarians, according to John Lyons, assumed that their task was to "preserve" language from "corruption".[6] They assumed that changes in content and form of the language constitute a degradation in the quality of the language. Lyons, however, argued that that is not necessarily the case, for changes in language are often necessitated by a need to communicate efficiently in a changing context. As such depending upon the need, new terms could be incorporated into a language, either "by 'borrowing' them from other languages or by forming them from existing elements in the vocabulary"; sometimes, "fresh distinctions may be drawn and old distinctions lost"; or "the same distinctions may come to be expressed by different means".[7] In the face of new ideas or situations, all languages undergo a crisis situation, out of which new forms or meanings emerge. The change in the semantics of the language, in turn, affects the discourse in the society, both in the way ideas are perceived or communicated.*

Language is intricately tied to the culture of the land. As Peter Burke in his *Social History of Language* posited, it "reflects the society (or culture) in which it is spoken". [8] The language used in the God-discussion in early

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[3] Sumithra, *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective*, 50.

[4] The essay asked a linguistic question and therefore does not intend to commit to a hermeneutical analysis of the term *Saccidananda* and its usage in Indian Christian Theology. For a detailed discussion on *Saccidananda* as a trinitarian concept, see Boyd, Robin. *Introduction to Indian Christain Theology.* Madrasi: CLS, 1975; Upadhyah, Brahmabandhab. "I bow to Saccidananda." In Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch. *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Vol. 1. Bangalore: United Theological College, 1991; Abhishiktananda, Swami. *Saccidananda: A Christain Approach to Advaitic Experience.* New Delhi: ISPCK, 1974.

[5] Barbara H Partee, "Semantics" in *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive* Sciences, eds Robert A Wilson and Frank C Keil (London: The MIT Press, 1999), 739-41.

[6] John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 42.

[7] Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, 43.

[8] Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3-4.

Christianity reflects the linguistic culture of the time. Christine Mohrmann, in her discussion on linguistic problems in the early church, has shown "how deeply a language is bound to the cultural and spiritual milieu" of the land. Thus, there is always the risk that existing "traditional ideas interfere with the new thoughts".[9] When new ideas are introduced into a given culture, the affinity of the message intended with the inherent meaning in the vocabulary of the language is key to effective communication. In the case of a semantic gap, the language often underwent changes in an attempt to accommodate meanings not originally envisioned in its cultural usage. *Graziano Lingua spoke of a crisis of classical language in late antiquity in the light of its contact with Christianity. Christians used terms taken from classic vocabularies to express their theological ideas, but in the process, Christian writers even "bend the language", triggering a crisis of language in the Greek. The existing language thus underwent "*a semantic transformation in the attempt to address some aspects of reality which were not envisioned by the previous usage of these words".[10] This is well stated by Richard Trench in his *Synonyms of the New Testament*: "When the Christian Church was forming its terminology, which it did partly by shaping new words, but partly also by elevating old ones to higher than their previous uses, of the latter is more readily adopted those employed in civil and political life, than such as played their part in religious matters; and this, even when it was seeking for expression of religious truth".[11] Thus, early Christian adoption of existing religious and philosophical vocabularies was often accompanied by a crisis of language, resulting in semantic transformation.

Much has been written on how the existing religious and philosophical ideas have influenced the God-discussion in the early church. Thomas Gaston has argued that early Christian apologists "found natural allies in the monotheistic Platonists" and that the latter has greatly influenced the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He wrote: "Not only did they introduce the triadic conception of the God-head but eventually, the Neo-Platonists would be instrumental in establishing the coequality of the members of the Trinity".[12] Similarly, Aleksandar Santrac has argued that "the inner dynamics of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been formulated using Plato's distinction between

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[9] Christine Mohrmann, "Linguistic Problems in the Early Christian Church" *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 11, No. 1 (March 1957), 19-20.

[10] Graziano Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person" https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11196-021-09835-9

[11] Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London-Cambridge: Macmillan, 1865), 122.

[12] Thomas E. Gaston, "The influence of Platonism on the early Apologists" *The Heythrop Journal* (July 2009), 578.

the Good, *Nous*, and *Pneuma*.[13] Thus, the critical influence of Greek philosophy in the God-discussion of the early church has received much attention. However, others have argued for a dehellenization process, whereby Greek concepts were baptized into a whole lot of significance in the light of the message of Christianity. Christoph Schwobel argued that the "ontological conceptuality" provided by the various schools of philosophy "could not without modification express the unity of God in different identities".[14] Thus, he proposed that trinitarian theology should start from "Jerusalem" (the Bible) not with "Athens" (Philosophy). Thus, while some argued that the conceptualization of God in the early church was shaped by the existing religious and philosophical tradition, others, argued that though philosophical mediums were utilized, the context was derived from the Bible. This essay will speak into this debate, with an emphasis on linguistic change. I will argue that the Patristic discussion on God and Godhead needs to be understood within the dynamics of the crisis of language and semantic differences that accompanied the patristic appropriation of the Christian faith. While the vocabularies were borrowed from the existing philosophical and religious deposits, new meanings were often attributed to them.

Semantics in logos discussion

A case in point is the linguistic crisis in the usage of the term logos in early Christianity. Its earliest Christian usage is to be found in the Johannine reference: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:1-3 NIV). Irenaeus of Lyon indicates that the Johannine logos was in opposition to Gnostic usage of the term. Irenaeus, who was a student of John's disciple Polycarp of Smyrna, posits that the fourth Gospel was a polemic against the teachings of Gnostic Cerinthus, who was accused of distorting the divinity of Christ (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.1; ANF 1:426). In response, John asserted that the "Logos was God" who "became flesh and dwelt among us". In doing so, he refuted the Gnostic belief that the divine cannot come in contact or mix with the material world. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of apostle John, in what is the first instance of reference to the logos outside the Johannine corpus, wrote of Jesus as the "eternal logos", who was the son of God, and not "proceeding forth from silence" (*Epis. Mag.* 8; ANF 1:62), a clear reference to Gnostic understanding of logos.

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[13] Aleksandar S. Santrac, "Three I know not what: The influence of Greek philosophy on the doctrine of Trinity" *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47(1) (2013), 2.

[14] Christoph Schwobel, "The trinity between Athens and Jerusalem" *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3(1) (2009), 39.

The Gnostics spoke of a protological drama in which thirty aeons emanated from Silence, the First-aeon, which together with the First-aeon formed the divine Pleroma (*Adv. Haer*. 1.1.1-2; ANF 1:316-7). Elsewhere, the logos is also an alternate title for the aeon principally called "Saviour", who is the product of all the aeons in a corporate act of worship of the First-aeon (*Adv. Haer*. 1.2.6; ANF1:318). In both cases, these aeons are later emanations from the First-aeon, and as such, they are located at an ontological and epistemological distance from the First-aeon.[15] What we see in Gnosticism is an attempt to appropriate the logos within the web of cosmic creation and redemption story that had developed in their system. It resulted in a logos that was a divine being, but a created one. The Gnostic logos was, therefore, neither the Supreme God nor an incarnate Christ; rather, it was an emanated, inferior divine being or aeon.[16]

In contrast to the Gnostic logos – an emanated being – Irenaeus referred to the logos as the "Son of God", who "eternally coexisted with the Father, from of old, yea, from the beginning", and "through whom all things were made" (*Dem. Ap. prea.* 6; Behr:43).[17] The notion of the role of logos in creation is well developed in Irenaeus. He wrote, "[T]here is but one God, who made all things by His Word" (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.1; ANF 1:426). Elsewhere, he wrote, "[God] formed all things that were made by His Word that never wearies" (*Adv. Haer.* 2.2.4; ANF 1:361). Also, "[W]e should know that he who made and formed and breathed in them the breath of life, and nourishes us by creation, establishing all things by his Word, and binding them together by his Sophia – this is he who is the only true God . . ." (*Adv. Haer.* 3.24.2; ANF 1:259). Irenaeus's attribution of an agentive role to the logos in creation is not a novelty. In Neo-Platonism the logos is identified with the *demiurge*, an intermediary divine being, of Plato's *Timaeus*.[18] Here, the need for an intermediary is necessitated by the platonic concept of divine transcendence, whereby there is a gap between perfect form and imperfect matter, God, and the material world. In Stoic philosophy, logos is used to describe both the governing faculty of a human being and the divine force that created and gave the order to the physical world.[19] The Jewish philosopher Philo took the concept of logos from Greek philosophy to Jewish

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[15] Jackson Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian" *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 66, No. 4 (2012), 350.

[16] Pheme Perkins, "Logo Christologies in the Nag Hammadi Codices" *Vigiliae* Christianae, vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec. 1981), 382. Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Study* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 69.

[17] Irenaeus. 1997. *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans., John Behr. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

[18] Santrac, "Three I know not what…, 2.

[19] J. Dillon, "Logos and trinity: Patterns of Platonist influence on early Christianity", in G. Vesey (ed.), *The philosophy in Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3; A.A. Long, "Stoic Psychology" in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds, Keimpe Algra et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2005), 560-584.

thought, and thus, acted as the bridge to later Christian usage of the term. Following Platonism, he identified Yahweh as the "One" who is "qualityless", "unnameable", and "unutterable", and thus altogether incomprehensible to the human mind.[20] This platonic concept of divine transcendence entails that Yahweh could not involve directly with the material world. Therefore, Philo posits that Yahweh created the material world through the mediation of the logos. The logos was "the first being of God", the highest of the intermediary beings.[21] Thus, for Philo, the logos was a divine being generated by God who was involved in the creation of the world. This understanding of the logos resulted in the attribution of a diminished divinity to the logos.

In contrast to the Platonists, Irenaeus did not maintain God's transcendence through spatial language; rather, he defined God as a "higher order of being" who freely relates with creation without a "filter".[22] Thus, his logos was not an intermediary being necessitated by God's transcendent nature. For Irenaeus, as Jackson Lashier rightly pointed out, the contrast between the Father and the logos "is not between God on the one hand and the logos on the other, but between God and the logos on the one hand and all other created things on the other hand".[23] Thus, the logos was not a lower, intermediary being; rather, "The Father and Son share invisibility and visibility equally".[24] This negates any notion of a diminished divinity for the logos. Lashier argued that Irenaeus came to this conclusion because his "interpretation comes not from the philosophical notion; rather, from the Scripture".[25] This is evident in his appeal to the apostolic tradition in his discussion of the logos. Irenaeus cited the apostle John as the scriptural authority by writing, "even as John, the disciple of the Lord, declares regarding him: 'All things were made by Him [that is, the logos], and without Him nothing was made'" (*Adv. Haer*. 2.2.5; ANF 1:361-2). He also identifies the presence of the logos as a mark of Paul's theology when he writes, "[T]he apostle [Paul] did, in the first place, instruct the Gentiles ... to worship one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the Framer of the whole creation; and that His Son was His Logos, by whom he founded all things . . ." (*Adv. Haer*. 4.24.1; ANF 1:495). Thus, in refuting the Gnostic concept of the logos, Irenaeus subscribed to the traditional understanding of the logos as an agent of creation; yet, his commitment to the *regula fidei* made him reject any notion of diminished divinity of Christ.

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[20] Gaston, "The influence of Platonism on the early Apologists", 574.
[21] See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 1* (London/NY: Continuum, 2003), 458-62.
[22] Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian", 349.
[23] Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian", 355.
[24] Perkins, "Logo Christologies in the Nag Hammadi Codices", 385.
[25] Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian", 354.

Another of Irenaeus' contributions to the logos discussion, which was to have a significant influence on the semantics of the word is the notion of the logos as the one who reveals the Father. The logos, Irenaeus wrote, "reveals the Father to Angels, Archangels, Powers, Virtues, and all to whom He wills that God should be revealed" (*Adv. Haer.* 2.30.9; ANF 1:406). Elsewhere, he wrote: "And his Logos knows that his Father is, as far as regards us, invisible and infinite; and since he cannot be declared [by anyone else], he does himself declare him to us; and on the other hand, it is the Father alone who knows His Own Logos." (*Adv. Haer*. 4.6.3; ANF 1:468). This pre-existing logos was incarnated "at the end of the times … was made man among men, visible and tangible" (*Dem. Apos. Prea.* 6; Behr:43). In Irenaeus, therefore, we see an ontological and epistemological understanding of the logos, who co-existed eternally with the Father, and therefore can reveal him. This definition of logos as the divine agent of revelation, as Jaroslav Pelikan argued, "owed very little to [Greek] philosophical speculation",[26] and thus, a Christian contribution to the semantic discussion of the term.

While Irenaeus' logos represent a dehellenization of the concept, there were others whose logos Christology was shaped by the existing cultural understanding. A case in point is Justin Martyr, who understood the logos as subordinate to God: "For next to God, we worship and love the Logos who is out of the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing" (*II Apol.* 13; ANF 1:193).[27] Justin's subordination of the logos goes with his platonic understanding of divine transcendence. He posits that no one with even the "smallest intelligence" would dare "to assert that the Maker of all things, having left his super-celestial matters, was visible on little portion on earth" (**Dial. Tryp.** 60; ANF 1:227). The act of biblical theophany, therefore, cannot be the action of God; rather it must have been done by another "God" or "Lord", the logos. Thus, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* he wrote, "I shall endeavor to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things, numerically, I mean not [distinct] in will" (*Dial. Tryp*. 56; ANF 1:223). Thus, as Pheme Perkins aptly phrased it, for Justin, "the Father is transcendent; the logos or Son is knowable".[28] Justin saw the logos as "god", but not the one true God.

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[26] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, *Vol. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 187.

[27] Justin also spoke of the logos as a divine being, who was involved in the action of creation. In his *Second Apology*, he wrote, "And His Son, who alone is properly called Son, the Word who also was with Him and was begotten before the works, when at first He created and arranged all things by Him, is called Christ…" (*II Apol.* 6; ANF 1:190).

[28] Perkins, "Logo Christologies in the Nag Hammadi Codices", 385.

Rather, the logos was the primary mediating agent between the world and the transcendent God. He referred to the logos as "a certain rational power", "begotten from the Father", and through whom all things were made (*Dial. Tryp.* 61; ANF 1:227). The language of power[29] here reflects platonic understanding of the logos as an active and immanent power in the world, which was ontologically subordinate to the static, transcendent One. This allows them "to affirm the creative and providential function of God in the world while keeping the divine nature free of mixture and contact with material creation".[30] The logos' ability to engage with the material world, therefore, condemned him to a diminished divinity.

The association of logos with the power of God leads to the development of the twofold stage theory of logos, which asserts that the logos existed eternally in God, and then, prior to the creation of the world, it was generated as a distinct person.[31] In his *Second Apology*, Justin wrote, that the Son, the word, was with the Father, and then, "begotten before the works [of creation]" (*II Apol.* 6; ANF 1:90). Tatian also expressed the same view in stating that the logos first "was in him" and then it "springs forth" (*Orat. ad Gr.* 5; ANF 2:67). Similarly, Athenagoras states that "God, who is the eternal mind, had the logos in himself, being from eternity instinct with the logos" as "the first product of the Father" to serve as "an idea and energizing power of all material things" (*pres. peri0 Ch.* 10; ANF 2:133). The idea of the twofold stage generation of the logos can be traced to Philo, who spoke of the logos as God's reason (or mind) and later becomes a distinct being, an agent of his creation and a representation of the immanent law of the universe.[32] In contrast, Irenaeus could not accept any notion of the beginning of the logos. Appealing to the Johannine statement, "In the beginning was the logos", Irenaeus would argue that the logos, the Son, is "always coexisting with the Father… from the beginning" (*Adv. Haer.* 2.30.9; ANF 1:406). Though Irenaeus was primarily addressing his Gnostic opponents' assigning the logos "a beginning and course of production" (*Adv. Haer.* 2.13.8; ANF 1:375), he also ended up rejecting the twofold stage theory. Instead, he affirms a single stage theory whereby, the logos "was to have no beginning at all, not even a beginning preceded by an eternal existence in the mind of God"[33];

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[29] Justin used the power language again in his *First Apology* when he wrote, "Jesus Christ is the only proper Son, who has been begotten by God, being his Word and first begotten, and power" (*I Apology* 23; ANF 1:170).

[30] Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian", 345-6.

[31] H.A. Wolfson, "Clement of Alexandria on the Generation of the logos" *Church History*, *Vol. 20, No. 2* (June 1951), 72.

[32] Jean Danielou, "The philosophy of Philo" *Theological Studies*, IX (Dec. 1948), 585.

[33] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers, Vol. I: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), 200.

rather, the generation of the logos from the Father was from eternity. Thus, once again Irenaeus' commitment to the *regula fidei* bats away the cultural understanding of the vocabulary. The semantic significance of Irenaeus' posture is evident in that his single-stage theory came to be considered orthodox.

Like Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria also subscribed to a single-stage theory of the generation of the logos. For him, the Father begets the son in an eternal act, and therefore, there was never a time when the son was not.[34] Origen insisted that the logos was distinct from the Father, but eternal, so that none could "dare to lay down a beginning for the Son, before which he did not exist" (*De Princ.* 4.4.1; Butterworth 315).[35] However, his pupil, Dionysius of Alexandria, was perhaps inattentive, and went on to state that the Son "was not before he came to be" (*ap. Ath. Dion.* 4; NPF 2/4:177). The creature status of the logos was further propagated by Arius, also of Alexandria, who famously said of the logos, "There was when he was not". The logos, Arius declared, is "only called Word conceptually, and is not by nature and of truth Son of God, but is called Son... by adoption" (*ap. Ath. Dion*. 23; NPF 2/4:185). Furthermore, he argued that the logos was "alien and unlike in all things to the Father's essence and propriety" (*ap. Ath. Ar.* 1.6; NPF 2/4:309). In Arian thought, the logos was a being necessitated by the transcendent nature of God. Thus, Arius posits that the mediatory logos is necessary since the creatures "could not endure the untampered hand of the Father and be created by him" (*ap. Ath. Ar.* 2.24; NPF 2/4:361). In Arianism, therefore, Christian understanding of logos swung back to something very close to a platonic understanding of the logos as a created divine being, who bridged the gap between a transcendent God and the creation.

The reaction of the Nicene Fathers to the Arian logos was the defense of its eternal sonship. To do so, they had to dig deep into the existing philosophical vocabularies on the person and substance of God. In the process they found themselves engaged in a number game, trying to untangle semantic issues pertaining to the trinitarian assertion of three and one.

Linguistic of numbers

The challenge for Christianity was its affirmation of monotheistic faith while negotiating the revelation of divine reality involving the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. How to explain these realities without falling into the pitfall of Tri-theism was the real challenge. Justin was treading dangerously when he

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[34] Allan Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2007), 92.

[35] Origen. 1936. *On First Principles,* trans., GW Butterworth. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock.

spoke of the three persons in a hierarchical sense: "we reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third" (*I Apol.* 13; ANF 1:167). Origen also shared a hierarchical Trinity, in which, the Father alone is ungenerated, and is superior to every being that exists, "for he imparts to each one from his own existence that which each one is; the Son, being less than the Father, ... the Holy Spirit is still less (*De Princ,* 1.3.5; Butterworth 34). In Origen's thought, the unity of the three in the Trinity is maintained because the Father is the fountainhead, and the other two are "an extension of his Godhead".[36] In this way, he used middle platonic schemes of procession to retain the biblical character of Christian faith in a God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The third-century Platonist, Plotinus, spoke of a triad of One, Intellect and Soul, in which the latter two mysteriously emanated from the One, and "are the One and not the One; they are the One because they are from it; they are not the One, because it endowed them with what they have while remaining by itself".[37] In the same vein, Origen spoke of the procession of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father. Through this, Origen was able to refute the Monarchian reduction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to an indistinguishable monistic deity by asserting the individuality of each person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, in this system, the Son and Spirit are always in some sense derivative of, less than, and subordinate to their source, the one God, that is, the Father.

Plotinus described the distinctiveness of each member of the triad as a *hypostasis*, a Greek word meaning, "being"; while the sameness is described using the term *homoousios*, a compound word – *homo-ousia* – meaning "same in essence".[38] *Hypostasis* and *ousia* were to become the key vocabularies in the anti-Arian or Nicene articulation of the concept of the Trinity. The problem was, in antiquity the terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* was synonymous, and often used interchangeably.[39] Thus, Athanasius was to say "*hypostasis* is *ousia* and means nothing else but very being" (*ad Afr.* 4; NPF 2/4:490). Origen, however, made a distinction between the two: *hypostasis* carried "a sense of individual subsistence", while *ousia* refers to the substance, as indicated by his use of the

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[36] Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune*, 92.
[37] *Enneads* 85 as quoted in Dale Tuggy, "Trinity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/trinity/, 74. Plotinus argues that what which comes from the One could not be the same as the One, because otherwise the One would not have been the One, but many. Dmitri Nikulin, "The One and the Many in Plotinus" *Hermes* 126 Hd., H. 3 (1998), 336.
[38] Tuggy, "Trinity", 75.
[39] Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*..., 219.

term *homoousios*[40] to state that the Son shares one substance with the Father.[41] Origen, therefore, started the process of baptizing the terms *hypostasis*, *ousia* and *homoousios* in Christian terms, and thus sets a precedence for the semantic development of trinitarian thought.

The adoption of platonic vocabularies – *hypostasis*, *ousia* and *homoousios* – for Christian trinitarian formulation stirred up a linguistic discussion on the precise meaning of the terms. The problem lies with the semantics that was already associated with the words. In Neo-Platonism, the term *hypostasis* was used "to describe the different lower degrees that descend from the One to the many". [42] Thus, the term already assumed a language of emanation and hierarchy. It was in this sense that Origen used the term, whereby the *hypostasis* of the Son was inferior to that of the Father, inasmuch as He is ungenerated (*De Princ*, 1.3.5; Butterworth 34). In the same vein, Arius talked about "a Triad" of *hypostasis*, "not in equal glories", "One more glorious than the others in their glories unto immensity". The Son, he continues, "has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence (*hypostasis*). For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence (*homoousios*) with" the Father (*Tha., De Syn.* 15; NPF 2/4:457). The Son, who was begotten "before eternal times" is inferior since he is not eternal, or coeternal with the Father, nor does he share in the Father's unbegotten nature (*ap. Ath. De Synodis* 16; NPF 2/4:458).[43] The same principle was applied to the Holy Spirit in the controversy surrounding Macedonius, who opined that the Holy Spirit was a creature, and "is inferior to, and less than [the Father and the Son] in every point; in power, in glory, in dignity" (Gr. Nys. *Adv. Mac.* 2; NPF 2/5:316). The challenge of the notion of emancipation and subordination was also evident in the debate in the Council of Nicaea over the use of the words *homoousios* and *homoiousios*. The two Greek words, though differing in just one alphabet, was decisive to speak of the coequality of the godhead in the Trinity. The *homoousios* camp won the day with the Nicene Creed affirming that the

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[40] "...the Son is homoousios with the Father, that is, of one substance with the Father, but foreign from the substance of a creature" (Pamphilus, *Apology for Origen* 94; Scheck 83). St Pamphilus. 2010. "Apology for Origen" *Fathers of the Church* tran. Thomas P Scheck. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press.

[41] Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune*, 92.

[42] Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person"

[43] The distinctiveness of the Father and the Son is clearly stated in Arius' statement of Faith quoted by Athanasius: "We acknowledge One God, alone Ingenerate, alone Everlasting, along Unbegun, along True, alone having Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign... who begat an Only-begotten Son before eternal times, through whom He has made both the ages and the universe; and begat Him, not in semblance, but in truth; and that He made Him subsist at His own will, unalterable and unchangeable; perfect creature of God..." (*ap. Ath. De Synodis* 16; NPF 2/4:458).

godhead shares the same substance. The *homoiosius* camp represents a tendency, which, unlike the Arians, acknowledged the divinity of Christ, yet was only willing to accept that the son shares a likeness of substance with the Father, thus, subordinating the son. In the council of Nicaea, the fathers of the church rejected the hierarchical understanding of the Trinity and asserted the belief in three co-equal *hypostasis*. Against subordination, it introduced the concept of consubstantiality, which was used to argue for the full divinity of the Son, as Athanasius asserted in his *Orationes Contra Arianos,* "He is very God, existing in one essence (*homoousios*) with the very Father" (*ap. ath. Ar.* 1.9; NPF 2/4:311). This means a redefinition of the vocabulary was necessitated if it had to convey the trinitarian concept proposed at Nicaea.

The immediate challenge was the semantics inherent in the then-cultural usage of the trinitarian vocabularies*.* The term *homoousios* could be interpreted either as implying "materialist ideas of God"[44] or uniting the Father and the Son so closely together as to lead to Sabbellianism (Modalism).[45] The Nicene affirmation of three *hypostasis* runs the risk of Tri-theism. The issue involves the notion of singularity inherent in the word *hypostasis*. In Platonism *hypostasis* is an ontological concept of concrete singularity.[46] Thus, identifying each person of the Trinity as a *hypostasis* runs the risk of understanding it to mean three gods. Gregory of Nyssa reported the reaction of many to the Nicene definition of the three *hypostasis*: "Peter, James, and John, being in one human nature, are called three men; and there is no absurdity in describing those who are united in nature, if they are more than one by the plural number of the name derived from their nature". Thus, they reasoned, "how is it that in the case of our statements of the mysteries of the Faith, though confessing the Three Persons, and acknowledging no difference of nature between them, we are in some sense at variance with our confession, when we say that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one, and yet forbid men to say 'there are three Gods'" (Gr. Nys. *Tres. dii*; NPF 2/5:331). The problem was compounded by the ambiguity involved in the semantic relation of the word *hypostasis* with *ousia*, which, as noted earlier, was often used interchangeably. Basil summarized the conundrum thus, "Many persons, in their study of the sacred dogmas, failing to distinguish between what is common in the essence or substance (*ousia*) and the meaning of the *hypostases*, arrived at the same notions, and think that it makes no difference whether *ousia* or *hypostasis* is to be spoken of". This landed

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[44] Franco Beatrice, "The Word 'Homoousios' from Hellenism to Christianity" *Church History, vol. 71, No. 2* (June 2002), 253.

[45] David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 64-5.

[46] Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person"

them either in Sabellian or Tri-theism, as Basil stated: Therefore to some "it seems just as appropriate to say one *hypostasis* as one *ousia*" (leading to Sabellianism). On the other hand, "those who accept three *hypostases* suppose that it is necessary, on the basis of this confession, to assert a division of *ousias* into the same number" (leading to Tri-theism) (*Ep.* 38.1; NPF 2/8:137).

In the post-Nicene era, the Cappadocian Fathers started to untangle the semantic ambiguity by differentiating *hypostasis* from *ousia*, by appealing to Aristotle's distinction between universal and particular categories to describe the persons of the Trinity. In a very Aristotelian language, Basil wrote, "ousia has the same relation to hypostasis as the common has to the particular. Every one of us both shares in existence by the common term of essence (ousia) and by his own properties is such an one and such an one". Applying it to Trinity, he wrote, "In the same manner... the term ousia is common, like goodness, or Godhead, or any similar attribute; while hypostasis is contemplated in the special property of Fatherhood, Sonship, of the power to sanctify" (*Ep.* 214.4; NPF 2/8:255). Thus, for Basil, the relationship between the unity of substance and the diversity of the hypostases should be read in analogy to the relationship between what is common and what is particular.[47] Basil wrote: "The distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* is the same as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear" (*Ep.* 236.6; NPF 2/8:278). With this distinction, Basil identifies *ousia* with the Aristotelian second substance (universals) and *hypostasis* with the first substance (individuals).[48] The semantic significance of this is that a clear distinction was made between the two words, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, which traditionally were often used interchangeably, as certain semantic emphasis associated with each were reinforced and affirmed with Christian appropriation.

On the question of three *hypostasis* and Tri-theism, Basil points out the problematics in transfiguring or projecting ideas "from finitude to infinity".[49] To say that three *hypostasis* means Tri-theism is to subject infinite things to finite calculation. In his *De Spiritu Sancto* he stated, "For we do not count by way of addition, gradually making increase from unity to multitude, and saying one, two, and three, nor yet first, second, and third. For 'I', God, 'am the first, and I am

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[47] Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

[48] George Karamanolis, "Early Christian Philosophers on Aristotle" in Andrea Falcon (ed.), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aristotle in Antiquity,* ed. Andrea Falcon (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 216), 475.

[49] Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

the last'" (*De Sp. Sant.* 45; NPF 2/8:28). Augustine also shared a similar attitude in stating "when the question is asked, what three? Human language labors together under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given three "persons", not that it might be [completely] spoken, but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken" (*De Trin.* 5.9; NPF 1/3: 92). Here, Basil and Augustine recognized the semantic difficulty as human speech labours under a great dearth of words while attempting to define the dogma of the Trinity. As Ligua points out, "the nature of numbers itself is extraneous to the reality of the Trinity", since "divine reality transcends the operations of mathematics that are only suitable for created things".[50] Vincent Brummer in his critique of the Cappadocian Trinity stated that the trinitarian formulation with three discreet divine beings still "looks more like tritheism than like monotheism".[51] However, Brummer is here guilty of quantitative distinction of the godheads, which Cappadocians and Augustine tried to avoid, in spite of the limitation of human language.

The formal Latin equivalent of the Greek *hypostasis* and *ousia* are *essentia* ("being") and *substantia* ("substance") respectively.[52] Adopting these two words to express the trinitarian concept would have landed the Latin fathers in a similar conundrum as their Greek counterparts. The problem was avoided with the use of the term *persona.* Latin theologian Tertullian was the first to use the term to speak of the intra-trinitarian distinction (*Adv. Praex.* 2; ANF 3:598). In classical usage, the term *persona* has been associated with a judicial identity as well as with social role and function. Therefore, as Ligua pointed out, the term has "a precise social value, keeping together the element of individuality and that of relationality". Thus, there was no difficulty in using the word to express intra-trinitarian distinction as "the word expresses in itself both the dimension of real and objective identity and the relational dimension".[53]

In the post-Nicene discussion, the semantics in the mathematics of numbers dominated the God-discussion of the fathers. What came to be the Christian doctrine of Trinity represents, in linguistic terms, a modification of Plotinius' teaching of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, though Christianity rejected the hierarchy of divinity it proposed. The Cappadocian solution was the singularity of the *ousia* (substance) while maintaining the individuality of the *hypostasis* (person). This radically changed Greek metaphysics, as it "shifted attention

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50 Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person"
51 Vincent Brummer, *Atonement Christology and Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 99.
52 Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religion Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011), 243.
53 Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

from the universality of being to the singularity of substances".[54] Though the *hypostasis* shares the same *ousia*, they exist individually, and thus, challenged the traditional notion of the universality of being. Thus, the patristic redefinition of philosophical vocabulary has a wide-ranging impact on the language and philosophy of the culture.

Crisis of language

The third-century church father, Tertullian famously wrote, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" (*Praes.* 7; ANF 3:246). He called Plato "the caterer to all these heretics" (*De Anim.* 23; ANF 3:203), and that heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy (*Praes.* 7; ANF 3:246). Tertullian epitomized those early Christians who reserved an antithetical attitude towards culture, yet, he himself was captive to the culture. K.J. Popma called him "the most brilliant representatives of culture during the early Christian period", identifying him within the cynic tradition of hostility toward culture.[55] An erudite writer, Tertullian was up to date with the philosophical and rhetorical tradition of the time. Some scholars have even placed him within the Second Sophistic Movement,[56] a movement characterized by a renewed emphasis on rhetoric and oratory. Tertullian, therefore, is perhaps the best example of someone, who was blatantly unsympathetic to culture, yet was well-cultured in his use of the cultural mediums for communication. On the other hand, were those early Christian writers who expressed much enthusiasm toward cultural engagement. Origen, for instance, enthusiastically employed the existing philosophical and rhetorical tools in his writings. One of Origen's pagan contemporaries said of him: "in his life conducting himself as a Christian and contrary to the laws, but his opinions of material things and of Deity being like a Greek, and mingling Grecian teachings with foreign fables" (Eus. *Hist. Ecc.* 6.19.7; NPF 2/1:266). For Origen, "biblical doctrine and philosophical speculation are both essential components" of theology.[57] Augustine compared the situation to Israel fleeing from captivity in Egypt at the time of Exodus, who, though they left the idols of Egypt behind them, carried the gold and silver of Egypt with them, in order to make "a better use" of them. Likewise, Augustine continues, "all branches of heathen learning … contain also liberal instruction which is

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54 Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

55 K.J. Popma, "Patristic Evaluation of Culture" *Philosophia Reformata*, vol. 38, No. 1 (1973), 99.

56 Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

57 Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 48-9.

better adapted to the use of the truth (*De Doc. Christ.* 2.40; NPF 1/2:554). Thus, the taxonomy of early Christian attitude towards culture identified two categories of fathers, one sympathetic to and the other antithetical to the culture. However, the fathers even of the latter category could not totally disassociate themselves from culture, particularly from the use of cultural medium to communicate the Christian faith. The fathers were children of their time, and naturally, they drew from the existing religious and philosophical vocabularies to express their Christian faith.

When Irenaeus, the second-century church father, wrote that the Valentinian Gnostics speak a language that "resembles ours", but intend different meanings, he underlines a prevailing semantic problem in Patristic discussion: a plurality of meaning. The Gnostics, according to Irenaeus, have craftily clothed their teachings in "an attractive dress", so that to the "inexperienced", it appears to be "more truth than the truth itself". Thus, he applied himself to show how "absurd and inconsistent" their claims were (*Adv. Haer*. I Preface 2; ANF 1:315). The issue at hand is the subjective nature of the words used by the early Christians as they infused meanings to words to serve certain purposes in the transmission of the faith they professed. The words were drawn from a common bank of religious and philosophical vocabularies, yet each heterodox group of Christians often used them to mean differently. This intra-ecclesiastical problem reflects a larger linguistic issue, or rather, a crisis of language, which resulted from the Christian infusion of meanings to existing vocabularies. Early Christians used the language that was prevalent in the existing philosophical and religious discussion and applied them to their theological articulation. These vocabularies already had meanings inherent in them before they were given a Christian one.

Much has been written on the Hellenization of Christianity since the German historian Adolf von Harnack made a case for it.[58] It has been argued that Hellenization radically altered the essence of Christianity. In particular to the discussion on the concept of God, a strong case has been made on the influence of platonic and stoic philosophy.[59] A case has also been made of a reverse movement of "dehellenization", whereby the infusion of Christian ideas resulted in modification in existing concepts, both in content and form.[60] In particular to linguistic studies, this essay has shown how Christian adoption of existing religious and philosophical vocabularies in the culture resulted in a linguistic

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[58] Von Harnack, Adolf. 1902. *What is Christianity? Lectures delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter-term, 1899–1900,* trans. by Th.B. Saunders. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons - London: Williams and Norgate, 214-221.

[59] See Gaston. "The influence of Platonism on the early Apologists". 573-580.

[60] See Schwobel, Christoph. "The trinity between Athens and Jerusalem". 22-41.

crisis, whereby the language underwent a semantic evolution. It resulted in either an emphasis on certain aspects or the introduction of new meanings. I have shown that Patristic appropriation of the Greek philosophical concept of logos led to a rejection of its culturally attributed diminished divinity and an emphasis on its revelatory role. Furthermore, the association of the term with sonship also resulted in a shift from an agentive to an ontological understanding of the term. The logos was neither the platonic thinking faculty of human beings nor simply the stoic creative agent of God; rather the logos was a person, Jesus Christ. Patristic appropriation of the terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* also resulted in a clear distinction between the two. They were no longer synonymous or interchangeable terms; rather were definitive terms to speak of the person and substance of beings. Patristic appropriation also rid *hypostasis* of its platonic notion of emanation and subordination. The Nicene trinitarian formula affirmed the co-equal existence of three *hypostasis* in a singularity of *ousia*. These patristic redefinitions had repercussions on metaphysical and epistemological levels. Language, as Burke noted, "shapes the society in which it is spoken".[61] Changes in the form and content of the language are bound to have a return effect on the philosophy and conceptual framework in society. A case in point is the way the Greek concept of person has come to be understood, which has repercussions on the way the concept has been applied elsewhere. The valorization of individuals in the way the term *hypostasis* has come to be understood challenged the traditional placement of truth in the universals, and thus, has widespread epistemological consequences.[62] Marcel Mauss is right to say: "Our notion of the human person is still fundamentally the Christian notion".[63]

The value in the adoption of existing vocabularies in the culture to communicate religious ideas continues to invite debate even today. In particular, the concept of *praeparatio evangelica* calls for identifying bridges between Christianity and other religions. In a multi-religious context like India, for instance, many words, phrases, or concepts from Hindu texts and traditions have found their way into Christian theological discussions and literature. Since the nineteenth century, the appropriateness of the adoption of religious vocabularies present in the culture for Christian theologizing has been proposed and even criticized. The adoption of the term *saccidananda* noted at the beginning of this essay is a notable example. The terms *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* were baptized with Christian meaning, whereby the Father is identified with "truth/being", the Son with "reason", and the Holy Spirit with "bliss". In Hinduism, the three constitute

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[61] Burke and Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language*, 3-4.

[62] Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

[63] Marcel Mauss as quoted in Lingua, "Trinity, Number and Image. The Christian Origins of the Concept of Person".

an inner relation within *parabrahman,* the indivisible supreme being, which is encapsulated in the concept, *saccidananda.* Bryan Lobo has shown that the Christian appropriation of these concepts has challenged the existing understanding of *Parabrahman* as an impersonal God to a personal one, with *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* as three aspects of the Godhead.[64] Thus, one can speak of a crisis of language in the culture due to its contact with Christianity. In regards to Christian theology, the key issue is the lingering presence of its cultural meaning, whereby *saccidananda* speaks of the "aspects of Godhead" rather than "relationships within the Godhead".[65] Thus, its effective adoption requires a semantic evolution toward conforming to the orthodox Christian Trinitarian understanding.

The experience of the early church shows that existing vocabularies as they are, seldom capture the full extent of the meaning intended by the Christian message. The language often had to undergo a crisis leading to the addition of new meanings or words, or a reinforced emphasis on certain semantic aspects. This can speak into the contemporary discussion on *praeparatio evangelica* in that the adoption of cultural vocabulary need not entail its transplantation as it is; rather as Popma puts it in his discussion on the Patristic estimation of culture, "a source-reorientation in the light of the Scripture"[66] is necessary. Swoebel had called for a need to be "dependent on the language of God" in the Scripture, whereby "the technical expression of the doctrine of Trinity constantly needs to be filled with the content of the biblical witnesses because this is their subject matter".[67] Patristic experience informs us that the adoption of vocabularies from the culture to communicate Christian dogma is useful, even necessary; yet, it needs to be done with adequate qualification to conform to the Biblical teaching of the concept.

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[64] Bryan Lobo "Tripersonalising the Hindu God of 'Advaita Vedanta – Parabrahman" *Gregorianum, Vol. 92, No. 1* (2011), 177-9.

[65] Peter May, "The Trinity and Saccidananda" https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/07-3_093.pdf, 98.

[66] Popma, Popma, "Patristic Evaluation of Culture" ,113

[67] Schwobel, "The trinity between Athens and Jerusalem", 37.

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