

*Reassessing the Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England:  
Recent Studies by Jason Vickers, Sarah Mortimer,  
Paul Lim, and others*

Review Article<sup>1</sup>

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Recent historiography on early modern England has rediscovered a neglected topic – debates on the Trinity in two crucial periods of English history. The first phase of what the historical theologian Paul Lim has called “the crisis of the Trinity in early modern England”<sup>2</sup> took place in the late 1640s and 1650s, that is, during the Civil Wars and the Interregnum, when the gentleman Paul Best and the schoolteacher John Biddle embraced and preached antitrinitarian, specifically Socinian, tenets. Many Puritans, including such prominent theologians as Francis Cheynell and John Owen, abhorred the Socinians’ stress on the role of the human will to achieve salvation, their advocacy of wide religious toleration, and their denial of the Trinity. Therefore, antitrinitarianism was suppressed, not without some difficulties, at least in its public manifestations. But antitrinitarian views reemerged in England in the late 1680s and 1690s, after James II’s Declaration of Indulgence (1687) and especially after the Glorious Revolution, when an intense controversy involved various antitrinitarian theologians and trinitarian divines. The political authorities eventually intervened to put an end to that controversy with a Royal Injunction in 1696 and a Blasphemy Act in 1697.

Despite the significance of the disputes on the Trinity in seventeenth-century England, “a strange lacuna regarding either the doctrine of the Trinity or the place of Socinianism within the larger intellectual history of early modern England”<sup>3</sup> existed in historiography until recently. For almost half a century until the 1990s, the only studies that thoroughly examined this subject were two books by Unitarian historians Earl Morse Wilbur and H. John McLachlan, published in the mid-twentieth century and now outdated, although still useful as introductions to the topic.<sup>4</sup> But, between the 1990s and 2013, five book-length monographs and over a dozen articles and book chapters appeared covering this theme.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Paolo Bernardini, Justin Champion, Ariel Hessayon, Paul Lim, Brent Sirota, Giovanni Tarantino, and Jeffrey Wigelsworth for their insightful comments.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul C.H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Earl M. Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, 2 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1945-1952); H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). A few studies in the 1970s and 1980s took into account the trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century: see especially John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 156-172; Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 82-108.

The reasons for this renewed interest in seventeenth-century antitrinitarianism lie in the recent historiographical reassessment of religious issues in intellectual, cultural, social, and political life. Whereas twentieth-century Marxist and liberal historiographies mostly saw religion as playing a subsidiary role in comparison with political and economic processes, or in relation to different intellectual and socio-cultural dynamics, contemporary historiography has revalued “religion *qua* religion” as a legitimate and independent area of inquiry. The tendency to reconsider the significance of religious issues can indeed be noticed in various currents of contemporary historiography on the early modern era and the Age of Enlightenment. For example, as regards antitrinitarianism, Jonathan Israel has accurately observed that Socinianism contributed to the “social, psychological, and cultural roots of Enlightenment”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Socinians’ stress on the reasonableness of true religion, their attempts at an unbiased reading of the Scriptures, and their defense of toleration had a remarkable impact on later intellectual developments in the Age of Enlightenment. But we must also recognize that Socinian thought developed within a complex religious framework, typical of the early modern era. The origins, evolution, and spread of Socinian ideas were indeed characterized by diverse theological, philosophical, and political dimensions. It is these dimensions that, since the 1990s, various studies on the subject have reassessed. Theologians William Babcock, Philip Dixon, and Jason Vickers have considered the emergence of antitrinitarian views in seventeenth-century England as resulting from long-term processes concerning the definition of trinitarian theology.<sup>6</sup> Nigel Smith, Sarah Mortimer, and Paul Lim have studied the spread and impact of Socinianism in the intellectual, socio-cultural, and political context of the English Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Last but not least, David Dockrill, Kristine Haugen, Udo Thiel, and Christopher Walker have explained the theological and philosophical dimensions of the trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century,<sup>8</sup> whereas Justin Champion, Stephen Trowell, and Brent Sirota have pointed out the political issues surrounding that controversy.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies on Socinianism

<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 115-134.

<sup>6</sup> See William S. Babcock, “A Changing of the Christian God”, *Interpretation*, 45/2 (1991), pp. 133-146; Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2003); Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See also Martin Mulsow, Jan Rohls (eds.), *Socinianism and Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists, and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), which presents some interesting contributions on seventeenth-century England.

<sup>7</sup> See Nigel Smith, “And if God was one of us”: Paul Best, John Biddle and Anti-Trinitarian Heresy in Seventeenth-Century England”, in David Loewenstein, John Marshall (eds.), *Heresy, Literature and Politics in Early Modern English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 160-184; Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*.

<sup>8</sup> See David W. Dockrill, “The Authority of the Fathers in the Great Trinitarian Debates of the Sixteen Nineties”, *Studia Patristica*, 18/4 (1990), pp. 335-347; Kristine L. Haugen, “Transformations of the Trinity Doctrine in English Scholarship: From the History of Beliefs to the History of Texts”, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 3 (2001), pp. 149-168; Udo Thiel, “The Trinity and Human Personal Identity”, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 217-243; Christopher J. Walker, *Reason and Religion in Late Seventeenth-Century England: The Politics and Theology of Radical Dissent* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 99-132; Stephen Trowell, “Unitarian and/or Anglican: The Relationship of Unitarianism to the Church from 1687 to 1698”, *Bulletin of the John*

in seventeenth-century England are enlightening in many respects, but existing historiography still presents a fragmented reconstruction of the background, development, and significance of early modern antitrinitarianism. Thus, this article aims at taking stock of the results of recent scholarship on the subject, in an attempt to clarify the most important characteristics of the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity in a comprehensive but concise way. In my conclusion, I will assess the state of the art of the study of Socinianism in early modern England, and I will finally focus on a still under-researched aspect of this subject – the influence of Socinianism on several intellectual developments in the Age of Enlightenment, especially in England.

## I. THE TRINITY, THE BIBLE, AND THE CHRISTIAN RULE OF FAITH

Recent scholarship, especially Jason Vickers's book *Invocation and Assent* (2008), has pointed out that the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity originated in long-term processes of definition, and redefinition, of the Christian rule of faith. Vickers has shown that trinitarian confessions of faith in the early Church were used for a twofold purpose – to distinguish the triune Christian God both from the plethora of pagan deities and from the God of the Jews, and to invoke God in catechesis, prayer, baptism, and other practices related to God's saving power:

Early Christian theologians were not interested chiefly in the internal relationship between the three divine persons or the so-called immanent Trinity. On the contrary, they were primarily interested in the way the triune God had been and continued to be in relationship with humans.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, they were mainly interested in “what God had done in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world, that is, the saving activities of the economic Trinity”.<sup>11</sup> Things changed when several theologians, including the Alexandrian presbyter Arius (after whom the antitrinitarian movement known as Arianism is named), started to ask metaphysical questions about the nature of God and the relations among the three divine persons. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) gave answers in the form of creeds that, drawing also on Neo-Platonic metaphysics, focused on the immanent Trinity and provided identifying descriptions of the nature and relations of the three divine persons, which were declared to be consubstantial, coequal, and coeternal. But, as Vickers has noted, those descriptions also clarified the saving function of the economic Trinity and, thus, strengthened and reinforced its significance, given that the whole work of creation and grace was considered as a single operation of the three divine persons.<sup>12</sup>



The formulation of the trinitarian dogma led to the suppression of the various currents of Arianism, which, despite some significant differences in their

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Rylands University Library of Manchester, 78 (1996), pp. 77-101; Brent Sirota, “The Trinitarian Crisis in Church and State: Religious Controversy and the Making of the Post-Revolutionary Church of England, 1687-1702”, *Journal of British Studies*, 52/1 (2013), pp. 26-54.

<sup>10</sup> Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See ibid., pp. 23-28.

views on the Son's substance, shared the idea that the Son and the Holy Spirit were subordinate to the Father (i.e. the unique God) and were neither consubstantial nor coeternal to him. They considered the Son as God's first creature, who pre-existed his incarnation. They identified the Son with the Neo-Platonic Logos, and some of them saw him as a demiurge creating the world.<sup>13</sup> After the defeat of Arianism, the doctrine of the Trinity went unquestioned for centuries, at least within the bosom of the western Church. But, when the Protestant Reformation rejected the role of ecclesiastical tradition in defining Christian doctrine and adopted the Bible as the rule of faith through the thesis of *sola Scriptura*, according to which Scripture alone contains all information necessary to salvation, the trinitarian dogma became more vulnerable to criticism: whereas the magisterial reformers did not discuss the Trinity in detail, other sixteenth-century Protestant theologians, mainly in countries like Poland and Transylvania, which granted a large degree of religious toleration, soon turned to questioning the trinitarian dogma.

## II. THE ROOTS AND TENETS OF SOCINIANISM

The most significant current in early modern antitrinitarianism was Socinianism, named after the Italian theologian Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), who, in the late 1570s, settled in Poland and joined forces with the antitrinitarian Polish Brethren, most of whom lived and studied at their academy in Rakow. Socinus and his associates rejected scholastic theological discourse. Instead, they concentrated "on philology and sacred history, on understanding the literal meaning of the Scriptures in their historical context and on drawing moral lessons from them".<sup>14</sup> Various recent works have demonstrated that the Socinians' understanding, and denial, of the Trinity was characterized by a rethinking of the concept of "person". The early modern debate about the principle of individuation (that is, about "what it is that makes an individual the individual it is and distinguishes it from all other individuals of the same kind")<sup>15</sup> actually originated from the efforts "to individuate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a way that would uphold the belief that the distinctions in God were real but did not compromise the oneness or unity of God".<sup>16</sup> The difficulties with this issue date to the early centuries of Christianity. When trying to make sense of the Trinity and to translate the Greek word "*hypostasis*", which denoted each of the three components of the Godhead, the ambiguous Latin term "*persona*" was adopted. A turning point in the history of this term was, in the sixth century, Boethius's definition of "*persona*" as "individual substance of a rational nature". The transfer of Boethius's definition to the trinitarian context "saddled trinitarian theology with the impossible task of explaining how the one divine substance could contain three divine substances; and it made the Trinity an all too easy target for its critics once they arose".<sup>17</sup> Given that they could not

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<sup>13</sup> An excellent history of Arianism is: Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Mortimer, *Reason and Religion*, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Thiel, "Trinity", pp. 217-218.

<sup>16</sup> Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Babcock, "Changing", pp. 141-142.

resolve the problem in logical terms, the Church Fathers had recourse to analogical language:

They insisted that the analogies and the terms they used were utterly incapable of referring to God in an even remotely adequate or accurate way. [...] Given that human discourse cannot serve for God, patristic theologians were keen to argue that the Trinity must be retained regardless of the degree to which the analogies or terminologies succeed or fail.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently:

For many trinitarians, apophatic theology formed an integral part of their theology, as they regarded divine incomprehensibility as foundational; by doing so, they could continue to leave room for the mystery of the Trinity, while proffering proofs of the Trinity from patristic witnesses or from Scripture. For the antitrinitarians, however, such invocation of mystery was a clear sign of the illogicality and unscriptural nature of the Trinity.<sup>19</sup>

By combining the Protestant insistence on *sola Scriptura* with the then emergent view of language as univocal and unambiguous in its signifying function (a view that did not allow apparent contradictions or vagueness regarding individuation), the Socinians drew the logical conclusion from Boethius's equation of person and substance (or essence): "Since a person is an individual intelligent essence, to assert three persons is to assert three essences; and to assert one essence, as Christians must (to avoid tritheism), is to assert one person".<sup>20</sup>

Sarah Mortimer has observed that the Socinians' rethinking of the concept of person was also influenced by legal theory, particularly Roman law:

All Roman law "has to do with persons, things and actions", and the implication was that personality (not essence or substance) was the key characteristic of an active entity. [...] Only if God were a person could he be an active agent able to relate to other persons and things in legal terms.<sup>21</sup>

To the Socinians, if God was one person, namely the Father, then Jesus Christ was not part of the Godhead: he was, instead, the Messiah – a human being charged by God with delivering a message of salvation which was hitherto unknown to humankind, even to the ancient Israelites. Thus, Christ did not pre-exist his human birth, neither as the second person of the Trinity, nor as God's first creature. Moreover, Christ's death on the cross was not meant to atone for the sins of humanity: to the Socinians, human nature had not changed with Adam's sin and, thus, humankind did not need to be reconciled with God. To the further discredit of the Trinity, the Socinians believed that the Holy Spirit was not a "person": it simply consisted of God's power.



Socinian theology also had significant political and moral implications, which Mortimer has clarified. Socinus argued that only God's revealed word,

<sup>18</sup> Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, p. 321.

<sup>20</sup> Babcock, "Changing", p. 142. By "tritheism" is meant the belief that the divinity is composed of three distinct entities.

<sup>21</sup> Mortimer, *Reason and Religion*, p. 35.

comprehensible to human reason, could lead humankind to salvation. To Socinus, the law of nature had nothing to do with true religion, because Christ's message had superseded natural law. Second-generation Socinians, especially John Crell and Jonas Schlichting, had a "softer" approach to natural law: to them, "nature was no longer a neutral source of rights but instead a source of moral obligation, albeit one which was always inferior to the revealed laws and commands of Christ".<sup>22</sup> The Socinians' separation of natural and divine law meant that religion was not natural to humankind: human beings were able to comprehend and accept Christ's precepts *freely* and in accordance with their understanding. Thus, the Socinians endorsed wide toleration, as they acknowledged "the diversity of Christianity",<sup>23</sup> and proposed a moralist soteriology, as they stressed the role of the human will to achieve salvation: "God gave to men free will and thereby made them at least in part *sui iuris*, able to act in a legal capacity in their own right, even in matters pertaining to their salvation".<sup>24</sup> This thesis, which was at the core of Socinian moralism, obviously clashed with the Calvinist emphasis on predestination, and this was not the only point of disagreement between Socinianism and Calvinism, as became clear when Socinian views reached England.

### III. SOCINIANISM VS. CALVINISM IN THE ENGLISH CONTEXT

By the time the Catholic Counter-Reformation led to the banishment of antitrinitarianism from Poland in 1658, Socinianism had already reached other countries, especially the Netherlands and England. An unsuccessful attempt to promote antitrinitarian beliefs in England was made in 1609, when the first Latin translation of the Racovian Catechism (i.e. a comprehensive summa of Socinian doctrine, originally published in Polish in 1605) was dedicated to James I. Later, the chaotic situation of the Civil Wars and the multiplicity of religious opinions in the Interregnum provided the opportunity, which Paul Best and John Biddle took, to adopt and propagate Socinian tenets. In this regard, it is worth stressing that specific political contexts facilitated the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity: *sola Scriptura* and the Protestant rejection of ecclesiastical tradition certainly exposed the trinitarian dogma to the criticism of those who saw it as both unscriptural and illogical, but antitrinitarian ideas emerged with vigor in England in periods of political and ecclesiastical crisis – first during the turmoil of the Civil Wars and the Interregnum and, later, in the context of the attempts to establish a new political and ecclesiastical order after the Glorious Revolution.

Sarah Mortimer's and Paul Lim's studies have shown that the English context between the 1630s and the 1650s provided fertile ground for the spread of antitrinitarian views. As Mortimer has stressed, Socinianism attracted the interest of those "who objected to the Calvinist system of predestination and who preferred to understand Christianity as an ethical religion which had to be freely chosen".<sup>25</sup> The Socinians' hermeneutics, moralism, and defense of toleration were indeed popular among intellectuals who, like the members of the Great Tew Circle, supported

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

Archbishop Laud's anti-Calvinist policies and inclined toward Arminianism – a system of Christian doctrine which, against Calvinist predestinarianism, maintained that the human will was able to accept or resist saving grace. Moreover, as Lim has noted, the claims of Ranters, Muggletonians, Familists, and other radical Protestants who identified with the living Christ “often ended up blurring the Creator-creature distinction, which often led to the inexorable outcome of denying the Nicene formulation of the Trinity”.<sup>26</sup> Thus, some currents of radical Protestantism acted as “another key tributary to the attack on the Trinity”,<sup>27</sup> despite the significant differences between Socinians and radical Protestants in their motivations, approaches to the Scriptures, and views on piety.

The main reason why various Puritan theologians, most prominently Cheynell and Owen, reacted with hostility to Socinianism was that Socinian moralism rejected the atonement and predestination. As Lim has persuasively argued, several other factors also prevented Socinianism from becoming a “respectable” Christian denomination in mid-seventeenth-century England. Many Puritans judged antitrinitarian Christianity to be also a threat to the Protestants’ consideration of the Bible alone as the rule of faith:

Best and Biddle could be seen as one further instantiation of Puritan biblicism; this critique formed an integral core of the Catholic attack on Protestantism in general. Leave the mother church, put the Bible into everyone’s hands, and then a hermeneutical pandemonium was surely to break out.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, various Puritans, particularly Presbyterians, considered the denial of the Trinity as potentially dangerous to the new ecclesiastical order they aimed at establishing: the rejection of the Trinity implied that Christ was not part of the Godhead; therefore, it was unnecessary and actually impossible to embody the earthly presence of Christ in religious institutions; as a result, ecclesiastical power became superfluous and even ill-grounded. In other words, the denial of the Trinity could lead to a crisis of *sola Scriptura* and promote religious individualism and even indifference. For these reasons, Best and Biddle were harshly persecuted. Best retired to private life in late 1647, after serving more than two years in prison for having expressed antitrinitarian ideas. While in captivity, he wrote the first English Socinian book, *Mysteries Discovered* (1647). Biddle was jailed several times in the 1640s and 1650s and was exiled to the Isles of Scilly between 1655 and 1658. He wrote some of his antitrinitarian catechisms and confessions while in prison. After his death in 1662, English antitrinitarianism “went underground” for twenty-five years, entering a phase of its history that is still little studied.

#### IV. THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY OF THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

After the collapse of the Protectorate and the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, various Socinian writings, mostly printed in the Netherlands and including the nine volumes of the *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum* (1665-1692), circulated

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<sup>26</sup> Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

clandestinely in England. Starting in 1687, with *A Brief History of the Unitarians, called also Socinians* by the Anglican clergyman and antitrinitarian theologian Stephen Nye, many antitrinitarian books by English authors were published in England, mainly thanks to funds provided by the merchant and philanthropist Thomas Firmin. The English Socinians, who, by that time, were calling themselves Unitarians, were encouraged to make their views public by the Royal Declaration of Indulgence (1687), in which the Catholic King James II had extended religious liberty in a failed attempt to draw support from the Nonconformists. The trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century was triggered not only by the circulation of Socinian writings, but also by reasons relevant to the meaning of *sola Scriptura*. In fact, Protestants rejected the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation as unscriptural. But the Socinians argued that also the Trinity could not be derived from clear and intelligible passages in the Scriptures. This enabled Catholic polemicists to insist on the necessity to ground biblical exegesis in ecclesiastical tradition:

English Protestant theologians had three choices: they could (1) maintain their commitment to Scripture as the rule of faith and prove the Socinians were wrong about the Trinity; (2) maintain their commitment to Scripture as the rule of faith and admit the Socinians were right about the Trinity; or (3) acknowledge that only the Catholic rule of faith could secure the Trinity.<sup>29</sup>

Historians Justin Champion and Brent Sirota have shown that also significant political factors furthered the trinitarian controversy, in the context of the attempts to define a new political and ecclesiastical order after the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. As Champion has argued, the antitrinitarians, with their focus on individual will and reason, led an attack (which was later continued by deists and freethinkers) on the politically demarcated boundaries of faith, in order to relocate the source of belief from public authority to the epistemological criteria of individual reason, conscience, and scholarship.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Sirota has demonstrated that “the very real revolt against ecclesiastical authority that Champion describes” combined with an “equally serious crisis occurring within ecclesiastical authority”.<sup>31</sup> In fact, “the trinitarian controversy repeatedly exposed the absence of any Anglican consensus on the methods and instruments of enforcing orthodoxy, whether through the universities, Parliament, or convocation”.<sup>32</sup> The exclusion of non-trinitarian Christians from toleration, sanctioned by the Toleration Act of 1689, did not stop the activities of Firmin, Nye, and their associates (many of whom, nevertheless, preferred to remain anonymous). The Unitarians even found new stimuli when, in 1689, an ecclesiastical commission was appointed to alter the liturgy and canons of the Church of England. Some influential churchmen, including Gilbert Burnet and Edward Stillingfleet, actually appreciated the option (which, nevertheless, was eventually discarded) to consider the trinitarian Athanasian Creed as only an inessential part of the Anglican faith.<sup>33</sup> This proposal can be better understood if one considers that, even after the Toleration Act had exempted trinitarian Dissenters “from the penalties of certain laws”, several latitudinarian clergymen kept striving for

<sup>29</sup> Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> See Champion, *Pillars*, pp. 99-132.

<sup>31</sup> See Sirota, “Trinitarian Crisis”, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See ibid., pp. 36-41.

a higher degree of comprehension within the established Church, which could be achieved by expanding the Anglican Communion to include moderate Nonconformists excluded by the Act of Uniformity (1662). Briefly, the trinitarian controversy was fueled by an atmosphere of uncertainty within the Anglican establishment and of hostility between Erastian clergymen, who endorsed the supremacy of state authorities in ecclesiastical matters, and High Church divines, who advocated the Church's right to decide over matters of theology and ecclesiology, especially through the synodical assembly known as Convocation.

As Kristine Haugen has stressed, the controversy revolved around “the question whether the Anglican doctrine of the Trinity could be historically justified – whether it could be traced back, that is, to the earliest period of Christianity”.<sup>34</sup> The Unitarians employed historical and textual criticism to argue that the trinitarian dogma was not based on Scripture, did not appear in the beliefs of the first Christians, and resulted from the Neo-Platonic corruptions of Christianity. Trinitarian polemicists had to adopt a different strategy:

The majority of English theologians [...] were in the process of abandoning any effort at all to make historical arguments in favor of the Trinity doctrine. [...] One reason why the creative pro-trinitarian historical narratives fell out of favor at this time was, no doubt, simply that they were hard to prove and easy to ridicule.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the Anglican defenders of the Trinity had recourse to metaphysical speculation. They employed Platonic, Aristotelian, or Cartesian concepts and formulated divergent, and all unorthodox, views of the Godhead. Some of them even clashed with each other. William Sherlock expressed a basically tritheistic view of the three divine persons, which he considered to be three distinct “minds”, self-conscious and reciprocally conscious of one another. In refuting Sherlock's thesis, John Wallis and Robert South inclined toward Sabellianism or modalism, namely the doctrine that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are simply three manifestations, aspects, or modes of existence of the same divine person. In the end, “there appeared to be as many Trinities as there were writers”.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Archbishop Tenison persuaded King William III to issue, in 1696, a Royal Injunction that forbade discussing the Trinity in terms different from those contained in the Scriptures, the three creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian), and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. One year later, the Parliament passed a Blasphemy Act which, among other forms of “blasphemy”, declared the denial of the Trinity by Christians to be a crime. In conclusion, the trinitarian controversy led to the partial resolution of some issues of power: the Erastian viewpoint prevailed for the moment, but the conflict between Erastians and High Churchmen soon resumed with the Convocation Crisis and, later, with the Bangorian Controversy of 1717.

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<sup>34</sup> Haugen, “Transformations”, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*, p. 125.

## V. SITUATING THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS OF THE TRINITY AND ITS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The recent studies I have referred to in this article have reevaluated some significant aspects, theological, philosophical, and political, of the trinitarian debates in seventeenth-century England. Nevertheless, a few questions still remain open, regarding how to situate the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity in relation to its historical and intellectual background and to later developments in biblical hermeneutics, ecclesiology, Christology, epistemology, ethics, and political thought. Several scholars, including Jason Vickers, Sarah Mortimer, and Paul Lim, have considered the early modern debates on the Trinity within the context of theological questions and processes which date back to the early centuries of Christianity, and which reemerged in the post-Reformation era, particularly in times of political turmoil or transition. Their examinations of the subject are, therefore, consistent with the renewed appreciation of “*religion qua religion*” in recent historiography on the early modern era, especially on early modern England. Nonetheless, Mortimer has also acknowledged that, in the Age of Enlightenment, “the questions raised by the Socinians about the role of reason in theology had become central to religious debates in England – and this would remain true throughout the eighteenth century”.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, such scholars as John Redwood and William Babcock have highlighted the secularizing implications of those controversies on the Trinity, which they have seen as the point at which reason effectively became critical of Christian faith.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, J.G.A. Pocock and Brian Young have suggested that those debates furthered the emergence of a “Protestant” or “clerical” Enlightenment in England, which aimed at accommodating rational theology and anti-dogmatism within a Christian worldview and, after the Glorious Revolution, within the framework of a new ecclesiastical and political order.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the recent reassessment of the seventeenth-century trinitarian disputes also plays a role in the current historiographical debate on Enlightenment and religion. In this respect, I find particularly interesting the proposal of a via media between old-fashioned, teleological views of the Age of Enlightenment as the time when “modern paganism” rose, and the recent insistence on the (supposedly) religious contexts, attitudes, and views that characterized the development of Enlightenment culture. I argue that Enlightenment culture, in its diverse components and manifestations, emerged both *from* and *against* a Christian worldview, given the Enlightenment’s significant and varied involvement with religious issues, and given also the epoch-making contributions of the Enlightenment’s rethinking of several religious sources, concepts, and institutions to the development of modern, secular societies.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Mortimer, *Reason and Religion*, p. 240.

<sup>38</sup> See Redwood, *Reason*, pp. 156-172; Babcock, “Changing”.

<sup>39</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock, “Within the Margins: The Definition of Orthodoxy”, in Roger D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 3-53; Brian W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 19-44.

<sup>40</sup> In this respect, I agree with scholars like Justin Champion, Wayne Hudson, Jonathan Sheehan, Adam Sutcliffe, and Jeffrey Wigelsworth, who have advanced complex and nuanced interpretations of “Enlightenment”. See, for instance, Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization”, *American Historical Review*, 108/4 (2003), pp. 1061-1080; Wayne Hudson, “The Enlightenment ‘Critique’ of Religion”, *Australian e-Journal of Theology*, 5 (2005), [http://aejt.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/395503/AEJT\\_5.2\\_Hudson.pdf](http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/395503/AEJT_5.2_Hudson.pdf)

In view of this interpretive option, I would like to stress that the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity indeed originated in long-term processes regarding the definition of trinitarian belief, the role of Scripture in Christian faith, and the position of human reason, morality, and will in relation to the understanding of God's revealed word, the leading of a pious life, and the pursuit of salvation. Therefore, as various recent studies have demonstrated, "the simplistic, inevitabilist paradigm of the decline of trinitarian theology and the rise of secular modernity"<sup>41</sup> is based on teleological approaches, which underestimate the religious infrastructure of the contexts of early modern antitrinitarianism. We also need to acknowledge that the disputes on the Trinity in seventeenth-century England influenced, and partly furthered, some momentous intellectual developments in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, Locke's reformulation of substance in an empiricist sense (which Stillingfleet judged harmful to the Trinity) was indebted to the emergence of the principle of individuation in the context of the trinitarian debates.<sup>42</sup> The crisis of the Trinity also facilitated the Newtonians William Whiston's and Samuel Clarke's rediscovery and dissemination of Arian views, which led to several controversies on subscription within the Church of England and among Dissenters, and which eventually contributed to the establishment of Unitarianism as a Christian denomination from the 1770s on.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, various deists between the 1690s and the 1730s, most prominently John Toland and Matthew Tindal, drew on the Unitarians' historical and textual criticism in formulating their views of early Christianity as an ethical religion devoid of mysteries – although the deists regarded Christ's message as confirming, not superseding, the universal law of nature.<sup>44</sup> Last but not least, the Socinians' rejection of trinitarian Christology contributed in the long run – via the deists' and the *philosophes'* insistence on Jesus' merely human nature – to triggering the quest for the historical Jesus.

In conclusion, the reassessment of the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity in recent historiography allows for a better understanding of its theological, philosophical, and political dimensions, which I have attempted to clarify in this article. Further research, devoid of teleological approaches, about its varied impact on later intellectual developments will certainly enable a deeper appreciation of its historical significance.

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<sup>41</sup> Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, p. 327.

<sup>42</sup> See John Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism, 'Socinianism', and Unitarianism", in Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy*, pp. 111-182; Udo Thiel, "Trinity"; Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*, pp. 138-169; Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, pp. 135-167.

<sup>43</sup> James Force, Stephen Snobelen, and the late Richard Popkin have written excellent studies on Newton's and his disciples' Arianism and biblical criticism. On the Newtonians' rediscovery of Arianism and the seventeenth-century crisis of the Trinity, see especially Stephen D. Snobelen, "To us there is but one God, the Father: Antitrinitarian Textual Criticism in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England", in Ariel Hessayon, Nicholas Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 116-136. On Arianism in eighteenth-century England, see Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism*, vol. 2, pp. 236-343; Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, pp. 19-82; Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy*, pp. 62-164.

<sup>44</sup> On the deists' borrowings from antitrinitarian methods, see especially Sullivan, *John Toland*, pp. 82-108; Champion, *Pillars*, pp. 99-132.