

‘NOT THE SAME GOD’: ALEXANDER CARSON (1776-1844) AND THE ULSTER TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY

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ABSTRACT. The impact of the Salters’ Hall Synod went beyond its immediate context in England and spread throughout the British Isles and into Ireland. Ulster Presbyterianism was wracked with debate over confessional subscriptionism and Unitarianism. Two key interlocutors in this debate were the Unitarian theologian William Hamilton Drummond and his orthodox counterpart, Alexander Carson. This essay traces the debate with a particular emphasis on their use of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as a way into or out of heterodox views of the Trinity.

KEYWORDS: Trinity, Unitarianism, divine attributes, long eighteenth century, Alexander Carson, William Hamilton Drummond, Ulster Presbyterianism, Scottish Enlightenment

The Protestant Reformation and its heirs in the post-Reformation period put a premium on confessional subscription. From the early Reformed symbols such as the Belgic Confession to the Westminster Standards of a few generations later, Protestants of various stripes took their denominational confessions seriously as part of their ecclesial and national identities. While there were notable differences between Protestant confessions, often for geographical and national reasons, there was a fundamental core that they shared with each other and with the catholic tradition stretching back to the theology of the ecumenical creeds. This unifying, biblical, and tradition-oriented confessionalism changed dramatically in the long eighteenth century when a decided move away from confessional orthodoxy occurred at the infamous Salters’ Hall Synod of 1719. There, a group of Dissenting leaders representing the Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist denominations decided by a close-margin vote that confessional subscription was not a requirement for ordination in their respective churches. This resulted in the waxing and waning of confessionalism within British Nonconformity that had a deleterious impact on catholic doctrines like the deity of Christ, the nature of the atonement, and relevant to this essay, the doctrine of the Trinity.

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The ensuing debate over such doctrines in relation to confessional subscription has been traced in a number of important works on British Nonconformity, particularly those of P. Dixon and P. C. H. Lim (Dixon 2003; Lim 2012). Yet little focus has been given to how those debates played out in a northern Irish context. This essay will trace the debate over confessional subscription and its impact on the doctrine of the Trinity in Irish Dissent illustrating it with a particular, though brief, summary of aspects of an Irish conflict between the Baptist Alexander Carson and the Unitarian William Hamilton Drummond. It will begin by looking at the larger question of subscription in England and Ireland and how it would impact the Ulster Synod. Then it will turn specifically to the debate over the Trinity between Carson and Drummond, though due to space constraints, we will focus on two aspects of that debate, one theological and the other philosophical, to get some sense of how it played out in the Ireland of the long eighteenth century. Thus, we can trace the impact of the Salter's Hall Synod on the Ulster Synod and what effect it had for a key orthodox doctrine.

Subscription and Unitarianism in British Nonconformity

The Salters' Hall Synod was related in some measure to the growth of Unitarianism in the British Isles whose origins can be traced back at least to the Socinianism of the seventeenth century, particularly the influence of John Biddle (1616-1662) and his translation of the Racovian Catechism (Lim 2012: 16-68). By the eighteenth century, a number within Dissenting leadership denied the deity of Christ, upholding a Unitarian view tantamount to Arianism. Others, though maintaining Trinitarian orthodoxy, nevertheless did not think that Trinitarian belief was necessary for ministerial ordination in Dissenting churches. British Unitarianism was influenced by the work of deists like Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) who also argued against using religious tests beyond the bible which they deemed the only 'rule of faith' (Thompson 2018: 3:23). In terms of legislation, non-subscription and related Unitarianism was made possible as far back as the Act of Toleration (1689) that required subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, but allowed for exceptions to be taken on matters pertaining to ceremonies, traditions, and homilies. Even more so, the Heads of Agreement (1691) loosened subscription further such that the bible was described as *the* rule of faith to be subscribed to, and only those parts of the Articles or the Westminster Confession that were deemed 'doctrinal' (Thompson 2018: 3:23). The eighteenth-century subscription controversies pushed this loosening even further.

For instance, over time, parts of British Dissent adopted certain requirements for ordination but not all of them required confessional subscription. This was seen explicitly in the Durham town of Crook where Samuel Bourn the Younger (1689-1754) refused to subscribe to the Westminster Standards

at his 1711 ordination. Likewise, John Taylor (1694–1761), an Arian, did not subscribe to any confession at his Presbyterian ordination in Derbyshire in 1716. The issue of non-subscription came to a head when Martin Tompkins (d. ca. 1755) preached at Stoke Newington, Middlesex, and openly criticised the doctrine of the Trinity, resulting in his expulsion from the congregation in 1718. Tompkins had argued against the imposition of the creeds and his view was taken up in Exeter by James Peirce (ca. 1674–1726), who argued likewise in 1717. Peirce, it is worth noting, was an acquaintance of William Whiston (1667–1752), an Arian at Cambridge. Hubert Stogdon (1692–1728), who had been trained at Exeter Academy, was ordained using his own personal creed. In a letter written in 1718 speaking against ‘the tyrannical fetters of blind obedience and implicit faith from men’s minds apace ... Men will no longer take things on trust; nor believe them because our forefathers, though ever so pious and venerable, told them so or so. But they will now immediately to the law and testimony; search the scriptures themselves and see whether it be so or no’ (Spalding 1959: 76). The so-called Exeter Controversy was to be adjudicated by Dissenting ministers in London who met at Salters’ Hall on February 24, 1719; their primary intention was to deal with the matter of confessional subscription, though Unitarianism was closely related. It was decided by a vote of 57 to 53 that confessional subscription was not required for ordination, nor did ordinands necessarily have to adhere to belief in the Trinity. It should be noted that only a few of those who voted against subscription were openly Arian, nevertheless, the Synod’s results split churches and denominations across the British Isles (Thompson 2018 3:24).

John Abernethy: Non-subscription and Arianism in Ulster

The general effects of the non-subscription movement and Arianism were felt beyond just London and Exeter but went north into Scotland and across the Irish Sea into Ireland. The notable example in Scotland is John Simson (ca. 1668–1740), Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, who underwent trial before Church of Scotland courts for Arianism and was eventually suspended from his faculty duties (Skoczylas 2001). In Dublin the Presbyterian minister Thomas Emlyn (1663–1741) was imprisoned and fined due to his Unitarian work, *Humble Inquiry into the Scripture Account of Jesus Christ* (1702). In Belfast John Abernethy (1680–1740) ‘shook the orthodoxy of Presbyterianism in the north of Ireland’ due to his non-subscription views (Barlow 1985: 400).

Abernethy’s story provides important context for the figures under review in this essay as he was deemed a contributing factor to the rise of Arianism within the Synod of Ulster in the long eighteenth century, though not himself an Arian. He had been trained at Edinburgh University under the Professor of Divinity, George Campbell (d. 1701), a convert to episcopacy and who was responsible for the training of many Irish Presbyterians. Abernethy was

licensed to preach in 1702 in the Presbytery of Antrim where he was installed as a minister after having declined an invitation to take over for Emlyn in Dublin (Barlow 1985: 401). Abernethy was, with James Kirkpatrick (ca. 1676-1743), instrumental in founding the Belfast Society that brought ministers, licentiates, and lay-people together to discuss theology, sermons, and books, but also had the express purpose of bringing 'things to the test of reason and scripture without servile regard to any human authority' (Anonymous A: 14). One such human authority was the Westminster Confession of Faith (1644) to which subscription was required by all Ulster Presbyterian ministers. On December 19, 1719, Abernethy preached before the Society a sermon entitled 'Religious Obedience Founded on Personal Persuasion', and argued that submission was only to be to Christ's teaching and not any 'human declarations and decisions in any point of faith or duty'. Persons were to follow 'impartially their own light' (Abernethy 1751: 252-253). This sparked intense controversy amongst Ulster Presbyterians with camps divided over whether to subscribe to the Westminster Standards or not; those of Abernethy's persuasion were deemed 'New Light' and Arminian. In 1720 the controversy was addressed by the General Synod of Ulster with the 'Pacific Act' that maintained confessional subscription, but allowed ordinands to take exceptions, wherein they could substitute their own preferred language about an excepted doctrine, so long as it adhered to the general principles of the faith (Barlow 1985: 406).

The Westminster Confession stood staunchly in the catholic tradition in its affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Article 2 of the Confession states that there is 'but one only living and true God' (2.1) who 'is alone in and unto himself allsufficient ... [and] is the alone foundation of being' (2.2) and yet 'in the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost' (2.3). With this confession of faith pushed to the side in terms of subscription, it was much easier for those who denied the doctrine of the Trinity as laid out in these articles to gain ordination in the Irish Presbyterian churches. Abernethy argued that his non-subscriptionism was not because he disagreed with the Confession on points of doctrine, but that he valued the dignity of freedom of conscience for those who did. In the midst of this controversy, another erupted over Thomas Nevin (ca. 1686-1744), minister in Downpatrick, who argued that it was not blasphemous to deny the deity of Christ. He was brought to trial before the synod in 1724 and when he refused to recant his belief he was removed from the synod's membership, though he maintained his pastoral charge (Barlow 1985: 408). The upset caused by this dispute was muted by the over-arching controversy over subscription, eventuating in the synod's pragmatic decision to move all non-subscribers into the Presbytery of Antrim. Though still under the jurisdiction of the Ulster Synod, the Antrim Presbytery was effectively free to allow Unitarians within its ministerial fold,

which it did. Though the Ulster Synod never formally allowed for Unitarianism, the influence of Antrim was significant. Arianism would soon surpass the controversy over subscription in the Ulster Synod, and would not finally be put down by the orthodox until the leadership of Henry Cooke (1788-1868).

Interlocutors: Drummond and Carson

The controversy over Arianism within Irish Presbyterianism can be seen in microcosm in the debate between the Unitarian William Hamilton Drummond and the Presbyterian-turned-Baptist Alexander Carson who engaged in a written controversy over the Trinity that originated in and went beyond the bounds of Irish Presbyterianism. Both controversialists knew each other from their student days in Glasgow, both had served Presbyterian churches in the North, though Drummond as part of the Presbytery of Antrim and Carson of Tyrone. Drummond’s writings on issues pertaining to Unitarianism prompted an irenic but forceful reply from Carson. Before considering this exchange, a brief biographical sketch of each will help further set the context.

Alternative Ulster: William Hamilton Drummond (1778-1865)

Drummond was born in Larne, Co. Antrim, in August 1778, though was raised in Belfast after the passing of his father. He was educated at the Belfast Academy and spent some time in England with the hopes of going into manufacturing. He soon left England for Glasgow where he studied at Glasgow College (part of the University of Glasgow) in 1794, though he did not obtain his degree due to financial stresses. It was common for Ulster Presbyterians to send their ministers-in-training to Glasgow to be educated, wherein they received an education that was ‘a mixture of orthodoxy and Enlightenment’ (Holmes 2006: 136). Though he left before graduation, Drummond obtained an interest in classical learning and began to write poetry. In terms of classics, he produced a translation of the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius’ (ca. 94-54) famous poem *Of the Nature of Things* (Lucretius 1808). He also wrote a number of noteworthy poems and hymns himself; one famous elegy eulogised that nation-defining event at Trafalgar and another poem described Northern Ireland’s great expression of natural beauty in the Giant’s Causeway (Drummond 1806; 1811). In the latter he addressed himself to the ‘Genius of my natal shore’. After Glasgow Drummond returned to Ulster and trained in the Armagh Presbytery which, like Antrim, did not require confessional subscription. He was licensed to preach in 1800 in Belfast, under the authority of the Antrim Presbytery. Drummond was a literary figure as well as a minister, and was a key founding member of the Belfast Literary Society (1801). He was also an early advocate of animal rights, arguing in a short tract published in 1830 that such rights were grounded in human obligation before God to care for nature (Drummond 1830). Not only did Drummond

pastor in Belfast, but also in Dublin for a time. His academic ability was recognised by his admission into the Royal Irish Academy due to his theological works such as the one on the Trinity under review in this chapter. Perhaps his most notorious work was his biography of Michael Servetus (d. 1553), the famed sixteenth-century Unitarian who was executed in Calvin's Geneva—Drummond described Servetus in the sub-title of his work as committing the 'alleged crime of heresy' wherein he was 'entrapped, imprisoned, and burned by John Calvin the Reformer' (Drummond 1848). He also obtained a D.D. degree from Aberdeen University at the behest of Bishop Percy of Dromore. He died in Dublin in October 1865.

Ulster Boy: Alexander Carson (1776-1844)

Drummond's great critic on the doctrine of the Trinity was his fellow Ulsterman Alexander Carson who had also served as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, though eventually he would leave the Ulster Synod over differing ecclesiological convictions. Carson was born in Annahone, Co. Tyrone, to Scots-Irish parents (Clary 2009). They raised him in the Presbyterian church wherein he learned the Westminster Confession of Faith and from a young age he showed an aptitude for learning. After receiving a classical education in Tullyhogue, which served also as pre-ministerial training, he matriculated at the University of Glasgow where for a time he was a fellow student of Drummond's. There he excelled in studies of philosophy, ethics, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, logic, and theology. In particular, he studied Greek under John Young (ca. 1747-1820), a noted philologist. At Glasgow Carson obtained BA and MA degrees. Upon his return to Ireland he was ordained in the Tyrone Presbytery (1798), a pro-subscription presbytery, and then became the minister at the Presbyterian Church in Tobermore (sometimes Tubbermore).

Carson would eventually recuse himself from the Synod of Ulster due to a change of ecclesiological convictions that he expressed in his *Reasons for Separating from the General Synod of Ulster* (1805). Though the problems over subscription were lurking in the background, his fundamental reason for leaving was over what he described as 'promiscuous communion', or the administering of the Lord's Supper to those who were not regenerated Christians. The 'decent worldling' could be found at the table, and however decent they may be morally, because they were of the world, they should not be admitted to the table (Carson 1805). What was required as a test of membership was their status in Christ, not whether they were merely moral in their character. This would lead him to develop Congregationalist convictions on church government. Carson was, however, also quite concerned over the growing Arianism due to Antrim Presbytery's influence in the Synod. Unitarians and orthodox Christians did not worship the same God, according to Carson, and Antrim Presbytery's abiding influence was denigrating the theological integrity of Ulster Presbyterianism. As he said in *Reasons for*

Separating, ‘A Calvinist and a Socinian or Arian, can with no propriety worship together. They do not address the same God’ (Carson 1805: 116–117). Leaving Presbyterianism came at great cost in a place like Ulster. He described the effects of his leaving by saying, ‘The day I gave up my connexion with the general synod, I gave up all that the world esteems. I sacrifice not only my prospects in life, and my respectability in the world, but every settled way of support’ (Carson 1805: iv).

Carson’s views of church government continued to change after he engaged with Scottish Baptists influenced by Robert (1768–1851) and James Haldane (1764–1842), two influential Baptist leaders with whom Carson would develop a friendship. These Baptists would convince Carson of believer’s baptism which would eventuate in his founding of a Baptist church in Tobermore and the publication of the work he is best known for, *Baptism Its Mode and Subjects* (1844). Carson also worked closely with the Haldanes in their controversies over the doctrine of biblical inspiration, and it is said that Carson was a key source behind Robert Haldane’s famous commentary on Romans (Clary 2014). Beyond his theological interests, Carson was in support of the growing missionary movement in Britain, and just before his death in 1844 had preached on behalf of the recently founded Baptist Missionary Society.

The Ulster Debate Over the Trinity. Drummond on the Trinity

Context: The Maguire/Pope Debate

The background to the debate between Drummond and Carson was another earlier one on the Trinity held in April 1827 between a Roman Catholic priest and Church of Ireland clergyman. Drummond’s opening chapter of *The Doctrine of the Trinity* traces the basic elements of this particular debate with the purpose of expressing his disagreement with both disputants who, though of different ecclesial communions, were agreed upon the orthodoxy of the doctrine of the Trinity. Thomas Maguire (1792–1847), the Roman Catholic, argued for the Trinity based upon the need for an infallible interpreter of scripture and tradition, namely the Roman Catholic magisterium. Richard T. P. Pope (1799–1859), on the other hand, argued for the Trinity against Socinianism based upon ‘a Scriptural foundation’ (Drummond 1831: 1). Interestingly, Drummond agreed with Maguire that the Trinity can only be established by tradition and the Roman magisterium, but agreed with Pope that both are inadequate as authorities for theological understanding. He disagreed with Maguire, however, that scripture or reason actually demonstrates the Trinity.

The Unitarian’s Creed

What is most interesting, in light of the Unitarian unwillingness to subscribe to a confessional document, is that Drummond demonstrated the basic

Unitarian position in the production of what he called, 'The Unitarians' Creed'. There is a sense of irony in this work inserted into his opening chapter because Drummond was adamantly opposed to the use of creeds or confessions. His creed affirmed the radical oneness and simplicity of God who is 'one in the strict and absolute sense of unity'. He described God as 'a spirit, simple, uncompounded, indivisible, without parallel or equal—self-existent—immutable—eternal—almighty—omiscient—omnipresent—possessed of wisdom, Truth, holiness, goodness, justice, with all other perfections, in their highest possible excellence' (Drummond 1831: 2). This God, though just, does not possess 'inextinguishable wrath' but instead an 'infinite placability and mercy'. Thus God requires 'no bloody sacrifice', but rather, appealing to Psalm 51:17, the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart. God is described also as the Father of all mankind, 'whatever be their name, country, complexion, or creed'. The Unitarians believed in the 'revealed Word of God' in Old and New Testaments, and denied the use of creeds as 'articles of human contrivance'. The faith of the Unitarian is entirely expressed in 'the very words of inspiration'. The 'pure light from heaven' requires, therefore, 'no guidance from the dark lantern of tradition' (Drummond 1831: 3). Later he will describe creeds as a 'shackling of the mind', a damnatory imposition, and 'devices of ecclesiastical tyranny' (Drummond 1831: 5).

Regarding the 'divinity of the Son of God', Drummond argued that in a sense his character, mission, doctrine, power, and authority were all 'divine', but Christ himself was simply a moral teacher, exalted by God, but not himself God (Drummond 1831: 3). Of the Trinity itself, Drummond argued, the scriptures are silent. Thus, taking *sola scriptura* seriously (according to Drummond), to be Trinitarian is to be Roman Catholic, because it is only in the councils of the Roman Catholic Church that the Trinity is expressed. Here he looked to the early church and, aside from the Jerusalem Council in Acts, all other councils were of no import. Church fathers were not to be looked to as authorities. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) was described by Drummond as a 'factious and turbulent ecclesiastic' (Drummond 1831: 7). The idea of a Trinity of persons in the godhead went expressly against 'reason and common sense' (hearkening to the subtitle of his book), which he believed were on the Unitarians' side.

Drummond's work is remarkable both for its depth and erudition. He did not take cheap swipes at Trinitarianism, but demonstrated a clear understanding of the arguments put forth by the orthodox of his day. Thus, his work goes into detailed discussions both of theology and scripture. Indeed, most of the work is devoted to key texts in Old and New Testaments typically appealed to as support for the Trinity. Theologically, he examined the names of Christ in the New Testament, arguing against their use as proofs for his deity. He gave attention to texts like 1 Tim. 3:16, 1 John 5:20, John 20:28,

and the *Carmen Christi* of Phil. 2:5-11 (Drummond 1831: 40-50). His argument over the latter likens the *morphe* that Christ shared with ‘God’ with the *morphē* of the slave arguing that just as Christ came in the likeness of a slave, so he had the likeness of God, but was not God himself (Drummond 1831: 41-42). Much more could be said about his argumentation, but for the sake of time, we will examine his use of the term ‘person’ for the Trinity and his use of the philosophical categories of reason and common sense.

The second section of Drummond’s opening chapter is called ‘What is Trinitarianism?’ wherein he explained the theology that was handed down from Athanasius. Here he focused on the threeness of the persons, arguing against the Trinity based upon the word ‘person’ itself. Quoting the Westminster Confession, he stated that the Trinity is best described as the view that says that ‘the Godhead consists of “three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity”.’ These persons are “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost” (Drummond 1831: 7). Here, the Confession makes use of the terminology of ‘person’ as used in the early church. Drummond then addressed the definition of person using what he described as ‘reason and common sense’, which should drive us to conclude ‘that three persons must mean three distinct beings’. This in turn leads to polytheism, because the three persons turn out to be ‘three Gods’ (Drummond 1831: 7). Drummond appealed to a definition of ‘person’ given by William Sherlock (ca. 1641-1707), Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, in his *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity, and the Incarnation of the Son of God* (1690). Sherlock had said that a person ‘is an intelligent being, and to say there are three divine persons and not three distinct infinite minds, is both heresy and nonsense’ (Sherlock 1690: 66). Drummond, following Sherlock’s orthodox opponent Robert South (1634-1716), described this as ‘palpable polytheism’ (Drummond 1831: 7). To describe the three persons, as some did, as three modes of thinking that are grounded in one infinite mind merely explains away the problem by denying the personhood of the individual persons. If they are not persons, they must be something else, such as ‘three differences’, per John Tillotson (1630-1694), or three ‘cogitations’, according to the Saumur theologian Jean LeClerc (1657-1736); the latter Drummond argued was an expression of the rationalist philosophy of Renée Descartes (1596-1650). With no person, there can be no union of persons in perichoresis. To try and ground the union of persons, Drummond thinks, again following South, necessarily leads to Sabellianism, whose subordinationism is essentially what the Unitarians believed anyway (Drummond 1831: 8).

The confusion is furthered, according to Drummond, by the ‘Egyptian darkness’ of the Athanasian Creed and its use of unbegottenness for the Father, begottenness for the Son, and procession for the Spirit. Though Athanasius was not the actual author of the Creed, it seems to be assumed by

Drummond that he was. As Athanasius was sometimes referred to in history as the ‘black dwarf’, it’s hard to determine whether Drummond is making a racialised reference by his epithet. Theologically, Drummond argued that the creedal language of ‘begotten’ and ‘procession’ indicate a fundamental difference between the persons such that ‘each has a peculiar and distinguishing characteristic’. The Athanasian and the Nicene Creeds also contradict the Apostles Creed that says that the Son was ‘conceived by the Holy Ghost’, thus confusing the distinction between the natures of the person of Jesus Christ (Drummond 1831: 9). The creeds therefore contradict both the scripture and themselves. Drummond thus argued that, ‘The three persons of the Trinity, after all that is said by the bishops and archbishops, about diversities and subsistences, modes and relations, perichoresis and circumincession, can be contemplated only as “three distinct infinite minds” (Drummond 1831: 9-10)’. For the Unitarian, however, the oneness of the persons is not essential or consubstantial, but in terms of ‘affection and design’. They have a unified purpose or mission, but this does not imply a unity of three persons in one Godhead. The doctrine of the Trinity is a chimera ‘full of conflicting imaginations’. Once it is seen that the three are united by ‘moral virtue’ only, their substantial ‘unity is abolished’ (Drummond 1831: 10).

The influence of aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly the emphasis on the reasonableness of religious belief, is apparent in Drummond’s work from its outset. This helps explain why he was so perplexed by what he saw to be a flat contradiction with Trinitarianism. In the preface to the first edition of the work, he decried any accusations of being a follower of Arius or the Socinians. Rather, the Unitarian is a follower only of scripture ‘with reason and common sense, as his guides’. Whatever can be judged by the reasonable mind is true and is to be accepted, whatever can be proven to be false, ‘no matter in what region it is found’, is to be rejected (Drummond 1831: v). Later, speaking of the two natures of Christ, he argued, ‘With what consistency then, can it possibly be maintained that those two Beings are one and the same, whose attributes and offices are so exceedingly distinct, and whose grand characteristics are so far from being reciprocal, that the very idea of ascribing to the one, those which belong to the other, puts reason to the blush, and ‘shocks all common sense’ (Drummond 1831: 40). He couples ‘reason and common sense’ some dozen times in the treatise when dealing with core issues pertaining to the core features both of Trinitarianism in general, and two-nature Christology in particular (Drummond 1831: 1, 56, 94, 143).

Carson’s Irenic Response

As noted above, the Unitarian controversy was a factor in Carson’s decision to leave the Ulster Synod. Even though he had joined the fledgling Baptist

cause in Ireland, he was still deeply troubled over the continued influence of Unitarianism in Ulster, and openly engaged in controversy over it. Drummond was not the only Unitarian that Carson was drawn into controversy with. In 1820 he defended the doctrine of the atonement, rooting it in the deity of Christ, against the deist-turned-atheist Richard Carlile (1790–1843). However, it was after reading Drummond’s *Doctrine of the Trinity* that Carson penned his *A Reply to Dr. Drummond’s Essay on the Doctrine of the Trinity, In a Letter to the Author* (1831). In it, Carson sought to answer Drummond’s objections to Trinitarianism on points of scripture and catholic doctrine. It is useful to note his response to the subject of Trinitarian personhood that Drummond had put forth, as well as what constitutes the appropriate domains of reason and common sense that Drummond appealed to. These two issues, then, will be the focus of our evaluation of Carson’s response to Drummond.

Though Carson was diametrically opposed to Drummond’s Unitarianism, he did share with the latter an antipathy towards creeds and confessions (Drummond’s ‘Unitarians’ Creed’ notwithstanding). Carson’s biographer, John Douglas of Newport, Wales, wrote of Carson’s view of the Westminster Confession in glowing terms: ‘From the time of his earliest conversion, he believed in the depths of his inmost soul that the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith were founded on, and in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Scriptures’ (Douglas 1884: 7). However, though Carson had been raised from a young age under the Westminster Confession, and though he was ordained in a pro-subscription presbytery, he did not appear to value the use of confessions of faith later in his ministry. As noted, Carson had a high view of the bible’s inspiration and authority and, as with the other orthodox subscriptionists in the Ulster Synod, saw the bible as the final authority for faith and practice. Yet like the Unitarians that he challenged over the doctrine of the Trinity, he did not make appeals to any confession for his theological commitments. The Unitarians appealed to the bible, but also to reason and common sense, whereas for Carson, the only authority was scripture. In *Reasons for Separating* he could say: ‘As to the Westminster assembly [sic], I am neither concerned to accuse nor condemn them—Episcopacy, presbytery, and independency have each had some of the most pious men in the list of their defenders; the christian [sic] then can have no safe guide but the bible’ (Carson 1805: 84). His changing ecclesiological convictions led him to a more diminished view of the authority of confessions as he observed elsewhere in *Reasons for Separating*, the Westminster Confession’s statements on church government did not line up with scripture and so must be discarded (Carson 1805: 88). Carson believed that both the Confession and the Presbyterian book of order were insufficient to truly act as guides for locally congregated churches. John Young summarises Carson’s view: ‘This vast system of church-laws had not been framed to regulate the conduct of a spiritual body, like the

primitive churches—for whose government the rules of the Bible would have been sufficient—but to hold together, in a state of religious formalism, the unnatural and discordant amalgam of saint and sinner, the wheat and the tares, the church and the world. Now this was precisely the condition of the people at Tubbermore. They had the ‘form of godliness’, but were destitute of its power; and the legislation of a formal church could supply no remedy’ (Young 1845: xxvii). As an Independent, Carson believed that the only standard for doctrine and church life was the bible: ‘With [Independents] it is absolutely essential, not merely in church rulers, but in private members. The Bible is their code of laws; they have no other confession or book of discipline. They can do nothing without it; it must be continually in their hands; the rulers rule only by the word of God. But a man may be a Presbyterian all his life, either pastor or private member, with a very slender acquaintance with the Bible. A knowledge of forms and of ancient usages, of ecclesiastical canons and books of discipline, is the chief qualification necessary for a Presbyterian judicatory’ (Young 1845: xxix). Curiously, as a Baptist, he did not appeal to the more ecclesiologically aligned standard like the Second London Confession of Faith (1689). This is likely due to the fact that Carson’s view of confessions was not unlike those of his contemporary, the Restorationist Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), who, in an attempt to restore a more primitive Christianity, argued against the imposition of human authorities like creeds and confessions. Campbell was born in Broughshane, Co. Antrim, and had heard Carson preach on a number of occasions. Campbell called Carson ‘the finest religious teacher to whom he had ever listened’ (Brazell 2007: 75). Like Campbell, Carson was a significant influence for the Stone-Campbell movement and it would appear that Carson’s view of creeds, though in some sense similar to his Unitarian interlocutor, was less about the role of freedom of conscience and more about primitivism.

It should also be noted that though Carson was a respected polemicist who had turned his at-times acerbic pen to matters of baptism, the Roman Catholic Church, and biblical inspiration, his tone with Drummond was more openly irenic. The two had been students together at Glasgow, and Carson made regular appeals to this bond, often speaking of Drummond’s upright character and intellectual ability. This irenicism did not, however, tone down the force of his criticisms of Drummond. Carson’s overall purpose was not simply to refute Unitarianism, but, expressing his evangelicalism, he stated to Drummond that, ‘I am anxious to make yourself my convert, for though delicacy, complaisance, or spurious liberality may disguise the danger of unbelief, I dare not dissemble that error on this subject is condemnation’ (Carson 1831: 4). Thus, Carson was ultimately concerned not merely about winning an argument but winning Drummond’s soul, which he perceived to be at peril.

When it came to the question of the doctrine of God and the Trinity, Carson directly addressed Drummond's 'Unitarians' Creed'. In his rebuttal, he expressed full agreement with the way that Drummond described the unity of God, noting classic attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, simplicity, etc. Carson noted to Drummond that 'much of your creed all Trinitarians receive as essential truth'. But, noting Drummond's red herring at this point, he had 'always thought it very uncandid in Unitarians to labour in the proof of the unity of God, as a point of difference with Trinitarians' (Carson 1831: 10). If there is no difference, why make it out that there is one? As for the charge of polytheism against the Trinitarians, per the work of Sherlock, Carson replied that 'the doctrine of a plurality of gods we hold in the utmost abhorrence'. Rather, 'we hold the unity of God in as strict and absolute a sense as language can express' (Carson 1831: 11). In a sense, then, Trinitarians are also 'unitarian' in their affirmation of the unity of God, which is why a term like 'Arian' or 'Socinian' is applicable to Drummond's view, his protestations notwithstanding.

As for the Son's divinity, Carson argued that Drummond's notion that the Son's divinity is only in terms of his moral character is insufficient. 'Divine' in this sense is not really divine in the theological sense, and here he accused Drummond of dishonesty in his use of language: 'Is it honest to use phraseology that will be understood in a sense altogether different from that in which it is explained?' (Carson 1831: 15). The proper mode of speech for the term 'divinity' is to speak of that which is God. Likewise, Carson argued that Drummond was being evasive in his language when he equates 'person' with 'being' in his argument that Trinitarianism was really tri-theism. Carson would not allow the equation of the two terms. Carson admitted that when it comes to God, 'no man can pretend fully and accurately to define personality, it is absurd to allege, even as a difficulty, that distinct personality must import distinct being' (Carson 1831: 19). The two terms have never been coterminous. Regarding humans, 'every distinct person is a distinct being' but this does not follow in its application to God (Carson 1831: 20). The three persons of the Godhead are described as being distinct and yet substantially united as each subsists in the one being of God. Carson says, 'I see in the scriptures, as clearly as I see the light of heaven with my eyes, a distinction in the Godhead, designated by the terms, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in the midst of the loudest assertions of unity' (Carson 1831: 20). The distinction corresponds to person. Any fundamental difference between the persons due to their differing roles is not about the eternal Trinity, but rather in terms of the 'economy of redemption' wherein the Father's wrath is satisfied by the death of the Son (Carson 1831: 21). There is certainly a unity of purpose between the persons, but this is grounded in their essential unity as the one God.

As much as Carson was concerned to critique Drummond's theological proposals and his use of Scripture, he was just as concerned to address Drummond philosophically. As both were inheritors of the Common Sense tradition at Glasgow, the frequent use of 'reason and common sense' by Drummond was something that Carson could not let go. He agreed with Drummond that reason and common sense are guides, and were a doctrine to contradict them, the doctrine was to be rejected. He admitted, 'I acknowledge reason and common sense as fully as I do the Scriptures' (Carson 1831: 7). Later he said, 'I receive reason and common sense as the inspired messengers of God' (Carson 1831: 18). If the doctrine of the Trinity was thus proved to be 'absurd' on the grounds of reason or common sense, he would reject it. However, Carson argued, 'Truth enters its protest against what is untrue, but reason and common sense do not enter their protest against what is untrue, but against what is contradictory and absurd' (Carson 1831: 52). Carson did not believe that Drummond recognised this distinction. And for Carson, the doctrine of the Trinity was not against reason, but beyond it. Therefore, reasoning pertaining to the Trinity was not unaided as there was another authority who leads into truth, and that is the Holy Spirit, who should be recognised as a guide to reading scripture. Carson also made an interesting polemical move by putting reason and common sense in relation to one of God's key attributes, namely divine incomprehensibility. Reason was sovereign when it came to things that are generally comprehensible to humans, but it had no domain when it came to the incomprehensible. Noting the inherent contradiction in Drummond's appeal to reason, and speaking directly to Drummond, Carson wrote, 'You acknowledge that a doctrine is not to be rejected merely because it is incomprehensible, and on that which is incomprehensible reason cannot pronounce an opinion. To admit that a thing is incomprehensible, and to say it is false, is not only unwarrantable, but absurd. It is a contradiction in terms, and is, therefore, itself condemned by reason' (Carson 1831: 8-9). Carson argued that the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation was contrary to reason, so it must be rejected as absurd. The Trinity, however, was a doctrine that was incomprehensible because of its supra-rational character, that is, it is not subject to the canons of reason or common sense. Thus, its status can and must be maintained because it is grounded not primarily on reason, but on revelation. Reason 'has not been commissioned to promulgate any thing on this subject' (Carson 1831: 8). Carson argued that 'to say that a thing is incomprehensible, is to say that reason does not understand it; but to say it is false, is to say that reason does understand it' (Carson 1831: 9). If the conclusions of reason are self-evident truths, or necessary deductions from self-evident truths, 'reason ... cannot say whether the doctrine of the Trinity is true or false, because it cannot fathom the subject' (Carson 1831: 9).

If reason and common sense were applied to other doctrines, they would inflict havoc on them as well, such as the resurrection of Christ. Likewise, nature holds ‘incomprehensible truths’ that reason and common sense, if used as Drummond does, would be destroyed. Here, Drummond is more a follower of the Scottish skeptic David Hume (1711–1776), and not a follower of Hume’s greatest critic, the Common Sense Realist Thomas Reid (1710–1796), who taught at Glasgow. It was Hume who denied the possibility of matter or mind by using reason and common sense. Should Drummond draw those same conclusions? Carson listed a number of aspects of nature that have what he calls ‘apparent incongruity’ such as the relation of soul to body, the law of identity, as well as time and space. Theologically, not only is the resurrection apparently incongruous, but so is the relationship between God’s knowledge with human knowledge, God’s aseity, and divine eternity in relation to time and space (Carson 1831: 32–33). If Drummond was consistent with his use of reason and common sense, all of these fundamental aspects of nature and God would have to be denied, just as the Trinity is denied. This is not the case with nature and God, therefore it should not be for the Trinity either. Carson argued, ‘So far from being the province of reason and common sense to determine that there cannot be a plurality as to personality, in unity of being or essence, I maintain that the highest degrees of reason and good sense are not entitled to give an opinion on the question, without revealed authority’ (Carson 1831).

Conclusion

Much more could be said, but this short excursion into the debate between Alexander Carson and William Hamilton Drummond on the Trinity demonstrates the issues at play in Irish evangelicalism in the long eighteenth century when it pertains to the doctrine of God. Drummond rejected the authority of creeds and confessions and so employed the language of the Enlightenment and the omniscience of reason and common sense as a reason to reject the Trinity. Carson, also sidelining creeds and confessions, used the same language, but within an orthodox Christian framework. He too had to make use of scripture and reason, though his language is often indebted to older theological terminology that had been derived from the creeds (like subsistence, person, etc.). For Drummond, the creeds and confessions were a culprit in the development of the Trinity and so both had to be abandoned. For Carson, the creeds and confessions were so subordinate to scripture as to be effectively rendered useless. Yet while not appealing directly to them, he nevertheless could not escape them. Yet in the main, he had to contest with Drummond on the same grounds.

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