

Trinity

“Did I ever tell you the story how the Holy Trinity was invented?” asked Mike. “It was when they standardized God.”

He took a swig from his pint of Sam Adams. The bar was emptying out, most of the people from the standards meeting had gone home. Soon another meeting would descend on the hotel, firemen or nurses or some such. Once it was a dance, the men in uniforms and the women all in dresses of exactly one color.

Frank, one of the people from this week’s meeting had joined him for a beer and they were chewing over a week of intensive standardization meetings. Frank had been working on some kind of software interface.

“Well, this morning was intense,” he said. “I didn’t think we would get through all the votes in time for lunch.”

“It seems we are always in too much of a hurry on the last day.”

“Yes, people always seem to be rushing for their flights home.”

This was when Mike brought up the thing about how they standardized God.

“They what now?”

“One of the world’s earliest standards meetings. To standardize God, by order of the Emperor. Had to invent stuff out of whole cloth just to get the thing voted through.”

Frank glanced at his phone. “OK so what was the story?”

“It was in the Year three hundred and twenty five...”

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It started with a cloud of dust on the near horizon. Anthonius, meditating atop his pillar, saw it first. Someone coming, perhaps that delegation that had gone off to that meeting in Nicaea, coming back. His first instinct was to hop down off his pillar and tell someone, but of course he couldn’t do that. He had sworn off speech, and human company, and not being up on a pillar, in order to contemplate the divine nature and immensity of God. Now he contemplated what it meant if he saw a cloud and knew someone was coming but told no-one. Like a tree falling in the forest when no-one is there. He was here, but not here, his mind turned to God alone. So did it really amount to knowledge, him knowing? Did anything? The sun beat down, unshaded.

Some time later, out in the desert, the Abbot Basil noted the same pillar of dust clouding the near horizon.

“Dig faster,” he said to the sack-cloth clad figures around him, surrounded by clay amphorae, “The Delegate is almost here! And make sure those jars are properly sealed up, got to keep these scrolls safe.”

“Why, how long are we expected to keep these writings buried?” moaned one.

“Just until this thing blows over,” he replied.

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“Ossius, welcome! Have some wine! I trust my people washed your feet adequately?”

“More than adequately, as ever, Marcus. Thank you.”

“And your horses, I hope my stables are looking after them well?”

“They are rented horses. You know what they say about rented horses?”

“Ah yes. The fastest horse known to man, your rented horse. Very good. Did you have a good journey back? Like some wine?”

A slave came in and poured wine into each of their cups as they eased into Marcus’s chaise longues in the atrium of his home.

“New wine?” Ossius commented. “Yet the amphora looks quite old. New wine into old bottles, I think I read something about that.”

“Yes, there seems to be a shortage of amphorae at the moment, not sure why. Anyway, how did you all get on at this standards meeting?”

“We did fine. We managed to standardize God, if that was what you were wondering.”

“Standardized. Ah. God. Quite an undertaking I would think?”

“Those were our orders. Make sure that this new God was the same everywhere in the Empire. Complete interoperability from one end of the Empire to the other, the same in every possible environment and setting, yesterday, today and tomorrow. No exceptions. Orders from the very top I should add.”

“Ambitious.”

“Well, the Chief has had this bug-bear about this ever since that Battle at Milvian Bridge, when he had a clear vision of an Empire with just one God.”

“Milvian Bridge, that’s near Rome somewhere, isn’t it?”

“Near enough. Somewhere up-river,” replied Ossius.

"I went to Rome once," said Marcus.

"Did you take in any of the shows?"

"I went to one of those gladiator shows, at the Colosseum."

"Didn't fancy one of those loin-on-Christian things then?"

"Not really. There's no dramatic tension. No 'Will they, won't they?' to it. They never crack. Might as well watch a lion snacking on a slave."

"I know what you mean. I went to one once. Normally you show someone a few teeth, they realize it's not really all that important what they say they believe."

"Yes, but these ones, it's like the fear of their god has gotten right into them," suggested Marcus.

"Exactly! The fear of God," said Ossius, slapping his palm. "The One True God. This same God the Empire is now adopting across the board. Control God and you create a market in fear. Fear as a Service. Think about that."

Marcus thought about that.

"I think a lot of the land-holders would be only too glad to be able to have everyone kept in line with that kind of thing."

"Exactly. We introduce this slave religion, and in a few hundred years people won't even need to keep slaves, everyone will just do as they are told. 'God-fearing' will even sound like a normal thing. And the sweet thing is, you don't get punished until after you are dead. So you remain afraid for life, and it costs nothing in terms of logistical overheads."

"You see," he added, "that business with the lions is precisely the kind of thing we can address by standardizing God. At the moment there are all sorts of Christian beliefs flying around. And not only in the Colosseum," he added, gazing meaningfully in the direction of some stylite columns he had seen in the desert on his way in. "We need to nip these kinds of extravagance in the bud, have one common God standard that everyone works to from one end of the Empire to the other, no funny stuff. Total interoperability, so you can take a priest from one end of the Empire, drop them at the other end, and God will be exactly the same. Plug and play."

"Plug and pray?" suggested Marcus, grinning.

Ossius looked at him. "No, Marcus. This whole thing is in translation so that doesn't work." There was a silence.

"So anyway, how did it go?" asked Marcus, "It can't have been easy to get everyone into line."

"It wasn't, believe me. Some of the break-out sessions and working groups were pretty stormy." Ossius watched a lizard as it climbed up one of the plants in the patio. "The toughest one was the task force headed up by this Libyan delegate called Arius. Had quite a following."

"What was his problem exactly?" asked Marcus, choosing his words carefully.

“The way Arius and his working group had it, this Jesus was the Son of God all right, but not in a way that made him eternal, so he couldn’t also be God. Instead he had to be subordinate to God. It was clear from the get-go that whatever we came up with, his version wasn’t going to be compatible.”

“Hmm. Didn’t Saint Peter say in the very first Christian sermon: ‘God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ Sounds to me like he started out just as a man?”

“Just as well you weren’t there. I have to say at these standards meetings there isn’t always time to read all the prior art, but that’s probably for the best. Anyway, keep that kind of thinking under your hat from now on, eh?”

“But if anyone reads the scriptures, surely the game will be up?”

“So let’s not encourage that. Some of this stuff might be available to the vulgar public, but going forward we should encourage local populations to steer away from Latin, leave that to the priests and such like, so this kind of thing doesn’t get out.”

“Makes sense.”

“Besides, you haven’t heard what we came up with in the end. Something that is definitely not mentioned anywhere in the scriptures.”

“Do people even know which scriptures they should be reading?” asked Marcus.

“Not yet, that’s one of the things we had to get agreement on,” said Ossius. “There were a whole bunch of break-out sessions on what writings should be considered canonical. One guy wanted to only have one single Gospel be canon, thereby avoiding all the awkward differences between them, and stuff like that thing you brought up. Another working group wanted to get it all out there, gospels by Barnabus and all sorts. There’s even a kind of prequel where the young Jesus is making birds out of clay and bringing them to life!”

“Hard to swallow if people are going to actually believe any of that stuff.”

“Quite. And Barnabus doesn’t exactly paint Saint Paul in a good light.”

“Who did they use for the Paul stuff?”

“Some stuff by a Doctor Lucas, they are calling it the Acts of the Apostles, though hardly any apostles feature in it. Mainly it’s Paul roaming around doing his thing, though Lucas glosses over some of the more awkward questions like why Paul was invited to explain himself at Jerusalem and what happened to the money he collected in Macedonia.”

“Just as well. He more or less invented Christianity as we know it, didn’t he?”

“Indeed. In any case Dr. Lucas also has a gospel which we decided to include. It doesn’t add much new except a whole section at the beginning, a kind of a dramatic treatment about the Nativity. The plan is to drop that in over Saturnalia.”

“That won’t be popular!”

“Don’t worry, we are keeping the eating and drinking. People got a bit passionate about that, as you can imagine. Things calmed down a bit once they realized there was not going to be a War on Saturnalia.”

“So what’s so important about this Nativity anyway?”

“It’s what the Hebrews call ‘medrash’, not something you’d take literally but it makes a point.”

“That point being?”

“There’s a virgin birth, not unusual I know but it backs up the point about Jesus being God from the beginning, which was one of the features we needed to make sure of.”

“So now God has a mother?” Marcus suggested with a smirk.

“I’m sure we can integrate that somehow.”

“Anyway, now you have a nice canonical set of writings we can put into one single Bible?”

“Yes,” confirmed Ossius, “That was the easy bit. The real challenge was, once the Arian proposals got voted down in the plenary session, what were we going to replace it with? Some delegates had arrived with this idea that Jesus was not really physical but some kind of phantasm; someone else wanted all the demons to be saved...”

“From Hell?”

“I know, right. Then you have the Holy Spirit. It’s also kind of God, being the Spirit of God, and maybe also Sophia the spirit of ancient Wisdom, though I think that got edited out in an early revision. So then we had to figure out, does the Holy Spirit come from God as God, or Jesus as God, or both of them together? Are they one substance? What proceedeth from what and all that kind of thing. A mess.”

“Gods, I mean God,” said Marcus, “and it fell to you to sort all that out?”

“Pretty much. We had to get to a place where not everyone was happy but most people were as unhappy as each other.”

“Except Arius.”

“Except Arius, obviously.”

“So how did you square the circle?”

“With a triangle,” Ossius looked quite proud of himself.

“Go on,” said Marcus.

The evening air was beginning to get chillier.

“Come on inside to the Tablinium,” said Marcus. They went inside the house, followed by the slave who unobtrusively topped up their wine once they were settled.

“I’m listening,” said Marcus. “How did you square the, er, triangle?”

“The Trinity.”

“The Trinity?”

“The Trinity. An Holy Trinity. Three Gods in One. One in Three. Each begotten not made, no awkward questions about which bit came first. Each proceedeth from one triune whole and so on.” Ossius smirked slightly. He had invented it after all.

“But that makes no sense!”

“Exactly. That was the point. You can standardize on one version of God, or you can make it make sense, but it turns out you can’t do both. There’s an incompleteness problem. It’s just not possible to accommodate all the ideas that have been flying around these past three hundred years and fit them all into one idea of God, even after we’d voted down the Arian stuff.”

“So what happened?”

“It was the last day. We were running out of time. People were getting fidgety. Most of them had already booked their journeys home. One fellow had a trireme leaving on the next tide for Alexandria. Another guy, one of the slaves for his sedan chair had fallen over so he had to get down to the slave market before it closed to pick up another one. Someone else had booked a spot on a caravan down to Damascus. And so on. We needed to wrap that shit up.”

“So you just came up with the Trinity so everyone could be on their way?”

“It’s a mystery. Don’t you see, since we are discussing God, one thing that was never off the table was that whatever we came up with didn’t need to be understood by mortal humans. God is meant to be ineffable, after all. So we just made the solution to the whole standardization question that little bit less effable.”

“So you just invented the Holy Trinity?”

“Exactly!”

“You realize of course this whole Trinity doesn’t appear anywhere in the scriptures, no matter what writings you decided to canonize. Being as how you literally just invented it?”

“Right. So you see why we are not encouraging anyone to read that shit. God has been standardized in a way that is beyond human comprehension. For mere mortals, you just go about your business and do as you are told by the priests, and no-one is any the wiser. And as a bonus, no-one needs to explain it since it is, as I believe I mentioned, ineffable.”

“Right, well. What happens next? How are you all going to enforce this new standard of God?”

“That’s bit’s embarrassingly easy. We published our communique at the end of the conference, and everyone just has to read it out and confirm that it represents exactly what they believe, or else.”

“Even though it didn’t exist until just now.”

“You ever get into an argument with a religious person? As soon you ask them something they can’t answer, they go running off to a priest or elder or something, to tell them what they believe. No-one really knows what they believe. They just believe they believe. Except now they do know, because their creed is written down for them on this nice piece of paper.”

“And if they don’t?” asked Marcus, remembering those stylites out in the desert.

“We have commoditized fear, remember. If they get it wrong, their eternal soul is damned. We might also deal out some discouragement in this Earthly realm for a while.”

“But they can’t understand what they are signing up to, you said so yourself.”

“Exactly. No-one can. The Holy Trinity is not for understanding. Everyone is in the same position. A truly democratic God; the Three in One, Whom no-one can hope to understand but Whom everyone believes in. With Capital Letters.”

Marcus drank some of his wine in silent contemplation. Ossius followed suit, gazing abstractedly at a patch of mosaic on the floor. The toenails never looked right, somehow. It began to grow dark.

“So, what next?” asked Marcus finally.

“We need to get this rolled out,” said Ossius. “We might have to reconvene sometime, there’s a task force working on a kind of ‘Filioque’ extension – don’t ask, I think it’s more of the ‘what proceedeth from what’ kind of thing, but as long as it’s backwardly compatible with the Trinity there shouldn’t be an issue. And one of these days we really should standardize on the numbering system for these Years of Our Lord.”

“Well, I guess I’d better pass the word on to the local religious types,” said Marcus.

“Indeed. Don’t you have some kind of place with monks and things? A monkery or something?”

“Monastery, yes. One of my lookouts saw a bunch of them heading out to the desert earlier looking a bit suspicious, but I got word that they came back OK, so I’ll pass this communiqueé thing along to them in the morning, this creed thing. What are you calling it, this creed from Nicaea?”

“The Nicene Creed.”

“Nice and simple.”

“Well, people might still need to be reciting this hundreds of years from now. Thousands even,” said Ossius.

“Right,” said Marcus. “One interoperable, standard God for all purposes...”

“Three.”

“I get it. Three gods yet One, interoperable, worldwide, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, worlds without end. Cheers!”

“Cheers! Or Amen, as I think we’re saying now.”

“Amen.”

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“And that was how they standardized God,” he concluded.

“And everyone in the Roman Empire followed this same set of beliefs?”

“Nearly everyone. Constantine himself was only baptized on his deathbed,” said Mike. “As an Arian.”

“And what about those scrolls they buried in the desert?”

“Those were dug up eventually, in the Year of our Lord One Thousand, Nine Hundred and Forty Five. By which time the whole thing had more or less blown over.”