



## HOLY TRINITY AND THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

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**ABSTRACT** Although early Christian theologians speculated in many ways on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, no one clearly and fully asserted the doctrine of the Trinity until around the end of the so-called Arian Controversy during the 4th century. Arius taught that God the Father and the Son of God did not always exist together eternally. In this context this research article attempts to review the evolution of the concept of Holy Trinity and the Arian Controversy, understand the main differences between Homoousian and Homoiousian arguments with an aim to help the reader understand the divinity of God the Jesus Christ and his co-eternal and co-equal position along with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

**KEYWORDS :** Holy Trinity, Arianism, Homoousian, Homoiousian, Homoian, Heteroousian.

### INTRODUCTION

Trinity is defined in Oxford Dictionaries as "The Christian doctrine of the Trinity (Latin: Trinitas, Greek: Trias: "threefold") holds that God is one God, but three coeternal consubstantial persons or hypostases, the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit—as "one God in three Divine persons". The three persons are distinct, yet are one "substance, essence or nature" (homoousios). The subset of Christianity that accepts this doctrine is collectively known as Trinitarianism, while the subset that does not is referred to as nontrinitarian (Arianism). In Arian's view, the Son is a creation out of nothing by the will of God the Father; a divine being, created before the worlds, but still a creature. As a father exists before his son, the Son of God is not co-eternal. There was a time when "He was not", and that the Son of God is subordinate to God the Father. This controversy shook the foundations of the nascent Christian Orthodox Church in both the west & East of the Roman Empire, which gave Jesus a co-eternal, co-equal status of God the Father. It involved most church members—from simple believers, priests, and monks to bishops, emperors, and members of Rome's imperial family. It took around 55 years (325-380), several incidents of Bishops and followers on both sides of Trinitarianism and Arianism being banished and punished and not less than fourteen creeds which finally culminated in the Nicene Creed of 381, which brought some semblance of agreement and the end of the dispute about the Trinity and the end of Arianism among the Roman, and the non-Germanic people.

### Arian Controversy

Arians taught that the Logos was a divine being begotten by God the Father before the creation of the world, made him a medium through whom everything else was created, and that the Son of God is subordinate to God the Father. A verse from Proverbs was also used: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work" (Proverbs 8:22–25). Therefore, the Son was rather the very first and the most perfect of God's creatures, and he was made "God" only by the Father's permission and power. For some years, this Arian Controversy created disputes and disturbed the unity of the Church in Alexandria. Alexander's (the then Bishop of Alexandria) initial peaceful efforts to contain this controversy failed, and then Arius was excommunicated by a Synod at Alexandria, of about one hundred African and Libyan Bishops. This did not contain controversy over Arianism, but spread wider and farther in the late 3rd century and persisted throughout most of the 4th century.

It involved most church members—from simple believers, priests, monks to bishops, emperors, and even members of Rome's imperial family. Emperor Constantine called for the First Council of Nicaea (325), as this controversy was threatening the unity of the empire. Of the roughly three hundred bishops in attendance at the Council of Nicaea, two bishops (Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea) did not sign the Nicene Creed that condemned Arianism. Emperor Constantine after the First Council of Nicaea (325) rejected Arianism, banished Arius and burnt his writing "Thalia". Emperor also ordered a penalty of death for those who refused to surrender the Arian writings:

Arius was condemned and banished by a decree of the emperor and a nick name "Porphyrian" from Porphyry, the well known Pagan enemy of the faith of Christ.

In addition, it was order that if any Arius'writing is found, it should be burnt, so that the wickedness of his teaching is totally obliterated. If someone was to be discovered to have hidden an Arius writing, his penalty shall be death.-*Edict by Emperor Constantine against the Arians* But that did not help stop the spread of Arianism. Even Constantine during his last phase of life recalled Arius back. Two other subsequent Roman emperors, Constantius II and Valens, became Arians or Semi-Arians, as did prominent Gothic, Vandal, and Lombard warlords both before and after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Such a deep controversy within the Church during this period of its development could not have materialized without significant historical influences providing a basis for the Arian doctrines.

### Belief of Arianism:

A letter from Arius (c. 250–336) to the Arian Eusebius of Nicomedia (died 341) succinctly states the core beliefs of the Arians: "Some of them say that the Son is an eructation, others that he is a production, others that he is also unbegotten. These are impieties to which we cannot listen, even though the heretics threaten us with a thousand deaths. For he was not unbegotten. We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a beginning but that God is without beginning.

Principally, the dispute between Trinitarianism and Arianism was about: (1) has the Son always existed eternally with the Father or was the Son begotten at a certain time in the past?(2) is the Son equal to the Father or subordinated to the Father?(3) for Constantine, it was minor theological claptrap that stood in the way of uniting the Empire, but for the theologians, it was of huge importance; for them, it was a matter of salvation. Homoian Arianism avoided the use of the word *ousia* to describe the relation of Father to Son, and described these as "like" each other.

### Athanasius

Athanasius of Alexandria ©. 296–373), also called Athanasius the Great, Athanasius the Confessor or, Athanasius the Apostolic, was the 20th bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius was a Christian theologian, a Church Father, the chief defender of Trinitarianism against Arianism, and a noted Egyptian leader of the fourth century.

In 325, at the age of 27, Athanasius began his leading role against the Arians as a deacon and assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria during the First Council of Nicaea.

Three years after that council, Athanasius succeeded his mentor as archbishop of Alexandria. In addition to the conflict with the Arians (including the powerful Eusebius of Nicomedia), he struggled against the Emperors Constantine, Constantius II, Julian the Apostate and Valens and was sent on exile at least 5 times of 17 years in his total of intermittent office of Bishop spanned over 45 years.

## The Development of Creeds

### First Council of Nicaea

By 325, the Arian controversy had become significant enough that the Emperor Constantine had to call an assembly of bishops, i.e First Council of Nicaea, (325), the first ecumenical council of the Christian church, meeting in ancient Nicaea (now İznik, Turkey). The emperor, an unbaptized catechumen, presided over the opening session and took part in the discussions. The focus of the Council of Nicaea was the nature of the Son of God and his precise relationship to God the Father. Of the roughly three hundred bishops in attendance at the Council of Nicaea, there were three groups in the assembly, a small group of Arians, under the leadership of Eusebius of Nicomedia, the team of Alexander of Alexandria (Mostly Western Bishops) and the moderate men.

The First Council of Nicaea, condemned Arius's doctrine and formulated the original Nicene Creed of 325. The beginning of the second and most important clause was as under.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God begotten from the Father only-born, that is from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten, not made, of one and the same essence with the Father, through whom all things were made. The Nicene Creed's central term, used to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, is *Homoousios* or *Consubstantiality*, meaning "of the same substance" or "of one being" (the Athanasian Creed is less often used but is a more overtly anti-Arian statement on the Trinity). Under Arianism, Christ was instead not consubstantial with God the Father since both the Father and the Son under Arius were made of "like" essence or being (*homoiousia*) but not of the same essence or being (*homoousia*).

The Council failed to satisfy the Eastern Bishops, who did not fully grasp the *Homoousios* theology, and feared that it would erase any distinctions between the God the Father, and the Son. In response they began to favour a *homoiousios*, in order to differentiate the Father and the Son, but also contradicted the Council of Nicaea's edict.

### First Synod of Tyre in AD 335 :

Although he was committed to maintaining what the church had defined at Nicaea, Constantine was also bent on pacifying the situation and eventually became more lenient toward those condemned and exiled at the first council. First, he allowed Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was a protégé of his sister, and Theognis to return once they had signed an ambiguous statement of faith. The two, and other friends of Arius, worked for Arius's rehabilitation.

At this Synod, in which sixty Bishops mainly Eusebians were present, they brought accusations against Athanasius, now bishop of Alexandria, the primary opponent of Arius, and deposed him from his see. In the same year, the Synod of Jerusalem under Constantine's direction readmitted Arius to communion in 336. Arius died on the way to this event in Constantinople.

### Third Council of Sirmium (357)

After Constantine's death in 337, open dispute resumed again. Constantine's son Constantius II, (Emperor of the eastern part of the Empire), actually encouraged the Arians and set out to reverse the Nicene Creed. Eusebius of Nicomedia who had already at the First Council of Nicaea been the head of the Arian party, was his advisor. In 355 Constantius became the sole Emperor and extended his pro-Arian policy toward the western provinces, frequently using force.

The Third Council of Sirmium in 357 was the high point of Arianism. The Seventh Arian Confession (Second Sirmium Confession) held that both *homoousios* (of one substance) and *homoiousios* (of similar substance) were unbiblical and that the Father is greater than the Son. (This confession was later known as the Blasphemy of Sirmium.)

But questions on the words, Latin *substantia*, but in Greek *ousia*, 'coessential,' or 'like-in-essence,' there ought to be no mention of any of these at all, nor exposition of them in the Church, for in divine Scripture nothing is written about them, and that they are above men's knowledge and above men's understanding;

As debates raged in an attempt to come up with a new formula, three camps evolved among the opponents of the Nicene Creed.

(1)The first group mainly opposed the Nicene terminology and preferred the term *homoiousios* (alike in substance) to the Nicene

*homoousios* (*Same substance*), while they rejected Arius and his teaching and accepted the equality and co-eternality of the persons of the Trinity. Because of this centrist position, and despite their rejection of Arius, they were called "semi-Arians" by their opponents.

(2)The second group also avoided invoking the name of Arius, but in large part followed Arius's teachings and, described the Son as being like (*homoios*) the Father.

(3) A third group explicitly called upon Arius and described the Son as unlike (*anhomoios*) the Father.

The debates among these groups resulted in numerous synods, among them the Council of Serdica in 343, the Fourth Council of Sirmium in 358 and the double Council of Rimini and Seleucia in 359, and no fewer than fourteen further creed formulas between 340 and 360, leading the pagan observer Ammianus Marcellinus to comment sarcastically: "The highways were covered with galloping bishops." None of these attempts were acceptable to the defenders of Nicene orthodoxy:

After Constantius' death in 361, his successor Julian, a devotee of Rome's pagan gods, declared that he would no longer attempt to favor one church faction over another, and allowed all exiled bishops to return; this resulted in further increasing dissension among Nicene Christians. The Emperor Valens, however, revived Constantius' policy and supported the "Homoian" party, exiling bishops and often using force. During this persecution many bishops were exiled to the other ends of the Empire. These contacts and the common plight subsequently led to a rapprochement between the Western supporters of the Nicene Creed and the *homoousios* and the Eastern semi-Arians.

## COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

It was not until the co-reigns of Gratian and Theodosius that Arianism was effectively wiped out among the ruling class and elite of the Eastern Empire. Valens was succeeded by Theodosius I, who adhered to the Nicene Creed. This allowed for settling the dispute. Theodosius's wife St Flacilla was instrumental in his campaign to end Arianism.

Theodosius I expelled the *Homoiousians* bishops, and surrendered the churches of that city to Gregory of Nazianzus, the leader of Nicene community. Soon he and Gratian had published an edict that all their subjects should profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria (i.e., the Nicene faith), or be handed over for punishment for not doing so.

Theodosius managed to achieve unity in the East on the basis of the Nicene Creed. In 381, at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople, a group of mainly Eastern bishops assembled and accepted the Nicene Creed of 381, which was supplemented in regard to the Holy Spirit, as well as some other changes: This is generally considered the end of the dispute about the Trinity and the end of Arianism among the Roman, non-Germanic peoples. Key text of the Nicene Creed 381 is as under.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead. whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

## CONCLUSION :

The teachings of the first two ecumenical councils – which entirely reject Arianism – are held by the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East and all churches founded during the Reformation in the 16th century or influenced by it (Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, and Anglican). Also, nearly all Protestant groups (such as Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals and most Pentecostals) entirely reject the teachings associated with Arianism. Modern groups which currently

appear to embrace some of the principles of Arianism include Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Remember that we have the revealed Word (Bible) of God who knows everything and who was there! Trust His Word, study it, consider what you would expect to find if it is true. As is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 2:5 - our faith should not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. When in doubt, take your Bible out.

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