

**THE ORIGINS, THE NATURE AND THE RESOLUTION OF
THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY**

Assignment 1 – Church History

Alex Robinson, 21 April 2001.

The origins, the nature and the resolution of the Arian heresy are a complex mix of theological views and raw politics. For much of the 4th century Roman emperors were preoccupied with holding their vast and diverse empire together by using the Christian church as the glue. A lack of clarity in the doctrines concerning the Person of Jesus Christ created an opportunity for the Arian heresy to become established and it was only by the Grace of God and the faithfulness of orthodox clergy that it was eventually defeated.

The origins of the Arian heresy are found in the various views held concerning the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and His relationship to both God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Tertullian had taught that the Son was subordinate to the Father although he had recognised the Deity of the Son as part of the Godhead whilst Origen had taught the Son was subordinate to the Father in essence.¹ The creation of this distinction between the Father and the Son created a vacuum into which Arius stepped.

Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, had had connections with Lucian of Antioch, a contemporary and follower of Paul of Samosata.² Paul had taught that there were not three Persons in the Godhead but rather three modes of activity by the Godhead. He considered talk of Persons of the Godhead amounted to polytheism. He taught Jesus was a man who had lived a perfect life, had merged with the eternal Logos, but was not the eternal God. Paul was deposed and exiled for his views. Arius' views bore a striking resemblance to Paul's.³

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh : Banner of Truth Trust, 1981) p82

² HR Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1951) p176

³ HR Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1951) p176

Arian theology was based on a rigid monotheism claiming that the Father Creator only assumed this role after He had created the Son. The Son, whilst He was created by the Father to assist Him in His work of creation, was only called “Son” by grace.⁴ He was not in fact the Eternal Creator’s “son” but a created being.⁵ The Son, not having the Divine nature, could not comprehend the Divine will, was changeable and could sin.⁶ Arius claimed that whilst the Father has no beginning, the Son does.⁷

Arius used poetry and shanties to propagate these views. He was personally popular with ordinary people, especially women and dock workers⁸, who sung his shanties as a means of both entertainment and memorising key doctrines. His theology may have been popular with his followers but his Bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, strongly opposed them.⁹ In 320, Alexander called a Synod and had him excommunicated and his formula condemned.¹⁰ Arius gained refuge with Eusebius of Nicomedia, who shared his theological views.¹¹

In a letter written to Bishop Alexander of Byzantium, aimed at correcting Arian misrepresentations, Alexander set out his own theological views.¹² He believed the Son and the Father to be co-eternal, two identities distinguishable from each other but at the same time inseparable, with the Son being the Father’s unique mediator

⁴ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p227

⁵ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd Edition, (Dallas : Word Publishing, 1995) p100

⁶ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p177

⁷ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p227

⁸ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p124

⁹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd Edition, (Dallas : Word Publishing, 1995) p101

¹⁰ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p272

¹¹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd Edition, (Dallas : Word Publishing, 1995) p101

¹² JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p205-6

between Creator and creation. He specifically rejected the idea that the Son was a creature or that God the Father was not always Father.¹³ These views were diametrically opposed to those of Arius.

When Eusebius of Nicomedia lent his support to Arius, Alexander of Alexandria protested this.¹⁴ This disagreement between two powerful Bishops spread and divided the church. The historic animosity between these eastern cities helped fuel this disagreement. At the same time Constantine having defeated his eastern rival Licinius,¹⁵ recognised the need to unite his empire under his sole emperorship,¹⁶ using the church as the “cement.”¹⁷ Aware of how explosive this controversy might be Constantine, commissioned his western religious adviser, Bishop Hosius of Cordova, to conduct a mission of inquiry and reconciliation.¹⁸ This mission failed. Constantine was unable to comprehend the theological issues but he did understand that division within the church could be damaging to his dream of a united empire.¹⁹ To achieve uniformity of religion he commanded the attendance of over three hundred Bishops at an Ecumenical Council in Nicaea. He chose the venue for its proximity to the imperial capital. He would be able to preside and control the Council.²⁰

In opening the Council, the emperor reminded the gathering of the need for unity. Kelly suggests that whilst Constantine was keen to settle the dispute the Bishops

¹³ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p224-5

¹⁴ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p272

¹⁵ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p129

¹⁶ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p180

¹⁷ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p272

¹⁸ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p129

¹⁹ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p272

²⁰ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p130

themselves would have assumed the situation was serious enough to require an agreed upon statement of faith. Constantine, having no clear idea of the theological issues involved, wanted a formula that would draw support from a majority of the Bishops.²¹ The great majority of Bishops fell between the two extremes of Arianism led by Eusebius of Nicomedia and Orthodoxy led by Alexander and his understudy Athanasius. Eusebius of Nicomedia seeking broad support read out a draft formula that reflected an extreme Arian view. A majority of Bishops were shocked by these views and broad sympathy for Arianism ceased to be an option.²²

Eusebius of Caesarea, representing the majority “middle” group²³ then put forward what was probably a Palestinian baptismal creed as a suggested formula. Kelly suggests Eusebius of Caesarea, already under provisional excommunication may have submitted this document not so much to be adopted by the Council but rather to show he held orthodox beliefs.²⁴ Whatever the reason we do know that the creed reflected the long held views of many eastern clergy. A group of Bishops were tasked with preparing a statement of faith, using this creed as a starting point, which the Council would be asked to adopt. Athanasius advised his Bishop to ensure no loopholes were left in the formula that could be capitalised on by Arian followers. He had in mind such phrases as “first born of all creation” when describing the Son.²⁵

²¹ JND Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London : Longmans, Green and Co, 1952) p212

²² Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p274

²³ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p180

²⁴ JND Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London : Longmans, Green and Co, 1952) p226

²⁵ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p180

The resultant Nicene Creed declared that the Son was of the same substance as the Father, both Son and Father being co-equal and uncreated.²⁶ The main aim of the framers of the Creed was to exclude Arianism.²⁷ Difficulty was experienced in expressing the concept of the Son being of the same substance as the Father. On the recommendation of Hosius, Constantine suggested that the word *homoousios* be used.²⁸ Hosius was a western Bishop and may not have realised the significance of this word. During the trial of Paul of Samosata sixty years before this word had been considered heretical when applied to the Person of Christ and His relationship to God the Father.²⁹ Thus, even though Constantine's purpose in calling the Council had been to impose uniformity of belief upon the church, the use of this word ensured the controversy was not immediately resolved.³⁰

There were essentially five groups holding differing views on what the Creed meant when it used the word *homoousios*. The first - western theologians led by Hosius, believed that *homoousios* reflected the traditional western view that the Son and the Father were of the same substance. The second - Eastern clergy led by Eustathius of Antioch interpreted *homoousios* as affirming the Son's sameness and absolute unity with the Father, although the Trinity was seen as God revealing Himself in three modes. The third - led by Alexander and Athanasius, held that *homoousios* simply expressed that the Son was not a creature but that He and the Father were both Divine and co-eternal. The fourth - Arians of differing complexions led by Eusebius of Nicomedia had mostly signed the Creed under threat of deposition but were looking

²⁶ Louis Berkhof *The History of Christian Doctrines* (London Banner of Truth Trust 1969) p86-87

²⁷ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p182

²⁸ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p274

²⁹ HR Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1951) p181

³⁰ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p237

for a liberal interpretation that would allow them to hold to their Arian views that the Son was a creature and not the eternal God. The fifth - the vast majority of Bishops had signed the Creed in order to condemn extreme Arianism and to satisfy Constantine, saw the Creed's use of the word *homoousios* as allowing them the opportunity of interpreting it as only an affirmation of the Divinity of the Son. They were generally more afraid of the Sabellian heresy than of Arianism.³¹ Increasingly this group came to use the word *homouiousios* (meaning similar or like in essence) when describing the Person of the Lord Jesus and His relationship to God the Father.³² Some have termed this group Semi-Arians although generally they held quite different views from those of the Arian group.

Over the next few years opposition to the Nicene "homoousion" interpretation grew. This is not surprising given that the Creed had been imposed upon the Bishops by threat of imperial deposition and exile by the emperor. Additionally various Bishops were a part of the constantly changing imperial power plays. Eusebius of Nicomedia had the advantage of proximity to the imperial court and obtained restoration after a short period.³³ Rather than a frontal attack on the Nicene Creed, which Constantine regarded as his masterpiece in imperial and church diplomacy, Eusebius worked at having prominent anti-Arians removed, usually for reasons other than theological error.³⁴ For example Athanasius of Alexandria, Alexander's successor was eventually deposed over claims that he had attempted to disrupt exports of corn to Rome.³⁵

³¹ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p275-7

³² Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd Edition, (Dallas : Word Publishing, 1995) p103

³³ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p134

³⁴ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p280-1

³⁵ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p134-6

Constantine's successors were his pro-Nicene son Constans in the west and his pro-Arian son Constantius in the east. This was a time of widespread reaction against the Nicene formula. An attempt to reconcile the differences failed at the Council of Serdica called in 342-343.³⁶ Athanasius was restored to his see in 346³⁷ but by 356 he had again been deposed and driven into exile by Constantius.³⁸ The Emperor and his Arian adviser, Bishop Valens of Mursa, were determined to destroy the Nicene doctrine and replace it with an Arian version.³⁹ At the 3rd Council of Sirmium in 357 the Arian view was given free rein. Bishop Eudoxius of Antioch and Bishop George of Alexandria (Athanasius' replacement) disowned not only the Nicene formula of homoousios, that held the essence of the Father and the Son were identical but also the alternative interpretation of homouiousios. In their place they advanced a radically different formula – that the Son's essence is *anomoios* or unlike that of the Father, as the Son is a created being.⁴⁰

The Council of Sirmium proved to be a critical point in the church's attempts to rid itself of the Arian heresy. The conservative homouiousios group now saw the Arian minority as determined to either impose their doctrine or wreck the church.⁴¹ Bishop Basil of Ancyra assumed leadership of the conservative group and sought to persuade the emperor of the perils of adopting the Arian/anomoios formula.⁴² For a time it appeared as though Basil might gain the upperhand over the Arian Valens but by 360 Eudoxius was Bishop of Constantinople and Constantius was back in the Arian fold.

³⁶ JND Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London : Longmans, Green and Co, 1952) p274-5

³⁷ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p140

³⁸ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p141

³⁹ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p238

⁴⁰ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p141

⁴¹ Louis Berkhof *The History of Christian Doctrines* (London Banner of Truth Trust 1969) p89

⁴² JND Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London : Longmans, Green and Co, 1952) p288

Eudoxius at his induction was able to obtain agreement from those attending to adopt a new Creed that held the Son was like the Father.⁴³ The vagueness of this phrase suited the Arian faction as its very vagueness assisted their cause. Constantius for his part simply regarded imperial unity as his first priority and if a simpler and more vague statement of faith achieved that, he was in favour.⁴⁴

Athanasius and Bishop Hilary of Poitiers, both in exile, came to realise that the difference between their homousios position and that of Basil's homouiousios followers was narrow.⁴⁵ Both saw Arianism as the greater danger. Athanasius, in seeking reconciliation with this group, recognised that since they believed the Son was of the Father's substance, His authentic offspring and co-eternal with Him they were close enough to admitting the homousion. The decisive move came when Athanasius called a Synod at Alexandria in 362. At this synod it was declared verbal differences were not important so long as the meaning was the same⁴⁶ – that is that the Son was co-eternal and shared the Divine nature of God the Father. Whilst there was a reconciliation between the groups, it was many years before a mutually acceptable formula was agreed upon.⁴⁷

As Athanasius assumed the role of elder statesman and defender of the Nicene faith the mantle of leadership passed to the Cappadocian Fathers. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus set about building a solid Nicene party and formulating a statement concerning the Person of Christ that would both honour

⁴³ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p143

⁴⁴ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p143-4

⁴⁵ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p252

⁴⁶ JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London : Adam and Charles Black ,1960) p253

⁴⁷ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p293

the Nicene formula and meet acceptance throughout orthodox circles in both east and west. Their compromise solution maintained the Divinity of the Person of the Son and unity of the Three Persons of the Godhead.⁴⁸

In 378 Theodosius I succeeded to the imperial throne. One of his first statements was to affirm that his ecclesiastical policy was based on full acceptance of the Nicene Creed.⁴⁹ In 381 Theodosius called the Council of Constantinople at which the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed, the key word *homousios* reasserted and Arianism condemned.⁵⁰

Later, as the Barbarians invaded Western Europe new variants of Arianism were introduced. The life of Arianism in the west however was shortlived as orthodox Christianity displaced the heresy.⁵¹ Arianism has been reborn in a number of guises since notably in the Jehovah Witness sect that regards Arius as a hero. Mainstream Christianity however by and large turned it's back on Arianism after 381.

Gonzalez says, "Arianism failed in the end because it seeks to introduce into Christianity the custom of worshipping a being or creature that is not quite God Himself. The Nicene faith was able to affirm in a more clear and radical way the fundamental Christian doctrine, "That God Himself was in Christ reconciling the

⁴⁸ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd Edition, (Dallas : Word Publishing, 1995) p105

⁴⁹ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p149

⁵⁰ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books 1973) p150

⁵¹ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p296

world unto Himself.”⁵² A being cannot attempt to restore creation, if God is Creator, then God must also be the Saviour.⁵³

⁵² Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p297

⁵³ Justo L Gonzalez *A History of Christian Thought – From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon – Volume 1* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1970) p306

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