

UNIT 5: GOD INCARNATE

What we now regard as Christian orthodoxy was fashioned over many centuries by the work of Councils and theologians. Why did the Church feel the need to define its identifying doctrines in the form of written statements known as creeds? Principally, because Christianity spread rapidly across seas and cultures. Practices began to diverge and, with such variations in practice, so too different patterns of belief began to emerge. In order to preserve Church unity – in accordance with the prayer of Christ – some basic ‘ground rules’ needed to be established. These doctrines – the teaching of the Church – came to form the basis of what the Church had to say about God and Christ. They are ‘regulative’ in the sense that these teachings help us to speak ‘a little less badly about God’ (a little less idolatrously) than we might otherwise do. Again, it must be remembered that the Bible does not form the straightforward regulative principal of Christian teaching and practice at this time *because there was no Bible*. The collection of texts which we now regard as authoritative and canonical did not emerge until at least the late fourth century, and remained in dispute for many more centuries. Therefore, it was not possible simply ‘to pick up a Bible’. Of course, the Church possessed its Scriptures and these were regarded as authoritative, but they did not constitute a ‘Christian manual’ in any straightforward fashion.

One of the most crucial ecumencial (i.e. global) Councils of the early Church was held in Nicaea in 325AD. This historical lead-up to this Council is important. In 312, the Emperor Constantine (who shared the leadership of Rome with Licinius) converted to Christianity following a vision the night before a battle with his rival Maxentius near Rome. Constantine’s conversion paved the way for the Edict of Milan (313) which decreed religious toleration in the Empire and led, eventually, to ‘Christendom’.

In referring to Constantine’s ‘conversion’ we need to be cautious. At this time, the Roman Empire was dominated by a myriad of paganisms (and thus it would be inaccurate to refer to ‘paganism’ in the singular). Unlike today, religions were not regarded as mutually exclusive. Therefore, it was perfectly reasonable for Constantine to become ‘a Christian’ while also maintaining many of his pagan religious practices. In fact, it was politically expedient for him to do so. As was common in the ancient world, Constantine was not baptised until he was very close to death (thus minimising the risk of post-baptismal sin prior to death and judgement).

What advantages did Constantine gain from his close association with the Church? His policy from the beginning was to unite the Church to the State in the most intimate possible fashion. Because the Church had an administration

spreading rapidly expanding throughout the Empire, this presented Constantine with a kind of ready-made civil service and spy network. As long as the Church remained on his side, it could provide him with an invaluable tool of administration and information. For this reason, Constantine had his own political motivations for desiring the unity of the Church. Not only was it necessary to have a single, coherent and – crucially – peaceful body of Christians in order for his ‘civil service’ to operate coherently; it was also important to preserve Church unity in order to maintain the credibility of Christianity itself.

This close association with the Church meant that Christians frequently appealed to Constantine to help them resolve their own disputes. A good example of such a dispute is the Donatist schism which emerged following the end of the Great Persecution under the Emperor Diocletian in 303 (this being the first State-sponsored, systematic persecution of the Church).¹ In the end, Constantine failed to resolve this division in the Church. However, he had more success with the Arian dispute and the Council of Nicaea.

Christ, Arianism and the Council of Nicaea

Strangely, the very early Christians had debated whether Christ was truly human (see 1 John 4.2-3). By the early fourth century, the debate focussed on whether, and in what sense, Jesus Christ could be said to be divine. The presbyter Arius (d. 336), a charismatic and ascetic preacher, is usually described as the focus for a movement which taught a subordinationist Christology, namely the view that Jesus Christ was not fully divine, and that the Son of God was created before the ages by the Father from nothing.² The Son was the instrument of creation, but was not God by nature and therefore subject to change.

It is often thought that Arius taught a very low Christology in which Jesus Christ is regarded as a very holy, but simply human, religious leader and prophet. This is not the case. Consider the following passage from the letter to the Colossians, followed by a letter from Arius to a prominent Bishop.

Colossians 1.15-17

¹ If you are unfamiliar with the Donatist schism, please look it up in a suitable reference work. This is an important episode in Christian history and a seminal debate in the development of

² Writers often refer to ‘Arianism’ as if **a)** Arius were the leader of an identifiable theological movement and **b)** a singular school of ‘Arian theology’ could be identified. Recent scholarship suggests that, amongst those who rejected the Nicene Creed, we can find a very wide range of theologies which are frequently mutually incompatible. Moreover, it is not at all clear that Arius was, in any definitive sense, the leader of the anti-Nicene party despite his condemnation and excommunication. The complexity of these debates, particularly in and around the city of Alexandria, cannot be overestimated. The dating of texts and events remains difficult and controversial.

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in [or 'by'] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

From Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320.

But as for us, what do we say, and believe ... That the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; nor from some lower essence (i.e. from matter); but that by his own (i.e. the Father's) will and counsel he has subsisted before time, and before ages as God full of grace and truth, only-begotten, unchangeable. And that he was not, before he was begotten, or created, or purposed or established ... We are persecuted because we say, 'the Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning' ... And this we say, because he is neither part of God, nor of any lower essence.³

We have very few of Arius's writings (and little evidence that he wrote at length), but this short letter illustrates well his position and the extent to which the Arian party believed itself to be reflecting scriptural passages such as the first chapter of Colossians. It is clear that, for Arius, Christ is not 'just another human being'. The Son, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, *is created*. The Arian mantra is this: **'there was a time when he was not.'** In this letter (although elsewhere Arius seems to take a different view), the Son is regarded as unchanging, but in no way part of, or sharing in, the eternal essence, or substance, of God. The Son is 'the firstborn of all creation', existing before the ages to the extent that it would be inappropriate to talk of the Son's birth in temporal terms. He is the principal instrument of creation. However, it is not appropriate to claim that the Son, or the Son-incarnate, is divine.

Why does Arius take this view? There are two reasons, the first is, possibly, less plausible than the second.

1. Soteriology

³ Available in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337* (London: SPCK, rev. edn. 1995), pp.324-325. The most substantial extant work of Arius is his *Thalia* (literally, 'the banquet'), of which only fragments survive (and portions are reproduced in Stevenson, *op.cit.*). Needless to say, the texts of those 'heretics' who lost the battle for Christian orthodoxy were not thought worthy of preservation! We have parts of works by Arius as conveyed by Athanasius. For obvious reasons, these are to be treated with caution.

In *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (1981), Robert Gregg and Denis Groh argue that Arius taught that the created Son of God becomes incarnate (and is thus subject to change, which is not inimical to his *created* nature in the way that change would be inimical to the eternal divinity of God) in order to provide for us a moral exemplar of perfect holiness that we might follow and thus be adopted as Sons of God. As Lewis Ayres points out,⁴ to view Christology and the doctrine of creation as a function of soteriology in this way is a peculiarly modern methodology (i.e. working out the character of salvation and then *going backwards* to work out the nature of Christ and creation). However, Gregg and Groh might not be wholly off the mark for the following reason: Athanasius was to pin his defence of the full divinity of Christ on precisely the same issue, namely soteriology. For Athanasius, as we will see, only God can save. If Jesus Christ is the saviour (and this seems beyond contention), he must therefore be divine.

2. Creation

In his book *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (1987), Rowan Williams points to the important philosophical context in which the fourth century debates took place.⁵ Although philosophy was regarded as a distinctly pagan enterprise, the early Christian theologians had always used philosophical learning in the service of articulating the meaning and implications of Christian doctrine. ‘Athens’ (the school of Greek philosophy) and ‘Jerusalem’ (the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures) were always intertwined. A number of philosophical schools exerted an influence on patristic debates, amongst them Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, the Peripatetic (that is, Aristotelian) School, and Stoicism. For the moment, our concern is the various forms of Platonism which seem to have influenced early Christian thought.

The tradition known as ‘Middle Platonism’ begins with Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 130-68 BC) and ends with the founder of so-called ‘Neoplatonism’, Plotinus (204-270AD). Among the most important later Middle Platonists is Philo of Alexandria (20BC–50AD), a Jew who used Greek Platonic thought to expound the Hebrew Scriptures. The Neoplatonists include Plotinus and Proclus (412-485). Their influence on Christian, Jewish and Islamic mysticism cannot be overemphasised (for example the work of Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus

⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.56.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM, 2nd ed. 2001), Part II.A and Part III.

Eriugena, Bonaventura, Aquinas, al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Nicholas of Cusa). Among characteristic Neoplatonic Christian teachings is the view that only the Good – that is, God – is real and intelligible, and that evil is *privatio boni*, namely a privation or absence of goodness.

The differences between Middle- and Neoplatonism are subtle and reflect their historical epochs and the various problems to which philosophers addressed themselves. Middle Platonism, for example, is often concerned with reconciling the so-called ‘unwritten’ teachings of Plato – those which are reported orally through his pupils – with his writings. For the moment, we should focus on one issue which, while most certainly not absent from Neoplatonic concerns, surfaces very clearly in Middle Platonism: the problem of the One and Dyad, or the One and the Many.

Ancient Greek philosophy is concerned with, among countless other issues, the origins of the visible cosmos, and is frequently struck by its flux and contingency. The universe is not self-explanatory, for it might not be. It is fundamentally unstable (things change) and therefore not fully ‘graspable’ (you may remember the famous Greek aphorism that one cannot walk through the same river twice). At the origin of the cosmos must be something from which all contingency and flux are removed and which therefore requires no further explanation but is rather ‘necessary’. They refer to this origin as ‘the One’. It is singular and simple. It must be ‘one’ because ‘one’ is the basis of all number and plurality (ten is a unity of ten lots of one), and the cosmos features multiplicity. This is reminiscent of the Jewish monotheistic teaching – highly unusual amongst religions of the ancient near-East – that God is first and foremost ‘One’. God is the only God, but also singular in himself and ‘simple’. God *is* unity. However, there remained a crucial difficulty: how can the eternal One – that from which all contingency and flux is removed – generate that which is inimical to the One, namely a cosmos of variety and change, a cosmos of *multiplicity*? Would placing the One in intimate relation to the cosmos not compromise the eternity, immutability and simplicity of the origin of the cosmos, thereby rendering it just another aspect of creation which, in the end, will itself require further explanation?

Philosophers and theologians probed this question at enormous depth over the ensuing centuries. One possible answer is reflected in Arius’s Christology and cosmology: posit some kind of ‘buffer’ between the One – or God – and creation. An intermediary, who exhibits the characteristics of the divine, for example unchangeableness, but in a non-necessary fashion, can act as an intermediary between God and creation, thus

preserving the divine eternity and immutability unsullied by the flux and plurality of the world.

This seems to be what we find in Arius's view of Christ: one who is not God, but who is begotten before the ages and is unchanging, but not *necessarily* unchanging (as is God), and through whom creation comes into existence. This remained a popular view in Christian thought (with non-Christological parallels in Islamic thought) and is reflected in diverse thinkers, including Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727). This view of Christ as the instrument of creation also helps to preserve God's absolute freedom; the divine is not constrained in what he might or might not create by relation to something purely temporal and finite.

Note that, on this view, methodology has shifted slightly. We are not working backwards from soteriology to Christology, but rather beginning with Christology and creation before proceeding to describe the fracturing of creation's goodness and the consequent need for salvation.

Arius's views, and those who rejected the full divinity of Christ for other reasons, did not prevail. The Council of Nicaea, which met for many months in 325 at the behest of the Emperor Constantine, was eventually to give its name to the creed which is now professed in Churches of almost every denomination, the Nicene Creed. The creed which we profess today is a variation of that promulgated at Nicaea and was finalised at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The key passage is this:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (*æons*), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father ...

Within this paragraph, the final statement became the mantra of Nicaea and Constantinople: Christ was of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. This contrasted with the anti-Nicene view that Christ was 'of a similar substance' (*homoiousios*) with the Father. What a difference an 'i' can make.

The original creed which emerged from Nicaea (which did not include the paragraph of the Nicene Creed we now recite which relates to the Church) includes an 'anathema':

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or

'changeable,' or 'alterable' — they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

The Church has two further creeds, the Apostles Creed and the very-rarely-recited Athanasian Creed. Take a look at it

(<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.htm>);

you will see that whoever authored the Creed (it probably was not Athanasius) is looking to make a point!

So what was the Athanasian Christology which was to become Christian orthodoxy? Athanasius's view is most clearly expressed in his most famous work, 'On the Incarnation of the Word of God'. This is crucial text in the development of Christian theology and it demands careful reading. Consider the questions at the end of the text.