

66. In Later Times

Arius of Alexandria

The human Jesus of Mark was followed by the divinely begotten Jesus of Matthew and Luke, and he in turn by the Johannine Jesus: the God Jesus, who had existed since the beginning of time. Nor was this the ultimate development. By the 4th Century, the doctrine of the Trinity asserted that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were *of one substance*,¹ and indistinguishable. One churchman who held back from this last step, and argued that since the Father had begotten the Son, there must logically have been a time before the Son existed, was Arius of Alexandria (256-336). Even this qualification aroused violent opposition. Wrote Arius to his ally Eusebius of Nicomedia,²

To that most beloved man of God, the faithful and orthodox Eusebius, from Arius, unjustly persecuted by father Alexander because of the all-conquering truth which you, Eusebius, are also defending. . . because the Bishop [Alexander] is severely ravaging and persecuting us and moving against us with every evil. Thus he drives us out of every city like godless men, since we will not agree with his public statement that there was “always a God, always a Son.”



¹The Greek term is “homoousia.”

²Not the famous church historian; that was Eusebius of Caesarea (c260-339). Nicomedia, a natural communication center, was the chief city of Bithynia in Asia Minor. It became the eastern capital of the Roman Empire (under Diocletian, in 286) until Constantine moved it to Byzantium (in 330), which he renamed Constantinople.

Reflections

The matter of Arius came to a head at the Council of Nicea (325), called by Emperor Constantine. The Trinitarian view prevailed. Arius was declared a heretic. His works were burned. Later Emperors were more favorable, but Arius was condemned again at the Second Council of Nicea (381). His ideas survived only among Goths and Vandals, to whom Arius' friend Eusebius of Nicomedia had sent the Gothic convert Ulfilas.

But the lands of these Goths were no small thing. They reached from the Black Sea all the way to the Baltic.

From this area of Central Europe, opposition to the Trinity doctrine emerged again at the time of the Reformation. The targets of the Reformers were many. One was the sale of indulgences, which was protested by Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses of 1517. Another was infant baptism, opposed by the Anabaptists, one early statement being the Schleithem Confession of 1527, written by the Swiss Brethren, distant ancestors of the modern Mennonites. Others sought to restore the uniqueness of God by abandoning the Trinity doctrine. It was denounced by Peter Gonesius at a 1556 meeting of Polish Protestants, leading to the formation of a Polish Brethren church in 1565. The Brethren were joined by the Italian exile Fausto Sozzini (after whom the "Socinian" heresy is named) in 1579, and by the German Johannes Crellius. They had an Academy and an Arian printing house at Racov (1602-1638). Their Latin publications spread their ideas to the rest of Europe.

The Polish Brethren church was dissolved, and the Brethren exiled, in 1658, only to take root in Prussia (where Christopher Crell founded new churches); in Transylvania, at the Unitarian College in Cluj; in the Netherlands, where "Unitarian" treatises of the Brethren were published (and read in France by Voltaire and Pierre Bayle); and in England, where John Biddle republished the Racovian Catechism and other works. Samuel Przyrkowski on tolerance and Andrzej Wiszowaty on "rational religion" preceded the work of John Locke.

Many of these ripples of theological opinion were part of the tide of the new science, which drew attention to the idea of God in nature. Isaac Newton knew Samuel Crell, the son of Johannes Crellius. Newton was well informed about events in Poland, and owned books from the Racovian Academy.

English Unitarian ideas were carried to other shores when Joseph Priestley founded a church in Philadelphia, sometimes attended by Thomas Jefferson. Thus did the Alpha strand of Christian theology emerge in the modern world.

But religion is more than theology; it is also what you *do*. And throughout all this history, down to yesterday, every Christian mother who told her child to do good and not evil became, for that moment, an *Alpha* Christian mother.

This is the deep continuity, the true permanence, of ancient Alpha.