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Christology

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Historical Christology

Chapter V

Arianism and the Council of Nicea

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If the person of Christ was a stumbling block among His own contemporaries, and the test of discipleship was acceptance or rejection of the Savior, the same condition prevailed as the Church approached the end of her catacomb days and was to take her place of freedom in the Roman Empire.

There had been challenges to the divinity of Christ from the beginnings of the Christian era and John's Gospel was written mainly to meet the critics of the first century who, in his words, wished to "dissolve Christ," and separate the man Jesus from Christ, the Son of God. The whole period from the apostolic age to the time of Constantine was not without its "heretics from within and hecklers from without" who sought to change the ancient faith.

A new crisis, however, faced the Church on the eve of her liberation, and continued through four centuries of her existence, to the time of Mohammed and for another hundred years after the rise of Islam.

Arianism was the crisis and Arius the one who provoked it, but both had a long ancestry that needs to be seen at the risk of losing the full meaning of Nicea, or of missing the import of this Council for modern times. Moreover, as many read the pages of current history, they see issues not less crucial though different than those which tried the Church in Arian days, and it would be a pity if we failed to learn from the lessons of the past.

Historical Origins

The beginnings of Arianism may be traced to the writings of Philo (20 B.C. to 50 A.D.), the Jewish thinker and exegete who exercised a strong influence on Christian interpreters of Scripture. Born into a prosperous priestly family in Alexandria, he wrote extensively, and, by all accounts, was the most influential Hellenistic Jew of his times.

Philo's main achievement was his development of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, which enabled him to find much of Greek philosophy in the Old Testament, and to combine respect of his religion for the Pentateuch with his own penchant for a more spiritual understanding of the Word of God.

He accorded a central place in his system for the Logos, who was at once the creative power that orders the world and the intermediary through whom men can know God. He was the Logos who spoke to Moses in the burning bush, and who is represented in the Old Testament under the figure of a highpriest.

His influence was particularly great in the Alexandrine school of Christian theology. Clement of Alexandria and Origen used him freely, and through them and later through some Latin Fathers, his allegorical exegesis became a standard form of Bible study in the Church. Unfortunately for the Church, Philo's concept of a created medium between God and man entered religious history to confuse the mainstream of Christian thought.

More consequential was the virus of Gnosticism, about which we have heard, but now should be seen as an attitude more than a doctrine, yet one that was bound to affect the theology of Christ.

Gnosticism was a complex religious movement which denied the historical validity of the Gospels. Essentially a claim to the possession of "higher knowledge," independently of the stream of apostolic tradition, it already plagued the Church before 100 A.D. Among the reasons which led St. John to write was the refutation of the Gnostic Cerinthus and the Nicolaites.

However, this was only a prelude to the inundation that broke over the Church in the middle of the second century. The last survivors of the apostolic age felt they were faced with a new and powerful enemy that came out into the open. Now that the apostles were gone, Oriental zealots began to preach and organize religious sects. Other factors were also operative, like the rapid growth of the Church and her penetration into the world of philosophy and letters, where the simple faith of the people was exposed to Hellenic speculation and an attempt to engraft Asiatic fancies on the body of Christian revelation.

Christ, they said, was not the Deity in human form but only an aeon, or intermediary, who was apparently endowed with human nature. Accordingly salvation was not to be obtained through the merits of Christ, but through the Gnosis or superior knowledge which was manifested in Him and discovered by the Gnostics. Christ, therefore, was not really born, nor did He actually live and die or rise from the grave. The events described in the Gospels were not historically but only symbolically true. Spiritual insight, possessed by the Gnostics, and not the reported words and deeds of Christ demonstratable by history, furnished Christianity with the religious truths of salvation.

The consequence of Fathers who combated Gnosticism reads like a roster of the Christian writers before the Edict of Constantine, but the outstanding among them was St. Irenaeus (130-200), Bishop of Lyons, who forms in thought and action an important link between the East and West. His chief work, *Against the Heresies*, is a detailed exposé of Gnosticism.

Irenaeus was the first great Catholic theologian. Unlike the Fathers in the East, he opposed Gnosticism not by setting up a rival Christian speculation, but by emphasizing the traditional elements in the Church, notably the papacy, the episcopate, the canon of Scripture and religious tradition. At every point in his writing he is conscious of the chasm that separates the Oriental concept of God and religion, inherited from the Hindus and Parsis, from the Christian message preached by Christ and handed down by His disciples. Christians have only one God, infinite Creator of all things; their revelation comes from this same Deity, especially in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, "Savior, King and God." Their faith is founded on His preaching and on the teaching of His Church, whose seed has been sown to the ends of the earth; and preserved by the bishops "who were instituted by the apostles," as the apostles were by Christ.

To discover, therefore, the truth about Christ and sift it from error, we have only to see what the bishops have taught since the time of Christ.

But as it would take "too long to transcribe here the successions of bishops of all the churches, we will consider the greatest and ancient, known by all, founded and established by the two glorious apostles, Peter and Paul. We will show that the tradition which it received from the apostles and the faith it has preached to men have come down to us through the succession of bishops." (1)

Gnosticism was thus disposed of in practice, but its theories were never far from the boundaries of the faith. Where believing Christians were willing to follow Ireneus and accept the Church's teaching about Christ, as the bishops and popes proclaimed it, sophisticated intellectuals were less easily satisfied and their speculations continued unhindered (albeit rejected) throughout the third century.

Less well known than Gnosticism, Manichaeism had a corresponding effect on Christian tradition and did much to stimulate the rise of Arianism. Typical of its impact, is the confession that Augustine makes (in the fifth century) that for nine years he was a Manichaean, and that for so long this system held him spellbound and unable to discover the true Christ.

Manichaeism was founded by Manes (215-275 A.D.), a native of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian Empire; it began as a Zoroastrian sect until opposition from the monotheist party forced Manes into exile in India. When he returned, he was for a time favored by the king, but then fell from the royal favor and put to death by being flayed alive. His Persian disciples were banished from the country. Yet Manichaeism spread to all parts of Asia, North Africa and into distant Europe. Among its most famous disciples was St. Augustine who later wrote devastating treatises against the Manichaeans.

What Manes borrowed from Zoroastrianism was its approach to the problem of evil, by postulating two eternal and ultimate principles, and two completely disparate kingdoms, that of Light (physical and moral goodness), which is governed by God, and that of Darkness (physical and moral). Satan comes forth from that darkness, invades the realms of light and declares war on God.

In Manichaean theory, man was indeed created by God with pure elements, but he was made a prisoner by Satan who plants in him the seeds of darkness. Since that time, man has become the subject of struggle between God and the evil Spirit. The only hope for man is by the practice of severe asceticism, which comprises the three seals or mortifications of the mouth, the hands, and the passions.

What Manichaeism had in common with Zoroastrianism was a preoccupation with evil and attempting to save the goodness of God by depriving Him of absolute sovereignty. It was tolerated for a while as sectarian Mazdaism, and would likely have entered the stream of Zoroastrian tradition with no further impact on history, except that Manes absorbed enough of Christianity to make his teachings attractive far beyond the intrinsic merits of the dualistic philosophy that lay beneath.

The followers of Manes developed his main ideas to which they added Gnostic speculations, claiming, as the Gnostics did, to a special *gnosis* or divine insight. They explained the Zoroastrian dualism by saying that from the good principle there emanated, in the first place, primeval man, who was the first to enter into the struggle with evil; in the next place the Spirit of Life, who rescued primeval man from the powers of darkness; finally the World-Soul, Christ, the Son of primeval man, who restored to man the light he had lost in the conflict with darkness. They distinguished in man two souls--the soul that animates the body, and the soul of light, which is part of the World-Soul, Christ. The former is the creation of the powers of darkness, the latter is an emanation from light itself. Thus, man's soul is a battlefield on which light and darkness are at war, as they are in the universe at large. Human action depends on the outcome of the contest; there is no freedom of choice. All material things are evil and the cause of evil.

The object of the practice of religion, according to Manichaeism, was to release the particles of light which Satan had stolen from the world of Light and imprisoned in man's brain; and that Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Manes had been sent to help in the task. Unlike its parent Zoroastrianism, the Manichaean sect spread rapidly. It was established in Egypt before the end of the third century, and at Rome early in the fourth. In the later fourth century Manichaeans were numerous in North Africa, where they were combated by Augustine, Serapion and others. Their spirit influenced such anti-social movements as the Albigenses, Bogomiles, and the Paulicians. They held their ground in China till the fourteenth century, and recent excavations in Middle Egypt uncovered several papyri books (equivalent to two-thousand pages) in the Coptic dialect containing works by Manes and his first disciples.

Manichaeism influence on Arianism gave it the main premise for its teaching. If, on Manichaean grounds, the body is evil, God could not have become man because the Holy One cannot deny His nature to form one personality with sin.

The foregoing may be considered remote precursors of Arianism, as giving the climate for its rise. The real roots must be traced to four men whose names have become attached to their respective systems of thought: Montanus, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, and Lucian of Antioch.

Montanus was a Phrygian convert to Christianity, who shortly after his baptism (about 156 A.D.) received the gift of prophecy and attracted a large following, notably of women, who began to prophesy with him. Before long, the Montanists announced a new revelation that went beyond the religion of Christ. At the Last Supper, Jesus foretold the coming of the Paraclete; these promises were now being realized. Montanus was the Paraclete even as Christ was the Son of God, who, according to Montanus, would soon return to earth and found a New Jerusalem. This equating of divine filiation in Christ with the divine procession of Montanus lowered the concept of Christ's divinity to a metaphor.

Early in the third century arose a more formidable challenge in the person of Sabellius, who wrote around 215 A.D. In company with men like Noetus and Praxeas, he developed what has since become known as Modalist Monarchianism.

As a general premise, Monarchianism sought to safeguard Monotheism and the Unity (Monarchy) of the Godhead. But the movement slipped into heresy because it failed to do justice to the independent subsistence of the Son. Sabellianism or Modalist Monarchianism, taught that in the Godhead the only differentiation was a mere succession of modes or operations. The Sabellianists were also called Patripassians, since it was a corollary of their doctrine that the Father suffered as the Son. Although the term "Monarchian" in itself is susceptible of a perfectly orthodox meaning, Tertullian began using it to describe the heretical deviation by this name.

The Father of Adoptionist Monarchianism, or at least its most famous proponent, was Paul of Samosata. Along with Theodotus and Artemon, he maintained that Jesus was God only in the sense that a special power or influence rested upon His human person. In the Paulianist theory, the Godhead was a closely knit Trinity, of Father, Wisdom, and Word, and until creation formed a single hypostasis. Paul of Samosata had been Bishop of Antioch, who for his heretical teaching was deposed in 268 A.D. His Christological thesis was that from the Incarnation the Word (*Logos*) rested upon the human Jesus as one person upon another, and that the Incarnate Christ differed only in degree from the ancient prophets.

Samosata had used the term *homoousion* (of one substance) in his own Adoptionist sense; as the Gnostics had done earlier to describe Christ the created intermediary, or aeon, who was like the Father but not of one substance with the Father. As a result, *homoousion* was at first suspect, and some writers, notably the Origenists, who had no sympathy with Monarchianism (or later on with Arianism) preferred the word *homoousion*, of like substance with the Father, feeling that this allowed for more distinctions in the Godhead.

It is commonly believed that Paul of Samosata was the teacher of Lucian of Antioch, who died in 312 A.D. and who was certainly the most influential factor in Arius' theology. As we shall see, the Arians prided themselves on being Lucianists, and with reason, because Lucian had died a martyr and his name was revered throughout the Near East.

He was a priest and theologian, who founded an important school of learning where Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia were students. In Christology, he professed a form of Subordinationism that later became known as Semi-Arianism. For some time he was excommunicated for heterodoxy, but ten years or so before martyrdom was reconciled to the Church, and we may suppose retracted his earlier aberrations. St. John Chrysostom preached a panegyric on his feast-day, and Jerome praised his industry, learning and eloquent writing style.

A brief comment should be made on the relative positions of two major sees on the eve of Nicea, Antioch and Alexandria. For generations, Antioch was the seat of tainted speculations on the person and natures of Christ,

whereas Alexandria was proud of its orthodoxy. Arius had studied at Antioch under Lucian; his arch-critic, Athanasius, was Bishop of Alexandria.

Arius and Arianism

Authorities differ about the details of Arius' life. He was probably a Libyan by birth (250 A.D.), had been a pupil of Lucian, and ordained deacon by St. Peter, Bishop of Alexandria (died 312 A.D.), who later excommunicated him as a member of the Melitian sect. The Melitians were rigorists who objected to the leniency meted out to reconciled apostates during a lull in the Diocletian persecution.

Under Achillas (312-313 A.D.), Peter's successor, he was ordained priest and put in charge of Baucalis, one of the main churches of Alexandria. A man known for his asceticism and fine preaching, Arius entered the lists (about 319 A.D.) as champion of the Subordinationist theory that Christ was not equal but subordinate to the Father. The controversy aroused has made history. Arius rallied to his support a number of prominent Lucianists, particularly Eusebius of Nicomedia, while a synod at Alexandria was summoned by the new bishop, St. Alexander, who excommunicated Arius.

Role of Constantine. We must pause a moment to reflect on the place that Constantine holds in the Arian crisis. It will shed much light on the subsequent history of Christology.

When after three centuries of opposition, the State finally gave freedom to the Christian religion, its motive for doing so was self-advantage. It recognized what the Church had always been teaching, that Christianity is not an enemy of the State but its most powerful ally. "When we," the edict of liberation read, "Constantine and Licinius, Emperors, met at Milan in conference concerning the welfare and security of the realm, we decided that of the things that are of profit to all mankind, the worship of God ought rightly to be our first and chiefest care. . . We therefore announce that, notwithstanding any provisions concerning the Christians in our former instructions, all who choose that religion should be allowed to continue therein, without any let or hindrance, and are not to be in any way troubled or molested." (2)

Equally significant and touching on the very heart of Church and State relations, is the legal status given to other bodies than Christianity in this pioneer document of religious freedom. At the same time that Christianity was being legalized, all others are to be allowed the free and unrestricted practice of their religions; for it accords with the good order of the realm and the peacefulness of our times that each should have freedom to worship God after his own choice." (3)

The Edict of Milan was a political compromise between Licinius, an avowed pagan, and Constantine, who was already a Christian at heart, although he did not immediately profess the faith. Prescinding from its motive, the decree was a practical necessity, a *modus vivendi* for two strong opposing forces. Soon after the edict, Licinius started a pagan reaction, which Constantine repulsed by defeating his rival in 324. Better advantaged as a result, Constantine was still obliged to make concessions to the pagan nobility. Later proclamations were even more favorable to the Christians, like the prohibition of soothsaying and fortunetelling, the grant of regular subsidy to the Catholic clergy, their exemption from military and other civil duties, and the state recognition of Sunday as a "festal day on which to fulfill petitions of special urgency." However, paganism was not suppressed.

Just before the Arian crisis broke, Constantine had his troubles with the Donatist schism, which divided the Church in North Africa from the reign of Diocletian to the Mohammedan conquest. Here, too, the emperor was not satisfied with taking a passive position, but directly entered the controversy--first by using vigorous measures to suppress the schism, and then (in 321 A.D.) by relenting and bidding the Catholics patiently to bear with the Donatists.

With this experience of imperial intervention in church matters, it is not surprising that Constantine should so promptly enter the Arian issue. No sooner had Arius been preaching against Christ's divinity, than the emperor on his own initiative wrote a joint letter to Arius and his bishop (St. Alexander), urging them to give up their "squabble" and come to terms in the interests of peace in the Alexandrian territory. Characteristically, Constantine gave two reasons for writing to them; his desire to have one single religion in the empire, as a guarantee of political unity; and his fear that theological wrangling over points of doctrine weakens the civil institutions of the land.

On investigation, I find that the reason for this quarrel is insignificant and worthless. As I understand it, you, Alexander, were asking the separate opinions of your clergy on some passage of your law, or rather were inquiring about some idle question, when you, Arius, inconsistently committed yourself to statements which should either never have come to your mind, or have been at once repressed.

Your contention is not about any fundamental issue of your law. Neither of you is introducing any novel scheme of worship. You are of one and the same way of thinking, so that it is in your power to unite in one communion. Even philosophers can agree together, one and all, on one principle, though differing in particulars. Is it right for brothers to oppose brothers for the sake of trifles? Such conduct might be expected from the uncultured, or from the recklessness of boys. But it is little in keeping with your sacred profession and with your personal wisdom. (4)

After this kind of speech from a ruler who was not yet baptized, we are prepared to expect a new dimension in the history of the Church. Rome went along with Constantine in summoning the Council of Nicea and in many ways allowed the political power to exercise authority in things pertaining to religion; but before long the liaison was regretted and by the time of Gregory resisted. In the East, however, Constantine's too ready zeal in the Arian crisis foreshadowed the Byzantine theory of the emperors as supreme rulers of Church and State alike. It also paved the way for the phenomenal spread of Islam in the Eastern Empire, by the simple expedient of controlling the Church through political means.

The Principles of Arianism. Under pressure from the emperor to make up and forget about their "trifles," and from Bishop Alexander to retract their unorthodox teaching, the Arian part defended themselves by writing a letter of explanation to Alexander. By this time, they had already been condemned in the Synod of Egypt. The letter can be read as a "considered and conciliatory statement" before the condemnation, or as a sarcastic defiance, more likely to have followed it. It served for some time as a firmal Arian Confession, and is so quoted by Hilary of Poitiers, (5) The text is preserved in Athanasius, (6) and Epiphanius. (7)

To our blessed pope and bishop Alexander the presbyters and deacons send greeting in the Lord.

Our faith which we received from our forefathers and have also learned from you is this. We know there is one God, the only unbegotten, only eternal, only without beginning, only true, who only has immortality, only wise, only good, the only potentate, (8) judge of all, governor, dispenser, unalterable and unchangeable, righteous and good, God of the Law and the prophets and the New Covenant. Before everlasting ages he begot his unique (9) Son, through whom he made the ages and all things. He begot him not in appearance, but in truth, constituting (10) him by his own will, unalterable and unchangeable, a perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures--an offspring, but not as one of things begotten.

Neither [was] the offspring of the Father a projection, as Valentinus taught, nor, as Manichaeus introduced, was the offspring a consubstantial part of the Father, nor [was he], as Sabellius said, dividing the Monad, a Son-Father, (11) nor, as Hieracas [taught], a lamp [kindled] from a lamp, or like a torch [divided] into two, (12) nor did he first exist, later being begotten or re-created into a Son--as you also, blessed pope, in the midst of the Church and in council often refuted those who introduced these [ideas]. But as we said, by the will of God [he was] created before times and before ages and received life and being and glories from the Father, the Father so constituting him.

Nor did the Father in giving him the inheritance of all things deprive himself of what he possesses unbegottenly in himself, for he is the fount of all things.

Thus there are three *hypostases*. (13) God being the cause of all things is without beginning and most unique, while the Son, begotten timelessly by the Father and created before ages and established, was not before he was begotten--but, begotten timelessly before all things, he alone was constituted by the Father. He is neither eternal nor coeternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some say "others with one," introducing [the idea of] two unbegotten sources. (14) But as Monad and cause of all, God is thus before all. Therefore he is also prior to the Son, as we learned from what you preached in the midst of the Church.

So therefore, as he has being and glories from God, and life and all things were given him, accordingly God is his source. For he precedes him as his God, and as being before him. But if the [phrases] "of him" and "out of the womb" and "I came forth from the Father and am come" (15) are understood by some as [meaning] a part of the consubstantial himself and a projection, then according to them the Father is compound and divisible and alterable and a body, and according to them presumably, the bodiless God [is thought of as] suffering what belongs to a body.

We pray that you may fare well in the Lord, blessed pope. Arius, Aeithales, Achilleus, Carpones, Sarmatas, Arius, presbyters. Deacons, Euzoius, Lucius, Julius, Menas, Helladius, Gaius. Bishops, Secundus of Pentapolis, Theonas of Libya, Pistus (whom the Arians installed at Alexandria). (16)

The date of this letter is about 320 A.D., and reveals a number of salient features of Arianism, besides the obvious fact that Arius and his followers were unimpressed by Constantine's criticism that this was not a matter of crucial importance to Christianity.

In the Arian confession to Alexander, the pivotal word is *eternal*, since it was the denial of the Son's eternity with the Father that lay at the basis of Arian heterodoxy and, at Nicea, proved to be the test which the Council used against them.

The joint letter to Alexander should be read together with another communication from Arius himself, written about the same time, to his friend, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. Eusebius had just been transferred from the See of Berytus in Syria to that of the imperial residence, Nicomedia. It gives us a more frank statement of Arius' position as he was willing to express it to his friends.

To my very dear lord, the faithful and orthodox man of God Eusebius, Arius, unjustly persecuted by Pope Alexander for the sake of the all-conquering truth of which you also are a defender, sends greetings in the Lord.

Since my father Ammonius was coming to Nicomedia, it seemed to me fitting and proper to send greetings by him, and also to bring to your attention, in the natural love and affection which you have for the brethren, for the sake of God and his Christ, that the bishop greatly injures and persecutes us and does all he can against us, trying to drive us out of the city as godless men, since we do not agree with him when he says publicly, "Always Father, always Son," "Father and Son together," "The Son exists unbegottenly with God, the eternal begotten."

What is it that we say, and think, and have taught, and teach? That the Son is not unbegotten, nor a part of the unbegotten in any way, nor formed out of any substratum, but that he was constituted by God's will and counsel, before times and before ages, full (of grace and truth), divine, unique, unchangeable. And before he was begotten or created or ordained or founded, he was not. For he was not unbegotten. We are persecuted because we say, "The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning." For this we are persecuted, and because we say, "He is made out of things that were not." But this is what we say, since he is neither part of God nor formed out of any substratum. For this we are persecuted, and you know the rest. (4)

Looking back at the Arian position, we may distinguish two elements that constitute the idea of sonship in ordinary human relations: a son does not exist before he is born, and a son has the same nature as his father. The main argument of the Arians was that Christ was a Son, and *therefore* was not eternal, but of a substance which had a beginning. Thus Arius, in his debate with Alexander, urged that: "If the Father begot the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence. From this it is plain that once the son was not, and it follows of necessity that he had his subsistence out of nothing."

In what sense, then, is sonship to be attributed to the divine nature of Christ? Catholic tradition before Arius said that the true meaning of the word was consubstantiality (co-essentiality) with the Father; whereas the point of subsequentness to the Father depended on time, which we cannot attribute to God.

But the Arians insisted that a son has his origin of existence from his father. What has an origin has a beginning; what has a beginning is not from eternity; what is not from eternity is not from God. They refused to admit that *origination* and *beginning* are not necessarily convertible terms. In other words, they would not allow that anything can have an origin and not have a beginning. They further claimed that a son not only has his origin of existence from his father, but also his nature, and all that is proper to his nature--and therefore in the absolute sense, is dependent on the father, as effect depends on its cause.

They went on to say that if you maintain God has a true son, you are blaspheming because you imply in God a division of substance (as happens in bodily generation), and change (since a human father acquires a son he did not have before), and composition (for human procreation is possible only because the parent is composed of body, which he reproduces, and of soul which cannot be transfused).

If we must admit, argued the Arians, that in some sense Christ is son of God, it can only be as one who is numerically distinct from God, inferior to God by reason of dependence and time, and consequently a creature but not very God. Sonship then becomes a quality or characteristic bestowed on a creature--an adjective added to a contingent being--but not a substantive that pertains to the very existence of God by a necessity of essence.

Unexpectedly, however, while the Arians were unwilling to allow that Jesus Christ was Son *by nature*, and maintained that the word implied a beginning of existence, they would not say that He was Son merely in the same way that we are sons of God. Athanasius was to push their premises to their conclusion, and pressed them to explain how the Savior was at the same time a creature and yet not as one of the creatures.

Under pressure, the Arians devised a more refined argument. They were ready to abandon the question of time and the analysis of the word *son*. Instead they urged that, no matter how you consider the relation of Father and Son, you always imply a voluntary originator (since a human father freely wills to beget), and a free gift conferred (since the child need not have been born). Their argument was reduced to the dilemma: "Did the Father give birth to the Son *willingly* or *unwillingly*?" They were in turn, asked: "Is the Father true God *willingly* or *unwillingly*?" In Athanasius' words: "The Arians direct their view to the contradictory of willing, instead of looking at the more important and prior question: as much as *unwillingness* is opposed to *willing*, so is *nature* prior to willing, and leads the way to it." In other words, the real issue is not to argue backwards from human generation, which is certainly a free act; but to ask if God is by nature Triune, so that He necessarily begets a Son, and would not be God were He not Father and Son (and also Spirit).

Another track the Arians took was to reason from the term *ungenerated*, which Christian tradition had assigned to the Father. They pressed with a sophism: If it is of the essence of the Father to be ungenerated, and of the Son to be generated, they cannot have the same nature because the same thing cannot be both generated and ungenerated. Critics of Arianism practically ignored the objection, because it ignored the radical difference between nature and person. Father and Son are not the same Persons, otherwise they would not be distinct; but they are one God, and so have the same nature.

Still again, the Arians appealed to the materiality implicit in generation, as obtains in human procreation. Their problem was complicated by the fact that pagan mythology was filled with bodily generations of one deity from another. Tertullian had anticipated the difficulty by his analogy of light from light, and Athanasius of

thought from mind--which does not include a physical partition of one thing from another but a spiritual procession that requires no materiality.

When the Arians came to such biblical terms as *only-begotten*, they fell back on their earlier premises. Although the Son was not true God, he may be called the only-begotten as "the only creature who was made immediately by God, as born alone from Him alone." All others were made through the Son, as the instrument of Divine power. He was therefore a creature, because made out of nothing; yet not as one of the rest of creation, but specially (and uniquely) produced by God in order to produce all other things outside of Himself under the aegis of God.

Once having denied the Sons's oneness with the Father, the Arians heaped every sublime attribute possible on the "only-begotten of the Father." They called Him the primeval and sole work of God, the Creator, the one Mediator, the one Priest, God of the world, Image of the Most Perfect, the Mystical Word and Wisdom of the Highest--everything but God without qualification.

Council of Nicea

Originally the Council of Nicea was convened to Ancyra, but assembled at Nicea (now Isnik) in the late spring of 325. A.D., traditionally on May 20. Proceedings seem to have started rather informally with discussions between the Arians and the Orthodox, followed by a solemn opening under Constantine himself. His main interest, as indicated, was not to reach a theological verdict but to find some compromise to insure peace.

Hosius, Bishop of Cordova in Spain, is commonly credited with presiding at the Council. An Arian Creed submitted by Eusebius of Nicomedia was at once rejected. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea then laid before the Council the baptismal creed of his own Palestinian community. Supplemented by the term *consubstantial*, the creed was accepted as orthodox. However, the official Creed of Nicea was not the Eusebian, but another, most probably the baptismal creed of Jerusalem somewhat revised.

Together with four anathemas of Arius, this Creed was subscribed to by all the bishops except two, Thomas of Marmarica and Secundus of Ptolemais, who were promptly deposed and banished. Most of the prelates were from the East, but there were also bishops from Africa, Spain, Gaul and Italy. At least two hundred and twenty signed the Nicene definition. For a long time, Nicea was known as "The Synod of the 318 Fathers," assuming that this many bishops participated. Almost certainly the figure is too large. What is certain is that two legates of the Pope actively participated and that Hosius was in contact with Rome.

The original Nicene Creed should be distinguished from the more familiar symbol of faith that goes by the same name and is used in the Eucharistic Liturgy; it was published about the middle of the next century.

The Nicene Creed is unusually brief, perhaps to preclude argumentation and come to grips with the main issue. It is conscious of the Arian tendency to dilute Christ's natural divine filiation, and therefore spells out in clearest terms the meaning of "Son of God." Manichaeism is outlawed by the declaration that God is Creator of visible and invisible things; Monarchianism in stating that God is triune; Gnosticism in teaching that through the Son of God all things in heaven and on earth were created; Docetism because this Son of God became man and in His humanity suffered and died for mankind; and Arianism is condemned by the expression, "of the substance of the Father," and in four specific anathemas after the Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of all things both visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten born of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father; God from God, light from light, true God from true God; begotten, not created, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made, those in heaven and those on earth as well. For the sake of us men and for our salvation, he came down, was made

flesh, and became man, he suffered and on the third day arose; he ascended into heaven and is going to come to judge the living and the dead. And we believe in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say: "There was a time when he did not exist"; and, "Before he was begotten, he did not exist"; and, "He was made from nothing, or from another hypostasis or essence," alleging that the Son of God is mutable or subject to change--such persons the Catholic and apostolic Church condemns.

In drawing up the Nicene Creed, St. Athanasius, then deacon to Bishop Alexander, was the leading defender of orthodoxy. Before 318 A.D., while still in his twenties, Athanasius had written two short treatises, the second of them *On the Incarnation*. He explained how God the Word (*Logos*) by His union with manhood, restored to fallen man the image of God in which He had been created. The Nicene formula, then, reflects Athanasian theology with uncompromising clarity. After the Council, Athanasius paid for his allegiance to the faith by suffering constant persecution, banishment and injury at the hands of the Arian imperialists who saw in him their sworn enemy.

The best commentator on Nicea is also Athanasius, reflected in his numerous writings, three volumes in a modern edition. From 339 to 359 he wrote a series of works in defense of the Council, i.e., the true divinity of the Son of God. He thus met the Arian arguments in theological debate and countered their intrigues in ecclesiastical politics.

At the Council, Athanasius and Hosius insisted on nothing so much as the inclusion of the word *homoousios* (consubstantial), as a criterion of truth. The Arian party, on the other hand, was ready to make every concession and give Christ every title possible, provided the test word was omitted. The plain question before the bishops was whether Jesus Christ was God in as full a sense as the Father, though not to be viewed as separate from Him; or whether, as the only alternative, He was a mere creature. The only issue at stake was whether Christ was literally of, and in, the one indivisible Essence which is adored as God, "consubstantial with God," or of a substance which had a beginning. Every other question was secondary.

The Aftermath

The first ecumenical declaration of faith at Nicea was bound to have repercussions in the Christian world. Those who accepted the teachings of Nicea gracefully would build on its premises and begin that edifice of doctrine which we commonly associate with Catholic Christology. Those who were condemned at Nicea became more active than ever, and started a chain of events which still affects the Church today.

In many ways the two streams crossed and flowed into each other; orthodox leaders were spurred on to action by the constant specter of heresy, and the innovators were emboldened to attack orthodoxy by their liaison with the secular power.

If the Fathers believed that defining Christ's consubstantiality with the Father would check the growth of Arianism, they were disappointed. Steady pressure from the imperial court and compromising bishops combined to advance the Arian cause beyond anything that the Church had experienced.

Spread of Arianism. Arianism had the advantage of clarity of position from the beginning. Its founder bequeathed his followers four principles from which they never wavered, even when their expression of doctrine was veiled under semantics.

1. God is absolute one, not only in nature but in person. He is in no sense generated. It is therefore impossible for Him to communicate His substance. He can only create things outside Himself out of nothing.

2. The Word or *Logos* is an intermediary between God and the world, existing before cosmic time but not eternal. Consequently there was a period when the *Logos* was not.
3. This means that the *Logos* was created. He was produced. If we insist on saying that He was born, in the sense of generated from the Father, such a term can mean only an adopted sonship and not a natural filiation.
4. As a result, the nature of the *Logos* is to be fallible and peccable; He could both err and sin. Yet His moral virtue was of so high an order that *de facto* he never blundered or sinned. Although inferior to God, He is so perfect that no other will be created superior to Him.

From these premises, Arianism developed a number of species, less distinct in concept than statement, and conditioned mainly by the need of steering a middle course between internal belief (that Christ is not God) and external circumstances (that Nicea should not be openly denied).

While names have changed, and the species have been crossed with one another many times since the fourth century, they are still with us today. One of the benefits of a brief review of these original forms of Arianism is to serve as a checklist of contemporary Christological theories according to their consistency with Nicea.

Heading the list of Arian derivatives was Eusebianism, named after Eusebius of Nicomedia, friend and confidant of Arius. As seen in the letter he received from Arius, previously quoted, Eusebius was at one with his master but managed by subtlety and intrigue to keep himself in the good graces of both the orthodox party and the Arian agitators. Eusebius should be held mainly responsible for the rise and spread of Arianism. By his influence with the imperial family, he changed what might have remained an Egyptian dispute into an ecumenical controversy of historic proportions. His ascendancy over Constantine (died 361 A.D.), whom he baptized in his last illness, and Constantius enabled him to organize the forces of State and Church against Athanasius and the Council of Nicea. A politician by nature, he signed the Nicene decree and in 339 A.D. had himself adroitly transferred from Nicomedia to Constantinople.

Pure Arians came to be called Anomoeans (*anomoios* = dissimilar). Founded by Aetius and Eunomeius, they are also known as Eunomians. They insisted that in God there is no internal generation, and therefore the Son of God is not consubstantial with the Father. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa wrote extensively against them.

Semi-Arians, so called because they tried to straddle Nicea and Arius, are known to history in at least four species. The Homoeans (*homoios* - similar), also known as Acacians from their leaders, Acadius of Caesarea, claimed that the *Logos* is not numerically identical with the Father but like to it. Homoiousians (*homoiousion* = of like substance) were in the same class as the Homoeans but more philosophical. Another name for the sect was the Basilian (from Basil of Ancyra). Their stance was in direct contradiction to the *homoousios* of Nicea, and gained the single largest following in post-Nicene times. Athanasius, Basil, Nyssa and Nazianzen opposed them, and yet tried not to alienate by stressing terms; they pointed out the errors of the Homoiousians without insisting on the formulas. In fact, this conciliatory attitude did not win over the Semi-Arians, who would not admit the absolute identity of nature between Father and Son, or Father and Holy Spirit.

The Macedonians are in a class by themselves. Their leader, Macedonius, usurped the See of Constantinople on two occasions, between 342 and 360 A.D., and his followers are best known for denying the divinity of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity, with stress on the Holy Spirit. Hence the name Pneumatomachi, "enemies of the spirit," since they held that the Third Person was a creature of the Son, as the Son was a created product of the Father.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Arian mentality was its penchant for producing confessions of faith. At least a dozen creeds are known to have been published and proposed for acceptance, mostly to assert the divinity of Christ, that He is in some sense "God," but at the same time to avoid the obnoxious word *homoousios* and the Nicene declaration, "of the substance of the Father."

Rome did not remain impassive to all this, but preferred not to aggravate an already entrenched Arian part in the East. Finally in 341 A.D., a council was held at Rome under Julius I to bring the Easterners into line. But most of their bishops refused to come. The Western prelates rehabilitated the orthodoxy of Athanasius who was pushed into and out of exile by the Arian zealots, it seems almost annually.

Things quieted down while the Catholic Emperor Constans was in power but on his death in 350 A. D., the Arian Constantius became sole emperor.

Immediately there was an outcropping of Arian-sponsored councils, at Sirmium, Arles, Milan, Beziers, Rimini and Seleucia, where the anti-Nicene party triumphed through pressure (including physical violence) from imperial authority dominated by Arian bishops from the East. At the last two synods, most of the Catholic bishops were induced by fraud and forced to sign a noncommittal symbol of faith, which was then flaunted to the world as an Arian victory. St. Jerome commented on this period, that "The whole world sighed as it awoke in wonder to find itself Arian." Actually the Christian world was not Arian; but many of its leaders had been betrayed into leaving that impression.

A sad illustration of the crisis through which the Church was passing is what happened to Pope Liberius (352-366 A. D.), the first pontiff to whom the title of "Saint" is not applied, probably because of his lack of courage under trial. He was seized at Rome by the Arian Emperor Constantius for his ardent defense of Athanasius and the Nicene Creed. After years of exile, and under threat of death, Liberius is reported to have signed a compromise formula as the price of restoration to the Roman See. When Constantius died (361 A.D.), Liberius publicly condemned Arianism.

This fact, plus the circumstances of the case, proves that no breach of infallibility was involved. It is also an unsolved question which of the three formulas Liberius actually signed, since only one was heretical. His conduct before and after exile was rigidly orthodox; hence the unlikelihood of heresy during exile. He was under duress, so that his acts were not juridically valid. Finally, even if what Athanasius said is true, that "Liberius, being exiled, gave way after two years and, in face of threats of death, subscribed his name," there was no intention to proclaim a dogma for acceptance by the universal Church. Nevertheless, Liberius stands as a symbol of the lengths to which Arians were willing to go to change the ancient faith in Christ's divinity.

Christology of the Golden Patristic Age.

Just as He is the Word of God, so afterwards "the Word was made flesh;" and while "in the beginning was the Word," the Virgin conceived at the fulness of time, and the Lord became a man. The One who is identified in both statements is one Person, for "the Word was made flesh." (31)

The personal unity between the two natures in Christ is the reason why Mary is truly the "bearer of God (Theotokos)," a term that had been used already by Origen to describe Mary's relation to her Son. "Scripture," says Athanasius, "contains a double account of the Savior; that He was ever God, and is the Son, being the Father's Word, Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards for us He took flesh of a Virgin, Mary, bearer of God, and was made man." (32)

Another result of the personal unity of Christ is the "communion of properties," *communicatio idiomatum*. Athanasius was among the pioneers who taught that, while the human and divine natures in Christ were separate, the attributes of the one may be predicated of the other in view of their union in the one Person of the Savior. This doctrine was to receive conciliar authority in the fifth century, under Pope Leo the Great.

Athanasius was the first to dwell at length on the reasons for the Incarnation, and his ideas were later adopted by most of the Greek Fathers. In his judgment, once God had determined to redeem fallen man-mind, the only way open was by means of the Incarnation--if we assume that God could not allow Himself to be satisfied by any amends that man offered, because the ravages of sin are beyond the capacity of mere man to remove.

In this preoccupation with Christ's divinity, Athanasius dealt only minimally with the human nature of the Savior. Moreover, he favored the biblical expressions "flesh" (*sarx*) and "body" (*soma*) to describe the

humanity assumed by the Son of God. By doing so, he did not deny that Christ had a spiritual soul, which he explicitly defended after the Apollinarist errors rose above the horizon.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386 A.D.) was a contemporary of Athanasius, who became bishop of Jerusalem and supported Athanasius in his defence of Nicea. For prudential reasons, it seems, Cyril never used the Nicene test of orthodoxy, *homoousios*, though it is known he was an outspoken critic of Arius. His best known work is *The Catecheses* or catechetical lectures containing twenty-four instructions, including an Introduction which stresses the need of preparation before baptism. Cyril's *magnum opus* is a complete study of the Catholic religion, with an extensive treatment of the Liturgy that figures heavily in the scholarly writings behind the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council. His profession of faith is the Creed of Jerusalem, which many believe to be substantially the Nicene-Constantinople Creed used in the liturgy of the Mass.

The "Three Cappadocians," Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa, were the chief influence which led to the final defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. Among these, Nyssa was the most analytic and became the principal theologian at Constantinople.

St. Hilary of Poitiers (310-366 A.D.) is also known as the "Athanasius of the West," who spent his life defending the divinity of Christ in the spirit of Nicea. A convert after marriage, he entered the Church with his wife and daughter, and shortly after baptism became bishop of Poitiers. Exiled through the efforts of the Arian bishop of Arles, he spent four years in Asia Minor where he studied Eastern theology and the Greek language. On returning to Gaul, he was reinstated in his diocese and succeeded, through preaching and writing, in freeing the French nation of Arianism.

A staunch defender of Christ's divine nature, he was not always clear about the humanity of the Savior. Among other positions, Hilary held that Christ could suffer physical pain (*passio*) but was not sure He could also suffer internally (*sensus doloris*), no doubt because he feared that any compromise on that score would give the Arians a handle for denying that God could suffer emotional distress. It seemed to him unworthy of the Man-God to be subject to interior trial and anxiety.

Didymus the Blind (310-395 A.D.) was blind from infancy. After studying under Athanasius, he was entrusted by the bishop with the direction of the Catechetical School at Alexandria, where he numbered among his disciples Gregory Nazianzen, Jerome and Rufinaus. He continued in that influential post for fifty years, with great benefit to the cause of orthodoxy in defending the Trinity and Christ's oneness with the Father. Unfortunately he was also affected by Origenism, and two centuries later (553 A.D.), the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople condemned him on that score.

Typical of an unflinching devotion to Christian tradition, St. Epiphanius (315-403 A.D.), was for thirty years superior of a monastery in Judea before he became bishop of Salamis in Cyprus. Of his writings in defence of Christianity, the most important was his *Panarion*, commonly known as the "Refutation of All Heresies," in which he described and refuted every known heresy from the beginning of the Church to his day. He counted eighty heretical systems in less than four hundred years of the Church's existence.

In his Christology, Epiphanius vigorously maintained the integrity of Christ's human nature against Apollinaris, and is best known for his defence of Mary's perpetual virginity *ante partum*, *in partu*, and *post partum* against those who questioned whether she was always a virgin.

The creed of Epiphanius marks the highpoint of orthodoxy, and the watershed of theological controversy--after the Council of Nicea and before the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus.

There are two forms of the Epiphanian Creed, both composed by him and proposed as expressions of a clear and exact statement of the Catholic faith, with accent on the person of Jesus Christ. The long form, given here, was to refute the errors of unbelievers; the short one served as an instruction for catechumens before they were admitted to baptism.

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of all things both invisible and visible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, only-begotten, born of God the Father; born, that is, of the substance of the Father; God from God, light from light, true God from true God; begotten, not created, consubstantial with the Father.

Through Him all things were made, both those in heaven and those on earth, visible and invisible. He came down and was made flesh for us men and for our salvation; that is, He was in the full sense of the word born of the holy, ever-Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was made man, that is, He assumed full humanity: soul, body, mind, and whatever constitutes man, excepting sin.

He was not born of male seed nor was He *within* a man; but He fashioned human flesh into Himself in a single holy unity--not in the way He breathed upon the prophets and spoke and worked in them, but in the full sense of the word He became man (for "the Word was made flesh" without undergoing any change or turning His divinity into humanity). He united His divinity and His humanity in the single holy perfection of His divinity; for the Lord Jesus Christ is one and not two, the same person being God and lord and king.

The same Christ also suffered in His flesh; and he arose and ascended into heaven in that very body, and took His seat in glory at the right hand of the Father. He is going to come in glory in that very body to judge the living and the dead. His reign will have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit who spoke by the Law, who preached through the prophets, and who descended on the Jordan. He speaks in the apostles and dwells in the saints. What we believe about Him is this: that He is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, a perfect Spirit, a spirit of consolation, uncreated, who proceeds from the Father and receives from the Son. In Him we believe.

We believe in one Catholic and apostolic Church, in one baptism of repentance, in the resurrection of the dead, in the just judgment of souls with their bodies, in the kingdom of heaven, and in life everlasting.

And the Catholic and apostolic Church, your mother and our mother, condemns those who say that "there was a time when the Son did not exist, nor the Holy Spirit"; or that either was made out of nothing, or out of a pre-existing substance or being; and who say that the Son of God or the Holy Spirit is mutable or subject to change. Further we condemn all heresies, which are alien to this orthodox faith. 32

There is special significance in the Epiphonian confession of faith in the light of subsequent events in the Near East. He represents the firmness of faith that withstood the maelstrom of Asian speculation and laid the groundwork for a development of Christology that took still deeper roots before the tide of Apollinarism, Nestorianism and Eutychianism swept the Eastern world. His creed is venerated with special devotion in the Orthodox Church and forms a perfect link with the Church of Rome.

Chapter V - References

1. St. Ireneus, *Adversus Heereses*, III, 3, 1-2.
2. "Edictum Mediolanense," from Lactantius, "De Mortibus Persecutorum," *MPL* 7, 267 sqq.
3. *Ibid.*

4. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, II, 64-72.
5. *De Trinitate*, IV, 12.
6. *On the Councils*, 16.
7. *Heresies*, 69, 7.
8. Romans 16:27; I Timothy 6:15-16.
9. Monogenēs, see n. 7, p. 330.
10. Here and below, the verb cognate with hypostasis.
11. Arius thus implies that his opponents are guilty of a variety of heresies--the Valentinian Gnostic idea of emanations, the Manichaean concept of a material and divisible divine light, the Sabellian denial of distinction between Father and Son; the word Son-Father (huiopator) was, as Eusebius notes (*Ecclesiastical Theology*, I, 1,2), not actually used by Sabellius, but was considered by his critics a fair expression of his sense.
12. The recorded heresies of the Egyptian Hieracas are not Christological, but denial of the redemption of matter and therefore of the resurrection of the body, (Epiphanius, *Heresies*, 67); Arius is trying to brand as heretical by association a familiar figure for the relation of Father and Son, which Hieracas had perhaps used rather carelessly.
13. Epiphanius and Hilary add, perhaps correctly, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"--one sees why the term "three hypotases" was long suspect at Alexandria, as suggesting three different kinds of being.
14. *Arche*--source, beginning, origin, here of the ultimate self-existent being.
15. 15. Rom. 11:36(?); Ps. 110 (109):3; John 8:42; 16:28.
16. The signatures are preserved only by Epiphanius. The two Arian bishops Secundus and Theonas were deposed by the Egyptian Synod and again at Nicaea. Pistus doubtless added his signature to this document later, when he was consecrated by Secundus as a claimant to the see of Alexandria, where an effort was made to install him in 338-339 (Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians*, 24). He may have signed as bishop of Alexandria, for which an orthodox transmitter of the letter substituted the explanatory note now found at the end. The other signatures look as if each presbyter were supported by his deacon; Eusebius remained closely associated with Arius, and survived to be Arian bishop of Antioch from 361 to 378.
17. St. Epiphanius, *Symbolum Epiphani*, In Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole*, Breslau, p. 126.

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