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THE FILIOQUE CLAUSE:
ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THEOLOGY AND LIFE

CHURCH HISTORY I: PATRISTIC THROUGH MEDIEVAL

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INTRODUCTION

History credits the *filioque* controversy as being “the source and focus of a schism between East and West that has endured for well over a millennium.”¹ To be sure, the distance that grew up between Rome and Constantinople must not be attributed to this cause alone. The assertion of papal supremacy, and even such seeming adiaphora as the use of unleavened bread in communion and the shaving of clerical beards, played a part in the division that developed.² The persistence of this division despite all efforts at union has been attributed by some to “the deep-rooted antagonism for the Latins felt by the Greek population.”³ However, this cultural antipathy does not negate the fundamental role of the *filioque* when one remembers that such popular sentiment was fueled and grounded, at least in part, on the underlying doctrinal differences. After all, “the totalitarian character of religion is such that it determines both man's cultus and his culture.”⁴

The purpose of the present study is to provide an overview of the *filioque* controversy. This paper will begin with a brief review of the relevant historical context, followed by a summary of the Biblical and theological support for *filioque*, and will conclude by noting some of the areas in Byzantine theology and culture where the rejection of *filioque* became apparent. It should be noted that some of the arguments against the *filioque* pertain to procedural issues, such as the legitimacy of a provincial church council altering an œcumenically formulated creed. The fact that this addition received subsequent conciliar acknowledgment and acceptance has been

1 A. Edward Siecienski, preface to *The Filioque – History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), v.

2 Deno J. Geanakoplos, “The Council of Florence (1438-1439) and the Problem of Union between the Greek and Latin Churches,” *Church History* 24, no. 4 (December 1955) : 325.

3 Ibid.

4 Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1972), 42.

well established and will not be pursued in the current study.⁵ Our present concern is with the doctrinal issue rather than the procedural one. Similarly, we will not trace out the saga of failed attempts at reconciliation which mark the history of the West's tenuous relationship with the East. These attempts at reconciliation do provide helpful insights into certain aspects of the debate,⁶ but fall outside the focus of the present study.⁷

HISTORY OF THE FILIOQUE CLAUSE

To appreciate the role of the *filioque* controversy in history, one must understand something of its background. The name for this controversy stems from the western interpolation of the words *et filioque* into the text of the Nicene creed. The Nicene creed itself was the product of one of the great christological controversies of the early church, one that revolved around the teaching of one Arius, a once eminent presbyter in the church of Alexandria, Egypt.⁸

In Alexandria, *circa* A.D. 318, Arius first publicly renounced the eternal divinity of the Son claiming that, as he was generated and thus not ungenerate, the Logos of God must have been “called out of nonexistence”. This placed the Son as the first of God's creatures. Alexander, then bishop of Alexandria, denounced Arius' views as heretical and forbade their dissemination. When Arius refused to comply, Alexander responded by calling a council of nearly one hundred bishops which deposed Arius. This led to Arius' flight to Palestine and the dispersion of his

5 Rev. Coker Adams, M.A., “*Filioque*”: *A Letter to the Rev. F. E. Warren, M.A.*, (London: J. Parker, 1884); Thomas Richey, *The Nicene Creed and The Filioque*, (New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1884).

6 Aristeides Papadakis, *Crisis in Byzantium: The Filioque Controversy in the Patriarchate of Gregory II of Cyprus (1283-1289)*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997); Aidan Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches: A Study in Schism*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997).

7 For a helpful summary of the *filioque* controversy, particularly in evaluating current attempts at reconciliation, see: Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1 “The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity”*, (Geanies House, Scotland, Great Britain: Mentor, 2008), 563-577.

8 Williston Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed., (New York: Scribner, 1985), 131.

teaching to the four corners of the empire through writing and personal influence. The bitter division which ensued threatened the peace and unity of the entire empire and led Constantine to intervene. Initially the emperor did not grasp the significance of the dispute and indicated as much by sending an emissary to call for an end of this “unprofitable” disagreement. The failure of this emissary led to Constantine's summons of the council at Nicea, which met as the first universal council of the Christian church in May 325.⁹

The council addressed itself to the matter at hand by rejecting the confession of faith proposed by Arius.¹⁰ When it came to formulating a statement that upheld the truth, some difficulty was encountered in satisfying the parties present. While the majority in attendance were dedicated to maintaining the full divinity of the Son, there was some difference of opinion as to how this should be expressed. This was due partly to differences in vocabulary and partly to the subordinationistic tendencies of some.¹¹ In the end, the creed was worded in a way that upheld the eternal deity of the Son by maintaining both the complete unity of deity and the reality of the distinction of persons. The creed as formulated at Nicea was thus a clear rejection of the Arian doctrine of the Trinity, as an examination of the article respecting the Son shows.¹²

We believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God the only begotten, i. e. of the essence of the Father, God of God, and Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made...¹³

9 Walker, 131-133.

10 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., rev. David Schaff, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds*, “The Private Creed of Arius”, 28-29.

11 Walker, 134-135.

12 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed., rev., (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2006), vol. 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, 670-683.

13 *Ibid.*, 668-669.

That being said, the creed was not a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicean creed in its original version of 325 was immediately concerned with establishing the full deity of the Son. This being the case, the creed contains only the simple one-phrase assertion of belief in the Spirit translated, "... And in the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ The insufficiency of the Nicean creed in its original form was given at least partial redress at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Constantinopolitan creed of 381 modified the Nicean creed of 325 to confront the heresy of Macedonius, a semi-Arian who "rejected the consubstantiality, and asserted the creation, of the Spirit."¹⁵ In meeting this new threat, the council of 381 omitted certain phrases in the section regarding the Son and expanded that regarding the Spirit. "That it was no part of the intention of the fathers assembled at Constantinople to depart from the creed of Nicea, or to add, in the way of discovery, anything to it, they declared in their first canon."¹⁶ In its expanded form, the creed as translated reads,

And in the Holy Spirit who is Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.¹⁷

This reference in the creed to the procession of the Spirit from the Father was a direct confutation of the Arian assertion that the Spirit was "the first creature of the Son."¹⁸ Thus in its Nicean form, the creed explicitly rejected the subordination of the Son and in its Constantinopolitan form, the subordination of the Spirit.

In the years that followed the Nicean council, Arianism continued as a live force, in the

¹⁴ Ibid., 668.

¹⁵ Ibid., 663-664.

¹⁶ Richey, 17-18.

¹⁷ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 669.

¹⁸ Ibid., 663.

political influence of its constituency, in certain church councils, and in the missionary zeal of the Cappadocian church, which largely held to an Arian theology. The first of these factors is illustrated in the life Eusebius of Nicomedia, an early compatriot of Arius who was invited by Constantine to serve as bishop of Constantinople in the aftermath of Nicea. Eusebius used his position of influence with the emperor to obtain the banishment and persecution of many of his opponents in the Nicean controversy, most notably, Athanasius bishop of Alexandria. The infamous career of Eusebius began the trend of association with “the secular political power”¹⁹ which was to characterize the history of Arianism. The second factor, exemplified in the councils of Sirmium (351 and 357) and the council of Béziers (356), produced several statements of faith that gave room to Arian interpretations.²⁰ The third factor, the missionary zeal of the Cappadocian church, led in particular by one Ulfilas, ultimately saw the conversion of the Germanic tribes: the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, the Burgundians and part of the Vandals to Arianism.²¹

These Germanic tribes, displaced by the invasions of the Huns on the eastern borders of the empire, captured and settled much of western and northern Europe. It was not until the marriage alliance of Clovis, Arian king of the Franks, to Clotilda, Christian princess of the Burgundians, in 493, that the tide was finally turned against the Arian doctrine in Europe. In 496, Clovis declared for Christianity after an important victory over the Alemanni. The leadership of Clovis brought the Franks back to Christianity and, through Frankish expansion and influence,

19 Ibid., 643.

20 Carl L. Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De Fide to De Trinitate*, (New York, Oxford University Press: 2008), 45-48, 54-57.

21 Walker, 147-151.

won the Burgundians to the true faith as well.²²

At about this time, the Arian kingdoms of the Vandals and Ostrogoths were destroyed by the conquests of Justinian. It was in Spain that one of the last strongholds of the Arians came down with the conversion of Recarred, king of the Visigoths, to the Christian faith in 587.²³ This conversion was made official at the at the third council of Toledo in 589.²⁴

It is in the records of this council that we find the first conciliar inclusion of the *et filioque* into the Nicea-Constantinopolitan creed.²⁵ Due to the long and bitter struggle that had been waged in Europe with Arianism, the confession of faith that was presented to Recarred for his instruction was expanded to rebut even more directly the subordinationism of the Arians with respect to both the Son and the Spirit.²⁶

The insertion of the *et filioque* into the text of the Nicea-Constantinopolitan creed was in the interest of securing once and for all the full divinity of the Son against the aspersions of the Arians. As such, it was simply a continuation of the doctrinal work of the Nicean and Constantinopolitan councils. The *et filioque* insertion by the third Council of Toledo yielded the following reading of the section in the Nicea-Constantinopolitan creed's description of the procession of the Spirit.²⁷ “We believe... in the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and Giver of life, who

22 Ibid.

23 In addition to these political factors, it should be acknowledged that on a theological front, it was chiefly through the influence of Augustine that the West came to accept the *filioque* doctrine. See Nichols, 196.

24 Walker, 147-151.

25 This is not to say that this is the first creed to maintain such a position. The Athanasian Creed (*circa* 450) clearly upheld the doctrine of double procession. “*Spiritus Sanctus a Patre et Filio...* The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son...” Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 693.

26 Richey, 18-22.

27 Ibid., 17-18.

proceeds from the Father *and the Son...*”²⁸ Thus, the addition of the *et filioque* interpolation was motivated by a desire to uphold the full deity of the Son and the Spirit over against the subordinationism of the Arians. In the third council of Toledo, the church in the west was simply concurring with the truth which Gregory Nazianzen had declared *circa* 380, “If you throw down the One, I am bold to assert that you do not set up the other Two. For what profit is there in an imperfect Godhead? Of rather, what Godhead can there be if It is not perfect?”²⁹ With the *filioque*, the West was insisting that a consistent rejection of Arian subordinationism carried with it an entire theology of the Trinity, particularly of its mutual relations.

Use of the Toledo wording of the Nicea-Constantinopolitan creed gradually became more widespread, but it was not until 1014 that popular use pressured Benedict VIII to add the creed to the official liturgy of the Roman church.³⁰ It was this acknowledgment of the *filioque* that led to the official schism between Rome and Constantinople in the years to come.

BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE FILIOQUE DOCTRINE

As is true of the revelation of the Trinity in general, much of the argument from Scripture in support of the *filioque* is indirect and inferential. In light of this, several of the most important arguments are more easily treated from a theological standpoint and will be considered in a following section. However, this is not to say that Scripture does not provide a clear witness in its direct statements on the matter. To appreciate the force of the Biblical argument, it is helpful to understand exactly where the difference existed between the Greeks and the Latins. Each side asserted that they held to the full divinity of all three persons of the Godhead. Each agreed that

28 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 669.

29 Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 7:318-319.

30 Richey, 26.

the Son in an economical sense did join the Father in sending the Spirit in history. The point of contention lay in the West's persistence that this joint economic procession was a reflection of a joint ontological procession within the eternal relations of the Trinity.³¹

[The Greeks made] a sharp distinction between the *procession*, which is an eternal and internal process in the Holy Trinity itself, and the *mission*, of the Spirit, which is an act of revelation in time. The Spirit eternally *proceeds* from the Father alone (though *through* the Son); but was *sent* by the Father and the Son on the Day of Pentecost.³²

Thus, at least in the claims of the participants, the issue was not the divinity of the Son or the Spirit but the source of the Spirit's procession.

The matter of Biblical justification, then, becomes one of demonstrating that the procession of the Spirit from the Son was not simply a redemptive-historical phenomena but predated the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit. The Scriptures address this matter directly in a number of passages.³³ We will briefly look at two of the clearest. First, consider 1 Peter 1:10-11.

Considering this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

Notice that the Spirit as operative in the Old Testament prophets was the Spirit of Christ. The force of this descriptor should not be avoided by asserting that this description was only meaningful in a post-Pentecost setting. The straightforward statement of verse eleven is not that the One now operating as the Spirit of Christ then led the prophets, but that the One who led the

31 Papadakis, 89-90.

32 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 688-689.

33 Because this is primarily a doctrinal rather than a historical study, it was not considered necessary to restrict this discussion to the passages used in the original debates. While there are many arguments to be gleaned from these early discussions, this section presents the passages that were deemed the most persuasive of the Biblical evidence without regard to precedent. A paper that pursued the original Biblical arguments would of necessity involve itself in hermeneutical evaluations quite beyond the scope of the present study.

prophets was then the Spirit of Christ. It was the Spirit of Christ who was in them.

This same point is made again in the following two passages from the New Testament.

1 For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ...

9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, 10 nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.

1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 9-10

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' 11 As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" ...

14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. 15 As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." 16 For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:7-11, 14-19

A careful comparison of these two accounts of the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel shows the relationship that the Spirit bore to the Son even before the Messianic mission was undertaken. Notice that in the 1 Corinthians account, it was Christ who was with the Israelites; it was the Son who was tested by their unbelief. In Hebrews, however, this role is ascribed to the Spirit. The Hebrews account gives us the explanation of how these Two stood in relationship to one another.

Notice in Hebrews 3:7 that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the children of Israel on behalf of another. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice...’” The identity of the one referenced is made clear in verses fourteen and fifteen where the quote is reintroduced. It is Christ, mentioned in verse fourteen, who is identified as the speaker; it is to his voice that the Spirit calls our attention. Thus, the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, engaged as they are in the same work, is made clear. The Spirit, in speaking to the Israelites, was acting as the Agent of the Son. The provocation of this divine Agent, described in Hebrews 3:9-11, is thus attributed, in 1 Corinthians 10:9, to the Son, who was his Principal.

Although many other legitimate Biblical arguments could be brought forward,³⁴ these two passages must suffice for the present. The Greeks' refusal to acknowledge that the immutability of God requires a correspondence between the economic and ontological relationships within the Trinity severely limits the Scriptural evidence that is admitted to this discussion.³⁵ By definition, revelation demands such a correspondence. “Trinitarian theology is pointless unless God from all eternity is what he has shown himself to be in history.”³⁶ Thus the Scriptural argument from the economic relationships in support of the *filioque* should not be abandoned simply because it is not acknowledged. However, having shown something of the Scriptural support for the *filioque*, we will proceed to consider the indirect or inferential arguments in its favor.

34 For example, see the summary of Augustine's exegetical argument for double procession, Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 686, footnote 2.

35 Interestingly, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner were among those who contended for the necessity of this correspondence. For a summary of Barth's argument, see the following: Avery Dulles, S.J. “The *Filioque*: What is at Stake?,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 59 (January-April 1995) : 39; Siecienski, 204-205. For a reference to Rahner's works dealing with this and for a summary of his argument, see: Nichols, 220-221.

36 Nichols, 221.

THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE FILIOQUE DOCTRINE

It has been asserted that the doctrine of Spirit's procession from the Son directly follows from the full divinity of the Son.³⁷ While there is a sense in which this is true, we should not understand this as a direct logical deduction. For instance, to argue that “the Son shared all that the Father had, which must . . . include a role in the procession of the Spirit,”³⁸ as the anti-Adoptionists did, proves too much. Consider that the full divinity of the Spirit does not imply that in his sharing of all that the Father has, he shares in the generation of the Son. This argument confuses the common divine essence with the distinguishing properties of the persons. The unity of the common divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit does not of itself define the specific relationships that the Three hold with respect to one another.

What the fully shared divinity of the three persons does necessitate is the “intimate union, communion, and inhabitation of the persons of the Trinity.”³⁹ The unity of the divine nature demands that each of the Three must be related to the other Two. “Paternity, filiation, and procession are not to be viewed as accidental properties of God's being; but as the eternal modes of existence of, and the eternal, immanent relations within that being.”⁴⁰ Thus the Father generates the Son and spirates the Spirit; the Son is generated by the Father and spirates the Spirit; and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son.⁴¹

37 Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church*, (Fairfax, Va.: Thoburn Press, 1978), 122.

38 Siecienski, 93.

39 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (n.p.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 462.

40 Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977), 303-304.

41 Joseph C. Morecrat III, *Authentic Christianity: An Exposition of the Theology and Ethics of the Westminster Larger Catechism*, (Powder Springs, Ga.: Minkoff Family Publishing and American Vision Press, 2009), 1:363-364.

The processions within the essence simultaneously bring about God's absolute personality, his trinitarian existence, and his immanent relations. ... Among themselves the three persons are related to one another in an absolute manner, by means of generation and spiration; their personal distinctness coincides completely with their immanent relationships.⁴²

This summarizes the Augustinian, Western conception of the Trinity. The unity of the Godhead was found in the shared divine essence, the eternal relations within the Trinity being defined by their distinguishing personal properties. With reference to the *filioque* controversy, this conception of the Trinity led the West to maintain that the Spirit must be eternally, intimately and directly related both to the Father and to the Son.⁴³

This understanding of the Trinity was not unknown in the East. Men such as Cyril of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, Epiphanius of Salamis, Hilary of Poitiers and Gregory of Nazianzus taught a doctrine of the Trinity that was very compatible with the Augustinian explanation.⁴⁴

To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are they divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons; and there is one mingling of Light, as it were three suns joined to each other. When we look at the Godhead, or the the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have there Being from the First Cause – there are Three Whom we worship.⁴⁵

42 Bavinck, 304.

43 Richey, 39-42; Dulles, 36-38.

44 Richey, 39-41; Greg Uttinger, *Christianity 101 The Theology of the Ancient Creeds: The Procession of the Spirit*, 1 April 2003 [article on-line]; available from <http://chalcedon.edu/research/articles/christianity-101-the-theology-of-the-ancient-creeds-the-procession-of-the-spirit/>; Internet; accessed 30 September 2010.

45 Gregory Nazianzen, quoted in Schaff and Wace, 322.

What came to be the majority Greek view, sometimes called the Monopatrism view, insisted “that the unity of the Godhead is not to be found simply in the unity of the divine nature, but at the level of the persons.”⁴⁶ It was the Father who was seen as “the one source of the being of Son and Spirit.”⁴⁷ This fundamental difference in locating the source of unity within the Trinity required that the Son and the Spirit find an indirect bond of unity and fellowship in the person of the Father rather than in the direct bond of the shared divine nature. Such a conception of the relationship between Son and Spirit precluded the very possibility of accepting the *filioque*. The Greek rejection of *filioque* reflected an impoverished doctrine of the Trinity. Under their hypothesis, “the inner communion of life within the Trinity becomes unthinkable.”⁴⁸

IMPLICATIONS OF REJECTING THE FILIOQUE

As we proceed to identify some of the implications of rejecting the *filioque*, two observations need to be made. First, when looking for the fruits of any philosophy or theology, it is important to bear in mind that men and their cultures are never entirely consistent. This prevents us from always being able to trace out neat, logical deductions within a culture which has embraced or rejected a certain doctrine. That being said, it cannot be denied that ideas have consequences, and certainly the conception of who God is will not fail to influence a people's view of worship, authority and all of life.

Second, we must distinguish a concomitant error from a true cause. The Byzantine culture offers a number of areas where logical connections may be drawn between the rejection of the *filioque* and a particular cultural phenomenon. It should be noted that these are not

46 Nichols, 223.

47 Ibid., 224.

48 Ibid., 221.

necessarily causal connections. The broader theological and cultural milieu, which contributed to the rejection of the *filioque* itself, was marked by a resurgence of neoplatonism.⁴⁹ At this point in history, “the influence of neoplatonism, especially through Plotinus, was extensive on Arab thought as well as on Jewish and Christian thinkers.”⁵⁰ This fundamental philosophical viewpoint must be acknowledged as the underlying cause of many of the issues that we will consider in connection with the *filioque*. The significance of the *filioque* in this regard is that its rejection left the Byzantine culture without the theological basis to recover from its neoplatonism. With these two qualifications in mind, we now proceed to consider some of the specific aspects of Byzantine culture which were impacted by the rejection of the *filioque*.

Religious Implications

The first sphere which calls for our attention is that of religious thought and worship. One of the most immediate consequences of neoplatonism in its rejection of the *filioque* was seen in the conception of Christ, the Son of God become man. Because of the tension between spirit and matter inherent in the philosophy of neoplatonism and reflected in the rejection of the *filioque*, “the Byzantines tended to push aside the human aspect or nature of Christ, and emphasize his Godhead.”⁵¹ This downplaying of the true significance of the incarnation understandably had drastic results in the Byzantines' conception of man's relationship with God. Related to this was the tension between a forced acknowledgment of the Spirit's economic procession from the Son and the denial of any direct eternal relationship between Son and Spirit, which was the essence of rejecting the *filioque*. This tension was unofficially resolved by the economic procession

49 H. W. Haussig, *A History of Byzantine Civilization*, trans. J. M. Hussey, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 42-43.

50 Rushdoony, 149.

51 Dean A. Miller, *The Byzantine Tradition*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 58.

giving way to the ontological separation. In the Greek conception, “the Son does not reveal the Father in and through the Spirit, neither does the Spirit lead us to the Father through the Son. The two are more or less independent of each other; each leads to the Father in his own peculiar way.”⁵² Thus, the fact the Son had come in the flesh was seen as a historical phenomenon, but because the Son was not directly related to the Spirit, it was difficult for the Byzantines to appreciate the present significance of the Messianic ministry of Christ. This disconnect between the Redeemer (the Son) and God's presence with his people (the Spirit) resulted in “a state of perpetual anxiety over the further question of whether or not God really intended to admit mankind to salvation after all.”⁵³

Associated with the unsolved quest for present union with God was the Byzantine theology of worship. The very concept of worship depends upon being able to bridge the chasm between God and man.⁵⁴ Because of their failure to appreciate Christ as the present Mediator between heaven and earth, the Byzantines had to supply their own “incarnation” in the present—the icon.⁵⁵ In Byzantine culture, icons were physical manifestations of the spiritual or ideal, “the window ... through which men may look into higher realms, and through which in return the divine Word-and-Light flows down from the Creator.”⁵⁶ In this broad sense, icons could be found in saints, the institutions of church and state, and in images.⁵⁷ Each of these were continuations of

52 Bavinck, 317.

53 Ibid.

54 It should be noted that the Byzantine conception of the separation between God and man was an almost strictly metaphysical one, the distance between spirit and matter, rather than a moral one, the distance between holiness and evil. This was due to the Platonic influence on their conception of sin “which denied that there could be such a thing as positive evil.” Miller, 59.

55 Rushdoony, 149-152.

56 Miller, 75.

57 Rushdoony, 150.

the incarnation of God with men; in each of these his presence was made manifest. In the context of worship, it was particularly icons as images—images of saints, of Mary and of Christ himself—that provided the bridge between God and man. “The image represented a continuity of being between heaven and earth.”⁵⁸ Thus the purpose of the incarnation was still to bring man to God, only in Byzantine thought, this was accomplished metaphysically, through the ongoing incarnation of icons rather than covenantally, through the incarnation of Christ.⁵⁹

An obvious consequence of this neoplatonic rejection of the *filioque* was a general tendency toward mysticism. The separation forced between the Son and the Spirit—between the Word and the Presence—carried with it a disregard for Scripture as the ordained divine revelation necessary and sufficient for knowledge of and communion with God. Rather, knowledge of God and communion with him was sought through “individual, transcendent religious experience.”⁶⁰ This experience could be sought in the experience of “the sacraments and the liturgy” (each heavily conditioned by their icon theology) or the more exclusive path of “spiritual discipline, contemplation, and prayer in a monastery.”⁶¹ These channels of experience, especially that of quiet contemplation, “would let the Godhead flow into him as into a vessel emptied of sense and thought.”⁶²

It was the monastic order that embodied the purest form of mysticism in Byzantine culture.⁶³ The separation between God and man, seen as the fundamental separation of spirit from

⁵⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁹ Miller, 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁶¹ Ibid., 68.

⁶² Ibid., 70.

⁶³ It is significant that although present in the West, the monastic movement was rooted in the philosophy and culture of the East, particularly Egypt and Syria. The introduction of the monastic movement into the West was

matter, was perhaps best bridged by those “who had renounced the world to become 'citizens of heaven'.”⁶⁴ It was in leaving the physical behind that one could approach God. The monastic movement in Byzantium began with these grand aspirations, but the tension of physical beings striving to live in an immaterial manner was too great to sustain. Although the original intent of discounting the material had been to free monks for their ascent to God, the total disconnect between spiritual and physical realities tended rather to free them from “an everyday ethical consciousness.”⁶⁵ Neoplatonism legitimately leads to both extremes. Because material goods were seen as irrelevant in a spiritual sense, the Byzantine monks went from abandoning them, to acquiring and using such “worldly” goods without reference to any spiritual standard. The progression of this tendency was such that, by 964, the pious emperor Nicephoras Phocas described the monks of his day as those whose “energies are devoted to their own enrichment, so that their life in no way differs from that of the people living in the world.”⁶⁶ By the eleventh century, the monks had established a reputation of using any available means to add to their possessions. Indeed, Byzantium “was full of vagabond monks who infested the roads, ravaged the countryside, and robbed wayfarers.”⁶⁷

However far from the original ideal this may seem, in reality the false dualism inherent in this neoplatonic philosophy logically led to total moral breakdown. The Byzantines did not understand “that both body and soul alike are redeemed in Jesus Christ and have a glorious

due to Eastern influence. Walker, 153-158.

64 Charles Diehl, *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*, trans. Naomi Walford, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 164.

65 Miller, 72.

66 Diehl, 169.

67 Ibid., 170.

destiny in Him.”⁶⁸ Because of this, they did not see the comprehensive character of God's Law. When regard for God's Law is seen as the particular work of Christ through the Holy Spirit,⁶⁹ the significance of their rejection of the *filioque* in the realm of ethics becomes apparent.

Social & Political Implications

As with any philosophy that impacts a culture's religion, the implications of the Byzantine neoplatonic philosophy, particularly their rejection of the *filioque*, came to expression in the political sphere as well. If anything, the implications specific to a rejection of the *filioque* were more immediate and direct in the state than they were in the church.

To understand the social and political implications of the *filioque*, it becomes necessary to review the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Despite the clear intention of the Nicene fathers to uphold the full divinity of the Son and Spirit, the language used to describe the exact nature of their relationship to the Father left room for a subordinationistic conception of the Trinity. The Nicene theology of the Trinity is summarized in the following statement:

The essence of the Godhead being but one, and being absolutely perfect, can admit of no degrees. Father, Son, and Spirit all have the same divine essence, yet not in a co-ordinate way, but in an order of subordination. The Father has the essence originally and of himself, from no other; he is the primal divine subject, ... The Son, on the contrary, has his essence by communication from the Father, therefore in a secondary, derivative way. ... The same subordination is still more applicable to the Holy Ghost. The Nicene fathers thought the idea of the divine unity best preserved by making the Father, notwithstanding the triad of persons, the monad from which Son and Spirit spring, and to which they return.⁷⁰

The latent contradictions in this wording were resolved differently by East and West.

Historically, the West has viewed this deficiency charitably and has interpreted the language of

68 Rushdoony, 149.

69 Ezekiel 36:26-27; John 14:15-21; 16:7-15; Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16-25; Titus 3:4-8; Morecraft, 866-869.

70 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 681-682.

the creed in terms of the consubstantiality of the persons.⁷¹ In this understanding, “the Father is the fountain of deity, not with respect of the essence, but the order [of the Persons of the Trinity].”⁷² The full maturity of the West's expression of the Augustinian, Nicean doctrine of the Trinity only came with the writings of John Calvin in the sixteenth century. Calvin, in his insistence on the *autotheotic* character of each person in the Trinity, specifically stated what had always been the implication of the Nicean doctrine of the consubstantiality of the persons.⁷³ The East however, as noted above, resolved the ambiguity in the opposite direction by holding to the derivative essence of the Son and the Spirit.⁷⁴

The necessary conclusion of the Greek position that the Father alone has the divine essence of himself was the subordination of the Son and the Spirit.⁷⁵ This effectively destroyed the equality of the persons and compromised the very concept of the Trinity.⁷⁶ The notion that

71 The Nicene fathers acknowledged their limitations in expressing the doctrine of the Trinity. Athanasius spoke for all of them when he said, “Man can only perceive the hem of the garment of the triune God; the cherubim cover the rest with their wings.” Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 671. For an example of a slightly more critical view of the Nicene construction, see Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed., (Nashville, Tn: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), 326.

72 Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig, (Philadelphia, Pa.:Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 245, quoted in Morecraft, 362, n. 87.

73 Morecraft, 361.

74 For an excellent summary of these two basic approaches to finding the basis for unity within the Godhead, see Kelly, 540-547.

75 It should be acknowledged that the Eastern Church does not admit to this conclusion. David Koyzis asserts that “although Orthodox theology often speaks of the monarchy of the Father within the Trinity (as opposed to the *filioque* conception of the West, which begins with the one divine essence in articulating the doctrine of the Trinity), it also acknowledges the perfect communion and equality among the Persons, as opposed to the Arian conception of the Son and Spirit's subordination to the Father.” This statement, though an attempt to distance the Eastern conception of the Trinity from the subordination of the Son and Spirit, is a tacit acknowledgment that such conclusions might be expected to follow. Although we may clear the Eastern Church of the explicit subordination of Arius, the implicit subordination of the Son and Spirit inherent in a monarchical conception of the Trinity cannot be escaped. The practice and theology of the Eastern church reflect a *de facto* subordinationism as described in the paragraphs above. David T. Koyzis, “Imaging God and His Kingdom: Eastern Orthodoxy's Iconic Political Ethic,” *The Review of Politics* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1993) : 286.

76 Morecraft, 383.

One must be absolute for there to be unity within the Trinity was reflected in the Byzantine social order. The absolute solidarity which the Byzantines relied upon to bring order and unity to the Trinity was manifested on earth in the person of the emperor. “By definition, the imperial function conferred upon him who assumed it absolute power and infallible authority.”⁷⁷ There was no earthly sphere which fell outside the emperor's sway. “He ... exerted an absolute authority over things and people, over the army and the administration, over justice, finance, politics, and religion.”⁷⁸

The implications of this concept of the emperor's absolute authority for the personal liberties of individuals are obvious.⁷⁹ There was no protection under the law.⁸⁰ Emperor Justinian made the imperial claims quite clear in this regard. “Who should be capable of solving the riddles of the law and revealing them to men ... if not he who alone has the right to make the law.”⁸¹

Beyond the implications for the individual was the significance of this position for the church. Because there could not be equal ultimacy in the Godhead, since they would not accept the *filioque*, the Byzantine church was by default “subordinate to the state.”⁸² This reality was not always cheerfully acknowledged,⁸³ but the Greek theology required it. In the words of Patriarch Menas, “in the Most Holy Church nothing must be done against the counsel and commands of

77 Diehl, 28.

78 Ibid., 32.

79 Morecraft, 387-389.

80 Koyzis, 282-283.

81 Diehl, 27-28.

82 Rushdoony, 93.

83 Diehl, 35, 131-134, 165-168.

the Emperor.”⁸⁴ The bitter fruit of the Greek church's rejection of the *filioque*, was that it was never able to free itself from the tyranny of the state.⁸⁵ “Once the emperor was elevated to the throne, no earthly power, not even the church, had a legitimate or constitutional means of questioning his acts.”⁸⁶

Even beyond controlling the church, the emperor was understood to have a religious function in his own right. In distinction from the papal claims which settled for being the vicar of Christ, the emperor was seen as “the true imitation or *mimesis* of Christ – a living image.”⁸⁷ The Christological allusions in the official acclamations to the emperor could not have been clearer.

The Lord who giveth life shall lift up your heads, O Masters, above the whole universe; He will make of all peoples your slaves that they may bring gifts, even as the Magi of old to your Majesty.⁸⁸

Perhaps more forcefully than anything else, the iconoclast controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries illustrate the emperor's desire to achieve supreme religious dominance. Rather than indicating the emperor's desire to rid worship of icons, the iconoclastic controversies were the emperor's attempt to establish his unique role as icon, the present manifestation of God's incarnation.⁸⁹

The final consequence of rejecting the *filioque*, which we will consider in terms of the emperor's authority, was the social turmoil that it produced. Because the emperor's authority was

84 Ibid., 34.

85 Ibid., 169.

86 Miller, 33.

87 Ibid., 36.

88 Diehl, 29.

89 Rushdoony, 150-152.

absolute by definition, it was “only by force ... that imperial power [could] be held in check.”⁹⁰

This played itself out in the numerous and bloody uprisings against imperial domination that mark Byzantine history.

Of the 107 sovereigns that occupied the throne between 395 and 1453, only 34 died in their beds, and 8 by war or by accident; the rest either abdicated—willingly or unwillingly—or died violent deaths by poison, smothering, strangulation, stabbing, or mutilation. In the space of those 1058 years we can count, therefore, 65 revolutions, in palace, streets, or barracks.⁹¹

The Byzantine concept of absolute unity, untempered by an equally absolute Trinity, yielded a political conception that had no division of power, and thus no means or motives for preserving the liberties of those under such a rule. The rejection of the *filioque* resulted in a political theory that has been described as “absolute monarchy tempered by assassination.”⁹²

CONCLUSION

As we conclude this study of the *filioque*, it remains but to observe the overall significance of this doctrine. The West accepted the *filioque*, and this understanding of the Trinity was brought to fruition in the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. “The Reformers, in revitalizing the doctrine of the Trinity in the life and thought of Christian civilization, were recovering what had been preached from the very beginning of Christianity, but which had been neglected through the intervening centuries.”⁹³ Thus the Reformation's recovery of a Biblical view of soteriology and political theory, of the significance and sufficiency of Scripture as God's revelation for all of life, of the centrality of Jesus Christ as the way, the

⁹⁰ Diehl, 37.

⁹¹ Ibid., 128.

⁹² Ibid., 137.

⁹³ Morecraft, 373.

truth and the life was nothing more than the outworking of the *filioque* doctrine of the Trinity.⁹⁴

The Reformation was *filioque* come to full expression.⁹⁵

The East, on the other hand, never enjoyed these same advances. Rejecting the *filioque* left them with no basis for combating neoplatonism, humanism, or totalitarian statism. The cultural fear, oppression and death that ensued was a reflection of the East's failure to answer adequately the most basic of all questions, "Who is God?"⁹⁶

If the West is to retain the theological and cultural advances of the Reformation and avoid the horrors that plagued Byzantium, it is imperative that we hold to a fully Biblical doctrine of the Trinity as embodied in the *filioque*. "Believing in and understanding what the Bible teaches about the Trinity is necessary in order to understand created reality and human society."⁹⁷ It is the *filioque* doctrine, perhaps more than any other, that will shape the destiny of a civilization.

94 Rushdoony, 106.

95 Ibid., 127.

96 Ibid., 90-93.

97 Morecraft, 387.

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