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June 25, 2010

Adventist Anti-trinitarianism And Alexandrian Theology

by Darius Jankiewicz



In 2001, clutching my newly-minted theology degree from Andrews University, I returned to regular front-line ministry in Australia. After spending eight years at Andrews—buried in books, writing, and theological parleys—I had become somewhat out of touch with modern Adventist (and Australian at that) culture with its theological trends. I did not, however, anticipate many challenges, at least not of a theological nature. Little did I know that one of the churches I was assigned to had recently become embroiled in a vigorous theological debate dealing with the nature of the Godhead.

The issue at hand: The nature of Jesus Christ's divinity. As it usually evolves, the church was divided into two camps. The majority supported current Adventist teachings. The minority, consisting of thinking, honest, and sincere church members, believed that the Adventist church had taken a wrong turn when it eventually accepted the trinitarian doctrines. This group agitated for a return to the teachings of the Adventist pioneers. Within two days of my arrival in town, a packet containing the materials compiled by the latter group arrived at my door soon followed by the distressed head elder. With my head still spinning from the recent inter-continental move, I took time to carefully review the materials that had arrived at my door.

Eternal Subordination

The main idea found in everything that I read was that the Bible clearly stated that Christ exists in subordination to God the Father, not only while He was here on earth but throughout eternity past and future. Moreover, Christ owed His existence to the Father in whose life He partook. The trinitarian developments of the second and third centuries AD represented the Catholic Church's departure from the clear teaching of the Scriptures and introduction of pagan ideas into Christianity. Adoption of trinitarianism around the turn of the 20th century imperiled the Adventist Church and made it vulnerable to further intrusion of heretical doctrines such as, for example, Sunday worship and ecumenism. The only hope for Adventism was to return to the ideas of the pioneers, who clearly supported the doctrine of subordination.

As I mulled over the material at hand, it struck me that the authors of these various anti-trinitarian pamphlets did not, in actuality, advocate a return to the very beginning of Adventist Christological thinking where Christ was considered by many to be but an elevated creature that differed quantitatively rather than qualitatively from all other creatures. Uriah Smith, for example, was unequivocal when he advocated that Christ was "the first created being, dating his existence far back before any other created being or thing." Instead, and without exception, the pamphlets advocated a more refined position stating that, rather than being created, Christ was generated (or begotten) by God the Father in eternity past. His beginnings, moreover, were so far back in eternity that, for all practical purposes, he could be considered as eternal.

This, however, did not entail co-equality. Similar positions were taken by Adventist thinkers around the time of the Minneapolis General Conference (1888) such as [E. J. Waggoner](#) or [A. T. Jones](#). The thought of these theologians, however, represented a clear shift from the earliest Adventist thinking on the Godhead.

The Alexandrian School

As I read these materials, so eloquently defending the idea of Christ's generation, His co-eternity but not co-equality, I realized that much of this does not differ significantly from the teachings of the Alexandrian school of theology that flourished during the second and third centuries AD. While not all positions of the Alexandrian school of thought and the modern Adventist anti-trinitarians overlap, the latter being far more Scripturally-based than the former, the two appear to be in essential agreement on the origin and function of Christ.

Two general remarks are in order before we take a closer look at the teachings of the principal thinkers of the Alexandrian school, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215 AD) and Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254 AD). First, both were strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, which they saw as the natural ally in combating the paganism of the day. Second, in their subordinationistic views, they were in general agreement with other Christian thinkers of the post-New Testament era. Such a position was not only viewed as more compatible with the monotheism of the Old Testament but it also resembled Greek thinking on the deity and its mediator, Logos, thus making Christianity intelligible to the pagan audience. It was this evangelistic desire that drove Clement and Origen to their conclusions.

Both of these Alexandrian thinkers centered their teaching on the affirmation of the absolute oneness and transcendence of God and the need of a mediator. This mediator, the Logos, was the source of all knowledge of God to humanity. Clement and Origen spoke very highly of the Logos, pointing to his sinlessness and blamelessness and calling him the "wisdom of God," "cause of all good things," and "God in the form of man." Despite using such exalted language, the Alexandrian thinkers hesitated to ascribe to the Logos the supreme, underived divinity that would make Him equal with God. This, however, raised the question of the Logos' origin.

In eternity past, the Alexandrians claimed, the Logos issued forth ("emanated" or "generated") from the Father. Origen went so far as to explain the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of "eternal generation." This allowed him to speak unabashedly of Christ as sharing co-eternal existence with the Father and thus participating in His nature without making the former co-equal with God. Following the first stage of His existence, when the Logos "was with God," Christ became incarnated in the human form of Jesus.

Subordinationism And Salvation

The life of Christ, as the incarnated Logos, was a continuation of the perfect union with God. While on earth, Christ mediated the knowledge of God and through his example showed humanity a way to obtain salvation. The way to please God and obtain salvation was through imitating Christ's perfect obedience on earth and reaching the stage of perfect sinlessness.

As such, neither Clement nor Origen left much room for Christ's death on the cross, focusing instead on his human achievements. They thus promoted "deification" or "becoming God-like" (a modern word for this process is sanctification) as the mode of salvation. For both of them, salvation was the responsibility of individual believers who, being completely free and having the inborn ability to choose between good and evil, were exhorted by Christ and the Holy Spirit to go through the stages of sanctification until they were made perfect.

Thus, a careful study of Alexandrian theology shows that its infatuation with Greek philosophy not only resulted in subordinationistic tendencies but was followed by even more sinister outcome related to soteriology. In this context, crucial questions must be asked. Was it coincidental that the Alexandrian thinkers were subordinationists who believed in sanctification as the mode of salvation? Or was it an integral part of their Christology, where the chief emphasis was on the earthly achievements of the man-Christ? Would that be the primary reason why, in the Alexandrian writings, the cross is de-emphasized in favour of perfect sanctification?

Implications

How does this relate to modern Adventist anti-trinitarians? As stated above, very few contemporary Adventist anti-trinitarians would agree with Uriah Smith. But neither are they willing to accept Christ's co-equality. Their only solution is, thus, the Alexandrian concept of generation. Like the ancient thinkers of that school, modern Adventist anti-trinitarians, therefore, may be classified as subordinationists or, as some of them refer to themselves, "Fountainarians."

Does their subordinationism/fountainarianism have any effect on their soteriology? I believe it does. A careful study of anti-trinitarian Adventist literature (mostly self-published) reveals an interesting trend: the centerpiece of their soteriology appears to be the life of Christ on earth and the example He provided for believers. While the death of Christ on the cross and its implications are occasionally referred to, these writers focus mainly on Christ's accomplishments on earth and His subordination to God the Father. Following His example, believers may, and indeed are required to – as some anti-trinitarians would insist – strive towards a life of sinless perfection.

This is not to say that as Christians we should not follow Christ's example or avail ourselves of His power to lead godly lives. However, it becomes problematic if sanctification, rather than Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, comes to be seen as the primary means of salvation. Such a soteriology can be traced back to the pre-Nicaean teachings of the early church fathers—particularly those connected with the Alexandrian school of theology—and ultimately to Greek philosophy.




Darius Jankiewicz is associate professor of Historical Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Born in Poland, Jankiewicz immigrated to Australia in 1986. Following his graduation from Avondale College in 1989, he worked as a pastor in the Greater Sydney Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. In 1993 he moved to the USA where he completed Master of Divinity and Ph.D. degrees, graduating in 2001. Following his graduation he returned to Australia where he served as the senior pastor of three churches in Tasmania. In 2004, he was called to serve as a professor of theology at Fulton College in Fiji, and in 2007 he was called back to teach at the Seminary. Darius is married to Edyta, and they have two children, Caitlin (11) and Ashley (9).

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on June 25, 2010 in [Adventist Studies](#), [Church History](#), [Historical Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

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Excellent post Darius. I have a story that you will find interesting.

I know of a conversative Adventist who developed semi-Arian ideas. They revolved around issues of the Son's begotten status.

He ended up converting to Eastern Orthodoxy. And one reason appears to be the Eastern Orthodox idea of the eternal generation of Son (which grows out of origen but is slightly different???).

Ironically, as far as I can see, his semi-arianism helped his move to a Eastern form of trinitarianism. Similiar language and ideas and problems and a solution that respects those problems. Although I think it is a solution bound and restricted to them as well.

Now he see's Adventisms Trinitarianism as deficient and even suggests we are not really trinitarian because we don't believe in the eternal generation of the Son - you can't please some people! (Though in my mind the Adventist view is a simple non-speculative Biblical model that doesn't claim too much).

Do you think we should utilise Eastern Orthodox ideas on trinity or would that creates another set of problems?

Posted by: Anthony | [June 29, 2010 at 12:20 AM](#)

Thanks for your comment Anthony.

I am not surprised your friend found Eastern Orthodoxy appealing. He is not alone. I am aware of several Protestant leaders who in recent years were received into the Orthodox church for a variety of reasons, one being the generation of the Son.

I am in agreement with you that, however incomplete, the Adventist understanding of the Trinity is very close to what we find in the Bible. Incorporating the Orthodox trinitarian ideas could introduce an unwanted (philosophical) complexity to our understanding of God and complicate our soteriology and eschatology considerably - something we don't need at this point of earth's history.

Posted by: Darius Jankiewicz | [July 07, 2010 at 12:22 PM](#)

Great post Darius! Reading it made me miss your class at the Seminary. I have Augustine's "The Trinity" on my shelf as well as a few

others about the Trinity and this made me want to pick them up soon as well. Blessings!

Posted by: Jeff Carlson | [July 14, 2010 at 12:50 AM](#)

Thank you for this post. I appreciated the connections it draws between theology, Christology, and soteriology.

One connection, however, that was not so clear to me was the connection between the "Alexandrian infatuation with Greek philosophy" and subordinationism. It could be argued that theological ruminations on "logos" has Scriptural roots, drawn from John 1, which itself has roots in the OT's reference to "sophia."

Furthermore, it seems to me that the crucial distinction between Arianism and subordinationism needs to be made more explicit. The central issue is not the time of Christ's creation, but if he was created or not. Even if Christ was created in the far distant past, this does not "for all practical purposes" make him eternal, or equal with God. Rather, it makes him a creature, i.e. Arianism, and this has disastrous consequences for soteriology.

The Alexandrians were not Arians. The language of "generation" should not be read as an analog to the language of creation, affirming Christ had a beginning in time. The issue of subordination is an issue dealing with the relationship of the members of the Trinity to each other, once their co-eternity is assumed. It assumes that Christ is not a creature, i.e. equal with God, but has a distinct role to play in relation to the Father.

Lastly, the nature of the Trinity is also distinct from the question of Jesus' nature, i.e. was he "fully human and fully divine" and what does this mean?

It seems to me that Adventism's struggles with developing and maintaining an orthodox view of soteriology stem from Arianism, not subordinationism, and this last question.

Posted by: Zane | [July 21, 2010 at 10:44 AM](#)

Dear Darius,

I read your above "Adventist Anti-trinitarianism And Alexandrian Theology" with interest. Though not a SDA, I found this bit of SDA history quite interesting. I have been following recent Christological developments in Adventism for the better part of a decade now. You called some of the Adventist anti-trinitarians (subordinationists) as "Fountainarians." I know what fountain means. Specifically, which SDA anti-trinitarian subordinationists refer to themselves as "Fountainarians?" I would be interested in knowing. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Richard Rocky Maraccini

Posted by: Richard "Rocky" Maraccini | [August 15, 2011 at 07:38 PM](#)

Thanks for your comment Richard. I came across the term "fountarianism" some years ago while researching a small group of Australian Adventist anti-Trinitarians. Here's a quote from their confession: "I believe that God the Father is the great original life source or fountain from whom all things flow. Therefore my use of the term fountarian to identify myself."

Darius

Posted by: Darius Jankiewicz | [August 16, 2011 at 09:16 AM](#)

I see a quote by Uriah Smith changing his view that Christ was created to more begotten, was not included. Also, where can a quote by any other pioneer or Ellen White saying Christ was created be found?

Posted by: Larry Davis | [September 23, 2011 at 04:32 PM](#)

One thing I find curious. How is it that most non-trinitarian or fountarians will only use the KJV which is decidedly from non-Alexandrian sources but traditional Antioch manuscripts while most trinitarians use the NIV and other bibles that are decidedly from the Alexandrian line of manuscripts. It would seem that what you are presenting is gnostic in nature. If what you say is true, should it not be the other way around.

Posted by: Mark | [September 26, 2011 at 07:50 PM](#)

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