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ATHANASIUS' WRITINGS ON ARIANISM:

A Brief Essay

CHURCH HISTORY I

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[See his entry at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/pdfs/more-about-contribs.pdf/>]

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I. INTRODUCTION

A serious danger to church unity during the fourth century was the great Arian controversy. The Western part of Christendom was in fairly common agreement regarding the crucial concept of the substantial unity of God the Father and Christ; the East was, however, divided in understanding of the Christological problem.

II. ARIUS AND ARIANISM

Arius, whose name identifies the school of thought of which he was leader, was a presbyter in charge of the Baucalis (c. 313), a church in Alexandria. The influence upon him by his former teacher, Lucian, and his own intellectual endeavors provided the seed from which a dispute grew between the young scholar and Bishop Alexander (c. 319), and subsequently among the greater Church.

A chief difficulty of Arius' position in the view of those who considered themselves orthodox was that this presbyter denied the deity of the Son of God. According to Arius, God is personally and substantially singular, having an individual nature, and being unchangeable, self-existent, and eternal. Everything else was created by Him *ex nihilo* in time. The Son of God, likewise, was created out of nothing by an act of God's will to be His agent in the creation of the world; Christ was neither eternal nor identical with God. God is immutable; the Son is changeable. God is perfect; the Son progresses toward perfection. Although the Son is the Logos, He is not God's own logos or reason. The Son existed before this world and was incarnate in Jesus Christ, who was born of a virgin and took on flesh but not a human soul. Although Jesus was not God, Arius agreed to His being worshiped because of His unique relationship to the Father; in addition, Jesus may be called God, but this does not mean that He really *is* God.

Thus, Arius attempted to combine the Logos Christology (*i.e.*, the idea of the pre-existent Son of God incarnate in Jesus Christ) and a form of adoptionism. Christ was sharply distinguished from God, but He was not just a man either, but rather the Incarnation of the Logos. Therefore, according to Arius, Christ was neither fully God nor fully man, but someone in between.

III. ATHANASIUS' ANTI-ARIANISM

Sometime before becoming a Bishop, Athanasius was secretary to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria. Having been in direct touch with Arianism, Athanasius became an active opponent of the Arian party.

This Alexandrian's theology centered about the motif of the true deity of God the Son, a concept contrary to the Arian school of thought.

Being concerned with the Incarnation as fundamental to salvation, the great opponent of Arianism had the problem of combining the idea of Christ's deity (made necessary by Athanasius' doctrine of salvation) with the Logos Christology.

If man was to be saved, it was necessary, so Athanasius thought, that a union in Christ of the nature of God and the nature of man be present. It was not necessary, however, that Jesus should *personally* be identical with God the Father, but it was essential that Christ and God be *substantially* one.

...He (God the Father) is ever, and is now, and as the Son is, so is He, and is Himself He that is, and Father of the Son. But if ye say that the Son was once, when He Himself was not, the answer is foolish and unmeaning. For how could He both be and not be?¹

...when we say that Father and Son are two, we still confess one God, so when we say that there is one God, let us consider Father and Son two, while they are one in the Godhead, and in the Father's Word, being indissoluble and indivisible and inseparable from him.²

Furthermore, according to Athanasius, for Christ to be equal with God or in harmony with His will was not sufficient for an adequate Christology. Jesus must actually possess God's very nature, which, though one and indivisible, is shared eternally by both Father and Son. The pre-existent Son becomes incarnate in Christ.

...for no holy Scripture has used such language (as Arius') of the Saviour, but rather "always" and "eternal" and "co-existent always with the Father." For, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*³

The Son was, however, subordinate to the Father, but not in essence. Both the Father and the Son are equally God and self-existent. The Son, though was begotten of the Father, being derived from Him, but yet retaining his self-existence.

...if He (Christ) is called the eternal offspring of the Father, He is rightly so called. For never was the substance of the Father imperfect; ...nor as man from man, has the Son been begotten, so as to be later than His Father's existence, but He is God's offspring, and as being proper Son of God, who is ever, He exists eternally.⁴

The philosophical idea of the unity and equality of the Divine and the subordination idea of the Logos Christology are combined in Athanasius' understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.

IV. SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Both Athanasius and Arius agree on the "wholly otherness" of God and the substantial and personal singularity and eternity of God. Both agree that Christ had a unique relationship with the Father. But their apparent theological compatibility here ends. Their mutual opposition arises with their attempts to explain the nature of Jesus Christ.

As has been above indicated, according to Arius, Christ is what the Reverend Professor E. R. Hardy, Ph.D., has referred to as a *Asuper* archangel, @ being neither wholly God nor wholly man. Arius' idea of the Incarnation seems to be *between* God and man rather than God *in* man. It is with Athanasius that, as we have seen, the latter concept is supported. [With an arrow toward "Ph.D.", Dr. Hardy penciled in "I suppose he ought to know." ☺]

V. WHO, WHEN, WHERE, WHY

The potential power of these theological differences were of such a magnitude that in 324 Constantine sent Hosius to Alexandria in an attempt to settle the dispute; for if they were left in discord, the unity of the church would seriously be threatened. (Most likely for political reasons the Emperor wanted peace within Christendom.) This action failed, and, subsequently the Emperor called for a Council of the whole Church.

It was at this Council (Nicaea, c. 325) that Arius, largely through the efforts of Athanasius, was condemned. The defeated theologian thereafter lived a rather insignificant life until his death (c. 336).

From 339 to 359 Bishop Athanasius wrote treatises and letters in defense of the faith proclaimed at Nicaea. (It is from these writings that passages are quoted in this paper.) In his later life he continued to write, and died (c. 373) to be later regarded by some as a great defender of the true Christian faith.

VI. FURTHER THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In a recent lecture the Reverend James Seibel [interim New Testament professor] commented that heresies are results of attempts to logically systematize doctrines and forcing consistency. It seems to this writer that it is precisely because of Arius' efforts to employ a measure of logical consistency that he fell into difficulty with the Church. In an effort to "make sense" of Jesus' relationship with God, Arius distorted what Athanasius and others felt to be necessary to the Biblical motif of a redeeming God, in that Arius had a creature (Jesus) accomplishing the redemption rather than God Himself. Athanasius,

being concerned with the orthodox belief in a God Who Himself acts and redeems in history, replied to Arius that had the Christ not been eternally begotten of the Father, man's redemption was not accomplished by God, and who else could possibly redeem man? From these considerations, as with others, the ever-begotten Son motif became established by the Church and persists to this day.

This writer is not convinced of the adequacy of expression of either Athanasius or Arius. The terms used (*i.e.*, "Father" and "Son") do not seem to adequately express the wholly otherness of God* and also the relationship which God is said to have with the world. Perhaps the difficulty must remain a mystery, if it is true that human language is inadequate to express the real Truths about and of God in a non-allegorical manner. [* Here Dr. Hardy noted, "It may be clearer to some along these lines, that the ultimate is also the intimate.]

ENDNOTES

¹E.B. Pusey, *et al.* (ed.), "S. Athanasius' Treatises Against Arianism," Part I, *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), VIII, p.195.

²*op.cit.* IX (pub. 1844), p. 524.

³*op.cit.*, VIII, p. 196.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 201.

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