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The Divine Trinity as Paradigm for Ideal Human Relationships: An Orthodox Perspective

Abstract

The divine Trinity is the social program of Orthodoxy, that implies that the Trinity obliges us to discard any form of egotistic individualism that leads to the destruction of communion and of life, but also to make sure we do not fall into depersonalizing collectivism that annihilates the personal characteristics of the human individual. Three in One is the divine model offered to us. Unity in di-versity. Each one with his or her own personal characteristics and all sharing the same human nature in respect and sanctity.

If our attitude before the Trinitarian persons is prayer, praise and adoration, our attitude towards one another as persons created in the image of the Tri-une God must be similar, only brought to the human level. That means love, praise and blessing. In other words, the Divine Trinity proves to be the most important reality for the future of humanity.

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Introduction

As René Girard put it, “the violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into scapegoats of our own violence can only backfire in the end”.¹

Three observations must be made here: first, there is a tendency in our days to transfer violence to religion and since we look for the cause of our illness in the wrong place we will never heal; second, but related to the first, we are not ready for critical self-examination, for a direct confrontation with ourselves. It is good to remind us in this context that Socrates placed the worthiness of life in the process of self-examination. Third, again related to the first one, looking for scapegoats just in order for us to falsely feel good, which is lying to ourselves, the gravest of all lies, is going to backfire in the end. It is going to produce more violence, pain and destruction. This reminds one of Christ’s warning when He said that the last lie will be worse than the first one (Matthew 27, 64).

We live in a world based on a mentality of self-righteousness. That by itself is a cause of aggression and violence. When it comes to defending ourselves even with all our deviations, no value is too great to be attacked, to be vilified and scapegoated.

If we look at the contemporary Western society it is easy to notice the rapid erosion of family values, the relativization of such values as friendships, commitment, honesty and the like, the blind dismissing of tradition, and other similar tendencies and attitudes. In fact, it seems that the more a certain thing is valuable to people, the more it will become subject to direct and indirect attacks and denigration. As if nothing is holy any longer in our days except for the self-righteousness of the individual or of a certain group of people.

There are plenty of those who blame religion for the violence we see in our world today. There is a need for everyone to listen, to learn, to re-examine, to apply that imperatively necessary *audietur et altera pars*.

¹ René Girard, “Violence and Religion: Cause or Effect”, in *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. VI, Nr. 1, Spring 2004, p. 20.

The topic of my paper springs from the conviction that religion is not to be blamed for the violence we witness in our jungle; on the contrary, it offers ideal modes of being in the world, and, as Mahatma Ghandi believed, no matter which form it takes culturally, it helps us discover the truth of our common root² which in turn gives us one of the most solid foundations for a harmonious life together.

The paper will start with an assumption that violence is characteristic to human nature and then will discuss shortly the doctrine of the Trinity as understood in the Orthodox Christian tradition, more particularly in terms of the origin and model of human personhood, as paradigm for proper human relations and interaction.

Human nature and violence

René Girard is convinced that violence does not come from religion but from the human nature and that, in fact, religion appears as a consequence of this violence and as a way of protection against it.³

From a theological point of view we will have to specify from the beginning that when we speak of human nature as a source of violence, we refer to the fallen human nature. Girard's assumption is shared by psychologists old and new. Freud, for instance, the way he is understood by Erich Fromm, believes that man's tendency to acquire and possess is an expression of human nature, but also reflects man's immaturity and illness. The same description is, of course, valid for a society where having takes priority over being.⁴

Reflecting upon the torture of Irak's prisoners in Abu Ghraib by mostly American soldiers, American psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo asks the very common question: what makes men into monsters? And by the end of his reflections on human nature he concludes that even the best of us, under wrong circumstances, can become perpetrators of evil.⁵

The mentioned desire to have, to accumulate more, intrinsic to actual human nature, not only engenders envy and jealousy from the part of others, feelings of revenge and calls for justice on the part of those who were dispossessed, but also fear of losing the accumulation on the part of the one who has or acquired. This kind of spirit generates an irrational

² See: Eugen Drewermann, *Ich steige hinab in die Barke der Sonne: Meditationen zu Tod und Auferstehung*, Walter-Verlag, Olten und Freiburg i.B., 5. Aufl., 1992, p. 9.

³ René Girard, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 13.

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Avoir ou être, un choix dont depend l'avenir de l'homme*, Editions Robert Laffont, Paris, 1978, p. 104.

⁵ Philipp G. Zimbardo, "After Abu Ghraib, Psychologist Asks: Is It Our Nature to Torture", in *Science and Theology News*, July/August 2004, p. 8.

tendency to gigantism, as Emil Cioran notices⁶ and leads to bestialization and even to the deification of the bestial, in Berdiaev's words.⁷

In one of his seminal anthropologic works Abraham Heschel warns that the opposite of the human is not even the animal, but the demonic. He deplores man's giving to himself zoologic definitions and thus taking on the image of the animal instead of looking for higher standards.⁸

Indeed, starting even with Aristotle's definition according to which man is a social animal (*zoon politikon anthropos*) man has been compared with the animal, at least in this common translation. In my view, this is a mistranslation and misinterpretation for two reasons: first, animals are social, too; in this case the definition does not tell anything specific about man, and therefore is not a definition. Second, the word *zoon* comes from *zoï*, "life"; *zoon* then is "living being" in its primary sense; *politikon* is "who lives in the city", *polis*. To live in the city implies rules, civilization, politeness, protocol etc.

Similar to Aristotle's definition of man, translated and transmitted to us in zoological terms, there are other more modern definitions according to which man is an animal who makes tools, animal who cooks his food, etc.

Whatever your term of comparison or point of reference is, that is what you will tend to become. We know that from daily experience. Tell your little child constantly that he is good, talk to him or her only in positive terms and you will see how wonderfully that child grows; tell him constantly that he is bad, hit and hurt him all the time and you will see what child you will have. While exceptions might exist, the rule is that you become the value you adopt. Tell me the values you have and I will tell you who you are.

Man as the image of God

This is where religion comes fundamentally and significantly into play. Religion promotes the idea of God, of a higher power, of a higher standard and point of reference. It basically means reconnection, which implies subtly the idea of a fall, of a separation, but indicates link, connection to a power that gives you security, stability and protection but also essential rules and regulations for a better life, that you are asked to consider.

This is the difference between zoological and theological.

⁶ E. Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, translated from French by Richard Howard, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1970, pp. 44-45.

⁷ N. Berdiaev, *The Fall of Man in the Modern World*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1963, p. 43.

⁸ A. Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 1965, pp. 20-25; 101.

According to Christian doctrine, man is created in the image of God. The image consists basically of reason, feelings and will as they are characteristic to the human being. But man was also created in God's likeness, that is with the possibility to attain holiness and immortality. As Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae writes, "man is a being who is rational and endowed with the ability to speak, who is communicative, inexhaustible, and that is why he is thirsting for immortality. Man is capable of immortality".⁹

Man's great chance was that he was created out of God's love. That is why, even after the fall, God did not dismiss him altogether. Through the fall the image was darkened, not destroyed. This point is so important for its dignifying character that the Church put it at hand for everyone, in common worship. One hears during the Orthodox burial service: "I am the image of Your ineffable glory, even though I bear the marks of sin." This is, one can say, the most beautiful and noble definition ever given to the human being.

The image of God in man is what keeps man into being. Man's existence was and is due entirely to God's love. Just because this love was the same before and after the fall it indicates that it is divine, perfect, total. God hates sin, but loves the sinner. Thus there is no ontological identification between sin and sinner. That is why the salvation offered by God is consistent with God's own ways. In Christ, man is given the chance to go back to where he used to be and start again. Since Christ is true God and true man, participation in Christ's life is participation in the divine life.

The human hypostasis of Christ is the bridge on which man walks from himself to God, on which he or she walks the way of likeness to God: holiness and immortality. If I am in Christ I am in God. Participation is the foundation *sine qua non* for deification.

Being created in the image of God implies that the ultimate goal of man's life is deification. This is a process without end. St. Gregory of Nyssa calls it *epektasis*. It is the constant tendency to reach higher. It starts here and it never ends because in God there is no end. That is why Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite calls God "the beyond beingly being."

This way of participation lets man live always *sub specie aeternitatis*. He cannot live without this eschatological perspective, because it is in perfect accord with his nature.¹⁰ In this sense one is called to have a doxologic existence, somehow similar to the one described by St. Augustine in his

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu [The Eternal Image of God]*, (in Romanian), Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1987, p. 11.

¹⁰ Theodor Damian, *Theological and Spiritual Dimensions of Icons According to St. Theodore of Studion*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, Queenstown, Lampeter, 2002, p. 23.

beautiful exhortation: “Sing with your voice, sing with your heart, sing to the Lord a new song. Sing as the traveler does: he sings and advances, he sings in order to renew his strength. You too, sing in order to strengthen yourself in the right faith and in the purity of life.”

The Holy Trinity and the human communion

The Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is at the basis of one of the most important doctrines in the Orthodox tradition. To say that we believe in one God in three persons or hypostases is paradoxical, but the paradox is exactly the appropriate language one should use when talking about God. The paradox is not only about the three in one, but also about the application of both apophatic and cataphatic theology - via negativa and via positiva - to the same reality: to say that we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is cataphatic, a positive affirmation, but to say that we believe in one God in three persons or hypostases is an apophatic or negative affirmation.

In his discussion with Ablabius, St. Gregory of Nyssa argues against the theory of Sabelius who believed that three hypostases in the Trinity mean three gods. Specifying the difference between essence (οὐσία) and energy (ἐνεργεία) in the Trinity, St. Gregory explains that all we know about the Trinity is related to the energy, movement, manifestation, not to the essence. Yet, any divine operation or energy has a Trinitarian character since it is “from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

As John Meyendorff explains, God is unknowable in His essence not because of the fallen condition of man and hence of his incapacity of perfect knowledge, but because as Creator, God completely transcends any created level of existence, so He is unknowable in Himself, but not to Himself.¹²

It is appropriate here to specify that the three persons of the Trinity are not just types of intra-Trinitarian relationships,¹³ in other words reflecting and describing *Deus ad intra*; that would mean to limit the Trinity to a theological concept, depriving It of the economic hypostatic manifestations - *Deus ad extra* - which represent for us the only basis on which we can say anything at all about the Divine Trinity.

One of the most popular, plastic, and educational ways to talk about the paradox of one God in three persons is Rublev’s icon of the Trinity. There

¹¹ John Meyendorff, *Christ in the Eastern Christian Thought*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1975, p. 144.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 93-94.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

are several interpretations of it. L. Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky's interpretation, to which I am referring here, is based on the Creed. First of all, the three angels are identical. This symbolizes the unity of essence or nature; one *ousia* (οὐσία). Then, the angel from the left clothed in a very pale, transparent vestment is the Father, whom we know very little. The angel in the middle, who faces us, is dressed with vestments in blue and red. He has behind him a tree. He is the Son, because it was the Son who faced us in the Incarnation; it was through the Incarnation that He allowed us to know more fully about Him. The two colors of the vestments represent the two natures in Christ, the human and the divine, and also their harmonious coexistence. Blue is the color of the sky, signifying the divine. Red is the color of blood, signifying the human. The tree in the background represents the cross. The angel on the right, whom, like the first one, we do not see fully, but only in profile, and who is clothed in green, is the Holy Spirit. We know little about Him that is why we do not see His full face. The color symbolizes life, as He is called the Giver of Life.

There is a circle that circumscribes the angels who are sitting at the table on which there is a chalice. The circle is not closed. It symbolizes the Church with the Eucharist through which we enter the divine life of the Trinity.¹⁴

The Holy Trinity, in the Orthodox tradition, is not a static principle of faith. It is the expression of a significantly dynamic relationship that renders justice to God, when we refer to His total transcendence and to the unknowability of His nature, but also to the human mind, with its need for logical comprehension, when we refer to the divine energies operating in creation.

Against modern tendencies to replace the Trinitarian attributes with other adjectives, such as Creator, Savior and Sanctifier, for instance, the Orthodox theology advocates for the maintenance of the classic, biblical appellatives which alone express at the same time, adequately both the intra-Trinitarian and the extra-Trinitarian relationships.

If man is created in the image of God and God is Trinity then man is the image of that Trinity. That means that man first of all has an ontological structure that is communitarian. Community is the opposite of fragmentation, therefore it implies unity at several levels. Just like in the Divine Trinity where we speak of one nature and three hypostases or persons, so with man: I am of the same nature with every other man while I have a distinct person, or hypostasis. It is like the definition which implies the two elements that we call proximate genre and specific

¹⁴ Dieu est vivant, Catéchisme pour les familles, Cerf, Paris, 1979, p. 81.

difference. Both of them apply to me. When it comes to genre I am part of all those that are in it. We share the genre. Then I have my own specific traits that do not separate but only distinguish me from the others with whom I share the genre. It really takes a divine mind to make such thing possible! United but different by distinction. Just like the Council of Chalcedon (452) formulated the way the two hypostases in Christ relate to each other with no separation, no division, with no confusion and no change. This is like *unitas in diversitas*, unity in diversity, the ideal mode of being in the world. And logically speaking it has to be ideal since this is the image of God. Of course, this is not all. The image is a gift to man. It depends on what one does with what one receives. This is where the fundamental responsibility of man comes into play and which is the ground of any type of ethics.

The communitarian, social character of man's existential destiny gives him not only power but also offers him infinite ways of growth and enrichment. Through the commonality of nature, which transcends me fundamentally, and on which I have no total control, I come in touch with every individual of my genre. Every good that one does affects me whether I realize it or not, just as every evil. In other words we are all in this pot together.

Just like C.G. Jung spoke of a collective unconscious that would represent a kind of common ground for humanity, so in this case, the ∞ , our common nature is the collective element. In some cases maybe unconscious, because people do not realize it, but that does not mean it is unscientizable.

Due to this gift that we have through our creation in the image of God, we can say, paraphrasing well known existentialistic language, that we are condemned to community, or to use a less deterministic language, we are given ontologically the gift of community. That is why fragmentation, division, separation is a sin, because it goes against nature, against the divine intention for and with us, against the most intimate structures that make us who we are.

When we speak about Trinity we do not mean sheer numbers. The number in itself does not make communion which is the sustaining power of any existence. By the same token, when we refer to human community we do not imagine numbers only, because numbers can be easily divided; we speak first of all of togetherness, consubstantiality. That is why we cannot speak separately about trinity in God without talking at the same time about unity and oneness, just as we cannot speak about the mystery of man just in terms of numbers, like one individual versus many or other individuals, without at the same time speaking about the unity and oneness of humankind.

If something is complementary to something else and helps the thing to which it is complementary to be what it is, then the thing that is complementary is part of the essential definition of the other one, which is why we cannot speak of one without the other. The same applies to oneness and trinity in God and to oneness and plurality in man's case.

On the other hand, if we are created in the image of the Trinity that means we have something from each divine person. Whatever attributes we believe the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have, keeping the proportions, are to be found in man, at the human level.

Having a multiplicity of qualities from a multiplicity of persons man's existence has infinite opportunities for growth. Man can grow multidirectionally and multilaterally to horizons never imagined that come from God, but also from other humans.

In fact this infinite number of opportunities for growth is confirmed by man's thirst for eternity and infinite, for endless growth in the realm of the good.

Personhood as transcendence

By elaborating with particular emphasis on the personal character of God and of God's relationships *ad intra* and *ad extra* the Cappadocian Fathers first of all saved the doctrine of the Trinity from becoming an abstract philosophical system,¹⁵ but at the same time gave the human personhood the highest possible dignity and importance.

The persons of the Trinity, Paul Florensky comments, are *homoousios* (of the same nature) not just similar to each other (*homiousios*). By the same token, based on the doctrine of man's creation in the image of God, all human beings are *homoousios*, of the same nature, not just *homiousios*, similar to each other. This consubstantiality of the humans, understood in the most realistic way made concrete in the human personhood is the true ground for ethics and morality.

Being based on the unity of nature, the human personhood tends naturally towards communion. The initial endowment of man with the possibility to reach immortality remains for ever a virtual reality. Both the tendency towards communion and the virtual immortality are reflected in the act of communication. My thirst to communicate myself to the other, in a relationship of authentic love, is never exhausted; the same is valid with the unexhausted thirst to receive the loved one's offer of himself in his communication to me.

¹⁵ John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

I am who I am as a human being and person based on this need to offer myself to others and to receive the others' offer through communication. Because it grows out of authentic love, I never get tired of this offering of myself to the one I love, as I do not get tired of receiving the continuous offer of the one I love. This type of exchange is characteristic of the divine persons in the Trinity.¹⁶ The only difference resides in the fact that with the Trinity there is perfect and total communication whereas in the human realm the communication is only partial and imperfect. Yet this is something we realize painfully. This pain in itself and our never giving up indicates that we are made for more, but at the same time, it indicates the inexhaustibility of the mystery of the human person.

This is how Dumitru Stăniloae puts it: "The fact that I cannot communicate myself entirely to others shows me the inexhaustible mystery that I am even though even as a mystery I do not know myself except through the fact that I communicate myself to the others. My mystery does not contradict the fact that I know myself as a person that communicates itself to other persons that make themselves known to me as mysteries."¹⁷

The mystery of the human person is another dimension that connects us to God, and is explainable in and through the image of God that we are. The difference consists in the fact that while God is not a mystery to Himself but only to us, we are mysteries, each one to oneself and to one another.

The connection between us is a mystery in itself as well. It springs from the ontological need planted in our being by the One who created us together and for one another.¹⁸ This is a *datum* which manifests itself in us independent of our will. That means that my communication here, with others, at the horizontal level is the basis of my communication with God at the vertical level; one prepares me for the other.

The better I communicate with others here, and through communication offer myself to them, the easier I will get ready to communicate with God to whom I have to offer myself entirely and unconditionally.

Such an offer requires a similar type of love, which has its paradigm in the Divine Trinity who, for St. Ignatius of Antioch is "the unmoveable movement of love".¹⁹ This love makes the persons transparent to one another. It is like the burning bush: it burns without consuming itself. The unity of love, its power and permanency, creates a perichoretic type of existence that in the Trinity is manifest in the unity and interpenetration

¹⁶ D. Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

¹⁹ S.B. Ignatius IV Patriarch of Antioch, *Sauver la Création*, col. "Theophanie", Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1989, p. 113.

of reason, feelings, will and action. What one person thinks and wants, at the same time the other two do. Love is the eternal dimension in the human being. When I love God and have the feeling that I am loved by Him I progress into a life that I don't want to end. The same is valid in the human realm: if I authentically love a person and I know I am loved by him or her, I don't want to die as I don't want him or her to ever die.²⁰ It is my offer in love to the others that makes them transcend their own limits and progress beyond them, towards eternity and God, and vice versa, their love for me makes me transcend my own limits and progress towards eternity and God. That is why Roger Garaudy personalized transcendence by saying: "my transcendence is you".

This transcendence is then intrinsic to our relations. It gives them the taste of the infinite and eternity in a way that with each transcended limit I have the feeling of fulfillment which yet becomes the stepping stone for a new desire of a new fulfillment. This is the type of dynamics that characterizes our relationships.

In Dumitru Stăniloae's words, "we sustain our life through mutual communication; however we remain contents of incommunicable mysteries. We sustain our life perpetually through perpetual communication as mysteries, through the fact that we do not exhaust what we communicate. This situation generates our desire to receive as much as possible from the other, through his or her communication."²¹

Communication as a tool that helps build the relationship and communion is a mystery in itself. It is a kind of language that precedes us because it comes from God as it is given to us by God. That is why learning to communicate is a process of anamnesis, of remembering. The inner language of communication (not the external one, the words), is what brings the others to us and makes them transparent to us, thus helping us to discover them, to "see" them in their inner dimensions. This language that helps us to approach and address them properly is the language of contemplation and knowledge: gnosis. It reveals to us the others' identity and facilitates our participation in that identity. That means we "see" how they are and through that we enter in a perichoretic relationship that allows an essential interpenetration which is communion of eternal life.

In this way our communication becomes an expression of our longing for the original communion placed in us by God through our creation in His Trinitarian image, and ultimately, an expression of our longing for God.

²⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

Such communication instaurates and restores the original communion with each other and implicitly with God. In that it has a sacramental dimension that makes it become liturgy, doxological chant.

You are therefore I am

That is why we believe that the Holy Trinity is not an abstract concept of God but a faith experience that transforms us and draws us to higher dimensions of existence. The inaccessibility of the divine nature, the mystery of God in general, does not stand in the way of the experience of God in faith. God's transcendence does not annihilate God's immanence, His economic manifestations in creation which are at the center of the religious life, as it is evident from the innumerable hymns, troparia, prayers, invocations, throughout the many forms of liturgical services in the Orthodox tradition.²²

So vivid is the image of the Trinity as a concrete reality in the life of the Orthodox believer that the Russian movie maker, Tarkovsky, commenting on his movie on Rublev and on Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity, wrote: "Here is, finally, the Trinity, great, serene, entirely penetrated by a vibrant joy from which human fraternity springs. The concrete openness of the One in three and of the triple union in The One, offers a prodigious perspective to the human future still to be reached in centuries to come."²³

This is the reason for which the Holy Trinity is considered the social program of Orthodoxy. That is, from the Trinity we know that a person exists only in communion with other persons. If Descartes defined man in terms of his or her rational capacity: *cogito ergo sum*, in the Orthodox Church, based on this Trinitarian personalistic theology, man is defined in terms of his or her authentic communion with God and the other: you are therefore I am. The "you" is God, first of all, then fellow human beings.

Conclusion

Today we are living witnesses of a strange paradox. The more "civilized" and sophisticated we become the more we have a problem to live in peace and harmony with each other.

When we learn of war and violence in the history books somehow we say: that's history. In the past man has not been so advanced in knowledge as we are today. But it seems that today we have even more war and violence

²² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology, Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1979, p. 184.

²³ S.B. Ignatius IV, of Antioch, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

than in previous times. The 20th Century, experts say, killed more people than the entire history up to it. We began the 21st century in the same way. It seems that there is a jungle within the individual that is cultivated by the jungle outside and vice-versa or both at once.

In this situation man needs to do something that will save him from final, irreversible destruction. Violence is not in religion, it is in man's corrupted mentality.

Where can we turn to find hope? Science and technology did not help in that direction up to now. On the contrary, with new scientific and technological discoveries, it seems that more threat is added to our existence. Economy and politics? History shows that there is no salvation in them. Arts? It is nice to think that beauty will save the world. God is supreme beauty after all.

Apparently religion remains the ancestral and the new source for hope and harmony.

When I said that the divine Trinity is the social program of Orthodoxy, that implies that the Trinity obliges us to discard any form of egotistic individualism that leads to the destruction of communion and of life, but also to make sure we do not fall into depersonalizing collectivism that annihilates the personal characteristics of the human individual. Three in One is the divine model offered to us. Unity in diversity. Each one with his or her own personal characteristics and all sharing the same human nature in respect and sanctity.

If our attitude before the Trinitarian persons is prayer, praise and adoration, our attitude towards one another as persons created in the image of the Tri-une God must be similar, only brought to the human level. That means love, praise and blessing. In other words, the Divine Trinity proves to be the most important reality for the future of humanity,²⁴ or to put it according to Paul Florensky's vision: Ultimately there will be no other choice for humanity but The Trinity or madness".

²⁴ S.B. Ignatius IV of Antioch, *op. cit.*, p. 112.