

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY AND THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

 <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.015-006>**Marcelo Henrique Silva de Santana¹****ABSTRACT**

This work analyzes the Arian Controversy (4th century) and the Council of Nicaea (325) in their theological and political dimensions. It begins with the theses of Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who affirmed the creation of the Son by the Father and His consequent subordination, and presents the responses of opponents—especially Athanasius—culminating in the affirmation of homoousios ("of the same substance") in the Nicene Creed. It examines how the legalization of Christianity and the actions of Emperor Constantine shaped the course of the conflict, highlighting the interdependence between Church and State in the Late Roman Empire. It shows that, although Nicaea condemned Arianism and established guidelines for Trinitarian Christology, the dispute continued for decades, with episcopal support and imperial interference, until later developments in Constantinople (381). It is concluded that the controversy not only consolidated central definitions of the Christian faith regarding the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, but also redefined institutional relationships and mechanisms of authority between imperial power and ecclesiastical leadership.

Keywords: Arianism; Council of nicaea; Constantine; Athanasius; Homoousios; Trinity; Church and state.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fourth century, during the rule of Constantine, the Roman empire saw a political and theological debate start: Arianism. The controversy, which lasted several years and led eventually to a final decision by the political leaders was over the nature of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Even though a decision was made about this issue, some modern-day Christians have not reached a unanimous opinion on the subject (Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, etc.).

Understanding the first part of the controversy is an easy task. Several details must be analyzed before arriving at an opinion, however, on the real issue of the debate. The theological issues are what most stick out in this debate. The man that helped mold these issues in such a way was a priest from Alexandria by the name of Arius. He believed that Jesus Christ came after God the Father and that he was subservient to his Father. Jesus, being created by God, should not be considered equal to him, but rather worshiped as a perfect human being. This theology was named Arianism.

Another aspect we must analyze is the political one. With the rise of Arianism begin a long series of debates within the Church that leads us to the political factors behind the welding of this storm. Guido Berndt and Roland Steinacher, write that the rise of this controversy era was all about, and also taught me that this controversy brought light of “Constantinian Shift”.² That was right the time what Roman Emperor Constantine, just legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire. It had gotten much more complicated than that because it wasn’t the Official Religion under Constantine yet, but it became legal because they made a basic agreement. Constantine knew that in order to bring the Roman Empire back together it will be much easier for to implement Christianity as a universal religion to the people of Rome. The Universal Religion begins and so does the political threats. There are a few church counsels convened at this time trying to get the politics out and deity upper part of the church.³

This was a critical mark of the in the early Christian Church that had various consequences. The theological disagreement challenged the doctrine regarding the nature of Christ's divinity and ignited debates that resulted in fundamental shifts in Christian theology.⁴ Furthermore, the controversy also shed light on the intertwined relationship between the Church and the state, with political factors significantly impacting the direction of theological discourse.

² Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher. *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*. (Routledge, NY), 2016. Pg. 2

³ Henry Melvill Gwatkin. *The Arian Controversy*. (Longmans, London), 1914. Pg. 18

⁴ Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho, *Precision, Devotion, and Controversy in Alexandria*. In *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 1st ed., 35–46. University of California Press, 2013 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt7zw0vs.9>.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is known that the early Christian Church went through significant theological developments in the centuries leading up to the Arian Controversy. Christianity emerged as a distinct religious tradition within the broader context of the Roman Empire. Initially, it faced persecution and struggled to gain recognition and acceptance, having its followers be called “atheists” and “cannibals”.⁵ However, with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, Christianity began to transition from being a marginalized faith to becoming the official religion of the Empire. This shift in status had profound implications for the Church and its theology.

Christianity was becoming politically powerful. As a result, the Church became an increasingly formalized institution. The turning point in this process came in 325 at the Council of Nicea, which Constantine called to address a divisive issue within the Church itself. The Council was called to settle the controversy over Arius, a presbyter from the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Arius’s teachings about Christ, hence the name Arianism, would cause the first great Christian schism since Paul’s death. In its simplest form, Arianism said that Christ was created by God the Father at some time before the creation of the universe. This meant that he was less powerful and eternal than the Father, thus leading a number of those who followed the traditional teachings of the Church to think about the nature of Christ.

What sounds absurd to modern evangelical ears today was much more complex back then. For instance, Arianism is known to have found support among several influential figures in the Church, most notably Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea. These bishops possessed significant political and theological influence, which complicated even more the controversy.⁶ They contended that Arius’ teachings were consistent with the Scriptures, and accused those who opposed Arianism of promoting a new form of polytheism. They considered it more important for the unity of the church to be preserved than it was to squabble among themselves. This led to a paradox arrangement among the theologians and church leaders; all were in agreement with one of two competing factions, Arianism and the counter-position.

THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

The debate centered around two individuals, a presbyter named Arius and a bishop named Alexander, who resided in the city of Alexandria. According to his opponent, Alexander, Arius taught that Christ did not always exist, but was created by the Father. Arius taught that the Son was the very first and

⁵ Justo González. *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. Kindle Edition (New York, HarperOne), 2010. Pg. 47

⁶ Justo González. *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. Kindle Edition (New York, HarperOne), 2010. Pg. 79



highest creature created by God, and that the Father created the universe through him. This teaching, referred to by the later church as Arianism, posed a serious challenge to the established view that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were equal and coeternal.

Arius supported his beliefs with biblical passages that seemed to indicate the subordination of the Son to the Father, such as John 14:28 where Jesus says, "the Father is greater than I." He also emphasized the unity and indivisibility of God, arguing that if Jesus was truly God in the same sense as the Father, it would imply that there were two Gods, violating the doctrine of monotheism. Arius thought he was being unjustly persecuted by the Pope of Alexandria, Alexander. He truly believed his interpretation of the Scriptures.⁷

The Arian doctrine gained popularity among both clergy and laity, leading to a rise in controversy and division within the Church. Many bishops, including Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea, supported Arius and his teachings, seeing them as a way to preserve monotheism while preserving the distinctiveness of God the Father.

However, the orthodox response to Arianism was led by Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, who energetically defended the faith of Nicea. Jesus, he maintained, was "of the same substance" (homousios) as the Father.⁸ He wasn't a merely similar being, but the same God who was in the beginning with God. The Son of God--being completely God, completely divine, of no lesser order than the Father in power and eternity--had no beginning; he wasn't a created thing. Athanasius argued that only a true God, and a true man, could accomplish the restoration of fallen humanity from sin: "What man could do this except the Word of God?" Denying the full divinity of Christ, Arianism robbed the redemption of its efficacy, and the incarnation of its significance.

POLITICAL CLIMATE

As it's clear, one of the most important figures in this particular controversy was the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (ruled 306–337), the first ruler of the Roman Empire to be converted to Christianity. Constantine had given Christians the freedom to worship in the Edict of Milan, ending their century of persecution. He declared in the Edict, "We also give them joyously our approval, that as Catholics they may have permission to build and to gather in those places they wish."

Constantine's political influence did not stop with the Edict of Milan. In 325, as previously mentioned in this text, he led the First Council of Nicaea, using his authority to bring together bishops from across the empire and personally presiding over the proceedings.⁹ At this council, the question of

⁷ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder. *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th Edition. (Oxford, New York, 2011). Pg. 42

⁸ William Bright. *The Orations of St. Athanasius Against the Arians*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014) Pg. 35

⁹ Ramsay MacMullen. *Constantine*. (Routledge, NY, 2014) Pg. 161



Arianism was fiercely debated, with the emperor himself advocating for the condemnation of Arius and his teachings. Although the matter was much beyond his knowledge, Constantine's direct involvement in calling the council demonstrated the significant role of political leadership in shaping the religious discourse of the time.¹⁰

The political decisions made during and after the Council of Nicaea had a profound impact on the development of Arianism and its opposition. Despite Constantine's efforts to achieve unity, the council failed to resolve the Arian Controversy decisively. While the council condemned Arius and his teachings, it did not eradicate Arianism. Instead, it sparked a wave of political and theological conflicts that would persist long after Constantine's reign.

The intense political will to ensure some degree of religious unity within the empire was passed on to the men who would now rule it. These men produced an avalanche of decrees and laws which made it clear that political power lay almost entirely on the side of the anti-Arians. Arian bishops were exiled. Later Arians were excluded from any civil office, from the administrative command of the army and from the imperial court. By the time of the First General Council, there was no legal doubt that the official, preferred religion of the empire was orthodox Christianity. But this same activity inflamed the still unresolved question of Arianism and thus a rift was not only created between the court and the many Arian sympathizers on its staff and in the army, but also between the Church and the state.¹¹ Moreover, the political climate of the fourth century had a disastrous effect on the development of theology itself. Emperors demanded and often received a considerable amount of control over the policies and teachings of what just half-a-century before Constantine had declared the official religion of the now rotten and military state. That employed Church and state in an ever-tightening and mutually useful grip. The Church was condemned to an alliance with a state which might have at any time replaced it with another state religion. And the state won a measure of control over a body of theologians who were finding new ways to suggest that the representatives of the official religion in the imperial court were in fact corrupt or even, in their theology, diminished.

The interplay between religious and political power during the Arian Controversy was complex and far-reaching. The emperors not only exercised political control over the Church but also relied on religious authority to legitimize their rule. In turn, the Church leveraged its influence to gain political favor and secure its doctrinal position. This symbiotic relationship between the two institutions meant that any shift in the political climate directly impacted the religious landscape.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 170

¹¹ Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher. *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed.* (Routledge, NY), 2016. Pg. 312

¹² Ramsay MacMullen. *Constantine.* (Routledge, NY, 2014) Pg. 183



The emperors' involvement in theological debates blurred the lines between the religious and political spheres. The Council of Nicaea, for example, highlighted the extent to which the emperor's opinion held sway over the Church's decisions. This fusion of religious and political authority set a precedent for future debates and controversies within the Christian Church.¹³

ESCALATION AND RESOLUTION OF THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The debates at Nicea were marked by intense argumentation on theological matters, the outcome of which was a triumph for the defenders of the orthodox, Trinitarian position. The council's chief pastoral achievement was the formulation of the Nicene Creed, which defined the divinity of Jesus Christ as "of one substance with the Father." This durable creed, which offered a response to the Arian heresy, settled the longstanding dispute about the nature of Christ and defined the limits of orthodoxy. Yet there were political motivations behind Nicaea. The unity of the Church was of utmost importance to Constantine, who saw the stability of the State as dependent on the unity of the Church. The Arian Controversy had not only split the Church, but created ongoing conflicts throughout the empire. The goal of the emperor, by convening the council, was to put an end to the dispute and declare a definitive and official teaching that would pave the way for religious harmony in the empire.

The outcomes of the Council of Nicaea were multifaceted. On one hand, the council succeeded in refuting Arius and his followers, reaffirming the traditional teaching of the Church. The Nicene Creed became the central statement of orthodox Christian faith and served as a safeguard against future heresies. However, the council did not completely resolve the Arian Controversy, as some factions continued to oppose the creed and promote Arianism.¹⁴ The aftermath of the Council of Nicaea witnessed continued theological debates and political turmoil. Arianism persisted as a popular doctrine, finding support among various bishops and even some emperors. This led to subsequent councils and synods that aimed to further clarify and solidify the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. These councils, namely the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, played crucial roles in the ongoing resolution of the Arian Controversy.

It was not until the Council of Constantinople that Arianism was definitively condemned, and the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine was reaffirmed. The council affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit and further articulated the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. This final resolution of the Arian Controversy had significant consequences for both the Church and the state. Doctrinal unity was achieved within the Church, laying the foundation for its future theological developments.¹⁵

¹³ Charles Odahi. *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. (Routledge, NY, 2010). Pg 221

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 183

¹⁵ Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher. *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*. (Routledge, NY), 2016. Pg. 64



In addition to its theological implications, the Council of Nicea had serious political implications for Roman emperors, particularly those who had previously espoused Arianism. Emperor Constantius II had been a supporter of Arianism, but afterwards he accepted the Nicene Creed. Now, for the time being, the emperors were united, and arguing would not be a part of their lives again until 381, when Theodosius revoked the Edict of Milan, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The victim of the political move was the Homoian political party. They had lost all credibility with their imperial patrons and in the Church.

CONCLUSION

So, in conclusion, the Arian Controversy was an event of major significance in early Christianity, and subsequently world history. The significance of the Arian Controversy lies in the fact that it ignited and sustained theological discussions about the relation between the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and the nature of God for more than half a century. The disputes and debates were written down and from them kigit took the support of people from all over the world in considering it. The lead-up to the Arian Controversy was an eventful one; the human nature of Christ was contemplated for the first time ever. The Council of Nicaea was held in 325 in order to resolve any remaining questions about the relation between God and Jesus. The position stated at the Nicene Creed became the final and eternal dogma of Christian orthodoxy regarding the nature of Christ.

Secondly, the Arian Controversy was a highly significant event in the history of the world because it put on trial the entire social-political system of the late Roman Empire. The dispute hardly begins with Arius, who was a highly suspect troublemaker only later on. The problems began when the Emperor Constantine applied for a Christian priest to be built in Byzantium, intending Christianity for the first time to be accepted into the secular realm of things. Continuing with the theme of controversy between religion and politics, we see that Arianism was used as a mass of combatant religious groups over the significant issue, first between the Arians and the Orthodox church and then between an entire range of mutually warring minority Arian sects and factions in the church. If no trust or agreement can be established between the state and the church with regard to the establishment of a policy of church and state, then the differences between the two factions mentioned above should obviously not be settled through secular diplomatic channels.

Finally, the significance of the Arian Controversy is agreed upon, as it did have a profound and everlasting impact on Christianity and the world. The Arian Controversy must be understood in the light of maintained discussion s and arguments of the vital theological ideas of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and the nature of God. The political world utilized the religious world, and the religious world used the others.



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