PART TWO

WESTERN THEOLOGIES’ RESPONSES TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

What ‘Substance’ and ‘Subject’ are have for centuries determined how Western theologies have understood the doctrine of God. Yet as a “... matter of fact, terminologically speaking, ‘substance’ and ‘subject’ have the same meaning. Both are Latin renderings of the Greek ‘hypokeimenon’. Substance, substantia, is essence, that which subsists in itself, the status of the thing in its independence. Subject, subjectus, is that which underlies, which is underneath, in which qualities inhere, and which qualities are predicated in propositions. ... Philosophical tradition has brought about separation between substance and subject. Substance has retained its original meaning of essence, that which underlies, while subject has come to mean the sum total of perceptions, images and feelings, that is, consciousness.”

N. Rotenstreich, From Substance to Subject: Studies in Hegel. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, 1
CHAPTER THREE

GOD AS ESSENCE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the influence of the concept of ‘substance’ seen in the Neo-Platonic philosophy in the reinterpretation of ‘one God’ as taught by the creeds. There appears to be a clear connection between the Aristotelian doctrine of the ‘substance’ and Augustine’s choice of the abstract concept of the ‘Godhead.’ This chapter investigates this connection and then seeks to understand how Augustine and his followers would interpret ‘one God’ and ‘three Persons’ in view of their Neo-Platonic commitments. Some notable Neo-Platonic thinkers who followed the footsteps of Augustine are Boethius and Thomas Aquinas. Their works, as well as the Christian-Muslim-Jewish debates of the Middle Ages, are very crucial to the view of ‘Divinity as essence.’

The doctrine of the Trinity formulated from the perspective of ‘God as essence’ is important for African Christianity because this is the doctrine of God that the missionaries who planted the church in Africa in the middle and the latter part of the nineteenth century knew and taught. Until now a greater part of the African church interprets the doctrine of the Trinity within the infrastructure of ‘God as essence.’ The reason for this is partly because the Christian denominations in Africa, the liturgies, the hymns, as well as the theologies that govern beliefs and conduct in the contemporary African situation reflect what was current in the West during the great missionary period.¹

AUGUSTINE AND NEO-PLATONISM

Many scholars seem to agree that, from its beginnings, Augustinian theology accessed the doctrine of the Trinity through Neo-Platonism.

¹ G. Kinoti, Hope for Africa (Nairobi: AISRED, 1994), 74 f.