

Arianism

The Council of Nicaea - convened by the Emperor Constantine in 325 to heal the virulent theological divisions which had for some years caused disturbance in the Church, above all in its eastern half - decreed the condemnation of the doctrine of Christ proposed by the priest Arius (256 circa -336), a doctrine to which many bishops had adhered. It was thus from Arius that the name Arianism derived to designate the most tenacious and dangerous Trinitarian heresy, one which caused deep fissures in the fabric of Christianity and mutual condemnations by members of various local Churches in the course of the fourth century. The council of Constantinople in 381 pronounced a definitive rejection of it by ecclesiastical authority, but it would have a long life among the Germanic peoples (Goths, Ostrogoths, Vandals) whose conversion to Christianity had been brought about by the work of Arian bishops such as Ulfila. Without giving a detailed account of the complex unfolding of this historical episode, which even included episodes of personal violence, in a convulsive sequence of reciprocal accusations and condemnations and in a continual process of synodal meetings intended to mediate between the opposing factions, it may suffice to note that it involved the principal personalities of the Church of that time: in the East, from Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria (the most strenuous defender of the Nicæan formula), Apollinaris of Laodicea – whose teaching (Apollinarianism) was in its turn judged to be erroneous and which provoked polemics – to Basil of Caesarea and the other Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen; and in the West from Hilary of Poitiers to Marius Victorinus and Ambrose, who was a champion of Nicene orthodoxy, energetically opposing the strong Arian currents in the Milanese community, to the point of directly confronting the empress Justina - wife of Valentinian I and mother of Valentinian II – who was pro-Arian. Arius's theology came to maturity in Alexandria, being decisively influenced by a tradition going back to Origen, and the drama of his life was played out in this city, rich in culture, and in an ecclesiastical milieu riven with powerful tensions. In fact, after being named deacon by the bishop, Peter (300 circa – 311), the latter excommunicated him for supporting the schism of Meletius of Lycopolis. Peter's successor Achilles (311-312) readmitted him into the Church of Alexandria and ordained him as a priest, and a little later bishop Alexander (312-328) put him in charge of a church, which he directed with great commitment and success. Before long however his Christological doctrine re-ignited his conflicts with the authority of the bishop. It would seem in fact that between 318 and 322 Arius elaborated an conception of Christ which moved away from Origen's idea - which aimed to reconcile the three 'hypostases' or persons of the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit with the fundamental assumption that God was one – and towards the view that the Son and the Holy Spirit, though their divine nature was recognized, belonged on a level below the Father. Arius was also profoundly influenced by Platonic assumptions developed in the milieu of Middle- and Neoplatonism, assumptions that implied the idea of a unique *arché*, a single principle of being, unbegotten and endowed with substance (*hypostasis*), in an absolute and unconditional sense, and a second principle, the Logos, emanating from the *arché*; the Logos on this view had the function of mediating with all the rest of reality, both visible and invisible (the latter being souls and intermediary beings such as *daimones*). The Logos is equated with the Intellect (*Nous*) of the system of Plotinus [the leading neo-Platonic philosopher], from whom the soul of the cosmos emanates. By analogy with this scheme of a chain of being - but naturally with all the differences that followed from the biblical principle of Creation, which Arius did not mean to contradict but, rather, to reinforce, precisely with

his own Christological formula - he stated that only the Father should be recognized as the one God who had no beginning (*anarchos*), was unbegotten (*aghenetos*) and uncreated (*aghenetos*). Arius put into play a clear distinction between two terms that still, in the Christian theological language of the time and in that of Origen in particular were treated as synonymous. The Father, unique, eternal and unchanging, is, alone, endowed with divine substance (*ousia*) and nature (*hypostasis*), these two terms being as yet imperfectly distinct. The Son, insofar as he is begotten, would also be created, with this idea being expressed, it was claimed, in the clear Arian formula 'There was a time in which he did not exist', which is supposed to have coined by Arius and used in his lost work *Thaleia* (the feast), in which he explained set out his own ideas. On the basis of scriptural exegesis, furthermore, Arius did emphasize the great dignity of the Son, marked off from all other creatures by being the first in the order of the work of God, the one who came into being before all time and the instrument of the creation which followed. According to this view he is the recipient of a special grace, thanks to which he too could be defined as God, as well as Logos, Wisdom and Power, made immutable and glorious thanks to his perfect and voluntary adherence to the will of the Father. All the same, however the Son could not be held to be 'of the same substance' (*homoousios*) as the Father, since he does not participate in the latter's divine *ousia-hypostasis*. But it would be precisely this formula *homoousios* that would be imposed at Nicaea. against Arius and his supporters, and which, in the oscillations between condemnations and attempts of conciliation - as for example that of the so called 'Homoiousians', which intended to propose an 'intermediate' formula which made the Son 'similar to' *homoiousios* even if not identical in nature with the Father - would become the firm foundation of subsequent Trinitarian and Christological reflection: it came to define, on the basis of the Nicene creed, what was specific and non-negotiable in Christian identity. In any case, as already noted, this solution would be the outcome of a long and difficult process that was adumbrated already in the ups and downs of the life of Arius himself. After appealing to Constantine to get his own orthodoxy recognized, Arius was excommunicated by a synod at Alexandria in 323 and subsequently by another held at Antioch, in which supporters of his were condemned, among them Eusebius of Caesarea, who had at that time taken his side, to distance himself later from him in order to adhere to the decisions of Nicaea. Even after these decisions, the destiny of Arius was changeable since, after he had been recalled by Constantine himself from exile in Illyria, and after Constantine had proposed a return to Alexandria, he was not received there, thanks to the hostility of Athanasius, which was decisive. Condemned again in 333 by the emperor, who decreed, also, that his writings be destroyed, he was rehabilitated by a synod held in Jerusalem in 335, at which Eusebius of Caesarea too was present; but Arius's death in 336 prevented his return to Alexandria. As indicated above, during this long series of events a process of theological reflection within the Catholic Church achieved remarkable results, precisely because of the threat of Arianism and the urgent need to elaborate and clarify relations of the Persons of the Trinity, in the orthodox sense of the Nicene formula. Christological and Trinitarian doctrine were defined in a systematic way, with the support of the greatest figures in the Church of the day, and there was a progressive clarification also of how the holy Spirit should be understood. In the Eastern half of the empire, this was primarily the work of Athanasius of Alexandria (295 circa - 373). In his *Discourses against the Arians* and in numerous other writings he threw all his energy into the struggle against his opponents and in his *On the Trinity* which is now lost, he worked out his ideas systematically. Didymus the Blind wrote treatises *Against Arius* and

Against Eunomius (the latter represented an radical version of Arianism); he also wrote a work *On the holy Spirit*, which has come down to us in the Latin translation of Jerome. Theological development was then carried forward with great energy by the Cappadocian Fathers, in the first instance by Basil (*On the holy Spirit*, written in 375), and *Against Eunomius* (written in 365), then by Gregory of Nazienzen in his *Theological Discourses*, and by Gregory of Nyssa. The latter too wrote a treatise *Against Eunomius*, as well as a treatise *On the holy Spirit*, aimed at the heresy known as ‘Macedonianism’, and one on *The Trinity*. Theology in the West also contributed on a to the refutation of Arianism. Hilary of Poitiers (315 circa – 367 circa), though he converted to Christianity at a mature age, undertook the defence of Nicene orthodoxy with an important treatise in twelve books *On the Trinity*, while Ambrose (339 circa – 397) composed three books *On the holy Spirit*. In addition to Eusebius of Vercelli (*On the Trinity*, in 8 books), a notable contribution was made to the debate by the Platonist rhetorician Marius Victorinus who, after converting to Christianity at an advanced ages, composed – in addition to an *On the Trinity* in 12 books – a number of anti-Arian works which had a powerful polemical impact and which were also very substantial theologically. Finally, in the first decades of the fifth century, at a time when the ‘Arian crisis’ had been virtually resolved throughout the Christian East but when it continued to cause problems in the West in connection with the invasion of North Africa by the Arian Vandals, Augustine of Hippo entered the fray (*Against the sermon [sermonem] of the Arians*, written in 418; *Discussion with Maximinus the Bishop of the Arians*, 427; *Against Maximinus the heretic*, 428). Transcending the polemical context, Augustine also wrote his great work *On the Trinity* in 15 books. This was the outcome on his own account of a long period of reflection on the works of his predecessors lasting from 399 to 420.

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R.P.C. HANSON, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God. The Arian Controversy 318-381*, Edinburgh , 1988, 1997²; Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, 2002 edition)