



3. An Approach on the Doctrine of the Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist Theology and Roman Catholic Theology¹

Un enfoque de la doctrina de la trinidad en la teología adventista del séptimo día y en la teología católica romana

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Abstract

The study of the doctrine of God has been at the very center of Christian theology. This is one of the reasons why the Trinity has been, historically, the subject of some of Christianity's most intense and protracted theological controversies, even in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For this reason, it has always been the most difficult doctrine to understand in theological discussions. The current debate in Adventist circles involving the Adventist position on Trinity has gained more and more prominence and the current Adventist position on the Trinity has been questioned, because there is a difficulty in grasping the concept of God as a triune being. Some critics argue that, by adopting the Trinity, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has moved away from the position of the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers in the understanding of the nature of God and closer to the Roman Catholic position. Thus, the main goal of this article is to present and analyze, in a systematic and comprehensive way, the Seventh-day Adventist position on the Trinity in light of the Roman Catholic theological position on its trinitarian dogma, in order to present the real Adventist theological approach on God.

Keywords

Trinity — Godhead — Adventist Theology — Catholic Theology

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Resumen

El estudio de la doctrina de Dios ha estado en el mismo centro de la teología cristiana. Esta es una de las razones por las cuales la Trinidad históricamente ha sido sujeto de algunas de las controversias teológicas más intensas y prolongadas del cristianismo, incluso en la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día. Por esta razón siempre ha sido la doctrina más difícil de entender en las discusiones teológicas. El debate actual en los círculos adventistas que involucra la postura adventista sobre la Trinidad ha adquirido cada vez más relevancia y se ha cuestionado la postura adventista actual sobre la Trinidad porque hay dificultad para comprender el concepto de Dios como ser triuno. Algunos críticos argumentan que al adoptar la doctrina de la Trinidad la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día se ha alejado de la postura de los pioneros adventistas del séptimo día sobre la comprensión de la naturaleza de Dios y se está acercando a la postura católica romana. Por consiguiente, la meta principal de este artículo es presentar y analizar la postura adventista del séptimo día sobre la Trinidad a la luz de la postura teológica católica romana sobre su dogma trinitario de manera sistemática y detallada para presentar el verdadero enfoque teológico adventista de Dios.

Palabras claves

Trinidad — Deidad — Teología Adventista — Teología Católica

Introduction

The knowledge of God for Christians is the “first major affirmation of the Christian faith”.³ Moreover, God has been understood to have “always existed as more than one person”,⁴ the Trinity. However, “of the various aspects of our Christian understanding of God, perhaps none is as difficult to grasp as the concept of God as triune”.⁵ After all, God as a Trinity is considered a mystery and thus His nature is open to debate. Different traditions, such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, have tried to unravel this mystery through some theological explanations on this doctrine. As a result, it has repeatedly been the subject of polarizing

³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 27.

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 226.

⁵ Grenz, *Theology for the Community*, 53.

debate not only in the wider Christian and Evangelical world but also among Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventist theology is constantly being developed through a dynamic process⁶ and thus has generated various theological perspectives. In view of this, there have been a variety of groups and movements within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, that have held differing understandings in matters of theological beliefs and the way of life.⁷ In the current debate on the Godhead,⁸ some “historic adventists”,⁹ do not recognize this dynamic nature of Adventist theology and therefore advocate a return to antitrinitarianism, based on the fact that many early Adventist pioneers held antitrinitarian views on the nature of God.¹⁰ They suggest that the progressive development of the Adventist thought toward Trinitarianism¹¹ is but a return to Roman Catholic theology¹² and that there is no

⁶ Insightful studies on the dynamic process in Adventist theology are provided in Fritz Guy, *Thinking theologically: Adventist christianity and the interpretation of faith* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1999), 65-93; George R. Knight, *A search for identity: the development of Seventy-day Adventist beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 2000), 17-28; Richard Rice, *The reign of God: an introduction to christian theology from Seventh-day Adventist perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985), 7-15.

⁷ See Reinder Bruinsma, “Theological diversity: a threat, an asset, or what?”, *Ministry* (December 2010): 17-19.

⁸ See Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist views on the trinity”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 17, n.º 1 (Spring 2006): 125; Gerhard Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity Among Seventh-day Adventist”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 17, n.º 1 (Spring 2006): 160.

⁹ They are identified as historic adventists or neo-restorationists. See Gary Land, *Historical dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists*, Historical dictionaries of religions, philosophy, and movements, vol. 56 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), 301; Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist views”, 125; Merlin D. Burt, “The trinity in Seventh-day Adventist history”, *Ministry* (February 2009): 5; Ralph Larson, *The Word was made flesh: one hundred years of Seventh-Day Adventist Christology, 1852-1952* (Cherry Valley, CA: Cherrystone, 1986).

¹⁰ See Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 196; Fred Allaback, *No new leaders . . . no new Gods!* (Creal Springs, IL: Fred Allaback, 1995); Lynnford Beachy, *Did they believe in the trinity* (Welch, WV: Smyrna Gospel Ministries, 1996); Rachel Cory-Kuehl, *The Persons of God* (Albuquerque, MN: Aggelia, 1996); Allen Stump, *The foundation of our faith: over 150 years of Seventh-day Christology* (Welch, WV: Smyrna Gospel Ministries, 2003); Pfandl, “The doctrine of the trinity”, 161.

¹¹ See General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 156.

¹² Allaback, *No new leader*, 11. See also Burt, “The trinity in Seventh-day Adventist”, 5.

difference between the Roman Catholic Trinitarian view and the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the trinity. Some authors representing the “historic” Adventist position urge contemporary Adventists to return to a semi-Arian position as a return to the key truths of early Adventism¹³ and to avoid the perceived corruption of Roman Catholic doctrine.¹⁴

The Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church both advocate the doctrine of Trinity as a central teaching. Each tradition agrees that God eternally exists as three co-equal persons. Yet, some antitrinitarians inside the Seventh-day Adventist Church claim that the doctrine of the Trinity originates from the Roman Catholic Trinitarian dogma. The claim that the Seventh-day Adventist trinitarian doctrine is rooted in the Roman Catholic position does merit attention. Thus, a comparison of views is a necessity.

The aim of this article is to analyze the correlation in the way these traditions declare their Trinitarian teachings and to identify if the Seventh-day Adventist Church view of the Trinity is dependent upon the Roman Catholic viewpoint. Thus, it is necessary to examine the official statements of the Seventh-day Adventist Church¹⁵ and the Roman Catholic Church¹⁶ on the doctrine of the Trinity, which requires an examination of the relationship of the doctrine between these two major systems of theology. This is accomplished by using the methods of description and comparison in order to conduct an analytic investigation.

¹³ For a definition of the semi-Arianism, see Merlin D. Burt, “Demise of semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957” (Research paper, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1996), 5. Accessed July 25, 2014, http://www.andrews.edu/~burt/010524_Burt.pdf; Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The coming of the Comforter* (Washington, DC: RH, 1949), 149-152.

¹⁴ Pfandl, “The doctrine of the Trinity”, 161.

¹⁵ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists believe: a biblical exposition of fundamental doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 23. See also pages 24-33.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2014), part 1, sec. 2, n.º 199-267.

Roman Catholic View of the Trinity

The Roman Catholic Church denies that there is a specific trinitarian teaching in the Old Testament and New Testament,¹⁷ and, to establish their trinitarian dogma, it had to refer to the process of historical and theological development of this doctrine. Thus, the formulation of this doctrine depends on extrabiblical theological reflection as found in the writings of the theologians in the 4th century.¹⁸ The church worked out this dogma at that time, “where she established her doctrine at two Councils”.¹⁹ These councils were the First Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).²⁰ At these councils the Son and the Holy Spirit were recognized as consubstantial with the Father. Such an understanding broadly represents how Roman Catholics understand the development of their concept of the Trinity. Consequently, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed was produced as a result of these ecumenical councils to serve as a teaching with full doctrinal authority. The content of this creed was refined by some theologians such as Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers, and later strongly reaffirmed during the Scholastic period, as expressed through the Augustinian and Thomistic

¹⁷ Cf. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994), 282-283. See also CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 684, 686; Francis Selman, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: teacher of truth* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 27; Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 1970), 10.

¹⁸ The following studies are particularly significant: Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The christian faith in the doctrinal documents of the Catholic Church* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1975), 91-93; R. L. Richard, “Holy, Trinity”, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 14:295-299; Rahner, *The Trinity*, 10; Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The way to Nicaea: the dialectical development of trinitarian theology*, trans. Conn O’Donovan (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 1-2, 8, 13; Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God: a biblical, historical, and theological study* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1994), 50-52; Clint Tibbs, “The Spirit (Word) and (Holy) Spirits Among the Earliest Christians: I Corinthians 12 and 14 as a Test Case”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, n.° 2 (2008): 313-330.

¹⁹ Gloria Schaab, a Roman Catholic professor of theology from the department of theology and philosophy at Barry University, Florida, USA, asserts that “the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople articulated the definitive [Catholic] doctrine”. Gloria L. Schaab, personal communication to the author, July 10, 2013. See also Gloria L. Schaab, Syllabus for RSGA 5301 History of Christianity II, 2.

²⁰ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 242.

systems. Thus the Catholic concept of God derives from these conciliar decisions.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Christianity faced the great challenge of the Classical Liberal Theology. Roman Catholic modernists with their *Nouvelle Théologie*,²¹ in light of what became known as *Aggiornamento*,²² led the Catholic scholars to examine again their concepts about God. But the Roman Catholic Church reacted to the modern world with new explanations about its beliefs and refused to compromise its historical position,²³ retaining thus its understanding of the development of the Trinity according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan view.

Current Dogma of the Holy Trinity

The official Roman Catholic Trinitarian statement is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This document is regarded as the most important document for 20th century Roman Catholics. It has great doctrinal value and it comprises the main themes of contemporary Roman Catholic thought.

Belief in the Trinity is central to the Catholic faith and the Trinity is seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a matter of dogma. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that promotes the church's official teaching

²¹ Cf. Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle théologie and sacramental ontology: a return to mystery* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle théologie—new theology: inheritor of modernism, precursor of Vatican II* (New York, NY: T. & T. Clark, 2010); Ted Mark Schoof, *Breakthrough: beginnings of the new Catholic theology* (Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan, 1970).

²² Cf. Christopher Butler, “The Aggiornamento of Vatican II—Voice of the Church, February 8, 2014”, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/aggiorna.htm>; Karim Schelkens, John A. Dick, and Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Aggiornamento? Catholicism From Gregory XVI to Benedict XVI* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013).

²³ See Karl Rahner, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, Theological investigations, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 39-77; Karl Rahner, *More recent writings*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smith (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 77-79; Karl Keating, *Catholicism and fundamentalism: the attack on “romanism” by “bible christians”* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988); Paul D. Murray, “Roman Catholic theology after Vatican II”, in *The modern theologians: an introduction to christian theology since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 265-286.

“represents the first comprehensive statement of Roman Catholic beliefs for more than four centuries”,²⁴ and it is possible to find the official formulation of the dogma of the Trinity in it. The Trinitarian statement appears in the following way:

The Trinity is One. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the ‘consubstantial Trinity.’ The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: ‘The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God.’ In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): “Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature”.

The divine persons are really distinct from one another. “God is one but not solitary.” “Father,” “Son,” “Holy Spirit” are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another: “He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son he who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit he who is the Father or the Son.” They are distinct from one another in their relation to origin: “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.” The divine Unity is Triune.

The divine persons are related to one another. Because the divine unity does not divide, the real distinction among persons resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another: “In the relational names of the persons, the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three persons in view of their relationship, we believe in one nature or substance.” Indeed “everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.” “Because of that unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.”²⁵

Section two of the *Catechism follows the Apostles’ Creed*,²⁶ with its Trinitarian structure, along with several references to the Nicene-

²⁴ Carson, *The faith of the Vatican*, 9.

²⁵ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 253-255.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 198-1065. For a view of the apostles’ creed or symbol of the apostles, see John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian creeds* (New York, NY: Longman, 1972), 369-397; George M. Philip, *The apostles’ creed* (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1990).

Constantinopolitan Creed.²⁷ Consequently, the Trinitarian Catholic dogma is constructed upon it, plus biblical references and philosophical arguments from specific Christian theologians through history (sacred tradition).²⁸ At the beginning of the second paragraph in article 232, the Trinitarian dogma concomitantly mentions Mattheus 28,19, the profession of faith of Pope Vigilius I and a few portions of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, supported by short statements from the Councils of Constantinople II, Toledo VI, Toledo XI, Lyons II, and Florence, all identifying the divine nature of the Son and the Holy Spirit and their consubstantiality with the Father.²⁹

Based on the classical theology, the text admits that God the Father is fully transcendent and the first origin of everything, whereas the Son is recognized as *homoousios/consubstantialis* with the Father, and the Spirit is clearly identified as eternal and divine, from the same *ousia* and nature of the Father, according to the statements of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Council of Toledo XI (675).³⁰ Moreover, the Catholic statement, that endorses the statement of the Council of Toledo VI (638) and mainly the Council of Florence, assumes the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit within the Godhead, admitting that these two divine persons proceed from the Father who is “the source and origin of the whole divinity”.³¹ In view of this paradigm, the Son was begotten by the Father from eternity and the Spirit proceeded from both; thus, affirming double procession within the Trinity according to the *Filioque* clause.³²

In the statement that directly describes the dogma of the holy Trinity, the *Catechism* starts by assuming that the Trinity is one and not three gods. Therefore, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, the Trinity is “one

²⁷ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 196.

²⁸ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 195, 200, 202, 242, 245, 246, 250-253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 232-233, 238-248.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 239, 242-243, 245.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

³² *Ibid.*, 246-248. A complete view of the Holy Spirit as an explanation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed can be found in sec. 2, n.º 683-747.

God in three persons, the ‘consubstantial Trinity’³³ That statement is an emphasis on the statement from the Council of Constantinople II, reinforced by decisions made at the Council of Toledo XI and the Fourth Lateran which admit that each divine person is God, each sharing the divine substance, essence, or nature.³⁴

Based on the important creedal formula, *Fidis Damasis*, the following article asserts the plurality of God. Then, it condemns the modalistic view of God by affirming the distinct reality of the persons of the Trinity, based on the statements of the Council of Toledo XI. It further identifies that distinction in their relation of origin, according to the decision of the Lateran Council IV, and does so by mentioning the generation of the Son by the Father and the double procession of the Holy Spirit, thus demonstrating a Triune concept.³⁵

In this statement, a quote from the Council of Florence is added to clarify that there is no opposition of relationship among these persons,³⁶ for they are wholly united among themselves. The statement ends with a direct quote from the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus³⁷ about the distinctiveness of the Trinity as having, only in their character of origin, three distinct hypostasis within the divinity.

Given those assertions, the trinitarian theology of God in Roman Catholicism was formulated and based on the Bible and the church’s tradition, both of which defined the dogma through papal authority,³⁸ and the church’s official statement of belief was thus set forth in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This development of the dogma within the course

³³ Ibid., 253.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 254-255.

³⁶ Ibid., 255.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, n.º 256; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration on the Holy Baptism* 40.41 (NPNE, 7.375, trans. Browne and Swallow); *Gregory of Nazianzus On the Son* 29.2; 39.12 (NPNE, 7.301, 356).

³⁸ According to Corbishley, “There is indeed much in Catholic theology which is not explicitly formulated in the books of the Bible”. Thomas Corbishley, *Roman Catholicism* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1964), 37; Cf. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (London, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 103.

of Christian history and under the authority of the church is justified by Karl Rahner on the basis of internal doctrinal development in the New Testament.³⁹ Thus, it is because the apostles developed some doctrinal aspect in the Scripture that the bishop of Rome, the successor of the apostle Peter, has equal authority to do so outside the Canon.⁴⁰

In summary, the Roman Catholic Church incorporated the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as an integral part of its faith based upon the apostolic succession by which the heir of Peter assumes not only the right to interpret the Bible, but to declare church teachings such as the Trinity as infallible dogma. Such a dogma was received by the bishop of Rome by revelation through God's absolute self-communication.

A key argument by Roman Catholic theologians is that the Trinitarian dogma took shape during the early church councils, from Nicea to Chalcedon. Augustine and Aquinas were the most influential expositors of the Trinity during the Middle Ages.⁴¹ The church has not really changed its position since then. In other words, "there has been no significant doctrinal development for centuries in this regard".⁴² The debate over the Trinity within Catholicism during the modern period was "more [of] the question of the essence",⁴³ or the use of analogies in order to explain the Godhead. The focus was now on theological formulation about the Trinity, rather than the actual formulation of dogma, which was a dynamic process in itself.⁴⁴ Contemporary Catholic Trinitarian theology

³⁹ Rahner, *More recent writings*, 7.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Theological investigations*, 65-69; Karl Rahner, ed., *The teaching of the Catholic Church* (Cork, Ireland: Mercier, 1966), 59-63; See also CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 74-100, 861-862; Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Lumen gentium: dogmatic constitution on the church*, trans. Colman O'Neil, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:371-372; Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Christus dominus: decree on the pastoral office of bishops in the church*, trans. Colman O'Neil (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:564-565.

⁴¹ Mark T. Miller, personal communication to the author, July 8, 2013.

⁴² Neil Ormerod, personal communication to the author, July 8, 2013. Dr. Ormerod is professor of theology and editor of the Australian Journal of theology of the Faculty of theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University.

⁴³ Mark T. Miller, personal communication to the author, July 8, 2013.

⁴⁴ Bulzacchelli, personal communication to the author.

“is divided mainly between those who support this Augustinian psychological approach and those who reject it, usually in favor of the social analogy”.⁴⁵

Ontological Presuppositions in the Catholic Trinitarian Statement

Unity of the Godhead

From the metaphysical viewpoint, the doctrine of God is especially important for understanding the ultimate reality of God. The Roman Catholic ontological and cognitive system, with its particular interpretation of God’s being (especially with regard to the relationship among the persons of the Trinity and the distinctiveness of their character of origin) was influenced more by philosophy than by biblical interpretation.⁴⁶

The Roman Catholic system recognizes that “during the first centuries the Church sought to clarify its trinitarian faith”.⁴⁷ The process of clarification admits “the work of the early councils, aided by the theological work of the Church Fathers”.⁴⁸ The doctrine of the Trinity was influenced by the use of Greek philosophical ideas, as directly reflected in Roman Catholic theology, mainly during the time of the first four ecumenical councils. The Roman Catholic ontological explanation of the Godhead followed classical theism, as found in the Church Fathers and

⁴⁵ M. T. Miller, personal communication to the author. For a psychological analogy of the Trinity, see Neil Ormerod, “The Psychological Analogy for the Trinity—at Odds With Modernity”, *Pacifica* 14 (2001): 281-294, accessed July 9, 2013, <http://paa.sagepub.com/content/14/3/281.abstract>; Bernard Lonergan et al., *The ontological and psychological constitution of Christ*, vol. 7 (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2002). For a social analogy of the Trinity, see Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, eds., *The trinity: an interdisciplinary symposium on the trinity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 179-325, 329-381; James William McClendon Jr., *Doctrine: systematic theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 2:310.

⁴⁶ Cf. Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God encountered: a contemporary catholic systematic theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical, 1993), 1:1-18; Bevens, *An introduction to theology*, 2-3, 89-136, 150-151.

⁴⁷ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 250.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Aquinas, whose solid Aristotelian philosophical ideas were incorporated into his theological system (*sacra doctrina*).⁴⁹

In the first sentence of the *Catechism*, the dogma of the Holy Trinity is affirmed. It states that there is “one God in three persons”.⁵⁰ The language describes the Trinity in terms identical to those used by the Cappadocian Fathers and Greek philosophy. Terms such as *substance*, *hypostasis*, and *relation* designate God’s essence or nature, including the distinctions in the relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ This statement refers to the definitions given by Origen,⁵² Athanasius, and especially Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, and ultimately reaffirmed at Constantinople II when they declared God as one substance (*ousia*) yet three persons (*hypostasis*). The Cappadocians were the first to distinguish these metaphysical terms by arguing that *ousia* refers to the oneness of the three Persons, and that *hypostasis* refers to the threeness in God. This view is totally dependent on elements of Platonism because, according to the Cappadocian fathers, the relationship of the three persons within the Trinity is best understood through the Platonic emphasis on the reality of universals (*Theory of Forms*).⁵³

From the standpoint of the Cappadocians, the common divine substance, shared by the three persons of the Trinity, is identified as universal, given the fact that from this Platonic interpretation, one real substance (*ousia*) must be present in each specific *hypostasis*. Things of the same nature have a common essence. The Cappadocians, like Plato, believed that by applying the theory of forms it was possible to know universal truths.⁵⁴ They believed that it is possible to know the truth of the transcendent God and His relational threeness by applying Plato’s metaphysical theory

⁴⁹ This conceptualization of Aquinas’ system is delineated in Watson, “Meaning and function of system”, 111-162.

⁵⁰ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 253.

⁵¹ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 252.

⁵² Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.6. Origen was the first to use the word *hypostasis*.

⁵³ See Plato, *Dialogues of Plato*, 7:159-163, 371-375; Plato, *Republic* 2.91-95, 421-425; Plato *Phaedo* 1.342-347.

⁵⁴ For a brief explanation on the theory of forms, see *ibid.*, 9:590-591.

of universals to theology. In this way they defended Trinitarian doctrine as essentially philosophical.⁵⁵

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Roman Catholic theology uses metaphysical terms (person, essence, substance, nature, hypostasis, and relation), applying them to its cognitive system in order to describe God's being.⁵⁶

Distinction of the Three Persons

The *Catechism* elsewhere declares that “the divine persons are really distinct from one another”.⁵⁷ This distinction is established in their relationship of origin, as explained through the doctrine of eternal generation.⁵⁸ Both statements were used to indicate the distinction of the persons and the internal relationship of the Godhead in the *Catechism*, which presupposes that God the Father proceeds “from none”.⁵⁹ This is the eternal cause of both the eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. This idea is based completely upon Greek metaphysics.⁶⁰ The *Catechism* says: “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten,

⁵⁵ “Yet, like Origen, he [Gregory of Nyssa] brings in many ideas that are not based on Scripture”. Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic theology: God as Trinity*, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 116. This idea emphasizes the differences between persons rather than the unity of the Trinity and, because of this conception, the Arians accused the Cappadocians of being polytheists. Cf. Bernard Lohse, *A short history of christian doctrine: from the first century to the present* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 67.

⁵⁶ See again CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 252.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the churches: a reader in christian doctrine from the bible to the present* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 57.

⁶⁰ Leith, *Creeds of the churches*, 57. Repeating the statement of the Council of Toledo VI, the *Catechism* recognizes the Fathers as “the source and origin of the whole divinity”. CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 245. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth theological orations on the Holy Spirit* 7-8, 14 (NPNE, 7.319-322); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration on the Holy Lights* 39.7 (NPNE, 7.356); Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Son* 24.3 (NPNE, 7.301-302); See Basil of Caesarea *Letters* 38.7; 125.3 (NPNE, 8.141, 195-196); Basil of Caesarea, *On the Spirit* 8.21; 16.38-40; 18.46-47; 26.64 (NPNE, 8.14-15, 23-26, 29-30, 40); Gregory of Nazianzus *On the Son* 29.5 (NPNE, 7.302); Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Holy Spirit* (NPNE, 7.321-322).

and the Holy Spirit who proceeds”.⁶¹ This idea of eternal generation is dependent upon the concept of timelessness, which is an echo of Plato.⁶²

The theology of Augustine was especially significant for the development of the Trinity doctrine within the Latin Church. The *Catechism* includes Augustinian arguments about eternal generation in its Trinitarian discussion.⁶³ When the *Catechism* argues that the three persons of the Trinity are equal, yet different “in their relations of origin”,⁶⁴ this reflects the thinking of Augustine who affirmed the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as equal. The only exception was their properties of origin, which happen through the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit.⁶⁵ Thus, the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit represent timeless acts performed by the Father, that is, the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit are determined by the internal activity of the Godhead (motion). This motion within God’s being cannot cause any change in the inner relationship of the three persons of the Trinity because there is “no temporal motion”.⁶⁶ He affirmed the double procession of the Spirit, which, in a similar way uses neo-Platonic categories.⁶⁷ Augustine appealed to the Trinitarian psy-

⁶¹ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 254. In describing the trinitarian dogma, the *Catechism* appeals to the doctrine of the eternal generation to affirm the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit.

⁶² Milton V. Anastos, “Basil’s *Kata. Ewnomi,ou*: A Critical Analysis”, in *Basil of Caesarea Christian, Humanist Ascetic*, ed. Paul Jonathan Fedwick (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 1:97-98.

⁶³ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 264; Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15.26.47 (NPNE, 3.225).

⁶⁴ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 254.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.7.14; 4.20, 21, 29; 6.4.6; 7.5.10; 6.11 (NPNE, 3.24, 84, 86, 100, 111 and 112).

⁶⁶ Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.21 (NPNE, 3.85).

⁶⁷ Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.20.29 (NPNE, 3.85). See also Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*, August 28, 1986, accessed May 28, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jpii_apl_26081986_augustinum-hipponensem_en.html. This idea of Augustine contributed to the medieval debate over the *Filioque* clause that erupted between Eastern and Western Christians in the 11th century.

chological model (analogy) inspired from Platonic dualism and its view of human persons.⁶⁸

The *Catechism* includes the Thomistic philosophy in its Trinitarian theology. When the *Catechism* introduced the phrase “I believe in one God”, from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, this idea was taken directly from the Aristotelian metaphysics of Aquinas by which God, as altogether simple (*omnino simplex*),⁶⁹ “has no part and therefore [is] indivisible”.⁷⁰ This reminds the faithful of a similar concept given by Origen about the simplicity of the divine nature.⁷¹ The idea of Aristotle, about absolute timelessness and an Unmoved Mover, is essential in order to appreciate this concept.⁷² Aquinas views God as the Almighty Power and also as the “First Immovable Mover, the First Efficient Cause”.⁷³ He sees God the Father as the beginning of the Trinity, and consequently as “the source of [the] whole divine proceeding”.⁷⁴ He is the principle of the Son and the Spirit. In other words, Aquinas rationalizes the term “procession” by stating that it is a kind of *motum at extra* (movement outward).⁷⁵ He

⁶⁸ See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*, para. 43; McBrien, *Catholicism*, 295.

⁶⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: existence and nature of God*, trans. Timothy McDermott, vol. 2 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1964), 19-47, 51.

⁷⁰ Fernando Canale, *Basic elements of christian theology: scripture replacing tradition* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithothec, 2005), 85.

⁷¹ See Origen, *De Principiis* 1.1.6 (ANF, 4.242-243).

⁷² See Aristotle, *The words of Aristotle*, trans. J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1912), 2-31, quoted in Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers speak of God* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 60-68; Aristotle, *On the heavens*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 6:17-25; Aristotle *Physics* 7.1 (trans. Wicksteed and Cornford, LCL, 5:207-227); Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1.7-8 (trans. Tredennick, LCL, 17:49-55).

⁷³ F. L. Cross, *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “God”; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: God’s will and providence*, trans. Thomas Gilby, vol. 5 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1967), 17-19; CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 271.

⁷⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles: Salvation*, trans. James F. Anderson, vol. 4 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1975), 146.

⁷⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: The Trinity*, trans. Ceslaus Velecky, vol. 6 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1965), 3.

admits that God is timeless and that “God can be moved or be outside”⁷⁶ He recognizes that for God there is no diversity because God’s essence is not compounded, but pure (*actus purus*) and it expresses “simplicity”⁷⁷ (that is, lacking *compositio*); then there can be no procession in God. On the other hand, according to him, there is a *processio ad intra* (inward procession),⁷⁸ or inward activity of the Godhead. Aquinas uses Psalm 2,7 to describe this procession of the Son (*verbum/λόγος*) within the Godhead by using the term *generatio*. It means that the Son belongs to the Father’s very substance, without being involved in time and space.⁷⁹ Aquinas next discusses the procession of the Spirit. In the same way as the Son, the Spirit is a second procession from God (*est quod Spiritus Sanctus procedit a Patre*), which he calls *spiration* (spiration).⁸⁰ For Aquinas, there is still another procession called the Word, or the generation of the Son.⁸¹ Aquinas sees the Spirit with reference to the model of will and love.⁸² In fact, he calls it a *procession amoris* (the procession of love).⁸³ Thus, the Holy Spirit is the true God and possesses all the divine attributes, but He is different from Him and is also different from the intellectual procession of the Son.⁸⁴ Both, Son and Spirit, come from the Father and the Son (*qui ex*

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 5. See also Rik van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 190.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 9, 11. A brief description of this term can be found in Gerald Bray, *The doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 182; Marsh, *The Triune God*, 149.

⁸⁰ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 13, 19. Cf. Brian Davies, *The thought of Thomas Aquinas* (New York, NY: Clarendon, 1992), 197; William G. Rusch, “The doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the patristic and medieval church”, in *The Holy Spirit in the life of the church: from biblical times to the present*, ed. Paul D. Opsahl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1978), 91-92.

⁸¹ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 11-19.

⁸² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Father, Son and Holy Ghost*, trans. T. C. O’Brien, vol. 7 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1976), 79-83, 89.

⁸³ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 13.

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *Salvation*, 138, 141, 143; Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 23-27. See also Davies, *The thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 198.

Patre Filioque procedit). Essential to this understanding is the timelessness of God's essence.

Roman Catholics explain the Trinity using mainly Scholastic theology instead of *sola Scriptura*. This gives its theology a certain flavor that resonates with secular philosophy. Yet, even the articulation of Trinitarian dogma (or a cognitive system), as expressed in the Roman Catholic *Catechism*, shows how at its essence the Roman Catholic Church appealed to Greek philosophy as the basis for formulating its understanding of the Trinity.⁸⁵ God's being is thus understood by the Roman Catholic Trinitarian cognitive system on the basis of its ontological presuppositions. The Roman Catholic doctrine of God came from the Platonic-Aristotelic ontological theory (timeless-spaceless-changeless). Scripture is interpreted through this philosophical lens, which simultaneously determines God's nature, including the Trinity.

Seventh-day Adventist View Of the Trinity

Historical and Theological Overview

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is the fifth largest Christian communion in the world, with more than 19 million church members now spanning more than 200 countries.⁸⁶ Since the 1980's this Christian denomination has officially adopted the Trinitarian view as one of its doctrines. Its current trinitarian understanding went through several theological debates during the late 19th century up to the middle of the 20th century. Contrary to the Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church argues that truth is progressive. This dynamic understanding of the "present truth" means that this process is based upon a biblical understanding of ontological reality (both natural and supernatural) and allows for flexibility in the development of its beliefs.

⁸⁵ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 251 and 252.

⁸⁶ For statistics, see the annual report of the Department of Archives and Statistics at the General Conference of SDA Church available at <http://www.adventist.org/information/statistics/>.

Development of Trinitarian Doctrine

Early Adventist pioneers belonged to various Protestant denominations. Two of the three principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Bates (1792-1872) and J. White (1821-1881), belonged to the Christian Connexion movement that espoused antitrinitarian views.⁸⁷ Many other early Adventist pioneers, such as J. N. Loughborough (1832-1824), R. F. Cottrell (1814-1892), J. N. Andrews (1829-1883), and U. Smith (1832-1903), shared this antitrinitarian idea.⁸⁸ Most early Sabbatarian Adventists considered Christ as a divine being who originated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit—whose source originated from the Father and Christ— was described as a mere influence who was divested of any personality.⁸⁹ Consequently, they “brought anti-trinitarianism into Adventism.”⁹⁰

Throughout the majority of the 19th century Adventist leaders rejected the Trinity doctrine. Instead, they “placed themselves with Unitarians and Socinians.”⁹¹ However, due to the Adventist theological-doctrinal dynamism, over time there was a progression away from this antitrinitarian position to a trinitarian view.⁹² Adventist historian Jerry Moon argues that the progressive change that occurred among Adventists on the

⁸⁷ James White, “The faith of Jesus”, *Review and Herald* (August 5, 1852): 52; James White, “Preach the word”, *Review and Herald* (December 11, 1855): 85; James White, “Latter from bro. White”, *The Day-Star* (January 24, 1846): 25; James White, “Mutual Obligations”, *Review and Herald* (June 6, 1871): 196; Joseph Bates, *The autobiography of elder Joseph Bates; embracing a long life on shipboard* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist, 1868), 204-205.

⁸⁸ Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity”, 161-162. For a list of adventists who presented objections to the doctrine of the Trinity, with their respective statements in Adventists publications, see Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arian and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 3; Holt, “The doctrine of the Trinity”, 4-20; C. M. Taylor “The doctrine of the personality”, 4-15.

⁸⁹ C. M. Taylor, “The doctrine of the personality”, 4-9.

⁹⁰ Knight, *A search for identity*, 32.

⁹¹ Christy Mathewson Taylor, “The doctrine of the personality of the Holy Spirit as taught by Seventh-day Adventist Church up to 1900” (BD thesis, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1953), 11. For a survey of the Socinians, see Otto W. Heick, *A history of christian thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1965), 2:137-145.

⁹² Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views”, 126.

Trinity was based upon chronological studies done by Erwin R. Gane, Russell Holt, Le Roy Edwin Froom, and Merlin D. Burt.⁹³

Moon has correctly demonstrated this development over six stages that occurred in Adventist history,⁹⁴ and consequently he shows a theological progression away from antitrinitarianism to trinitarianism. This transition of conviction occurred between 1846 and 1980 for the following reasons: First, a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity⁹⁵; second, soteriology analysis —during this time, the 1888 General Conference session was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, especially through theological efforts of A. T. Jones (1850-1923)— that led Seventh-day Adventists to conclude that Christ possessed the same divine attributes and the same divine nature as that of the Father;⁹⁶ third, the careful analysis of the book *The Desire of Ages* (1898), written by Ellen G. White, that sparked debates in Adventist periodicals;⁹⁷ fourth, the impact of classical liberal theology that in turn influenced several Protestant churches to consider the hypostatic union as a myth (“the historical Jesus”) and helped the Adventists to position themselves in favor of the full deity of Jesus⁹⁸, especially during a broad discussion of this issue at the 1919 Bible Conference, highlighting the participation of W. W. Prescott who gave

⁹³ Jerry Moon, “The Adventist trinity debate part 1: historical overview”, *AUSS* 41, n.º 1 (2003): 114-115.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Cf.* Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate Part 1”, 115-118; Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: understanding God’s love, his plan of salvation and christian relationship* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 191-194.

⁹⁶ Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate Part 1”, 118-120; Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 194-196. For an overview of this General Conference session and its message, see Arnold V. Wallenkampf, *What every adventist should know about 1888* (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 1988); Robert J. Wieland, *The 1888 message: an introduction* (Washington, DC: RH, 1997); George R. Knight, *A user-friendly guide to the 1888 message* (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 1998);

⁹⁷ *Cf.* Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 15-21.

⁹⁸ Alonzo L. Baker, *Belief and work of Seventh-day Adventists* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1930), 55-58; Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 33-34; Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate Part 1”, 123; Raymond Holmes, “Adventist identity and evangelical criticism”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 2, n.º 2 (1991): 81-90; Denis Fortin, “Nineteenth-century evangelicalism and early Adventist statements of beliefs”, *AUSS* 36, n.º 1 (1998): 66-67.

an influential series of lectures at this conference reinforcing the Trinity;⁹⁹ and last, the arguments in favor of the biblical Trinity presented by a wide variety of Adventist theologians and resulting in the statement of the doctrine of the Trinity officially adopted by the 1980 General Conference session that definitely affirmed the unity of three co-equal and co-eternal Persons.¹⁰⁰

Thus, it is possible to recognize that all these factors came together and helped to establish this paradigm shift from antitrinitarian to the current trinitarian view. Adventists incorporated a plurality and unity of the Trinity within Adventist theology. It is necessary to affirm that the decline of antitrinitarianism and the acceptance of trinitarianism reflect a deep biblical reality that was given through an experience of progressive revelation.¹⁰¹

Philosophical Presuppositions in the first Adventist Trinitarian Statements of Beliefs

The Seventh-day Adventist Church identified that there were philosophical presuppositions in the first Adventist trinitarian statements of beliefs. Consequently, a transitional theological thought arose from Arian-Modalistic Monarchianism¹⁰² to the affirmation of the biblical Trinity. This transition can be seen through different statements of beliefs regarding the nature of God.

For those, such as the historic Adventists (or neo-restorationists), who advocated a complete return to the semi-Arian position of the early

⁹⁹ For more details about this Adventist meeting, see Michael W. Campbell, “The 1919 bible conference and its significance for Seventh-day Adventist history and theology” (PhD diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2008); Molleurus Couperus, “The Bible Conference of 1919”, *Spectrum* 10, n.º 1 (1979): 23-26; Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 25-39.

¹⁰⁰ The reason for the publication of these fundamental beliefs of the Adventists can be found in Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists believe*, 5.

¹⁰¹ See the conception of progressive revelation and its role in the development of Adventist doctrines in P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines and Progressive Revelation”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 2, n.º 1 (1991): 77-92.

¹⁰² Moon, “The Adventist trinitarian debate part 1”, 117.

Adventist pioneers (based on the fact that they always held antitrinitarian views on the nature of God), it is possible to affirm they are wrong. On one hand, the historic Adventists justified their denial of the trinitarian doctrine based on its Catholic origins. On the other hand, however, their antitrinitarian approach is as mistaken as the Catholic and Protestant conception about the nature of God, since both have their doctrinal construction reference based on the grounds of classical interpretation, containing philosophical elements (instead of pure biblical data) to interpret God's being.¹⁰³ Yet they made the same mistake by adopting an antitrinitarian approach from Unitarianism, which denied the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit. This dependency can be seen in statements made by various Adventist leaders, such as U. Smith, S. N. Haskell, G. B. Starr, and others, who affirmed that God the Father alone is without beginning and that furthermore Jesus Christ is also derived from the Father at some point in eternity past.¹⁰⁴ Such perspectives are grounded in the Arian or semi-Arian philosophical underpinnings.

Not even the first trinitarian statements were free of this influence. As an example, the 1874 Statement of Belief by Uriah Smith, published in the *Signs of the Times*¹⁰⁵ “affirmed belief in ‘one God’ and ‘one Lord Jesus Christ’ but made no statement regarding belief in the trinity”.¹⁰⁶ Why? Because Smith never believed in Jesus Christ's divinity. For him, “God alone is without beginning”,¹⁰⁷ the Son (*Logos*) had a beginning because He is “the first created being... [by] divine impulse... [in] a period

¹⁰³ See Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God”, in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 12:148-149; C. M. Taylor, “The doctrine of the personality”, 9-11; Fernando Canale, “The quest for the biblical ontological ground of christian theology”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 16, n.º 1-2 (2005): 3-7, 10-13.

¹⁰⁴ Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 9, 19, 23.

¹⁰⁵ White, “Fundamental Principles”, 3; Glyn Parfitt, *The trinity: what has God revealed? objections answered* (Victoria, Australia: Signs, 2008), 532. This statement was originally published 2 years earlier in 1872. [Uriah Smith], *A declaration of the fundamental principles taught and practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist, 1872), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Land, *Historical dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists*, s.v. “Trinity”.

¹⁰⁷ Uriah Smith, *Looking unto Jesus: Christ in type and antitype* (Battle Creek, MI: RH, 1898), 10.

so remote that to finite minds it is essentially eternity”,¹⁰⁸ and the Holy Spirit is the power that proceeds from both God and Christ.¹⁰⁹

Here Smith reflects a semi-Arian approach to God. As the majority of 19th century Adventist leaders who believed that Christ was a divine subordinate and not an eternal or pre-existent Being, Smith never accepted the doctrine of the Trinity.¹¹⁰ Thus, his theological approach on God’s being contains Arian philosophical elements widely used by Unitarianism.

Around 1930, a group from Africa requested the General Conference to clarify the denominational beliefs. Consequently, a statement was drafted by F. M. Wilcox and published in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*¹¹¹ in 1931 admitting the Trinity doctrine. This statement clearly represented and advanced a more comprehensive Scriptural view of the Trinity.¹¹² However, this statement was somewhat a repetition of an earlier 1913 statement of belief (also written by F. M. Wilcox) and somehow reflected some possible vestiges of a semi-Arian position. One sentence of this statement says that Jesus retained “his divine nature”.¹¹³ This expression does not suggest an affirmation of the co-equality between the Father and the Son.

Merlin Burt also currently observed that “these statements left certain details undefined”.¹¹⁴ As an example, this sentence was deliberately left unclear so that semi-Arians could claim that Jesus “is not eternal and who

¹⁰⁸ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, critical and practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist, 1865), 59, 10; Uriah Smith, *The prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1899), 391.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *Looking unto Jesus*, 10, 17.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 13; Pfandl, “The doctrine of the Trinity”, 167.

¹¹¹ “Statement of our faith for the yearbook”, General Conference Committee Minutes, December 29, 1930, 195.

¹¹² S. Joseph Kidder, “Creeds and statements of belief in early Adventist thought”, *AUSS* 47, n.º 1 (2009): 114.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist views”, 136; Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism”, 36-37. This 1931 statement left certain details undefined and was therefore one of the weaknesses in F. M. Wilcox’s 1931 statement that had been pointed out by Lawrence T. Geraty, “A new statement of fundamental beliefs”, *Spectrum* 11, n.º 1 (1980): 5.

at some stage *became* divine”.¹¹⁵ It can easily be interpreted as declaring that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of the eternal Father, without affirming that He Himself is eternal. This and other expressions employed in the 1931 statement seem absent of any categorical affirmation of the eternity of Jesus and thus many still felt that that “trinitarian” statement had continued to leave room for different approaches and interpretations. Seemingly, both semi-Arians and trinitarians could view it favorably. And quite possibly this is what eventually led the Seventh-day Adventist Church to feel the need for further trinitarian clarification of its doctrinal statements and confessions regarding the Trinity, since the first Adventist trinitarian statements of 1874 and 1931 had unscriptural elements and were based on Greek philosophy. Such clarity came at the 1980 Dallas General Conference session.

Current Debate on the Official Trinitarian Statement

Contrary to the Neo-restorationists (Historic Adventists) Seventh-day Adventists maintain that the Trinity doctrine is based on Scripture. The current official statement on the Godhead was voted at the 1980 General Conference session:

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation. (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 14:7).¹¹⁶

In comparison to the 1874 and 1931 statements of beliefs, the 1980 Dallas statement is unmistakably trinitarian. It left no room for ambiguity

¹¹⁵ Dojcin Zivadinovic, “Early Adventists and Trinity: an analysis of historical christian influence on SDA views of trinity” (Term paper, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2006), 34.

¹¹⁶ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 156; Office of Archives and Statistics, *SDA Yearbook 2013*, 7; Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 11.

and it eclipsed all lingering questions about repudiating the church's earlier semi-Arian heritage.

The accusation of historic Adventists cannot be sustained. In opposition to the Catholic claim that trinitarian dogma is not totally found in Scripture but is post-biblical, Seventh-day Adventists assume that although this doctrine "is not explicitly stated but assumed"¹¹⁷ in the Old Testament, yet it is an idea or concept that is plainly taught in the New Testament.¹¹⁸ Here Adventists prioritized Scriptural authority over any post-biblical tradition. The current Adventist trinitarian position is also far different from the Roman Catholic view, which is heavily anchored in philosophy. Adventists do not turn to the Church Fathers as the source of their authority. Instead, they assert Scripture as the source of their understanding of the nature of God. On the other hand, although the Roman Catholic Church considers the Bible to be one of the multiple sources, yet it has also consistently prioritized tradition, with its philosophical ideas, and therefore it is most clearly evident that tradition has counted for far more than did the scriptural data. This point is of particular importance: Thus, for Seventh-day Adventists the Trinity doctrine is not independent from Scripture. In fact, it is totally dependent upon Scripture. There is no need to be subordinated to tradition or any material apart from the Scripture because *Scripture sacra sui ipsius interpres*. Adventists assert about the Bible that it is superior to the Fathers and councils, and it is therefore the genuine and unique authority in matters of doctrine. Adventist theology strives to remain independent from philosophy and dependent on

¹¹⁷ Canale, "Doctrine of God", 12:138. Cf. Jiří Moskala, "Toward trinitarian thinking in the hebrew scriptures", *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 21, n.º 1-2 (2010): 245-275; Norman R. Gulley, "Trinity in the old testament", *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 17, n.º 1 (2006): 96-97.

¹¹⁸ See Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 22-32; Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 21-91; Parfitt, *The Trinity*, 47-50; Raoul Dederen, "Reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity", *AUSS* 3, n.º 1 (1970): 2-12; Woodrow W. Whidden, "Trinitarian evidences in the Apocalypse", *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 11, n.º 1-2 (2000): 248-260; Gerhard Pfandl, "The Trinity in scripture", *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, n.º 2 (2003): 80-85; Richard M. Davidson, *Biblical interpretation*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 12:58-104; and Gerhard F. Hasel, "Scripture and Theology", *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 4, n.º 2 (1993): 47-94.

scriptural thought. And furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity, as presented by them, is derived from Scripture and subordinated only to it.¹¹⁹

Thus it is neither necessary to appeal to the ecumenical councils (from the First Council of Nicea and to the Council of Constantinople) nor to articles of creedal faith (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) as authoritative aiming to recognize the consubstantiality of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father, because Adventists "accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures."¹²⁰ Unlike Lutherans and Calvinists, who tend to accept early creeds in respect to the patristic testimony of Augustine,¹²¹ Adventists have formulated the doctrine of the Trinity as based solely on Scripture. Scripture is, therefore, the primary source and ultimate norm for the interpretation of the Christian faith and Adventist fundamental beliefs are in an ongoing dynamic relationship with it.¹²²

Between 1931 and 1979, no statement of belief was taken or developed. Recognizing the dynamism of Adventist theology, the session of the General Conference of 1946 voted that any revision of their beliefs could be done at anytime, at any General Conference Session.¹²³ And that was exactly what happened. During that time several publications supporting the doctrine of the Trinity were published, which encouraged the Seventh-day Adventist Church to review its trinitarian doctrine, and thus this church officially defined its system of doctrines and a new statement on the doctrine of the Trinity was revised and officially voted at the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas, Texas, USA.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ "We [Adventists] do not accept the Trinitarian formula based on the authority of church dogma or of church councils, but only the fact that it best represents what Scripture presents about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God". Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 150.

¹²⁰ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 156.

¹²¹ For a view of creeds by Protestant Reformers, see Kidder, "Creeds and statements of belief", 101-102.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 99.

¹²³ Land, *Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-Day Adventists*, s.v. "Church Manual".

¹²⁴ For details about the procedure and adoption of this new statement and the others, see Geraty, "New statement of fundamental beliefs", 2-13. See also Neal C. Wilson, "The 1980 GC Session", *Adventist Review*, March 6, 1980, 3; *Adventist Review*, February 21, 1980, 8-10.

Current Seventh-day Adventist Position on the Trinity

The Adventist trinitarian statement can be officially found in the denomination's church manual, and in the annual *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*.¹²⁵ Adventists developed their doctrine of the Trinity from a particular, focused analysis of the writers of the New Testament. Based upon Christ's own teachings, they conclude that Jesus used a theological method to present a monotheistic view of God the Father. At the same time, He alleged Himself and the Holy Spirit to be on the same divine level as the Father.¹²⁶ But, it has been seen articulated as a matter of fundamental belief, expressed through biblical data, which has thus provided Adventist theological identity and facilitated the understanding of this complicated biblical teaching and thereby has promoted unity in the interest of carrying out the church's mission.

In relation to the 1874 statement of belief (that adopted the Arian Platonic philosophical arguments) the 1980 fundamental beliefs present a total opposition and reversal to that statement, by which it is possible to see the demonstration of the progression of the Adventist theological position from antitrinitarianism to trinitarianism. The 1980 trinitarian statement recognizes Jesus as "God the eternal Son"¹²⁷ and affirms that the Holy Spirit is "God the eternal Spirit"¹²⁸ and not a divine impulse from the Father and the Son or an impersonalized influence emanating from God. In relation to the 1931 statement that gave the impression of being somewhat semi-Arian in its christological approach (by failing to state categorically the eternity of Jesus), the 1980 trinitarian statement asserts that Jesus is "God the eternal Son [who] became incarnate in Jesus Christ".¹²⁹ In addition to that, the current fundamental belief number five

¹²⁵ General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2013 (SDA Yearbook 2013)* (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 2013), 7.

¹²⁶ Peter M. van Bemmelen, "The authority of scripture", in *Understanding scripture: An Adventist approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 1:76-77.

¹²⁷ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157.

states that the Holy Spirit is “God the eternal Spirit”,¹³⁰ and not just “the third person of the Godhead, the one regenerating agency in the work of redemption”¹³¹ (as indicated by the 1931 statement of belief).

Among these three official statements of beliefs (1874, 1931, and 1980), “only one [1980] has had a formal vote at a General Conference session”.¹³² It is absolutely trinitarian for it recognizes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as “one God”,¹³³ and not three gods, and it clearly assumes that this God is a “unity of three co-eternal Persons”.¹³⁴ It means that the Son has a divine nature and that the Holy Spirit is truly God and from eternity He “lived within the Godhead as the third member”.¹³⁵

Theological implications

The 1980 trinitarian statement, using the formula of Matthew 28,19, clearly juxtaposes the three persons in the Trinity by stating that God is “a unity of three co-eternal [and co-equal] Persons”.¹³⁶ Clearly the Adventist statement “conceives the unity of God and the Trinity of persons”.¹³⁷ It is evident that the statement does not oppose genuine monotheism. It upholds the dynamic concept of divine plurality.¹³⁸ In other words, this divine plurality suggests a oneness of substance and a threeness of persons (as related to the Godhead) representing diversity into unity, or pluralism into monotheism. This statement accepts the fact that God has eternally existed as three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Affirmation made in 1931 in *ibid.*, 29.

¹³² Knight, *A search for identity*, 23.

¹³³ General Conference of SDAs, Church Manual, 156.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ministerial Association, Seventh-day Adventists Believe, 71.

¹³⁶ General Conference of SDAs, Church Manual, 156.

¹³⁷ Dederen, “Reflections on the doctrine”, 15.

¹³⁸ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:123; Ministerial Association, Seventh-day Adventists Believe, 29. This divine plurality that suggests an oneness and a threeness of persons (as related to the Godhead) representing diversity into unity, or pluralism into monotheism.

and that each Person is fully God.¹³⁹ God is both one God and contains a unity of essence within this diversity of Persons. Dederen summarizes, “The Trinity is one indivisible God and the distinctions of persons do not destroy the divine unity. This unity of God is expressed by saying that He is one substance”.¹⁴⁰

God the Father

God the Father is described as “infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation”.¹⁴¹ In other words, the Father is seen as the one who enters into space and time, along with the Son and the Holy Spirit, participating actively “in Creation, incarnation, and redemption”.¹⁴² Through His infinite temporality,¹⁴³ the Father also participated in the act of creation, thereby experiencing the historical event within this created world, instead of just being a timeless spectator who used the Son (*Logos*) and His Spirit as mediators of His actions in the temporal, spatial realm.¹⁴⁴ Although God’s time is “qualitatively different from our time”,¹⁴⁵ God’s being and His acts are therefore related to time and human history. In consequence, there was compatibility between His immutability and eternity.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ “God the eternal Father”, “God the eternal Son”, and “God the eternal Spirit”. General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 156-157.

¹⁴⁰ Dederen, “Reflections on the doctrine”, 16. In the Adventist view, “This monotheistic emphasis does not contradict the Christian concept of the triune God or Trinity”. Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 29.

¹⁴¹ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 156.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴³ This term is used by Guy. See Fritz Guy, “God’s time: infinite temporality and the ultimate reality of becoming”, *Spectrum* 29, n.º 1 (2001): 26.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:109. This is explained by Guy as God’s infinite temporality, in contrast with the finite temporality of humans. See Guy, “God’s Time”, 25.

¹⁴⁶ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:109.

God the Son

In the fundamental belief number four, Seventh-day Adventist theology describes Jesus as the eternal God. He is “God the eternal Son”.¹⁴⁷ The One who was not an intermediate *Logos* between God the Father and His creation, as stated by the Arian Platonism, but the preexistent God (John 1,1-2; 8,58; 17,5) who was active with the Father in creation (John 1,3; Col 1,16; Heb 1,2).¹⁴⁸ His activity is seen in a temporal perspective, involving His “historical presence with nature”,¹⁴⁹ and clearly manifested by His entering into a relationship with the world (immanence). In this particular aspect, the Seventh-day Adventist view is in contrast with the Christian philosophical conception of God’s immanence, based on His transcendental timelessness.¹⁵⁰ In the fullness of His divinity, He became a human person, the “God with us” (Matt 1,23), which implies a union of both deity and humanity simultaneously (hypostatic union), entering into the human history (Phil 2,5-11, *kenōsis* or self-emptying).¹⁵¹ During this process, the union of two natures in one person (fully God and fully human), the Holy Spirit has a special participation for He “brought Him in the Incarnation to become God-Man”.¹⁵² This union of Christ’s humanity and divinity (John 1,14) also reveals the union between the infinite time of the transcendent God and the finite time of the immanent

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 157. See also Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 49-52.

¹⁴⁸ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157.

¹⁴⁹ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:118.

¹⁵⁰ This idea is based in part on the scholarly work of Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:117-118; Canale, *Basic elements of christian theology*, 105.

¹⁵¹ Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic theology: creation, Christ, salvation*, vol. 3 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 398-399, 421-467; Raoul Dederen, *Christ: person and work*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 2000), 12:164-165; Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 52-58; Arthur J. Ferch, “The Apocalyptic ‘Son of Man’ in Daniel 7” (PhD diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1979); Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 1997), 12-95; Rice, *Reign of God*, 157-160.

¹⁵² Gulley, *Creation, Christ, Salvation*, 393. Cf. Raoul Dederen, *Christ: person and work*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: RH, 2000), 12:163.

God, the Son.¹⁵³ Gulley observes that Jesus' incarnation was possible because in Jesus, both infinite time and finite time are compatible.¹⁵⁴

God the Holy Spirit

In the fundamental statement of belief number five, the Holy Spirit is described as the eternal God and He is a distinct person, not an impersonal force.¹⁵⁵ This statement of belief also sees the Spirit as God. The Holy Spirit is mentioned 25 times in 16 of the 28 fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Son (John 16,7; Acts 2,33) in His fullness (Matt 3,11; John 7,39; Luke 24,49; Acts 1,8; 2,33).¹⁵⁶ The Holy Spirit was “sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children”.¹⁵⁷ It means that in regard to the origin of His mission, the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, in the sense that He is to be sent by both in His earthly ministry. By the sentence “to be always with His children”, the statement of belief number five admits that this procession is for mission, by which “He draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God”.¹⁵⁸ Based on that, the Spirit does not proceed from both the Father and the Son in double procession within the Trinity, as attested by the *Filioque* clause. He *proceeds* from both, the first and second Persons of the Trinity, in the sense that the Spirit is sent by them from heaven to earth “to be always with His children”.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ Ibid., 3:396.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157; Ron E. M. Clouzet, “The personhood of the Holy Spirit and why it matters”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 17, n.º 1 (2006): 11-32; Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “The person and work of the Holy Spirit in the general epistles and the Book of Hebrews”, *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 23, n.º 2 (2012): 72-111.

¹⁵⁶ The reason for the sending of the Spirit is that His fullness is given, as explained by Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 72-73.

¹⁵⁷ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

A Comparison of the Seventh-day Adventist and Roman Catholic Trinitarian Positions

After describing the Catholic and Adventist theological approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity, this study now turns to an analysis of these commonalities and differences in order to demonstrate the following point: both Catholicism and Adventism are very different when it comes to their trinitarian convictions.

Apparent Similarities

Both Catholicism and Adventism recognize the Trinity doctrine as central to their theology. The language used by both churches expresses some apparent equality. Affirmations such as “there is one God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”¹⁶⁰ by Adventists, and “we do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons”¹⁶¹ by Roman Catholics indicate that there is a similarity of thought in relation to the reality about God. Each position manifests some close resemblance. For instance, in the Roman Catholic position each divine Person shares in the same divine essence or nature,¹⁶² and thus in its understanding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit form one true God. In the Seventh-day Adventist understanding, God eternally exists as a unity of three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *i.e.*, the Godhead “consists of three divine, coeternal persons... who are ‘one’ in nature, character, and purpose”.¹⁶³

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Roman Catholic Church believe that there is one true God, and that God the Father is one of the three persons of the Godhead. Each church sees God the Father as a member of the Trinity. They also vigorously defend both: the divinity and humanity (two natures united in one single person) of Christ and

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹⁶¹ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 253.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 20.

His full equality with God the Father,¹⁶⁴ and consider the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Godhead (not an impersonal force) who is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son, that is, He is one in nature but at the same time He is also distinct from them.¹⁶⁵

As can be seen, both traditions affirm the monotheism of God and that this unity of essence and diversity of persons does not extinguish the divine unity. Each church demonstrates that three divine and co-eternal Persons constitute the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and they are three divine persons distinct from each other. They also recognize a sense of mystery when it comes to the Trinity that involves a mysterious relationship between these divine persons.¹⁶⁶ Part of this mystery is shown by God's revelation and self-communication. However, these apparent similarities in the way Catholics and Adventists declare their trinitarian beliefs does not imply that both traditions explain the Trinity exactly in the same manner or through the same theological aspects.

Concrete Dissimilarities

It is not difficult to notice that each church differs in some aspects of its understanding of the Trinity. The main divergent points with regard to their understanding of the Trinity are: firstly, the nuances and variations on the concept of God as Triune based on the usage of Greek philosophy by the Roman Catholic Church regarding the concept of God as Triune. Secondly, the way they explain the internal relationship of the Godhead (the procession of the Son and the Holy Spirit). **There are many discrepancies, but I will stand by these two aspects, for they present differences that emphasize the subordinationism and the modalistic implications concerning the nature of God as well as the possible existence of vestiges of tritheism in their approaches.**

¹⁶⁴ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 268-271, 279-281, 441, 444, 456-457, 461, 467-469, 599, 624, 639-647, 660.

¹⁶⁵ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 63-685, 687, 690; Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 71.

¹⁶⁶ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 234, 237; Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 29.

Ontological Subordinationism

Based on philosophical speculation, the Roman Catholic Church affirms that “God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end”.¹⁶⁷ It argues that the Son is “eternally begotten [not made] of the Father”¹⁶⁸ and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. In other words, “the eternal order of the divine persons in their consubstantial communion implies that the Father, as ‘the principle without principle,’ is the first origin of the Spirit, but also that, as Father of the only Son, He is, with the Son, the single principle from which the Holy Spirit proceeds”.¹⁶⁹ This argument is based upon the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers who saw God the Father as *archē/principium*¹⁷⁰ or the Father as the monarchy of the whole Trinity, the Unbegotten or “the First Cause”,¹⁷¹ the one who establishes the divine unity.

Seventh-day Adventists, in contrast, admit that this plurality of persons within the Godhead should be seen as “a unity of three co-eternal persons having a unique and mysterious relationship”.¹⁷² Adventist theology recognizes that when the Roman Catholic trinitarian approach states the Father as the first origin of the whole divinity¹⁷³, where in the process of the eternal generation the Son is begotten and the Spirit processed from both, determined by motion within the being of God, this inevitably leads to the fact that the Father is ontologically and hierarchically superior in relation to the Son and the Spirit.¹⁷⁴ If the two other divine

¹⁶⁷ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 213.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 239, 245, 254-256. Cf. Basil of Caesarea *On the Spirit* 18.47 (NPNE, 8.29-30); Gregory of Nazianzus *The Third Theological Oration on the Son* 2 (NPNE, 7.301, trans. Browne and Swallow).

¹⁷¹ Gregory of Nazianzus *The Fifth Theological Oration on the Holy Spirit* 7-8, 14 (NPNE, 7.319-322).

¹⁷² Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 29. Cf. Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 83.

¹⁷³ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.° 238.

¹⁷⁴ See Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:132; Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 131.

Persons are caused by the Father, then they are consequently subordinate and dependent upon His being, particularly when it is said that this procession from God means communication of the divine nature.¹⁷⁵ Though stating that the procession of the Son does “indicate the order of origin of one person from another and not their subordination one to another”,¹⁷⁶ this Catholic argument is not satisfactory because it embraces the philosophical argument to formulate the idea of the Son and the Spirit as caused by the Father (the Cause).¹⁷⁷ It implies, for instance, that the Father can impose His will upon the Son, who is not able to come to the Father by His own will (voluntarily). It suggests that the Son’s hypostasis is dependent on the Father.¹⁷⁸ It is not a Scriptural argument.

For Adventists, God’s being is eternally temporal. Catholics affirm the opposite approach by stating that the Son and the Holy Spirit were generated in eternal timelessness from the Father. They are eternally generated and have the same essence as the Father. For Adventists, this idea of God the Father as the cause of each of the other members of the Godhead does not mean that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were generated in timelessness by the Father. Adventists then believe that if this Roman Catholic argument is applied to the inner structure of the divine nature, the Son, therefore, must have been begotten from the Father’s substance as a divine being but could not be truly eternal, for His generation had at some point a temporal beginning. This prominence of the Father as the first cause of the Godhead (as understood by Roman Catholics) must be described in the ontological sense of the dependency of the Son and the Holy Spirit on the Father in their relationship to the Father.¹⁷⁹ Adventists refuse to

¹⁷⁵ Aquinas, *The Trinity*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Trepè, “Saint Augustine”, 4:428. Cf. also CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 255; Augustine *On the Trinity* 4.20.27-29 (NPNE, 3.83-85); Augustine *The city of God* 11.10 (NPNE, 2.210).

¹⁷⁷ The following scholarly works help to identify a similar idea: Bray, *The doctrine of God*, 159; Mackey, *The christian experience of God*, 148-152; Alister E. McGrath, *Historical theology: An introduction to the history of christian thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 66.

¹⁷⁸ Bray, *The doctrine of God*, 163-164; Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: the image of Christ in the mirror of heresy and orthodoxy from the apostles to the present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 153.

¹⁷⁹ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:149.

admit the inferiority of the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹⁸⁰ Such a view results in much speculation and needs the logic of philosophy, and totally dependent on elements of Platonism.

The Seventh-day Adventist theology views this theme in light of the immanent and economic Trinity. Thus, the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit in atemporality (as defended by Catholics) are totally unnecessary. Adventists view the divine action of the Trinity in relation to human salvation within time. Any subordination of function is merely temporal.¹⁸¹ If this generation were eternal it would presuppose a subordination of the persons of the Son and the Spirit in relation to the Father who is ontologically and hierarchically superior to the Son and the Spirit.

Adventists believe that this subordination of the Son to his Father is not in any ontological sense an indication of dependency. It is “as if the reality of God the Son were dependent on the reality of God the Father”.¹⁸² Instead, it has to do with “involvement of the Godhead in accomplishing the work of salvation”,¹⁸³ which is continuous in Christ’s post-resurrection ministry in the heavenly sanctuary for a limited period of time.¹⁸⁴ The subordination of the Son, in relation to the Father, cannot be confused with “the inner structure of divine reality”¹⁸⁵ as involving them. Thus, Adventists believe that the subordinationism of the Son is best understood within the context of the incarnation. Jesus described it as “obedience to the Father”¹⁸⁶ but not in an ontological sense.

Vestiges of Tritheism

In the Roman Catholic Church position, the Cappadocians formulated the doctrine of the Trinity by promoting the logical idea that God

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 12:126-127.

¹⁸¹ Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 129-130, 162-213.

¹⁸² Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:126.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 12:127.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 12:128.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 12:126. Cf. Gulley, *Creation, Christ, salvation*, 397-398.

¹⁸⁶ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:127.

“is a God in three Persons who form the most profound unity that exists: divine unity”¹⁸⁷ summarized in the formula of one *ousia* and three *hypostases* (or *una substantia, tres personae*). The three Persons of the Trinity “are distinct from one another in their relations of origin”.¹⁸⁸ This social analogy, which explains the three-in-oneness of the Godhead, explains the fact that the Son is eternally generated by the Father (the Son is thus a part of the Father’s image) and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and receives the Father’s wisdom.¹⁸⁹ This occurs because, according to Gregory of Nazianzus, the Father is “the unique ἀρχή, the Origin or Source or Author in the Trinity”.¹⁹⁰ However, such affirmation does not mean that this trinitarian theology is exempt from problems. Thus, Adventists see this social analogy as approximating tritheism. If the two other divine Persons are caused by the Father, then they are consequently subordinate and dependent upon His being, particularly when it is said that this procession from God means communication of the divine nature. This philosophical concept of the Father (who has no source) as the source and origin of all divinity defended by Catholic theology virtually gives support to the argument that there are three Gods instead of one God. It means that this social analogy, in the manner exposed, is in risk of establishing itself between Arianism and Sabellianism,¹⁹¹ and consequently, it is not easy to avoid the fact that they are accused of tritheism.¹⁹² Even though this formula tries to protect the trinitarian doctrine against

¹⁸⁷ Benedict XVI, *The fathers of the church*, 56. Cf. CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 242, 245.

¹⁸⁸ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 253.

¹⁸⁹ Roger E. Olson, *The story of christian theology: twenty centuries of tradition and reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 187; Geoffrey William Hugo Lampe, “Christian theology in the patristic period”, in *A history of christian doctrine*, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 113-114.

¹⁹⁰ Noble, “Nazianzen’s doctrine of the Trinity”, 27:95. Gregory of Nazianzus points to God as Monarchy, the first cause or origin of the Son and the Spirit. See Gregory of Nazianzus *The third theological oration on the Son 2* (NPNE, 7.301).

¹⁹¹ For a similar explanation, see Basil Studer, *Trinity and incarnation: the faith of the early church*, trans. Matthias Westerhoff (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 145.

¹⁹² Studer, *Trinity and incarnation*, 145; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 361-363, 865-866; Lampe, “Christian theology”, 113-115; George Leonard Prestige, *God in patristic thought* (London, UK: SPCK, 1964), 242; Heick, *A history of*

Modalism, the same cannot be said for tritheism,¹⁹³ about it somehow threatens the divine unity.¹⁹⁴ This gives the impression that *ousia/substantia* is an abstract entity, effectively serving as a fourth God, apart from the three divine Persons.¹⁹⁵ The impression is given that the being itself is larger than its existence. The divine essence is seen as more “significant than the Trinity of persons”.¹⁹⁶ Consequently is the *ousia* of the Father more than in the other persons of the Trinity.¹⁹⁷ The explanation of these internal relations and distinctive properties of the members of the Godhead is an idea of God’s immutability that follows Greek philosophy and it has *per se* difficulty in relating the paradox of both the Unity and the Trinity of God.¹⁹⁸ Thus, this approach, as portrayed by Roman Catholics, is, from the standpoint of Adventists, a conceptual contradiction to Scripture.

Generation of the Son and Procession of the Holy Spirit

Another major distinction between Adventists and Roman Catholics, in terms of their understanding of the Trinity, concerns the concept of eternal generation. The Roman Catholic Church assumes that the eternal generation of the Son (*filiation*, eternally begotten or bringing forth) and the eternal procession of the Spirit (*spiration*, eternally proceeds) within the Trinity means that the Father is both totally transcendent and the origin of all.¹⁹⁹ Thus, the Son (*λόγος/verbum/Word*) is equally

christian thought, 1:160-161; Maurice Wiles, *The christian fathers* (London, UK: SCM, 1981), 47; Origen *Commentary on John 2.6* (ANF, 10.328-329).

¹⁹³ Erickson, *Christian theology*, 2nd ed., 362.

¹⁹⁴ Studer, *Trinity and incarnation*, 145; Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 242-264.

¹⁹⁵ Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 130-131; William C. Placher, *A History of christian theology: an introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1983), 78; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The christian faith* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963), 2:741-747.

¹⁹⁶ Bray, *The doctrine of God*, 164.

¹⁹⁷ Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 130.

¹⁹⁸ Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation*, 145.

¹⁹⁹ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 254; McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1248; Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A concise dictionary of theology*, rev. ed. (2010), s.v. “Processions”.

divine because He is eternally originated within the Godhead, and the Holy Spirit, proceeding (*processio ad intra*) from the Father and the Son (*Filioque*), is consubstantial with both. But the Father is the origin of the entire divinity, that is, He is responsible for the origination of the second and third persons of the Trinity.²⁰⁰ God is timeless and spaceless, the Son is eternally begotten (bringing forth), and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (*Filioque*).

Adventists affirm that “we do not logically need to view them as such”²⁰¹ for they strongly believe that the Son is not the One who is begotten and the Holy Spirit is not the One who proceeds forth in the Roman Catholic sense of monarchy. Seventh-day Adventists have a different position from that of Roman Catholics. Whereas Catholic theology admits a nontemporal and eternal generation of the Son and an eternal procession of the Spirit in an inward activity of the Godhead, Adventists argue that this generation of the Son and procession of the Holy Spirit does not refer to an inner process of the Godhead. Adventists believe “there is no origin of the Son from the Father”.²⁰² They argue that Catholics misunderstand John 8,42; 15,26; 16,27, and 30, because these texts refer to Jesus’ coming into the world, and do not refer to His origin.²⁰³ Jesus united infinite time in eternity alongside God the Father in heaven includes finite time alongside humans. He came to this earth during His incarnation.²⁰⁴ The eternal Son of God entered into “human history as the Son of Men”.²⁰⁵ He experienced a different communion with the other two persons of the Godhead. Jesus Christ compared His procession with the disciples being sent forth by Him in historical and temporal terms: He clearly said “as the Father has *sent* Me, I also *send* you” (John 20,21,

²⁰⁰ CCC, part 1, sec. 2, n.º 245.

²⁰¹ Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 155.

²⁰² Guley, *Creation, Christ, Salvation*, 398.

²⁰³ Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 171-172; Canale, *Basic elements of christian theology*, 92-93.

²⁰⁴ Guley, *Creation, Christ, Salvation*, 396; Guley, *God as Trinity*, 178.

²⁰⁵ Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 171-172.

NAS; italics added).²⁰⁶ Adventists believe that Jesus taught on earth that He “proceeded” from the Father. He meant that the Father sent Him to the world in an incarnate state “to fulfill a specific mission in time and space—to save the world (1 John 4,14).

While Catholics insist that the procession of the Holy Spirit is part of the essential inner relationships of the persons of the Godhead, Adventists, in contrast, view this procession as the economic Trinity, whereby the Spirit comes (proceeds, *evkporeu,etai*) from the Father and the Son (John 14,26; 15,26) from heaven to earth (John 16,8) as a *alloy para,klh-toj* (“another Mediator,” or “Helper,” or “Advocate,” John 14,16) in continuation with the earthly ministry of Jesus.²⁰⁷

This *processio ad intra* of the Spirit (*Filioque*) is not such an ontologically interior motion, happening in the very being of the Godhead, but “the inner divine activity involved in sending the Holy Spirit”²⁰⁸ into human history for the purpose of human salvation. The “procession” is, in reality, the “historical coming” of the Holy Spirit from heaven to earth, and mainly, to the hearts of humankind.²⁰⁹ The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms that the Holy Spirit was “sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children”,²¹⁰ involving a temporal correlation with the people of God across the world.

Therefore, Adventist theology neither admits the Son’s eternal origin nor the eternal (double) procession of the Spirit within the Trinity as defended by Catholic theology. The eternal generation of the Son (*filiation*) and procession of the Spirit (*spiration*) within the Trinity should be understood as related to the origin of the Son’s incarnation and the Spirit’s mission involved in a soteriological process. According to Adventist theology, this Catholic idea that sees the Son as eternally begotten and

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Amin Rodor, “O Espírito-*Parákletos* no quarto evangelho”, *Parousia* 2, n.º 2 (2006): 53-67.

²⁰⁸ Canale, “Doctrine of God”, 12:132.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 12:133; Canale, *Basic elements of christian theology*, 94.

²¹⁰ General Conference of SDAs, *Church Manual*, 157.

the Holy Spirit as proceeding ontologically from both the Father and the Son is not biblical.

Conclusions

This article has examined the similarities and differences between the Seventh-day Adventist position and the Roman Catholic one about the Trinity. The so called Historic Adventists (or neo-restorationists) have tried to demonstrate that Seventh-day Adventists have modified its original antitrinitarian view by supplanting it with another trinitarian view defended by Roman Catholicism. As has been demonstrated, the Seventh-day Adventist theology did not present any significant doctrinal modification in the sense of adapting or accommodating its trinitarian doctrine to the theological trends of the teachings of Catholic dogma regarding of the blessed Trinity.

In the light of the evidence provided by the analysis of these comparisons between the Roman Catholic trinitarian dogma and the Seventh-day Adventist trinitarian doctrine, my conclusions are as follows.

Common points of understanding exist, especially with regard to the distinctiveness of the persons and the unity of essence within the Godhead. But they also clearly differ from one another in terms of how they explain this unity as well as the distinctiveness of each of the Persons in the Trinity. Similarities exist between the approaches of each church to the Trinity doctrine. They both recognize that the Trinity consists of three divine and co-eternal Persons —the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—, they recognize that they are clearly distinct from one another, they also recognize and defend the union of the divine and human natures (two natures united in one single person) in the eternal Son, and they share the same view in relation to the third Person of the Trinity by admitting that He is eternal and consubstantial with the Father and the Son, and does not exist as an impersonal force of God. However, it is necessary to note that differences exist between Roman Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists regarding the Trinity.

The most obvious contrast is linked to the understanding of the formation of the Trinity. Roman Catholics view the Trinity dogma as not clearly revealed in Scripture. This dogma was developed during the post-biblical period through ecumenical councils, especially during the 4th and 5th centuries. Adventist theology sees Scripture as the only authoritative source for the Trinity and recognizes that the period of doctrinal formation was mainly confined to the biblical writers during the 1st century. Roman Catholic thinkers used pagan-inspired ideas during the formation of the Catholic trinitarian dogma. Hence, some Adventist theologians see this kind of interpretation as a misconception.

Thus, for Neo-restorationists who argue that, by adopting the doctrine of the Trinity, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has moved away from the position of the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers in the understanding of the nature of God and have stayed close to the Roman Catholic position, it is possible to affirm in a definite way that the Seventh-day Adventist trinitarian doctrine does not originate from the Roman Catholic trinitarian dogma. The way in which Seventh-day Adventists and Roman Catholics interpret God's reality also differs substantially. Roman Catholics relied heavily on Greek philosophical and speculative sources. These impacted the church's ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology (speculation). Speculation from human reason is, for the Roman Catholic Church, preferable to divine revelation. God's nature was conceptualized from tradition and Scripture, in contrast to Seventh-day Adventists who use the *sola-tota Scriptura* principle. Once Catholic trinitarian theology affirms that the Father causes, or is the central fount of, all the Godhead, its dogma seemingly cannot escape from the notion that the other members of the Trinity are ontologically subordinated nor notion of tritheism.

This analysis allowed me to conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity, as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Roman Catholic Church, exhibit major, even foundational, differences from one another. I would say that the doctrine of the Trinity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the dogma of the Trinity of the Roman Catholic Church are ideologically analogous, but not univocal. That is to say,

their trinitarian concepts would only be identical to one another if they explained the Trinity exactly in the same manner or through the same theological aspects. In their analogy of concepts they are similar in some points in the description of the content of their statements, but actually distinct in the biblically informed essence of their trinitarian content. They cannot be considered equal by having similarities in some aspects of the statement of their dogma/doctrine. They can be considered divergent by having different explanations when they define the reality of the Godhead. Therefore, their similarities do not make them entirely equal, but their dissimilarities make them clearly, even possibly fully different.

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