

## THE COUNCILS OF NICAEA AND CONSTANTINOPLE I: A RESPONSE TO ARIANISM

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### **Introduction**

As ages passed by after the death of Christ Jesus, various questions started to be raised with regards to the nature of Jesus Christ. One of the major questions that emerged about the nature of Jesus Christ was whether he was human or divine. In a quest to answer such questions there are some who strayed from the teachings of the apostles and the orthodox teaching. It is out of such questions and controversies that the early Church Fathers had to define the faith of the Church through a formulated creeds. Such questions also included the unity of Christ and God the Father. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity began to be developed due to arising questions on the person of Jesus Christ and due to rise of unorthodox teachings which were termed heretical positions. Thus, it is plausible to state that the doctrine of the Trinity evolved out of Christology. One of the earliest heresies is Arianism which was suggested by Arius who questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ. Hence the purpose of the following piece of work is to expose the Arian heresy and to respond to it focusing on the responses that were given by the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople I. To achieve this, the paper will first define what a heresy is, secondly the paper will expose the Arian heresy and lastly the paper will respond to it considering the Councils of Nicaea of 325 AD and Constantinople I of 381 AD.

### **Heresy**

It is of paramount importance to acquaint ourselves with the term heresy so that one may be able to understand the rationale behind why Arianism was classified heretical. The term heresy has been defined differently and sometimes nebulously. According to Belloc some define loosely the term heresy as religious disputes of the past or bygones.<sup>1</sup> However, looking at this definition one can note that it is limited especially if we look at heresies that have taken place in the history of the Church as one can note that heresies continue to be a threat to the orthodox teaching of the Church.

Heresy can therefore be defined as a “dislocation of some complete and self-supporting scheme by the beginning of a novel or new denial of some essential part therein”.<sup>2</sup> Already from the definition proposed by Belloc, one can see that in some heresies there will be focus on a particular truth and not looking at it holistically, that is why he uses the term “dislocation”. It is also important to note at this point that some theological standpoints have been declared heretical because they over emphasized a certain part of truth at the expense or ignoring the other part or parts or aspect(s). This seems to be the case with Arianism which is under scrutiny. Arianism is considered a dislocation of the essential aspect of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and more specifically that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. Arianism considers one part of the truth leaving an unfulfilled empty space. Thus, having said this, it qualifies to be termed a heretical position.

### **Arianism**

Arianism is a heretical position that was championed by Arius and his followers such as Marcellus. It is a kind of subordinationism. Arius’ discourse was on the nature of Jesus Christ, thus raising questions on the whole doctrine of the Holy Trinity and Christology. The thought of Arius is seen mainly in his letter he wrote to Eusebius. In the letter Arius denied the divinity of Jesus Christ as he based some of his arguments from the scriptures. Part of the letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia in 318 reads:

... the Son is not unbegotten or a portion of the unbegotten in any manner or form any substratum...and before he was begotten or created or defined or established, he was not. For he was not unbegotten. But we are persecuted because we say, “The Son has beginning, but God is without beginning.”<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the letter of Arius one can note from the onset that Arius was teaching that Jesus Christ the Son of God was just a creature which cannot be equated to God who is eternal. His idea started from the monotheistic understanding of God that there is one God. Arius struggled in a quest to understand how we can talk of three in one God. According to Moltmann, Arius’ conception of God was that of “God as the simple, supreme substance which, by virtue of its indivisible unity, also represents

the ground of all being”.<sup>4</sup> It is from such a conception of God that Arius argued that God cannot share His substance with any other being. The Arians argued that Jesus was just a creation of the one God and if that is the case it means that Jesus Christ is temporal, mutable and subject to alteration. Hence, he is not part of the Godhead. It is important to note that the Arians based their arguments from some of the scriptural passages. Some of the scriptural passages include John 14:28 when Jesus says that God the Father was greater than him. Another scriptural reference they used to support their theses was Colossians 1:15 which talks of Jesus as the first born of all creation. The argument of the Arians basing on these scriptural texts implied that Jesus was just a creature and that he was inferior to God.<sup>5</sup> This would imply that Jesus belongs to the world of contingent beings just as we ourselves do.

In addition to the above the Arian teaching basing on the above, vehemently stated that Jesus was a perfect human being. In this sense the divinity of Jesus was put in question. Jesus was just like any other creature; hence not divine. According to the Arians, Jesus was perfect in the sense of being a reservoir of the Word. This was the understanding of the Arians on the gospel of John with regards to the issue of the Logos. It is because of that which dwelt in him that distinguished him from other creatures.<sup>6</sup> Arius maintained that Jesus Christ was adopted by God the Father as His son and that he remains subordinate to the Father. It is in this way that Arianism is a kind of subordinationism. Thus, Arius reduced Jesus Christ to a demigod which is a creature which was subject to change and suffering.<sup>7</sup>

The use of the term “creature” as used in the scriptures especially Colossians 1:15, it was understood by the Arians literally as meaning that something that is created cannot be at par with its creator. Thus, the Arians maintained the teaching that God is one, who is impassable, undivided, ineffable, whose substance cannot be shared with any other being or person otherwise it would imply a multiplication of deities. Hence the Son since he is a creature, he has a beginning according to Arianism. This can be seen in their slogan, “There was when He was not”.<sup>8</sup> For Arius and his followers to say that Jesus was co-eternal with the Father according the orthodox teaching it would imply “two self-existent principles” and this

was a threat to monotheism.<sup>9</sup>

### **A response to Arianism focusing on the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople I**

Following a thorough deliberation, the Council of Nicaea of 325 AD decreed that Arianism was an unorthodox teaching. It is important to note from the onset that the Council of Nicaea was the first to respond to Arianism and that the Council of Constantinople I was a further re-affirmation of what was discussed at the Council of Nicaea. The Council of Nicaea following the tradition of the Fathers of the Church established that the “Son is one person of the Trinity, distinct as a person but of the same substance with the Father”.<sup>10</sup> He was generated or begotten, but this must be understood as a kind of eternal generation outside space and time. In this way Jesus must not be viewed as a creature or generated in a literal sense because human language is limited in expressing the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Hence since Jesus is eternally begotten, then He is divine and one person of the Triune God. According to William P. Loewe, the problem that Arius had was failing to recognize why Jesus is the Emmanuel.<sup>11</sup> It seems Arius failed to recognize that Jesus Christ is God who came to dwell among people and became like them. They didn’t consider that at some point in time there was an incarnation that took place. Loewe continues to mention that it is through the experience that Jesus the Nazarene was, “the one true God had been communicating, revealing, expressing God’s own self to them”.<sup>12</sup> Hence it is plausible for one to argue that Jesus was God himself who expressed the Godself to humanity. This is the reason why Nicaea maintained that Jesus was divine and as the Word that proceeded from the Father.

Further to the above, another term that was introduced in a quest to express the faith of the church on the divinity of the Son was homoousius which had its equivalent in Latin *consubstantialis*.<sup>13</sup> By considering this terminology the Council aimed at expressing what was meant in the Johanne literature. Thus, making the scriptures clear and avoiding misinterpretations of the scriptures by the Arians. The term *homoousius* clarified what the Church believed in and the tradition of the patristic Fathers that the Son was of the same substance with the Father. This does not mean

that the Son is the Father and it can be further explained in the words of Athanasius who explained what was meant to say that Jesus Christ was of the same substance (*homoousius*) with the Father. He said that,

It meant that whatever you could say about the Father, you could say about the Son and vice versa, except what is proper to being Father or to being Son. Thus, if you say that the Father is eternal, omnipotent, all wise, so also the Son. But if you can say that the Son is only begotten, you cannot say this of the Father. Being only begotten is proper to being Son.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, it is precise that Jesus Christ the Son of God was both human and divine not a mere creature as the Arians had contended. They only focused on one part of his nature not considering the other aspect of His divinity, that explains why their position is unorthodox. That explains the reason why the Council Fathers had to define the faith of the Church and they stated that, “Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father”.<sup>15</sup> This definition of who Christ is, which remains part of the creed today becomes concrete. Thus, Jesus Christ is of the same substance with the Father, hence he is divine.

Moving on, captivated by the asserted definition of the Council of Nicaea and the contribution of the Cappadocian Fathers cannot go unnoticed. They submitted a thesis before the Council of Constantinople I which was titled “Blessed Trinity”. This is because their contribution helped in coming up with a defense of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as it was reaffirmed at Constantinople I as they also elaborated on the issue of three divine persons who share the same substance. There was need for this since after the Council of Nicaea, Arianism continued, and some became semi-Arians. The Council affirmed the teaching of Nicaea, hence condemning the Arians and other heresies. The three Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus submitted their thesis which emphasized the unity of persons. This unity forms their substance and it comes from the relationship they have.<sup>16</sup> It is from their thesis that the Council of Constantinople adopted the term *hypostasis* which can be equated to the previous term that was used at Nicaea *ousia*<sup>17</sup>

Cyril in response to Nestorius is said to have argued saying that Jesus is “one incarnate nature of the divine *Logos*”.<sup>18</sup> In this way he explained that the *Logos* whilst it remained divine, it took our human nature. Thus, he summed this up as a “union in *hypostasis*”.<sup>19</sup>

Further to the above, after establishing well founded arguments on the Holy Trinity, the council of Constantinople established a creed and added some more statements to that of the Nicaea. This was after the Council dealt with Arianism and other heresies that included that of Nestorius and Apollinarianism. Therefore, the Council developed what is often called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. The Council avowed that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary and became man...was crucified under Pontius Pilate...and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” The divinity of the Holy Spirit was also declared that He is God as it was expressed that He is “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.”<sup>20</sup> These words became part of the creed that the Church professes today on top of the Nicene creed.

### **Conclusin**

To conclude, the paper has defined what a heresy is. Secondly the paper has exposed the Arian heresy and lastly the paper has responded to it focusing the deliberations that took place during the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Considering what has been discussed above, it is clear that Arius’ Christological and Trinitarian position flawed because it strayed from the teaching of the patristic fathers and the tradition of the Apostles. Arius only focused on one part of the truth and ignored the other part. Hence the Church intervened in and defined the true faith as it is evidenced from the creed. This is as mentioned in the above piece of discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Belloc, Hilaire. *The Great Heresies*. London: The Catholic Book Club, 1968. P. 3

<sup>2</sup> Belloc, Hilaire. *The Great Heresies*. London: The Catholic Book Club, 1968 P. 4

<sup>3</sup> Lacugna Mowry, C. *God for Us: The Trinity and The Christian Life*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1991. P. 31

- <sup>4</sup> Moltmann Jurgen. *The Trinity and The Kingdom of God, The Doctrine of God*. Munich: SCM Press Ltd, 1981. P. 133
- <sup>5</sup> Kelly J, N, D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. Fifth Edition. London: A. and C. Black Publishers Ltd, 1977. P. 230
- <sup>6</sup> Boff, Leonardo. *Trinity and Society*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005. P. 48
- <sup>7</sup> Rausch Thomas, P. *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003. P. 155
- <sup>8</sup> Kelly J, N, D. 228
- <sup>9</sup> Kelly J, N, D. 228
- <sup>10</sup> Vidmar John, OP. *The Catholic Church Through the Ages*. Second Edition. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2014. P. 60
- <sup>11</sup> Loewe William, P. *Introduction to Christology*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989. P. 194
- <sup>12</sup> Loewe William, P. *Introduction to Christology*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989. P. 194
- <sup>13</sup> Goergen Donald. J. *The Jesus Of Christian History*. Volume 3. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992. P. 128
- <sup>14</sup> Loewe William, P. 194
- <sup>15</sup> Rausch Thomas, P. 156
- <sup>16</sup> Moltmann Jurgen. P. 137
- <sup>17</sup> Loewe William, P. 34
- <sup>18</sup> Rausch Thomas, P. 158
- <sup>19</sup> Rausch Thomas, P. 158
- <sup>20</sup> Vidmar John, OP. 60-61