

5-1-2007

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Arianism, Athanasius, and the Effect on Trinitarian Thought

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Church History.

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Collegeville, MN
May 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

Miguel Diaz

May 2007

Andy Witchger
has successfully demonstrated the use of
Greek
in this paper.

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May 2007

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Description of the Project: An investigation into how Arius, Arianism, and the ensuing response by Athanasius influenced the development of Trinitarian thought in the early Church. Specific attention is paid to the how this conflict influenced the widening gap between *theologia* and *oikonomia*.

The paper may not be duplicated

Signature

May 2007

Arius, Athanasius, and the Effect on Trinitarian Thought

Arius, and the response to Arianism from theologians such as Athanasius, significantly affected the development of theology, especially Trinitarian theology, in the early Church. Early Trinitarian doctrine was developed in an attempt to explain God's relation to us in salvation history and what that work can tell us about God's eternal being. In the early fourth century the Arians began to argue that Christ was less than God, yet still the greatest of all creatures. Theologians throughout the Christian world challenged this belief because of its soteriological ramifications: If Jesus Christ is not God then we cannot be saved through him. However, many began to associate themselves with the beliefs of Arius, causing divides in communities and prompting efforts to unify the beliefs of the Christian community as a whole.

In an effort to unify the beliefs of the Christian communities in his empire, Constantine called the council of Nicea in 325. The council clearly condemned the main tenets of Arianism and pronounced the Father and Son to be *homoousios*. This proclamation, and the work of theologians supporting it, resulted in a shift in exploration from a concentration on Jesus and God in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*) to *theologia*. *Theologia* being a more speculative concentration regarding metaphysical statements about God in Godself. This shift was also noticeable in the language used in regards to Jesus' relationship with God. What once was a conversation regarding Jesus and his relationship with God, was now a discussion of the inter-relatedness of the Father and Son. This moved conversations to an intra-divine realm where the Father and Son

were equal in substance or being, rather than in terms of the economy of salvation where Jesus might be seen as subordinate to the Father.

While the proclamation that Father and Son were *homoousios* rectified the subordination of Jesus at the ontological level, it did pose another problem to the development of Trinitarian theology. Now that Christ and the Father were of the same being, meaning Christ's full divinity had been confirmed, theologians were confronted with the problem of Christ's suffering. If Christ was God, then did God suffer? At this point there was an unwavering belief that God could not suffer, and as a result theologians proclaimed that the humanity of Christ suffered, not his divinity. This solution to the problem of God's impassibility created a divide between *theologia* and *oikonomia*, a divide that would affect theology for quite some time.

This divide arose as Jesus' depictions in the gospels were examined in relation to conclusions being drawn about his ontological relation to the Father. The gospels drew a picture of a Jesus who suffers, is uncertain at various points, and is vulnerable to the circumstances and unpredictability of the world. Both sides agreed that God could not be vulnerable in the ways that Jesus was depicted in the scripture. Arius argued that the Logos, who is not fully God, could be vulnerable and mutable, therefore solving the problem of a Jesus who suffers. This solution made Arianism particularly attractive to many, in that it allowed a reading of the gospels that could fully embrace a suffering Christ without reconsidering any firmly held preconceived notions about God's being, invulnerability and impassibility.

However, at the same time, it made many uncomfortable by creating a separation between the Father and the Son. Yet, even this critique was not unanimous amongst

those who took issue with Arius. Rowan Williams explains that Eusebius of Caesarea, who at one time was a steadfast supporter of Arius, became disillusioned with his theology because of a perceived break in continuity between the theology of Arius and that of Origen. ‘He had realized, it seems, how different Arius was from Origen, but continued to believe that the great danger for theology was anything that obscured the distinctness of Father and Son.’¹ So while Eusebius, in the end, counted himself among those who disagreed with Arius, he became disenchanted for different reasons than many others.

Against Arius, other theologians, such as Athanasius, ended up arguing for a division between the human and divine nature in Christ. In this way, the human nature of Christ can be said to have suffered, while the divine nature is left unscathed.

This divide eventually led to a cloistering of sorts for the Trinity, the de-emphasizing of the unique role of each person, and diminishment of the soteriological importance of the God’s work. Essentially, Arianism caused theologians to radically reconsider their approach to Christology and the theology of God. Theologians had to consider how it was that Christ is related to God in being, person, substance, etc. These same investigations would need to be repeated in regards to the Holy Spirit. Catherine Mowry LaCugna emphasizes the effects of Arianism in her work *God for Us*, which attempts to reconcile this division of *oikonomia* and *theologia*, “Arius pushed Christian

¹ Williams, Rowan, “Athanasius and the Arian Crisis,” *The First Christian Theologians* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 161.

theology and speculation away from *oikonomia*, with its undeniable subordination of Christ to God, to an ontology of *theologia*.²

To understand the evolution of Trinitarian theology and the influence of Arianism, it is important to explore the beliefs of Arius and the response these ideas encountered. Arius gave rise to what is widely considered the most important and influential controversy in the early Church. This controversy, in turn, brought about the most significant and formative council in the ancient Church, Nicaea.

When investigating Arius it is difficult to discern what, precisely, he believed. Little has been preserved of Arius' writing, and that which still survives is only available in the writing of his detractors. This is problematic because the detractors included only those excerpts of Arius' writing which they had selected to serve their purposes of defamation. While in reality Arianism was a complicated and relatively fluid set of ideas, the main tenet of Arius' belief that created such controversy during the formative years of the Church was the ontological subordination of the Son to the Father, or the denial of Jesus Christ's true divinity. Although, as Stuart Hall notes, many modern theologians have the tendency to, 'read into Arianism whatever views they themselves particularly abominate.'³

Arianism had its beginning with the theological investigations of Arius of Alexandria. Arguing that the Son was not eternal, that he was created by the Father *ex nihilo*, and that he was not God in the same sense as the Father, Arius had his views

² Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 37.

³ Stuart Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 121.

condemned by Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria during a synod in 320.⁴ After having his views condemned Arius did not acquiesce. Instead, he appealed to other communities and Bishops in the hope that he would find support elsewhere. Some prominent leaders from outside of Alexandria, most notably Eusebius of Nicomedia, decided to support Arius and argue his case against the Bishops of Alexandria. As Arius garnered support from leaders throughout Asia Minor, other Bishops united against him. The debate spread quickly throughout the eastern empire, causing divisions in many communities.⁵

Evaluations of Arianism often differ, and it can be difficult to distinguish Arianism from the actual teachings of Arius. He began the controversy by teaching that the Logos was not eternal but was God's first creation, that a mediator was necessary for God to communicate Himself, and that God alone was unbegotten and eternal. However, as the controversy spread, Arianism started to take different forms. Some scholars have classified Arianism into different types as a result of varying theological beliefs and chronology.⁶

Early Arianism was the first manifestation of Arianism and is associated with the belief that the Logos, or Son of God, was a subordinate being to the Father who served as a mediator between an ineffable and unchanging God and humanity. *Homoian Arianism* developed after *Early Arianism* and was a response to the Nicene proclamation of the Son's same substance as God (*homoousious*) and instead proposed that the Father and Son were *homoiousious*, or of similar substance. This manifestation of Arianism was particularly popular and persistent, with its claim that the Son was like the Father, yet the

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., s.v., "Arianism."

⁵ Irvin, Dale and Sundquist, Scott, *History of the World Christian Movement: Early Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 175.

⁶ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 30.

Father was far greater. *Anhomoians* believed that the Son and the Father were not similar in any way. While many were accused of holding this opinion, it seems unlikely that any large group actually adhered to this belief. *Neo-Arians* believed that the Son could not be of the same substance as the Father, and that God was comprehensible. This belief was exemplified in Eunomianism, and was met with a strong response by the Cappadocians. It is important to note that while Arius initiated the spread of beliefs that came to be known as Arianism, “There was, in fact, little in common between the teaching of Arius and that of Arians such as Aetius and Eumomius at the end of the controversy.”⁷ While beliefs within Arianism and their interpretations by “orthodox” groups varied widely, what remains significant are the discussions, responses, and theological inquiries that these beliefs led to, and the effect they had on theology in the history of the church.

One of the most important responses to Arianism came from Athanasius. A successor to Alexander as the Bishop of Alexandria in 328,⁸ Athanasius quickly assumed control of his predecessor’s campaign against Arius and his teachings. Three years prior to his appointment as Bishop, he had attended the decisive Council of Nicea as a deacon.⁹ This experience proved formative, as much of his career would be spent in defense of the council’s decisions.

Athanasius’ path to receiving the designation of “Champion of the Nicene Faith” was a rocky one. After the Council of Nicaea Arius and others adhering to his views were able to regain acceptance from Constantine. Shortly after this, Athanasius found himself the object of Arian hostility. He was accused of murder and other violence. Although

⁷ Moreschini, Claudio and Norelli, Enrico, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 22.

⁸ Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 30.

⁹ Irvin and Sundquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 176.

these charges were proved false, tensions were raised between the groups, and reached a boiling point as Constantine allowed Arius's return to Alexandria. Athanasius refused this return, causing complaints from Arians to Constantine, which resulted in the convocation of the Council of Tyre in 335. It is widely believed that this council was called with the sole purpose of condemning Athanasius, which is noticeable by the fact that Athanasius's supporting Egyptian bishops were not allowed to participate. As a result, Athanasius was deposed by the council and fled to Constantinople.

Soon after Athanasius pleaded for a hearing with Constantine, which was granted, and seemed to favor Athanasius,¹⁰ however, the tide turned and he was once again exiled by Constantine. This time to Trier, in the western part of the empire. Here he remained until Constantine's death, upon which he returned to Alexandria and reassumed his place as bishop. Yet once again he was deposed, this time by the a council in Antioch in 339.¹¹ This would not be the last time Athanasius would fall out of favor. He spent much of the remainder of his life alternating between his place in his see, and deposed. However, during his exiles he was given consistent support from the western church, especially the emperor Julian. This, in turn, brought the eastern and western churches into disagreement. Finally Athanasius returned to Alexandria and his position as bishop in 366. Here he lived the remainder of his life and died seven years later.

As we have seen, Athanasius' attack on Arianism was not a one-sided affair. At no point was it clear which party would be accepted as the "orthodox" view within the Church. As he waged a war against Arius, he was attacked with equal vigor. In this environment of uncertainty, amidst constant political instability, accusations of violence and

¹⁰ Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 31.

¹¹ Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 31.

conspiracy, councils convoked against him, and even exile, Athanasius remained steadfast in his opposition and produced many works which contested the views of Arius. Among these were countless letters that were distributed to other theologians and Church leaders. His most influential works, however, were his three¹² *Oration against the Arians*, that were intended for the entire Christian community. A precise date for the writing of these *Oration*s has not been determined. One school of thought argues they were written as a result of Athanasius's disagreements with emperor Constantius between 356-362. Others argue that he wrote them soon after his return from Trier, somewhere around 337.¹³

Regardless of their date of authorship, The *Oration*s constitute a direct attack on Arianism. They critique many of its arguments and even address specific claims from the works of Arius and Asterius. The tone of the *Oration*s is scathing. The reader is able to sense Athanasius' loathing for Arianism as he mocks its tenets and exposition in Arius' *Thalia*.

The *Thalia* was a declaration of Arius' views in verse form. In fact, the name *Thalia* was given by Arius' opponents to deride its form and content, and can be translated as "dinner party songs".¹⁴ Only small portions of it have been preserved, yet it remains an important instrument for understanding Arius. What survives illustrates Arius' belief in the Father as the lone transcendent being, and the Logos as the greatest of creatures. While the *Thalia* is often understood as an explication of Arius' main tenets, Rowan Williams argues that some of its stances may have been controversial to other Arians,

¹² A fourth *Oration* is attributed to Athanasius, however it is generally agreed that it is not authentic.

¹³ Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 33.

¹⁴ Williams, "Athanasius and the Arian Crisis," 161.

especially regarding the Son's likeness to the Father. "Some elements of this text must have alarmed his supporters; Lucian and others had tended to stress the perfect likeness of Son to Father and not at all to emphasize the unspeakable mystery of the divine being."¹⁵ This statement demonstrates the diversity present within Arianism at an early stage, and also reveals that while Arianism was being attacked by men such as Alexander and Athanasius, it may also have been experiencing turbulence from within.

In his first *Oration against the Arians* Athanasius directly engages the *Thalia*. Leaving little room for the reader to make his own interpretation of his provided excerpt of the text, Athanasius introduces it in this manner: "Now the beginning of Arius' *Thalia* and irreverence, effeminate in character and melody (Ὁ μὲν οὐτῶν ἀορίστῃ τῆς ὀρεϊανῆς καὶ κωφολογίας, ἡρῶς ἐξουσα καὶ μελοῦν ἡλυκῶν, *First Oration against the Arians*, 5.47-48)." While Athanasius certainly was not alone in deriding the *Thalia* for its readiness to be sung as a common tune,¹⁶ the pericope he provides displays a rhyming structure which undoubtedly would have made the *Thalia*'s message easier to commit to memory.

Athanasius' sharp criticism, however, does not ease when moving from the document's tone and structure to its theological stances. Introducing his readers to many of Arius' claims, including the famous axiom, "the Son was not always (Οὐκ ἀοείῳ ἦν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ πατρὸς, *First Oration against the Arians*, 5.51)," Athanasius develops a response.

This particular disagreement stemmed from one of the most contentious debates during the Arian controversy. It took place over the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22 ("The

¹⁵ Williams, "Athanasius and the Arian Crisis," 161.

¹⁶ Moreschini and Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, 33.

Lord created me at the beginning of his ways'). This passage seemed to confirm the Arian claim that there was indeed a difference between God and the Logos. If God creates the Logos, then the Logos is not eternal in the same manner as God. It also follows that the Logos would not be part of God's nature because God willed his existence. The debate over this passage's interpretation had its roots in the conflict between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria.¹⁷ Athanasius, as Alexander's successor, continued his defense of the eternal nature of the Son in his *Orations against the Arians*.

Drawing from texts in Genesis, Proverbs and the Gospel of John, he concludes in section 13 of his *First Oration* that Scripture reveals the eternal and everlasting nature of the Son. This debate between Arius and Athanasius demonstrates the incredible importance of biblical interpretation in this debate. Entire arguments made my Athanasius depend on exegesis and the interpretation of single words. This is clearly exhibited in 13.56 of the *First Oration*.

'Scripture, in speaking thus, implies, O Arians, not that the Son is originate, but rather other than things originate, and proper to the Father, being in His bosom. Nor does even the expression 'become,' which here occurs, show that the Son is originate, as you suppose. If indeed it were simply 'become' and no more, a case might stand for the Arians; but, whereas they are forestalled with the word 'Son' throughout the passage, showing that He is other than things originate, so again not even the word 'become' occurs absolutely, but 'better' is immediately subjoined.'

Throughout his *Orations* Athanasius' arguments are rooted in, and dependent upon, scripture. He draws widely from the Old as well as the New Testament, and makes extensive use of the Gospel of John to emphasize the closeness of the Father-Son relationship. By emphasizing this closeness that is described at various points throughout

¹⁷ Williams, "Athanasius and the Arian Crisis," 159.

John's Gospel, Athanasius hopes to convince his readers that the Logos is not divided, or different, in the manner that Arius claims. Using passages such as John 16:15, "All things that the Father has are mine,"¹⁸ John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life,"¹⁹ and John 14:9, "Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father,"²⁰ Athanasius places emphasis on those texts which emphasize the Son's likeness to the Father. Yet, for every verse of scripture which provides Athanasius with support, there seems to be another that supports the views of Arius. Athanasius specifically addresses many of these texts because of what he believes to be Arian misinterpretation. John 14:28, "My Father is better than I,"²¹ is addressed, as is the ever-contentious Proverbs 8:22-23, "The Lord begot me, the first-born of his ways, the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago; Or ever the earth was, when there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, was I brought forth."

Because interpretation of Scripture played such a large role in the dispute between Athanasius and Arianism, in his *Orations Against the Arians* Athanasius takes a systematic approach to address these issues. It is apparent that there are two degrees of disputed texts within the *Orations*. The major disputed texts are used to create the general structure of the document, while the minor texts are dispersed throughout, appearing wherever they are relevant to whichever argument Athanasius is undertaking, and receiving little attention relative to major disputed texts.

When addressing a major disputed text, Athanasius clearly identifies the excerpt, explains that the Arians have propagated a faulty understanding of the text, and either

¹⁸ *First Oration*, Chapter 13.61

¹⁹ *First Oration*, Chapter 6.19

²⁰ *First Oration*, Chapter 6.21

²¹ *First Oration*, Chapter 13.58

responds to that understanding clearly and immediately, or announces his forthcoming return to the topic. Clearly the text of foremost importance for the dispute is Proverbs 8:22-23. While Athanasius dedicates a great deal of time to other passages, such as Phil 2:9-10, Proverbs 8:22-23 quickly assumes a place of prominence in the discussion.

According to James Ernest,

“The overwhelming prominence of Prov 8:22 is evident from the fact that Athanasius announces this text three times only to defer treatment of it while dealing with other major texts (the first two times) or presenting a lengthy introductory essay on related themes (the third time). The fourth time he announces it he is ready to take it on, and the following twenty-nine paragraphs are devoted to it, then another eleven to its context. Thus it dominates the whole second half of CA 2 and also casts a long shadow backward into CA 1.”²²

After Athanasius has completed his confrontation of biblical texts used to support the Arian viewpoint, he again returns to scripture to formulate his own arguments. Building a base to support the Nicene position, he utilizes the writings attributed to Paul, John, Peter and texts from Psalms and Prophets. His use of these texts gives us considerable insight into his views on scripture.

After reading Athanasius’ *Orations Against the Arians*, it is noticeable that he considers each book of the bible to be the inspired word of God. Having studied Athanasius’ methods for attributing citations in his writings, James Ernest notes that, “For Athanasius, the divine Word speaks through all Scripture, and accordingly citations from any part of the Bible may be attributed to ‘the Lord’ (44 citations).”²³ Ironically, while Athanasius seems to have a firmly held belief in the divine inspiration of all scripture and

²² Ernest, James, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 120.

²³ James, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria*, 121.

its relevance for the debate with Arianism, he does not seem to have a problem with modifying texts he uses for his arguments. While some of these modifications seem to come from a small degree of carelessness, honest mistakes in memory, or an added word here or there with no real influence on the meaning of the text, others are clearly used to aid his anti-Arian arguments.

The *Orationes* provide us with an interesting look into the conflict between Athanasius and Arianism. At this point neither position has emerged as “orthodox” within the church at large, and we are able to see the developing arguments from each side. Looking back and examining the influence Arianism has had on the development of Trinitarian theology, we are able to see the beginning of the divide between “theology” and “economy,” in the response provided by Athanasius.

While challenging the Arian position, Athanasius clearly states that Father and Son are part of who and what God is for us. Father and Son are not just two names with which we can address God. According to Alwyn Pettersen, for Athanasius, Father, Son and Spirit are, “not arbitrary ascriptions but terms of Scripture, which, to be interpreted aright, are to be understood in terms of the being of the God who acts and who initiates the process of creation, salvation and sanctification.” This is a view of the Trinity which, as it should be, is deeply and ultimately rooted in the economy of salvation. Yet as deeply as this view is rooted in the economy, and as closely connected as every aspect of Athanasius’ writing is to scripture, the definition of Nicaea, and its support by Athanasius marks an important point in the widening of the gap between theology and economy.

The Nicene definition of consubstantiality leads to a discussion in how God exists in Godself. Athanasius, supporting this proclamation, draws his support exclusively from

scripture, yet we still see a seemingly inevitable progression from God's work for us to the manner in which God exists for himself. Summarizing what he believes to be Athanasius' contribution to Trinitarian theology, Pettersen writes, 'For Athanasius the eternal Fatherhood of God identified the immutable being of God as the relationship of mutual generosity of Father, Son and Spirit. This divine being was further conceived as *existing in its own right*²⁴.'

Arianism clearly has had a lasting impact on the development of Trinitarian thought. The Council of Nicaea and theologians such as Athanasius worked tirelessly to heal the divisions in the church and formulate a unified statement about how God exists. In doing so, despite the rooting of arguments in scripture and the economy, a discussion developed concerned with God's being in itself, devoid of a proper root in the economy. This discussion progressed until theology no longer properly rooted in scripture and the economy was normative, which had a negative influence on theological and Trinitarian inquiry until quite recently.

Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Second Edition*. Malden: Blackwell, 2003.

²⁴ The italics are not Pettersen's.

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