

Three Doctrines, One Faith

Commonsense Christianity

EVAN FALES

University of Iowa

evan-fales@uiowa.edu

Abstract: Religious thought and belief in a wide variety of traditions harbors claims that, on their face, offend against both science and common sense. At their extreme, they include affirmations that are paradoxical. They seem to defy the constraints of logic and reason generally. Yet they are often neither negotiable nor confined to the arena of “primitive” religions.

Here I will focus on three doctrines that have been situated at the heart of Christianity through nearly all its complex historical development and that are perplexing enough that they have been declared by many theologians to be “mysteries.” They have undoubtedly played a role in the development and interest in dialethic logics over the past few decades, for obvious reasons. This paper will challenge the claims of such devices to provide insight into the theological concerns that historically motivated the formation-history of those doctrines and their doctrinal centrality. I shall do so by offering an alternative framework for understanding those doctrines that adheres to defensible hermeneutical principles, results in rationally sensible interpretations, and provides a reading that makes better sense of their content, their historical motivations, and their importance to early Christians.

Keywords: Interpretive charity, Religious ontology, Trinity, Incarnation, Eucharist

1. Introduction

Few affirmations excite the blood of philosophers like apparent contradictions. And few match contradictions in prickling the ears of exegetes and interpreters—especially if the claims are culturally important and backed by long tradition. Christianity has offered hospitality to a number of such doctrines, three of which are central to orthodox faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the associated Eucharistic

doctrine of the Real Presence.¹ These, moreover, are intimately associated with a variety of other important doctrines, such as the Resurrection, the atemporality of God, and conceptions of vicarious atonement.

The present volume aims to consider what contribution certain modern explorations in formal logic might contribute to an understanding of these puzzling pronouncements. My own response to this exploration anchors one terminus of the possible answers to the question: absolutely nothing. The Fathers were not trafficking in contradictions, much less friendly to them. They were, I shall try to show, fundamentally concerned with what we now would understand to be social/political questions. My position is, however, less draconian and dogmatic than this might suggest. Recalcitrant problems invite drastic solutions. Among these, solutions that embrace contradiction plausibly anchor the opposite terminus of our options.

One way to evade swallowing such a conclusion is to maintain that formulations of the unruly doctrines can be rendered tractable by a recognition that they deploy non-literal uses of language, resorting to metaphor, analogy, or contradictory phrasing in order to “point toward” realities so profound and transcendent that the ordinary semantic and grammatical structures of human language cannot capture the realities they intimate. An appeal to dialethethic semantics, however, appears to grasp the bull by the horns and make the forbidden leap: some contradictions are, in fact, true.

It would be natural at this point to offer a general criticism of dialethic logic.² It is more to my purpose, however, to investigate whether a logic of this sort, even if it can be defended, can help us understand the meanings of certain classical (and for many Christians orthodox) ancient creedal statements that, on their face, appear to be logically odd or even incoherent.³ It is at least clear that within the history of Christian theology, the impetus for reflections upon the limits of logical consistency has been deeply provoked by early, extended and vigorous disputations regarding the intelligibility and correctness of doctrinal formulations of central theological commitments.

¹ To say nothing of The Resurrection (both of Jesus and of Christians). While not itself flatly contradictory, it quickly provokes daunting questions concerning the possibility of bodies that are immortal. What kind of being could be eligible for resurrection?

² The fact that a model-theoretical formal semantics can be provided for such systems does not, in my opinion, show that actual contradictions can be true.

³ Of course not all Christian denominations accept every – or even any – of these doctrines; nor are they the only doctrines given creedal status by some churches that appear to be logically or conceptually confused. Orthodox Quakers, for example, do not institutionally endorse any creedal claims.

That leaves wide open the legitimate question whether dialethic formal systems might contribute in some way to the formulation of other religious beliefs, whether within the ambit of Christian theology or some other religious tradition.

Of course, each of these doctrines has been subject, at length, to various attempts at metaphysical analysis. The rancor with which many of them were debated in the early Church testifies to the fact that the positions taken were not merely “theoretical,” but of immanent concern. Yet they remain recalcitrant, and the canonization of particular formulations has neither placated unease nor provided enough clarity of language to avoid hand-waving or, at last resort, a declaration of mystery.

While many things remain mysterious to us, and some are perhaps impenetrable, the appeal to mystery amounts to intellectual surrender, the abdication of understanding. This, in matters of existential import, is a heavy price. I do not aim, for the most part, to engage the lengthy history of these debates. Instead, I aim to outline, as briefly as possible, an ontological strategy that can shed some light on the metaphysical puzzles at issue. If successful, this has some advantages. The ontology I propose is relatively intuitive and comprehensive; it provides a key to avoiding contradiction and various other intellectual sins, and the core ideas are ancient, even if perhaps not then fully developed. The conceptual framework offers a set of analytical tools that are (I hope) contradiction-free and, importantly, untangle the mysteries that many Christian dogmas seem to entail.

Yet there is a methodological difficulty at the outset. As a matter of interpretive charity, one prefers to ascribe intellectual clarity to a thinker rather than confusion. But the theological diversity of Christian thought, from its earliest expressions, rules out consensus, and hence freedom from error. Nevertheless, one can see that history as revealing a partial recognition of the ontological foundations my proposal offers. It is, after all, common-place that we can be functionally competent at systematically using conceptual tools that are challenging to formulate explicitly and adequately in abstraction: we reason using rules of inference we don’t know how to formulate explicitly, deploy ordinary-language grammars that not even linguists fully understand, make use of legal systems that not even most lawyers can articulate a foundational defense for, let alone agree on the fundamental principles of, and so on. Why expect more of our theological ancestors? But even making allowance for that, my proposal does have one disadvantage. It will be judged pretty clearly unorthodox by current confessions.⁴

⁴ But not out of bounds by the early Church. Having said this, I would moreover insist that in reality the philosophical sophistication of the early Church Fathers—certainly by the Fourth Century

Prominent on the marquee of such creedal doctrines are the following:

- The Trinity: God is one substance, but also fully three persons.
- The Incarnation: The savior who died on the cross is at the same time both fully human and fully divine.
- The Eucharist: The Church is the Body of Christ. That body (and blood) is wholly and substantially present in every sacramental consumption of the wine and the wafer.⁵

The Roman Catholic Church, for one, has indeed come to be hospitable to claims that these dogmas are mysteries in the “strict” sense: understanding what makes them true lies beyond the capacity of the finite human mind, and will be so even for the beatified saints in heaven (though not beyond God’s powers of comprehension).⁶ At the same time, it is at best mysterious what it can be to *believe* a proposition if one doesn’t have (and can’t have) any conception of its content.⁷

As a way to interpret the early formulations of these doctrines, the appeal to dialectic logic is far-fetched, for at least three reasons. First, it is a general principle of interpretation that one exercises charity—roughly, that one gives pride of place, other things being equal—to an interpretation that, given the context of the text, provides an exegesis that presumes the text and its author(s)’ adherence to basic criteria of rationality, both as to logic and factual support. The criterion is unavoidably imprecise: also relevant will be any independent evidence concerning the source’s intelligence, competence, etc. But the Church Fathers, on the whole, had an abundance of both. And so unless there are explicit declarations that mystery is

and quite clearly before then, is nothing to be scorned. For reasons I shall presently allude to, their project in theological system-building presented no mean challenge to theological dexterity.

⁵ Simultaneously, the Church is also the Bride of Christ. None of the above are formal contradictions. But they can be made to entail contradictions with the addition of additional premises that are evident truisms. There are, of course, less paradoxical formulations of the meaning of the Eucharist.

⁶ The Roman Catholic appeal to mystery seems to have emerged at around the end of the 4th Century.

⁷ Although one’s understanding of the application of Lagrangians in General Relativity might be quite nebulous, one might still have excellent reasons to believe that these matters are clear to a large body of physicists, and could, with sufficient patience, become transparent to oneself as well. By way of contrast, one might have no such confidence regarding, say, the hermeneutical theories of post-modernists or the view that the entire body of Jesus (in the sense of the Hebrew *nephesh* or, more controversially, the Greek *soma*) is identical to each communion wafer.

unavoidable, and why, one must presume that they took their declarations to have intelligible content.

Second, the debates over creedal formulations were extensive, extended, and often theologically sophisticated. Clearly, whatever was at stake mattered. It would be folly to suppose that participants in these discussions over several centuries understood themselves from start to finish to be engaged in a discourse that was fundamentally unintelligible, with outcomes that were meant to be binding upon believers. Indeed, it is hard to fathom why the early Church Fathers would have debated so voluminously, vigorously, and indeed vituperatively over alternative phrasings they conceded to be nonsense.

The third reason is that the Fathers knew nothing about dialethic logic or formal semantics. One can make use of thought processes one cannot, or hasn't good reason to formalize; but in the face of the first two objections, it is not plausible to suppose that the Fathers were engaged in a project guided by implicit conceptual maneuvers along such lines.

It is true that in the Hellenistic world there was abundant traffic in so-called mystery religions, reference to "mysteries," use of magic ritual, and the like. But that was not a matter of invoking contradictory doctrines. Mysteries were trade secrets: esoteric doctrines and beliefs revealed only to those who had achieved "insider" status.

Of course a modern interpreter of these ancient religious traditions may not be engaged at all in an endeavor to bring to light original meaning or authorial intent. One might, for example, be interested in refurbishing such doctrines so as to recruit them for theological (or other) purposes of interest in a contemporary cultural context. In that case, appeal to modern analytic tools might be fair game. So, for example, Paul Tillich held that paradox and contradiction lay at the very heart of a Christian understanding of God and the world: in his view, a signal merit of such beliefs was that contradictions evoke the ineffable by pointing beyond themselves to something transcendent. Such an interpretive stance may be attractive to those whose religious sensibilities are stirred by the "otherness" of the holy and of God; they can serve as a basis for skeptical theism and apophaticism.

But herewith I will set aside dialethic interpretations of opaque religious doctrines, skeptical theism, and the like. My interest lies in addressing this challenge: can we find conceptual tools that are susceptible to quotidian rational defense and that, applied to religious doctrines that seem incoherent or impenetrable, yield something approximating a specification of their meaning that (a) makes sense, (b) makes sense *in context*—that is, as something open to plausible belief by persons situated at the relevant time and in their historical/cultural environment, and (c)

insofar as it is relevant to action, recommends policies that would be persuasive to some groups within that society and motivate corresponding action, even at some expense or sacrifice. In short, my interest lies in understanding what the three doctrines I have mentioned plausibly meant to those who formulated them and to suitable audiences that would have adopted and acted on them.

I should make clear that my aim is not to articulate a precise analysis of these doctrines in their orthodox formulations, although I will examine the creedal formulas at some length. It is rather to capture the conceptual arena in which the early debates were situated, both with respect to their underlying ontological dimensions, and with a view to understanding why the Fathers *cared about* how these questions were resolved. One might think the answer to that last question is obvious: they cared because the salvation of the Church was at stake. But, while correct, I suggest, this just begs the question. Why should one assume that the Fathers, who lived a couple of millennia ago, understand salvation in the same way as modern Christians do?

Another reason I am not primarily aiming to provide a precise articulation of creedal orthodoxy is because, as I have remarked, the debates were driven by complexities both at the level of correct ontological analysis and at the level of pragmatic consequences for the Church. I am not assuming that any of the early views, whether orthodox or heretical, had it “exactly right,” but rather with understanding the terms in which the debates were actually framed.⁸

2. A Short Excursus on ANE Official Titles, and Perhaps a Bit of Culture-Shock

Jesus was, in the eyes of early Christians, a king. As a first-born son claiming a Davidic lineage, he was seen as a potential successor to the long-vacated position of King of Israel. Accordingly, he became to be known as Jesus the Christ (*Christos*, a Greek royal title; in Hebrew: *Mashiach*, God’s Anointed One). In due course, he received that anointing.⁹ And, following Davidic traditions, he was also heir to the title ‘Son of God.’¹⁰ It is further beyond dispute that Christians accorded to Jesus a

⁸ This said, a particularly interesting question that will emerge is whether my analysis of the ontological terrain will favor the heresy of modalism. More on that below.

⁹ Though under highly unusual conditions, fraught with symbolic overtones. See Mt. 26:6-13.

¹⁰ See e.g. 2 Sam. 7:14, 1 Chron.17:13, Ps.89:26-28. That appellation, though not explicit, plays a trenchant polemical role in Jesus’ wisdom-contest with the Pharisees and Herodians in Mt. 22:16-22. Indeed, very early on Christians came to an understanding that Jesus, like David before him and like contemporaneous Roman emperors, was to be acknowledged as divine and Son of God—a fact that would not have been lost upon early Jewish and Gentile proselytes; see Beskow (1962). Beskow documents the multiple Roman royal descriptors Christians used to characterize Jesus, including,

status implied by Hellenistic conceptions of the role of emperors (see footnote 10). What they *meant* in using such terminology is of course a hermeneutical matter, to which I will soon return. Was this just metaphor or hyperbole, or was it something more?

There are a good many other ways in which it is all too easy for our understandings of ancient religious thought to be filtered through culturally anachronistic ways of thinking. Here I might mention, all too briefly, two that bear importantly upon the larger cultural world we are trying to get in focus.

As is common if not universal among cultures, those that emerged in the ANE were interested in understanding their world at large, and at a fundamental level. As part of this quest, in the context of religious thought, they pursued questions about origins, including, on the face of it, by developing creation myths. We tend to assimilate such efforts to our own pursuit of physics and cosmology. Though there are undeniable analogies along these lines, there is ample evidence that this skews the search for commonalities in the wrong direction. Creation myths, I suggest, are more often generated within conceptual frameworks in which origins are to be explained ultimately in terms of (or by way of analogy to) social interactions between persons, not blobs of matter, and, accordingly, are centrally concerned with the business of theorizing about the origins, nature, and justification for social arrangements among members of a society or culture; see Walton (2009). That is why, as anthropologists have long observed, attempts to conceptually cordon off tribal religious ideology from political questions involve artificially imposing our own conceptual categories upon the thought of other people in ways that significantly impair understanding. To illustrate this, consider the Greek term ‘kosmos,’ which appears frequently in the NT and is usually translated ‘world.’ That rendering is, unhelpfully, ambiguous. An examination of the contexts of usage will confirm that, almost without exception, occurrences of ‘kosmos’ are more naturally translated, in line with normal Greek usage of the period, as ‘social order’ (e.g. Jn.18:36) rather than as ‘physical universe.’

A second stumbling block is a theme that appears at numerous points in the NT. It concerns the attitude(s) of Jesus towards family duties and relationships. Jesus’ teachings are almost uniformly hostile to family ties, both affine and consanguine, and quite stridently so (e.g. Mt. 8 & 10; Lk.14). These passages appear, on an unvarnished reading, to be offensive, and so invite apologetic interpretations. But I

e.g. *Parousia*, *Basileus*, *autokratoras*, and others. Such theomonarchic ideas date to more than two millennia BCE, to at least the reign of Akhenaten in Egypt, if not earlier; see Bell (1997, 180-182). And going forward, they exerted a deep influence upon Medieval jurisprudence concerning the authority of kings; see Kantorowicz (1981).

suggest that Jesus indeed persistently devalued kinship, in ways that would have appalled ancient Jewish moral sensibilities even more than our own.¹¹

I shall have occasion in what follows to advert to these exegetical stumbling-blocks. But at present, I simply offer them as vivid examples of the myriad ways in which our own cultural presuppositions can interfere with interpretation.

3. The Metaphysics of Social Facts

The above remarks, in ways that I have yet to elucidate, are intended to provide prolegomena and context to the metaphysical work that remains to be done. That constitutes the main course of my project. It is time to get down to that business.

A. *Three Gods or One?*

We begin with the doctrine of the Trinity, which brings into view the basic ontology that serves to clarify the other two doctrines to be dissected and, by extension, provides tools for making sense of much else besides.

Let's first bring the issue closer to home. The President of the United States is, for the nonce, Donald Trump. But eventually, the President will no longer be Trump, if only because human lifespans are finite. Let's suppose the successor turns out to be Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. She is then the President. The identity of the office remains the same. But not the identity of the occupier of that office. So neither Trump nor AOC can be identical to the President. The 'is' in these occurrences is not the 'is' of identity. But then, what is it? The answer to that question lies at the foundation of our inquiry.

The President of the United States is an officer who occupies a position in the nation's social structure. I shall say that the President is a *personage*. Occupancy of the office—a social role—is a legally or conventionally defined status. There are many such positions in most societies: father, step-mother, daughter, son-in-law, Postmaster General, Rotary Club President, etc. Not all social relationships are of this sort—e.g. 'best friend.' The line between formal and informal roles isn't always sharp: is the Village Blacksmith an officer? But any analysis of a *social structure* must

¹¹ These claims are well supported by the textual evidence, and by the ways in which literal interpretation is congruent with larger documentary and cultural evidence. For much fuller argument, see Fales (2021, Chapters 6, Sec. IV and 12, Secs. IV–VI). If the above claims strain readers' credulity, I suggest that their acceptance is at least a milder sin against intuitions that an acceptance of patent contradictions, as per below.

recognize the existence of formal, culturally defined statuses and their (jural and other) regularized relationships.

One may consider such a structure abstractly, but, normally, its existence is in some intimate way dependent upon there being actual human individuals who serve to fulfill constituent roles. I shall call these human individuals, considered apart from their social standing, (natural) *persons*. Persons have been created by Mother Nature; personages and the other formal accoutrements of social structure are created by persons. They are creatures of “convention.” And it is, literally, not inapt to characterize them as *super-natural* entities. This I intend to be a metaphysically loaded claim: that the state of affairs of there being a personage/officer who occupies a social role in a society is not *reducible to* facts about existing *persons*, their natural relationships and interactions, and/or their mental states. The argument for this ontological claim cannot be set out in the present confines; it entails an analysis of reductive explanations generally, and a good deal else. I shall have here to take it on-board as a premise of my argument.¹²

I maintain, then, that *persons* and *personages* are ontologically distinct. The former are subject to death; the latter are, at least in principle, able to endure indefinitely, insofar as social structures are durable in that sense. The former are physically located where their bodies are. The spatio-temporal locations of the latter are to be determined, in most cases, by the locations of those who *embody* them. But, as we shall see, there are many, and interesting, extensions and exceptions to that rule. The intelligibility of these extensions reflects the intelligibility – and practical necessity – of the flexibility of conceptual resources available in the construction of human social conventions.¹³

There are common-sensical ways to expand upon the ontology of persons, personages, and social structures. Not only natural persons, but collectives of them bound together by appropriate systems of social relations are regularly, indeed almost universally, conceived of in ways modeled upon our natural conception of persons occupying social roles. The obvious examples are societies themselves and institutional sub-groups: nations, tribes, clans, armies, corporations, political parties, and so on. Without further thought, human members of perhaps every culture apply

¹² But see Fales (2021, Chap. 6, Sec. IV) for a fleshed-out analysis. There is a considerable literature regarding this question.

¹³ My resistance to reductive analysis blocks the dismissal of such conventions as “mere fictions” or figments that require no ontological bedrock. In some cases there is no clear sense in which spatial location can be assigned. One can speak of locations where the U.S. legal system is in force (or not); but there is no ordinary sense in which that system itself occupies a location in space. The system itself is not a spatial thing.

to social realities the conceptual categories rooted in thought about natural persons and their natural relationships. Nations, tribes, etc. are agents. Although individual opinions may be divided, a nation can act “with one mind.” Corporations can be deemed innocent or guilty under the law, and treated accordingly. Examples, obviously, can be adduced indefinitely; the language of social realities is grounded in and permeated by the conceptual resources of folk psychology.¹⁴

B. Embodiment

Thus far, I have made a number of observations about how we think and speak about our social world. It is now necessary to focus more particularly on the implied ontological structure of social facts. What sort of thing is a personage? And how are personages related to persons? We may helpfully begin with another category of facts that display (initially) surprisingly close structural analogies to social facts: works of art. The analogies are not entirely happenstance: both social realities and artworks are human artifacts, and both, while rooted in the soil of human nature, are identified in ways that are essentially governed by human conventions.

A fundamental commonality that social facts have with what it is to be a work of art of a certain kind is that, in both cases, we have states of affairs to which we have access by way of sense perception, but which are not simply physical phenomena. What they “are” is deeply a matter of how they are related to human artifice, traditions, and conventions. In particular, we find the following similarities. Just as social institutions and personages are not, per se, physical things, so, too, works of art are not per se physical things. And, just as claims to social status, authority, and significance are adjudicated within traditionally developed criteria of legitimacy, so, too, are artworks.

When we ask, as a general matter, what sorts of things works of art *are*, we are asking both what constitutes them as art and correlatively, how they are to be identified and individuated. That literary works, musical compositions, and lithographs are not physical (or, for that matter mental) objects becomes readily apparent once one asks, e.g., with which physical object Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is identical. The mental states by means of which Tolstoy imagined the narrative? The

¹⁴ Reductivists (methodological individualists) will naturally think of such usage as analogical. Analogical interpretations are possible, but so are deeper ontological commitments. Collectivist ideologies can, with empirical justification, argue that normal individual personhood itself is so deeply entangled biologically with the social nature of human beings that there can be no such thing as the maturation of a fully and normally functional human personality in the absence of social interactions with parents, peers, and larger human collectivities.

original manuscript? Any given copy of the book? Obviously, none of these will serve. Any two copies are distinct; neither, then, can be identical to the novel itself. *Mutatis mutandis* for musical works. Oil paintings, however, might seem to offer an exception to this rule. The “original” is what counts. But must it be? And how deeply embedded is this artistic convention? Sculptures that are bronze castings can, and do, come in limited editions. What about original editions of Audubon’s ornithological illustrations? In any event, the clear cases suffice to raise the point that the ‘is’ of strict or even gen-identity cannot be the relation between many works of art and their material realizations.

The English particle ‘is’ is polysemic. In addition to the ‘is’ of identity and the ‘is’ of predication, we find syncategorematic uses (“It is raining.”), metaphor, and others. The use that meets our present need is none of these. The ‘is’ we must characterize is the ‘is’ that appears in the first paragraph under section A above, where it is deployed in a claim about social facts. I shall dub it the ‘is’ of *embodiment*: just as oil paint on canvas embodies Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and my copy of *Moby Dick* embodies Melville’s greatest novel, so Trump currently embodies the office of U.S. President and, someday, AOC may win that distinction.

Let us here enumerate, without defense, a number of important features of the embodiment relation.

- It is anti-reflexive and anti-symmetric; hence not identity.
- It is anti-reflexive and anti-symmetric; hence not identity.
- It is not an instantiation relation; nor is it a relation of constitution, a part/whole relation, a determinate/determinable relation.
- It is a relation between particulars.
- One embodied thing can be simultaneously or collectively be embodied in several embodiers, and one embodier can simultaneously embody several embody-ables.
- It may be—though I have no view on this point—true of every particular that it is either a material particular or ultimately embodied in material particular(s).¹⁵
- It does not admit of degrees of strength or intensity. But it can, in some instances, admit of degrees of adequacy or perfection (as for example, performances of a symphony or a social role).

¹⁵ If it is true that the relation between a mind and a brain (or an animal) is one of embodiment, then this becomes more plausible. Mind-embodiment might then also be unique in that the thing embodied is not something that is essentially or intrinsically governed by conventions.

- Embodiment of a whole can be comprised of embodiments of its parts, suitably arranged.¹⁶

This list of features, for which I make no claim of comprehensiveness, should suffice for present purposes.

Embodiment can in many instances be *vague*. Take my university. It is an institution. What embodies it? This can vary over time. It includes a faculty, student body, administration and staff, a campus or two with buildings and other physical facilities, a state-issued charter, and a good many other things of which I am unaware. On some matters, the question may not admit of a determinate answer. Is the university partly embodied in its shrubbery? In its various business affiliations and research partnerships? And so on. But again, for present purposes, it is not necessary to settle such questions.

Rather, let us focus first on natural persons and their social roles. A given person may have—ordinarily will have—several such roles. She may be a citizen, a (legal) mother, a committee chair, etc. Some roles may legitimately be filled by only one person at a time—e.g., the U. S. Presidency. Others may, or must, have multiple embodiments. The role of U.S. Senator from Iowa is embodied by two persons at a time. We may note that when a person X occupies several social positions, he or she is simultaneously an embodiment of several personages. In such cases, X will fully embody several personages. *At the same time*, a colleague Y might also fully embody some of those same personages: X and Y might fully embody the personage US Senator from Iowa. There is here no radical puzzle about individuation or identity. And we gain a glimpse of how the doctrine of the Trinity might be both true and non-paradoxical.

Before we can draw such a conclusion, however, we must first say more about what sorts of things gods and persons of a Trinity might be—and have historically been understood to have been. Historically, the formulation of the Constantinople 325 CE first version of the Nicene Creed has expressed the doctrine of the Trinity by holding that God (Θεόν) is one essence (hypostasis, ὑποστάσεως) but also one

¹⁶ A further feature of embodiment is that, under certain conditions, it is possible for the relation to support instantaneous action at a distance between physical bodies. Suppose a certain act A is illegal in society S. S is jointly embodied by two physically distant populations P1 and P2. The legislature is located in the territory occupied by P1; light-signal communication between the two takes 24 hours. Any law in effect for P1 also governs P2. On Monday morning at 10 am the legislature vacates law L. So in both P1 and P2 territories, L becomes null and void at 10. (If at 11am someone in P2 performs an act forbidden by L, they have broken no law; if arrested, they will be summarily released upon arrival of the news on Tuesday. When P1-region ceases to embody L on Monday, P2-territory also ceases to *at that very moment*. Nor is this a mere “Cambridge change.”

substance (*homoousio*).¹⁷ The 381 CE Constantinople revision uses only ὁμοούσιον. The terms *homoousion* and *hypostasis* are, in these contexts, terms of art: they carry philosophical baggage. So from the start, translation is not a straightforward task. The usual rendition into English has it that God is one *substance* but three *persons*. And, since we ordinarily understand (human) persons to be individual substances, this invites trouble.

And perhaps worse, even such a superficial survey of historical formulations of Trinitarian doctrine suggests that the early theologians were beset by indecisiveness, and perhaps significant vagueness, in their efforts to articulate with clarity the ontological structure of the Godhead. The difficulties besetting interpretation are compounded by likely non-uniformities in their usage of the philosophical terminology they were borrowing, and by genuine conceptual disagreements.¹⁸ The upshot of this historical circumstance, making allowance for the possibility that fine-grained analysis of the textual traditions may untangle some of the threads, is complexity begetting perplexity.

How, then, should one best proceed? Are genuine contradictions being consciously and intentionally propounded? Or are the incongruities merely apparent and satisfactorily resolved by greater care in language? Is there room here for maneuver?

The earliest of the Latin Creeds—the Athanasian Creed from the Fourth Century—provides an interesting and suggestive clue.¹⁹ It reads, in part:

Neither confounding the Persons, nor *Neque confundentes personas, neque*
dividing the substance. *substantiam seperantes.*

For there is one person of the Father, *Alia est enim persona Patris alia Filii, alia*
another of the Son, another of the Holy *Spiritus Sancti:*
Spirit.

¹⁷ The latter was added at the insistence of Constantine, siding with Athanasius against Arius, and motivated by the political implication that ὁμοούσιον accorded greater authority to the emperor. See also footnote 28.

¹⁸ See <https://www.todayscatholicworld.com/athanasian-creed.htm>. What is more—but this is speculation on my part—it may have been that the difficulties the Fathers faced in finding accurate technical language for their purposes derives in part from their having come under the influence of Hellenistic philosophical traditions that were profoundly engaged with developing conceptual tools aimed at understanding the material world: the fundamental constituents of matter, and the natural history of living things. Although Greek philosophy was undeniably also engaged deeply in matters of social and political theory, the Fathers may have, for the purposes of theology, been especially attracted to analyses grounded in ideas of substances and essences.

¹⁹ It was at about this time that the NT canon appears to have been settled.

But the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have one divinity, equal glory, and coeternal majesty. *Sed Patris, et Fili, et Spiritus Sancti una est divinitas, aequalis gloria, coeterna maiestas.*

What the Father is, the Son is, and the Holy Spirit is. *Qualis Pater, talis Filius, talis Spiritus Sanctus.*

The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated. *Increatus Pater, increatus Filius, increatus Spiritus Sanctus.*

The Father is boundless, the Son is boundless, and the Holy Spirit is boundless. *Immensus Pater, immensus Filius, immensus Spiritus Sanctus.*

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal. *Aeternus Pater, aeternus Filius, aeternus Spiritus Sanctus.*

Nevertheless, there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being. *Et tamen non tres aeterni, sed unus aeternus.*

So there are not three uncreated beings, nor three boundless beings, but one uncreated being and one boundless being. *Sicut non tres increati, nec tres immensi, sed unus increatus, et unus immensus.*

Likewise, the Father is omnipotent, the Son is omnipotent, the Holy Spirit is omnipotent. *Similiter omnipotens Pater, omnipotens Filius, omnipotens Spiritus Sanctus.*

Yet there are not three omnipotent beings, but one omnipotent being. *Et tamen non tres omnipotentes, sed unus omnipotens.*

Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. *Ita Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Deus Spiritus Sanctus.*

However, there are not three gods, but one God. *Et tamen non tres dii, sed unus est Deus.*

Here we find the one *substantium* of the Lord God to be such that its being somehow involves *tres personae*, each of them sharing, however, *as one being*, the identical essential properties: uncreatedness, boundlessness, and omnipotence. But what, then, is it to be, or have, a *persona*? What is it for the Father (Son, Holy Spirit) to “be” the Lord?

The etymology of the word ‘*persona*’ is suggestive. The root meaning of the term is “mask.” It referred to the masks that the actors in ancient Roman theater performances wore to establish themselves as the various characters in a play. The mask, in other words, identified the *role* that an actor’s performance was

personifying. So a mask, or *persona*, denoted a role—that is to say, a locus within the cast—filled by an actor. Or, as I should prefer to say, the mask was to be identified with a personage—a social role contextualized by his or her participation in the story of the play. If so, then the ‘is’ of “Julius is the Consul in this evening’s performance” isn’t the ‘is’ of identity but the ‘is’ of playing the role—which is to say, he is, for the purposes of the play, portraying—embodying—a social role. If we understand the Athanasian Creed in these terms, we face two possibilities:

- a) ‘Lord’ is a proper name of an individual who embodies, simultaneously, a triad of closely interrelated roles: that of “Father”, that of “Son of Father”, and that of “Spirit.” or,
- b) ‘Lord’ designates a role, a position in which the defining duties are partitioned into three different but deeply interrelated “sub”-roles. Whoever is the embodiment of the role ‘Lord’ is, *a fortiori*, the embody-er of the subvenient roles.

An elaboration of these interpretations of the Trinity would suggest, I believe, that the second interpretation would provide a better “fit” for the meaning of the creed. However, for present purposes, I want rather to offer a brief discussion of what these role-designating terms could have meant, and then to analyze in these terms the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Real Presence, at least sufficiently to show how they, too, can very naturally be understood in terms of this same conceptual framework.²⁰

²⁰ This analysis, to be sure, raises (for the orthodox) the specter to Modalism. That suggests some greater complexity may be in order. However the very fact that Modalism was “on the table” for the Fathers signals that it contains an important insight. On the other hand, it was condemned and declared heretical. Taken too simply, it quickly raises difficulties. Does God play both Father and Son to himself at the same time? Or at different times? When he is crucified, which role is he playing—or is he simultaneously the one who is abandoned and the one who abandons? And so forth. These are sensible questions, that deserve a response. Our model of the Trinity must have more structure than actor-who-plays-multiple-roles.

Once again, the ontological “flexibility” of the embodiment relation offers opportunities. To illustrate, consider a musical example: say, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. It can be partly embodied (e.g. in a performance of just the fi movement) or wholly so. It can be embodied in different ways—in performances or in a score. The score can be embodied in multiple copies, with differing notations. A performance, in turn (it is not a physical thing) will be embodied in the actions of the musicians; and these, in turn, in certain bodily motions. Since embodiment is transitive, the Ninth will, sometimes, be ultimately embodied in many bodily motions and their effects. It takes some imagination to deploy such possibilities in constructing a fully fleshed-out model of the Trinity.

C. A Historical Precedent for Christian Trinitarianism?

I have already mentioned, briefly and in passing, a much earlier historical exercise in the creation of a deeply unitary conception of rulership—of monarchy, specifically—that bears an eerie structural resemblance to Christian Trinitarianism. That ideology of kingship emerged, with some variations, during the more than two millennia spanned by the history of one of the dominant cultures of the ANE: that of Egypt. Here I am singling out two aspects of that ideology (or rather, *those ideologies*, since, obviously, the structures and ideologies of the Egyptian state were far from static or even unified over that long period of time.

The first of these aspects concerns the ideology under which the relationship between a Pharaoh and his (or in a couple of instances, her) titular god was to be understood. Within Egyptian polytheism, we find recurrent institutional recognition of a divine hierarchy in which one god (or perhaps a couple) exercise dominion over the others, and over Egypt itself. A Pharaoh could, during his lifetime and upon his

A first step: at the most generic level, humans form social groups that follow certain norms of interaction; we may speak of social order or government. This is a genus, but what is its substance? Governing orders are not material things. Governments fall into types; there are monarchies, city states, hunter-gatherer tribes, and so on. None of these is a material thing; nor can the types be said to occupy space or time. Yet each has a *nature*. Its nature consists in its being an idealized structure constituted by a variety of institutions, social roles, laws, rules of succession, and relations between them. These, too, are not material things. Yet the institutions and roles can be understood as personages—as immaterial substances of a sort. They, too, have natures, that are determined by their form and functions. These “parts” of a social order determine its nature; they are distinct from one another, but together form the nature of a single substance, the nation or tribe.

On the ground, this, or timeless parts of it, can be embodied, partly or completely, multiply or singly by individual citizens, changing over time. A king can be both a father and a son, though *vis á vis* different persons, also citizens. The role of king can be multiply embodied (by the citizenry) and *at the same time* be singly embodied: medieval kings were both.

In a nutshell, the difficulty with Modalism is that there is insufficient agential “distance” between the contrasting roles that have to be simultaneously performed and the single agent who performs them. The solution is to recognize that there can be “layers” of agency, inasmuch as social roles are occupied by distinct personages, conceived as having individual agency. (Note that personages do not have the same relation to time as persons.) These may, in turn, be variously embodied, e.g., ultimately in the person of Jesus and/or the members of the Church collectively.

As with Beethoven’s Ninth, governments have a layered structure of immaterial personae, related in multiple rule-governed ways so as to form a single personage: a society. Working out further details—in short, developing a model that is consistent (more or less) with Scripture, is not the work of an afternoon, and is left as an exercise for the reader. My goal here, to repeat, is not to prescribe a given result so much as to provide conceptual space for a coherent solution.

death, come to be “identified with” one or another of these high gods (which included, at various times and inter alia, Horus, Osiris, Ra/Re, Amun, Aten, and others). The exact nature of this association between king and high god is somewhat obscure, and in any case changed over time. But kings sometimes assumed names upon coronation that included the name of their divine patron—as, e.g., Akhenaten, Tutankhamen, Hor-Aha, etc.). A king could be identified with the royal god Horus—and also as son of Osiris (Horus’ divine father)—and would, upon death, come to be identified with Osiris, the god of the underworld. Probably the most vigorous affirmations of such an identification occurred with the ascendancy of Amenhotep, who, upon ascendancy to the throne, changed his name to Akhenaten and declared an identification so intimate with his patron-god Aten that scholars have wondered whether a literal claim of identity was being made; see Bell (1997, 137-144)²¹

The second item worth mentioning is that the elaborate rituals attending the death of a Pharaoh and coronation of his successor (ideally, though in fact often not a son) involved a “passing of the baton” from the deceased father, for a couple of days still legally in power, to his heir: at which point the father became legally dead, and descended into the underworld. That “baton,” the King’s *ka*, was personified as the King’s spirit, or soul. And the social role that it played, both during the coronation ceremony and then thereafter as essential to the royal status of the heir, was functionally essentially the same as the authority-conferring role played by the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Bible, as it descends from Yahweh and comes to rest upon, or in, those human beings who have been chosen by Yahweh to do his will on earth.²² It will easily be seen how and where the embodiment relation should be inserted and deployed in an ontologically explicit telling of this story.

²¹ Akhenaten was a singularly autocratic ruler. His ideology did not outlast him (his son and heir, Tutankhamen, abandoned it). However, some historians have suggested that Akhenaten (ca. 1350 BCE) was the first historical figure to have embraced monotheism. It does seem possible that aspects of Egyptian theology and kingship ideology endured long enough to have had some influence, direct or indirect, upon Jewish conceptions of Yahweh and of his earthly king. But I do not know of any firmly established evidence for that.

²² Ordinarily, that Spirit came to rest upon one person in particular (at a time), but there was no ontological barrier to its finding multiple perches on occasions that called for some committee of human individuals to exercise jointly the required leadership (as in, e.g. Exod. 28:41 and Acts 2:2-4; cp. Jn.14:9-21. John does, interestingly and perhaps tellingly, say the spirit will “live with you” and “be in you”.).

D. The Incarnation

What is it for a human person to be incarnate? What, for that matter, would it be for a human person to be *disincarnate*? To ask this question is to be led almost immediately into a muddle. This should not come as a surprise. To be disincarnate is, literally, to lack a body—to be disembodied. Yet, to all appearances, human beings are just the sorts of things that, by nature, have bodies.

The source of the difficulty is, evidently, that we lack a clear and uncontroversial conception of what, ontologically speaking, it is to be a person—or to “have” a body without simply *being* a kind of body. Not that there has been any lack of reflection upon this matter; but the results are neither uniform or reassuring, even while boasting an ancient pedigree. Western modernity has popularized the view that a person is some sort of composite of a body and a soul and thus directly invites all the conceptual problems that attend the so-called mind/body question. These provide the soil in which we encounter such imagined creatures as disembodied souls, brains in vats, minds “programmed into” computer programs, artificial intelligences, and the like.

Rather different conceptions of persons have arisen in other cultures, including those in antiquity. In the singular brief ontological analysis of resurrection in the New Testament, we find Paul, philosophizing within a quite different tradition in philosophical anthropology, asserting that different kinds of material things—plants and stars, for example—have different bodies proper to their nature. And Paul distinguishes, with some lamentable obscurity, between the *soma pneumatikon* (spiritual body) acquired by saved Christians in the general Resurrection, and the *soma psychikon* (psychic body) accorded to the damned.

But I will not—and fortunately need not—attempt to untangle these aspects of the ontology of natural persons (and it faced the later Church Fathers with a hornet’s nest of perplexities). My reason for such delinquency is that the problem raised by the doctrine of the Incarnation is, as Paul’s own posing of the question in 1 Cor.15 suggests, less difficult and, in fact, amenable to solution using the conceptual tools we have at hand.

Paul, we must notice, does not pose the question by asking how it is that *Jesus* was resurrected, but as follows:

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ...

¹²Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ...

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

These passages (and indeed all of Chapter 15) make heavy exegetical demands, but what at present is most noteworthy is that Paul does not refer to his Savior by his given name, 'Jesus,' but by his divinely-conferred *title*. His reference, literally, is to the one who is the Moschiach—the newly conceived King fit to rule over the new creation (kingdom). This being will be cloaked in a new, immortal, "body". So he/it will be re-embodied, albeit in some novel way. What that novel way might involve will be the topic of our final quest, the quest for the "Body of Christ." But for the moment, it suffices to point out that what it is, ontologically, for there to be a King is for someone to embody a personage: the social role of monarch. And that role is, so long as the monarchy survives, enduring. In the case of an everlasting kingdom, it is, therefore, immortal.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, then, teaches that Jesus, a human being, was chosen by God (the Father) to be God (his Son, the Christ) and effected the embodiment of that personage in the man Jesus by "sending" it to him. The agent of transfer, the Spirit, was functionally analogous to the Pharaoh's *ka*.

E. The Body of Christ

And so we come, finally, to the Body of Christ. The sacrament of the Eucharist, the sacred communal meal, lies at the very heart of the ancient Church's conception of itself as a nation, a union of persons under one sovereign and one law. The canon that articulates the sacral content of the ritual, enacted for the first time according to the Synoptic Gospels at the Last Supper,²³ is one that unites the members of the Church into a single, corporate person, the Body of the King. It does so by way of the ritual transformation of bread and wine, through the offices of a priest acting on

²³ But at the feeding of the five thousand according to the Gospel of John.

behalf of the Christ, into the very body and the very blood of the Christ (and sending the Spirit; Jn. 14:26 ; Acts 1:8).

The religious resonances here are voluminous; explicating them requires a detailed examination of Jewish practices of sacrificial atonement, as presented in the Torah and in the Second Temple cult. That we must set largely aside.²⁴ Here my primary aim is to dispel the apparent paradoxicality of the doctrinal claim that the blessing of the bread and the wine ritually effects, in some “magical” way, the transformation of each wafer into the *entire* “body of Christ” and the transformation of each sip of wine into a considerable volume of blood: all this in plain defiance of the visual (and gustatory) experiences of a perhaps large congregation.

Aside from the mere testimony of the senses, we are presented with a demand to believe that some large number of individual wafers have each become identical with the one body of Christ: This, if anything, outdistances in profligacy the miracle of the Trinity.²⁵ Indeed, moving from the preposterous to the positively peculiar, we may note the early emergence of the Catholic doctrine that the Body of Christ is also the Bride of Christ.²⁶

Without entering into a proper discussion of the theological implications of these doctrines, which would take us far afield, we can nevertheless construct rather straightforwardly an ontology that satisfies the ideological structures at which this language aims. The required model rests on the fact, noted earlier, that the embodiment relation allows cases in which a single thing of the right kind can be multiply embodied. Here, the logical mistake of interpreting the ‘is’ of the doctrine of the real presence as that of (substantial) unity can be set aright by understanding the relation of the bread/wine to the body of Christ on the one hand and the bodies of the communicants, collectively conceived, on the other, to be embodiment.

²⁴ A fuller treatment is offered in Fales (2021, Chapters 6, Secs. 4-6 and 7).

²⁵ Protestant churches generally reject this ontological understanding of the Eucharist, but it is not difficult to discern, behind any appeal to ontological reservations, the political reasons that historically led to this doctrinal schism. Most Protestants, after all, nevertheless accept the apparent paradoxicality of the Trinity. John Locke, for example, while denouncing the doctrine of the Real Presence as incoherent in his “The Reasonableness of Christianity”, interestingly has nothing to say there about the parallel problem with the doctrine of the Trinity. Privately, however, he seems to have rejected orthodoxy on this matter; see Lucci (2020, Chap. 5).

²⁶ This doctrine had a varied history. Adopted in one form in the Third Century by Valentians, it entered mainstream Catholicism by the Fourth, with Augustine. Its roots are earlier: see Eph. 5:21-33. Paul may well have had in mind The Song of Solomon and Hos. 2:16-19. The obvious inference would be that Jesus is married to his own body. (This amounts to a kind of Modalism on steroids.) The suggestion that this sort of language is “merely symbolic” misses, I suggest, the deep ideological underpinnings of such terminology and in particular its legal dimensions.

Here is the picture: Jesus was a man. He embodied a certain persona: that of (a re-conceptualized) Jewish Messiah. When Jesus died, that persona was vacated: it was temporarily replaced by a multiply embodied personage, viz. the Church. The Church is collectively embodied by its (temporally varying) membership, its ultimate leadership having been temporarily delegated to the Apostles, as leaders *pro tem*. The Church, taken legally as a unitary “personage” is, more mundanely described, a social institution.²⁷ Each of its participants embodies that institution: embodies not just a part of it (a role), but, qua citizen, the social structure that is the institution itself. To be sure, that institution, holistically conceived, is embodied in different “ways,” by individual members, according as they occupy differing social positions that are structured into the whole. Among these human embodyers of the collectivity, there is, ideally, one that most fully and in the most unified and focused way embodies the whole. The individual human being who occupies this role is the reigning Messiah, the one who serves in the role of Sovereign. (A matter of central concern jurisprudentially is that the law specify under what conditions and by what authority the Sovereign, issuing edicts *ex cathedra*, is legitimately speaking *in loco societate*.)

It is the enduring population of the community, and in a special sense the lineage of its kings, that is (embodies) the immortal Body of Christ. And the union of the lineage’s embodiment with that of the collective whole was, in legal terms, analogized to the union between man and wife: the “atom” of social unity in human beings. In this sense, the advent of a qualified person to assume the role of Sovereign can be represented by the assignment of the Messiah personage to that human being; the collective retains however its role as Body of Christ and legal status as wife to husband.²⁸

²⁷ More precisely, the Church is embodied in its membership and other institutional hardware; it itself is an embodied personage, with a location in the map of socially related institutions that structured Roman society as a whole. And it itself was structured by multiple social roles and constituent institutions, in turn embodied by parishioners, each of whom also embodies a role as citizen. There seem to have been at least two claimants to leadership of the earliest form(s) of Christianity—two heirs to the position of leader *pro tem*: James and Peter. Little is known about their relationship, to each other and to the third emergent contender, Paul. But these historical developments bring to the fore the whole arena of thought and theories regarding the principles of legitimate creation of new institutions and legitimate propagation of existing ones.

²⁸ Cp. Is. 54:5, Hos. 2:16. When the English Parliament impeached Charles 1 and imposed the death penalty, it first deprived him of his status as King—and then re-embodied that role in the Parliament itself during the interregnum. See Kantorowicz (1957, 20–23). It is perhaps obvious that, flexible as the application of the embodiment relation is, political exigencies can lead to something of a tangle in fitting theory to practice.

4. Complications and Conclusion

Our brief discussion of the relation of embodiment and the conceptual resources it affords to systematic thought about social structure and relations may have made it seem easier to fit theory to social reality—at least in the Fathers’ struggles with their formulation of Church doctrine—than the historical record would suggest. Judging by the time it took, the energetic disagreements it spawned, and the evident intellectual effort expended to reach clarity, the efforts directed by the Church toward this project were anything but smooth sailing. What factors might have presented theologians with so many difficulties?

The Fathers faced at least three major hurdles imposed upon them by their historical circumstances. The first is the consequences of the cultural crises that roiled the ancient Near East during the last couple of centuries BCE and the first couple of centuries CE: major shifts in centers of power and cultural influence, chaotic failures of social institutions to control violent internal contests over legal authority and political power, wars, and population shifts. None of these were new occurrences, but their scale, coupled with increasing population density and new technologies, had increasing impact upon social stability and the autonomy and cultures of nations and cultural groups. In short, the very notions of social order and cultural identity—which were, at least *de jure*, founded upon fundamental structures of kinship—i.e. tribalism—were increasingly inadequate to the social realities on the ground.

The second is that various temporizing efforts to adapt tribal principles of social obligation to societies that had transcended the kin-boundaries required by that foundational political framework were tried and had failed. It had become increasingly clear that the shallow reach of kinship, and attempts to enlarge social cohesion by way of conquest and empire, provided no stable path to peace and prosperity. Christianity responded with a new idea, rooted in certain Jewish traditions: a principle of cohesion based, not on kinship, but on universal kingship and a theory of government founded upon a new conception of social union and sovereignty.

Third, such a transformation entailed, not only a new jurisprudential foundation, but a detailed specification of the qualifications for legitimate exercise of governing authority, from top to bottom. It would have to be shaped in ways that constructively redirected allegiance to old laws into new wineskins, while identifying and marginalizing or destroying the structures that constituted the heartbeat of tribalism.

To even survey all these aspects of the historical *Sitz im Leben* of early Christians would obviously be an enormous task, well beyond the scope of my project here. But it may be illuminating to say just a bit about one example of the sorts of theoretical issues that faced the Fathers, issues that heightened the already inevitable philosophical challenges of clearly formulating even a coherent metaphysical account of an “ideal” social structure in which relations between structural realities and flesh-and-blood human existence were cashed out in terms of a suitable theory of embodiment.

One of the sine-qua-non requirements of such a project was to re-conceptualize the source and nature of sovereignty, while drawing where possible upon the long history of thought about kingship and a king’s proper relations with Yahweh in Jewish Tanachic traditions.

An example: In the Fourth Century, when the Church finally found opportunity to make alliance with the Roman state—specifically with the emperor Constantine—they faced a considerable number of institutional/legal problems. Whatever conceptions various factions of the early Church had of the envisioned Kingdom of God, they now faced a power arrangement that crowned the existing Roman Emperor ruler of the social order. What about Jesus? And what about the Parousia?—not to mention the impending co-ordination of Roman law and institutions with those of the by-now complexly organized Church? Here are two things that happened. Jesus was, of course, no longer available to proclaim a successor. There was no Papacy.²⁹ Both Constantine and one of his supporters, the bishop Eusebius of Caesaria, intimated, in rather thinly veiled language, that, indeed, Constantine himself embodied the Parousia.³⁰

But more: a corollary unavoidable issue was the question: what is the foundation of the King/Emperor’s authority over Christians? There is abundant evidence to

²⁹ It was Constantine himself who later initiated the recognition of the bishops of Rome as pre-eminent Church leaders.

³⁰ This was evidently central to the deliberations of the Nicene Council. See Eusebius’ (339) *Life of Constantine*, 3.6–3.16. It appears that Eusebius coordinated his championship of Constantine with Constantine’s own political machinations; his rhetorical move is to analogize (if not identify) the assemblage of Fathers at Nicaea to an assembly of the Apostles, and the great banquet Constantine gave a bit later to the one hosted by the Christ for his disciples, upon his ascent to the throne of the Kingdom of God (Rev. 19:1-10). There can be little doubt that Constantine’s insistent support at Nicaea of the Athanasian view of the Trinity and the Incarnation was informed by his familiarity with the trope of deification of Emperors; which he had previously applied to his “identification” with his patron god Sol Invictus. See Kantorowicz (1957, Fig. 32) and Bardill (2012, Ch. 2). Constantine was, of course, not of the house of David. But, since tribalism was not a factor in the new order, that was a dispensable qualification. See Firth (2022, Chapter 11) and Eusebius (336, Chapter 16).

indicate that the Church found the Roman political status quo unsustainable. There was no functioning legal tradition that established a candidate's right to the throne, and actual occupancy of the position had for quite some time been a matter largely of sheer exercise of military force and palace intrigue. The result was the constant erosion or elimination of the distinction between legitimate kingship and tyranny. I suggest—and here I can only offer a hint—that a good deal of the disagreement that attended the Church's debate over the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation owed its intensity, and indeed rancor, to the Father's understanding that the formulation of these doctrines had deep political implications: specifically, defining the foundations of the Emperor's right to rule.

Given these many challenges, the accommodation between Rome and Jerusalem evolved over many decades, endured the organization of several major councils, and—in the midst of this—the overthrow of the Roman Empire itself. Yet in their efforts to inaugurate a new age and a new social order, the Christians were second to none in their influence upon the affairs of the Western World. In the end, it seems they did not fully succeed in their aims. But, in introducing a fundamental re-conceptualization of human social existence, institutions, and legal foundations, it cannot be denied that theirs was a rare and signal achievement—one that revolutionized the shape of Western civilization.

This conceptual framework exercised, indeed, a profound influence upon the development of European jurisprudence concerning the responsibilities, authority, and privileges of kings within the history of the Holy Roman Empire and, subsequently, the nation-state monarchies that emerged after its demise.³¹ Although it finally gave way during the period of the Enlightenment to social theories that are fundamentally individualistic rather than communitarian (and to the “separation of church and state”), the latter history remains deeply rooted in the centuries of European tradition in which the ontology and legal theory of social union was communitarian.³²

³¹ The evolution of this millennium-and-a-half long period of European royal legal theory, built upon the emergence of Christianity and the ontological bedrock of human persons understood fundamentally as participants in social unions, as citizens, personages – occupiers of social roles – and of legally organized collectivities such as tribes, nations, and the like has been given detailed examination by Kantorowicz (1957).

³² Both traditions are founded upon contractual principles. But in Judeo-Christian and early European societies, the parties to the contract were a people on the one hand and a god on the other; in the tradition spawned by the Enlightenment, the parties to the contract are individual (mature, rational) natural persons.

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