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Influence of some Patristic Notions of *substantia* and *essentia* on the Trinitarian Theology of Brenz and Bucer (1528)

I must emphasise that by the term οὐσία and its Latin translations *substantia* and *essentia* I do not mean here “the individual” or what Düring calls “ein ‘Das’”, d.h. “das konkret existierende Ding”¹. In fact οὐσία is used here in the sense of (1) the answer to the question “what is x?” where x stands for a concrete individual (e.g. Socrates; this horse); (2) in the sense of “existence”² as a fact or a state; (3) in the sense of character of a thing which cannot be lost without the thing in question ceasing to exist; (4) in the sense of matter or “stuff”.

In the commentaries of Brenz and Bucer³ on the Gospel of St. John we notice that at Joh 1,1ff. Bucer uses *substantia* for οὐσία whereas Brenz uses *essentia*. Bucer says: “Deus substantia idem Verbum... erat” (12 v.), while Brenz has: “Unus ergo Deus sunt Pater et Filius, quia una est eorum essentia” (3 r.). This discrepancy of vocabulary is surprising, firstly because the commentaries were written at almost the same time and rely on the same patristic tradition and secondly, because Bucer’s commentary, while disagreeing with Brenz on the Eucharist⁴ does nonetheless rely on him for many points of doctrine. In

¹ I. Düring, Aristoteles: Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens, Heidelberg 1966, 612.

² This meaning is attested by C. Stead, Divine Substance, Oxford 1977, 134–136.

³ Iohannes Brenz, In D. Iohannis Evangelion, Ioannis Brentii Exegesis... Haganoae per Iohan. Sece[rium] 1527. Second edition January 1528. For further editions see W. Köhler, Bibliographia Brentiana, Berlin 1904. – Martin Bucer, Enarratio in Evangelion Iohannis... Argentorati apud Ioannem Hervagium mense Aprili... 1528. For further editions see R. Stupperich, Bibliographia bucerana: Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 58:2, 1952.

⁴ By 1528 the Eucharist had already become a point of contention between the Zwinglian and the Lutheran parties. The fullest, although in some ways misguided, study on this remains that of W. Köhler, Zwingli und Luther, 2 vols., Leipzig 1924, Gütersloh 1953. See also Martin Brecht, Die frühe Theologie des Iohannes Brenz, Tübingen 1966, 193 ff.

fact at Joh 1,1ff. verbal borrowings can be established as regards for example the definition of *Verbum*.⁵ Furthermore Brenz, together with Melanchthon and Erasmus is mentioned by Bucer as a model for his own commentary.⁶

On examining other contemporary commentaries on the 4th Gospel, namely that of Lefèvre d'Etaples⁷, Melanchthon⁸ and Erasmus (*Annotationes*)⁹ we see that Bucer is in fact anomalous in referring to οὐσία as *substantia*, both in *John* and in his *Confutatio Libri Septem de Trinitatis Erroribus* of Servetus 1531¹⁰. In the latter Bucer emphasises: “una ergo trium horum substantia et essentia erit” thus distinguishing between *substantia* and *essentia*. All the other theologians, not only modern, but also medieval¹¹ are unanimous in having *essentia* for οὐσία. *Substantia* (or *natura*) appears only occasionally and then as an exact synonym for *essentia*.

The origin of *essentia* for οὐσία can be traced back to Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7,4–5¹² who identifies *essentia* with *esse* (to exist) and *substantia* with *subsistere* (to exist in such a way as to admit of accidents). Thus, according to Augustine, a body can be said to be a *substantia* because it admits of colour and shape, but as God is simple and without

⁵ According to Bucer it is: “oraculum virtus et gloria Dei” and “sapientia et virtus omnium effectrix” (12 v.). Brenz defines it as: “Patris sapientia, character, virtus, splendor et imago” (2 v.).

⁶ Only in the last (1536) edition. But Bucer paid attention to Brenz's commentary from the moment of its publication, and borrowed more from him than either from Melanchthon or from Erasmus' *Annotationes*.

⁷ *Commentarii in quatuor Evangelia Iacobo Fabro Stapulensi Authore, Basileae, ex aedibus Andreeae Cratandri... Anno 1523* (First edition 1522).

⁸ *Annotationes Philippi Melanchthonis in Evangelium Matthaei et Ioannis... Anno 1523.*

⁹ *Novum Testamentum (graece et latine) ab Erasmo recognitum cum annotationibus, Basileae, I. Froben 1522.*

¹⁰ Unpublished in Bucer's lifetime. For full text of the *Confutatio* see: *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer* 7:1, ed. M. Krebs and H.G. Rott, Gütersloh 1959, 592–598 (esp. 593). See also H. Tollin, *Butzers Confutatio des Libri VII de Trinitatis erroribus*, ThStKr 48 (1875), 711–736.

¹¹ See for example Aquinas, S. Th 1.1 q. 28 art. 2 and In Joh 1,1ff. Piana 14:2, 2r.–3v.; Buonaventure, *Breviloquium: De Trinitate, Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi) 5, 199 ff.; Lombard, *Sent.* 1, dist. 3, cap. 4; Gabriel Biel, *In libros Sententiarum 1: in Prologum aiii r.–b r.* (Lugduni 1511). All those theologians do very occasionally use *substantia* or even *natura* for οὐσία but they show a marked preference for *essentia*.

¹² MPL 42,942; CCL 50,260. The relevant passage from Augustine is cited by Lombard, *Sent.* 1, dist. 8, cap. 7.

accidents, he (and he alone) qualifies for the predicate *essentia*. In support of this view Augustine cites Ex 3,14: “Ego sum qui sum”.

We shall now give an account of other most relevant patristic works available to Brenz and Bucer in order to see what precedents are provided for the use of *substantia* in any of the four senses of οὐσία mentioned in our introduction.

The first (pre-Nicene) exponent of the rendering *substantia* was Tertullian in *Adversus Praxeum*, printed in 1521 as part of his *Opera*¹³. Tertullian uses the term to describe the begetting of the Son by the Father on the analogy of the river and its spring or of the sun and its rays (Adv. Prax. 8, MPL 2, 163; CCL 2, 1168). *Substantia* there however, applies to the two persons as well as to their unity οὐσία: the Son being brought forth from the substance of the Father is himself a substance (Adv. Prax. 7, MPL 2, 162; CCL 2, 1166). Tertullian is thus saying that a quantity of matter produces another, identical, quantity of matter so that the two remain (physically) inseparable. His notion of *substantia* therefore corresponds to sense (4) of our introduction and as the metaphor of the river and its spring etc. is cited by Brenz but not by Bucer at Joh 1,1, we may suppose that Bucer, unlike Tertullian, does not take *substantia* to mean “stuff” or “matter”.

Another source for the rendering *substantia* was Rufinus' addition to Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* available in print since at least 1473.¹⁴ There *substantia* is defined as that which “rei alicuius naturam rationemque qua constet, designet” (Hist. eccl. 10:30, GCS 9,2:2,992) in other words the unchangeable character of a thing in sense (3) of our introduction. This might well also be the sense intended by Bucer at Joh 1,1 and in the *Confutatio* were it not for the fact that such an interpretation of *substantia* might be said to understress the notion of the Trinity as “one thing”.

Tertullian and Rufinus are the only definite Latin sources for the translation *substantia* which would have been available to the Reformers. Hilary of Poitiers whose works, notably *De Synodis* and *De Trinitate* had been available since 1489¹⁵ treats *substantia*, *essentia*, *natura*

¹³ His works in the edition of Beatus Rhenanus were first printed by Froben, Basel, in 1521. On Tertullian's use of *substantia* see further Stead (n.2), 228–229.

¹⁴ See for example the Strasbourg edition of H. Eggsteyn, c 1473.

¹⁵ A selection of his works including *De Synodis* and *De Trinitate* was printed as early as 1489 “per magistrum Leonardum Pachel, Mediolani”. First “complete” edition of his works was that of Erasmus, printed by Froben, Basel 1523.

and *genus* as synonymous renderings of οὐσία.¹⁶ He stresses, however, that among all those terms only *essentia* has connotations of eternal existence and is thus best applied to God.

Greek patristic sources were for the most part available only in Latin translations. The most important of these were undoubtedly Chrysostom's and Cyril's commentaries on the fourth Gospel and (Ps) Basil's *Adv. Eunomium*. Cyril's commentary had been in print since 1508¹⁷ in the translation by George Trapezuntius¹⁸ a follower of realist philosophy of the Dominican Order to which Bucer belonged until 1522. Bucer had a copy of the translation in 1520.¹⁹ Trapezuntius was also the translator of *Adv. Eunomium* which came out in 1520. Chrysostom's commentary on the fourth Gospel also, apparently, existed in Trapezuntius' translation but was not printed until 1543.²⁰ By far the most popular translation, however, was that of Franciscus Aretinus (1470). Aretinus translates οὐσία in Chrysostom's text (Joh 1,1) indifferently as *essentia* or *substantia* but *essentia* occurs more frequently²¹, and thus it is doubtful that he is a model for Bucer's *substantia*.

It is, however, very striking to see that Trapezuntius in his translations of Basil and Cyril translates οὐσία and εἶναι always by *substantia* and never by *essentia*. This is due neither to whim nor to accident. In his invective c 1453 against Theodore Gaza's Latin translation of Aris-

¹⁶ De Synodis 12, MPL 10, 489–490.

¹⁷ Opus insigne beati patris Cyrilli... in Evangelium Ioannis a Georgio Trapezontio traductum. In officina V. Hopilii impensis eiusdem Vuolfgangi, I. Parui et T. Kerner: Parisiis 1508.

¹⁸ The most recent study is that of John Monfasani, George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of his Rhetoric and Logic, Leiden 1976. There is, however, no detailed study of Trapezuntius as a patristic translator.

¹⁹ See: Correspondance de Martin Bucer, Tome 1, Jusqu'en 1524 publiée par Jean Rott, Leiden 1979, letter no. 22 (Hutten to Bucer), 131, 1.10.

²⁰ D. Ioan. Chrysostomi episcopi Constantinopolitani in sanctum Iesu Christi evangelium secundum Ioannem commentarii. Apud Ioannem Roigny: Parisiis 1543, 8°. Listed in the B. M. Catalogue as translated by George of Trebizond but the text, with a few minor exceptions, seems to correspond to the Aretinus version.

²¹ Thus commenting on: In principio erat Verbum (Hom. 1) he speaks of the Son as being “eiusdem substantiae” with the Father (7 v.), then as being “eadem essentia” (10 v.) and then, commenting on Verbum erat apud Deum (Hom. 3), as being “par illius (Patris) essentiae”. (Folio references here to the Cratander, Basel, edition of 1522.) See further Dom. Chr. Baur, S. Jean Chrysostome et ses œuvres dans l'histoire littéraire, Louvain et Paris, 1907. – The same interchange of *substantia* and *essentia* occurs in *Athanasii... Opera*, Paris 1520. There see e.g. fo. cclxxxvii r.

totle's *Problemata*²² Trapezuntius gives the following reason for his objection to Gaza's rendering of οὐσία by *essentia* in Aristotle: "es-
sentiam enim de accidentibus etiam dici, quamquam oblique, perspi-
cum est. Substantiam de accidentibus proprie dicet profecto nemo." "Existence" can be said of accidents while "substance" cannot. Thus, according to Trapezuntius we may ask of any "concrete thing" *what* it is and the answer will be provided by a "secondary substance" term normally a common noun; e.g. "This man is an animal" is an answer to the question "what is this man?". If, however, we take an accident of a concrete thing e.g. "bald" as an accident of "this man", there is no expression analogous to "animal" which will answer the question "what is this bald [ness]?". Yet this does not mean that we can deny the existence of baldness as a quality.

Bucer would have been familiar with Trapezuntius' theory of substance not only from his patristic translations but also from his *Dialectica* 1513²³ which curiously enough was published in Strasbourg and of which Bucer possessed a copy in 1518. There the same distinction is made between things that *subsist* (divided into particulars and universals) and things that *are* e.g. whiteness in a body (48–49).²⁴

Thus according to Trapezuntius, the three persons of the Trinity being of one *substantia* means that they are "one thing". This view leads to a certain overemphasising of the "oneness" at the expense of the three persons, as will be seen from the following examples:

1. In Cyril's commentary at Joh 1ff. Trapezuntius (1523 ed. 5A) has: "Faciamus igitur plurali numero dictum... ut... clara magnaque hac voce tu audire atque intelligere queas trinum esse personarum in sancta Trinitate in una substantia numerum" where the original text (MPG 73, 36) has:

... πληνντικῶς δὲ διδοὺς ἀριθμῷ τὴν ποιησιν... ἐπαγαγὼν ὁ τοῦ βιβλίου συγγραφεὺς, μονονουχὶ λαμπρῷ, καὶ μεγάλῃ βοῇ τῇ φωνῇ τὴν ὑπὲρ ἐνάδα τῆς ἀγίας Τριάδος ἀπαρίθμησιν.

²² See L. Mohler, Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann, III. Band: Aus Bessarions Gelehrtenkreis, Paderborn 1942, 274–342 (esp. 284).

²³ See Bucer's list of books bought and borrowed from the Dominicans at Sélestat 1518 in *Correspondance* (n. 19), 46, 52.

²⁴ I have referred to the fourth edition of the *Dialectica*: Georgii Trapezuntii Cre-
tensis utilissimus de re dialectica libellus... cum scholiis Iohan. Noviomagi... Colo-
niae... 1539.

Purely stylistic variations apart, Trapezuntius, by eliminating μονονούχι and by inserting “una substantia” where the Greek merely has ἐνάδα (originally a Platonic term for “unity”), emphasises, much more than the original, the idea of the Trinity as one thing.²⁵

2. In (Ps) Basil’s *Adv. Eunomium* 4,1 Trapezuntius (1565 ed. Musculus *Basilii Opera*, 143 r.) has:

“Vere imposita nomina eorum substantiae quorum sunt nomina, notae sunt, Dominus autem et Deus vere tam Pater quam Filius. Eadem ergo est substantia sicut et eadem nomina sunt” where the original (MPG 29,672–673) has:

Είτα ἀληθῶς ὄνόματα τῆς οὐσίας ὡν ἔστιν ὄνόματα, γνωρίσματα. Κύριος δὲ καὶ θεὸς ἀληθῶς καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ καὶ ὁ Υἱός. Ἡ αὐτὴ ἄρα οὐσία, ὥσπερ καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ ὄνόματα.

Here the insertion of “imposita” in Trapezuntius’ otherwise perfectly accurate translation again reduces the distinction of the three persons.

Our inquiry here has not been comprehensive enough to justify definite conclusions about the influence of Trapezuntius’ patristic translations on Bucer’s use of *substantia*. The following points, however, merit noting. 1. Trapezuntius is the most consistent advocate of the translation *substantia* and uses it in Cyril’s commentary which Bucer possessed and which he used in his own commentary on the fourth Gospel. 2. Trapezuntius distinguishes in his *Dialectica* (which Bucer also possessed) between *substantia* and *essentia* (“thing” and “existence”) a distinction which, we saw, Bucer adopts in the *Confutatio*. 3. Trapezuntius’ emphasis on the unity of the Trinity at the expense of the three persons serves admirably Bucer’s own purpose against Hans Denck in *John* and against Servetus in the *Confutatio*²⁶, as they both denied the divinity of Christ. It would seem thus, that due to the influence of Trapezuntius, Bucer remains anomalous in his understanding of οὐσία as *substantia*²⁷ while his contemporaries, notably Brenz, prefer *essentia*.

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²⁵ It is interesting to note that these changes do not appear to represent different MS readings. See Cyrilli... in D. Ioannis Evangelium ed. P. E. Pusey, Oxford 1872, vol.1, 27.

²⁶ It is interesting to note that in the *Confutatio* (n.10). Bucer associates the three persons with the “three faces” of God, thus further reducing their independence.

²⁷ We might note here that at Joh 1,3–4 Bucer uses *essentia* as meaning of JHWH (14 r.) but makes it synonymous with the concrete expression “author essendi”.