

## EXPLODING CONSPIRACY THEORIES ABOUT NICAËA

### Introduction

In a previous article, examining the faith of Constantine, I observed that a frequent theme of Islamic polemics and of Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* was that the Trinitarian faith of the Church and the Canon of the New Testament were supposedly decided at the Council of Nicæa. Brown's novel presents the villainous scholar called Teabing referring to the Nicene synod and claiming: '... until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nevertheless. A mortal.' Teabing goes on to claim that the Council established Jesus' divinity and position as 'Son of God'. Since the principal cause of the synod was the controversy surrounding Arius' views, it is understandable that the average man in the street would conclude that Arius must have denied the divinity and divine Sonship of Jesus, believing that he was merely human.

Similarly, one work often utilised by Muslim polemicists is the book by Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim entitled *Jesus Prophet of Islam*. The book makes some ridiculous and false assertions about Arius:

The leader of the Apostolic Church [sic], which continued to affirm belief in One Reality, was at this time a presbyter known to history as Arius. He was a Libyan by birth. He gave new strength to the Apostolic Church. He followed the teaching of Jesus implicitly, and refused to accept the innovations introduced by Paul. 'Follow Jesus as he preached' was the motto of Arius. His importance can be gauged by the fact that his name has become a synonym for unitarianism today.

The author later claims: 'Arius' intention was solely to keep the teachings of Jesus pure and free from alteration...' By 'belief in One Reality', ur-Rahim is alleging that Arius had a unitarian concept of God equivalent to that held in Islam – that Arius was a kind of proto-Muslim. He presents no evidence in support of his claim as to Arius' motto (certainly, there is no such 'motto' in Arius' extant writings or in contemporary accounts), and as for Paul, we shall see that Arius quoted approvingly from the Apostle.

Sometimes analogies have been found between Arius' teaching and that of the Jehovah's Witnesses: 'Jesus clearly was a man, but he was unlike other men in that previously he had been a spirit person, known in heaven as the Word. Then his life was miraculously transferred by God to the womb of Mary.' However, there are important differences with Arius' position. It is also evident that the Unitarianism proposed by Socinian groupings was also at variance with Arius' teaching. Since *The Da Vinci Code* has enjoyed a wide readership, and as Muslim polemicists often attack Christians concerning the Nicene synod, the investigation of Arius' views is no longer an academic exercise, making an examination of the Heresiarch's position vital.

### Arius and his attitude to Scripture

The principal reason for convening the synod of Nicæa was the challenge presented by the teaching of Arius (c. 256-336), a presbyter of Alexandria, though possibly originally from Libya. It is important to state that there was no *textual/canonical* issue at stake regarding his views: 'Arius was, by profession, a biblical exponent, at least in the sense

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that he intends to be faithful in his theological reflections to the spirit of the scriptures, as he presents himself in his letters to Constantine and Alexander.' Kelly notes that the Arians supported their arguments by quoting various Scriptural texts. Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury and an acknowledged Arian scholar) declares that 'Arian was by profession an interpreter of the Scriptures'. Indeed, 'Arian and his supporters were interested in a large number of texts, from Old and New Testaments alike'.

This is an essential point: it clarifies that the issue at Nicæa was not over Biblical Canonicity. We see direct evidence from the quotes made by Arian and his supporters in regard to their faith in the canonical New Testament, for example in the letter Arian and his followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, quoting (in the phrases in inverted commas) Romans 11:36; Psalm 109:3; and John 16:28:

But if the expressions 'from him' and 'from the womb' and 'I came out from the Father, and I am come here' are understood by certain people in terms of a portion of something consubstantial or in terms of an emanation, then, according to them, the Father is compound and divisible and changeable and material, as far as they are concerned, the God who is without a body is undergoing the experiences proper to a body.

Indeed, in the same declaration, Arian refers to his faith in the 'God of the Law and the prophets and the New Covenant' – i.e. the canonical Bible, since the 'Law and the prophets' referred to the Jewish division of the Old Testament, and 'New Covenant' is a synonym for 'New Testament'. The point at issue at the Council of Nicæa was not the *canon* of Scripture, but rather its proper interpretation.

Canonicity was not an issue at the synod, since both Arian and his opponents shared the same canon of Scripture.

### Arian's Christological doctrine

It has been suggested that Arian was a pupil and disciple of Lucian of Antioch. In his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, Arian had even described himself as 'a true fellow-disciple of Lucian'. Williams is more cautious, since the expression *sulloukianista* ('fellow-Lucianist') may simply indicate that Arian claimed 'common ground with potential supporters' or that he merely studied under Lucian. Lucian was famous for his literalist approach to Scripture, in contrast to the allegorical hermeneutic of Alexandria.

The Christological attitude of the East was that it held in horror the doctrines of Sabellianism, the best known form of Modalistic Monarchianism. This held that God was unipersonal, and that the terms 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' referred to differing, possibly successive *roles* of God (as opposed to 'Persons') – creation, redemption, sanctification. Sabellius was a third century Libyan who taught in Rome and whose heresy led to his being excommunicated. We will see that this is relevant to what ensued.

In regard to what Arian actually believed, we largely rely on extant material from his opponents, and in terms of complete texts, there are only three in number: the confession of faith presented to Alexander of Alexandria; Arian's letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia; the confession submitted by Arian and Euzosius to the Emperor in 337.

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## Arius' Letter to Eusebius

In Arius' letter to Eusebius, he complains about Bishop of Alexander harassing him because Arius denies what Alexander upheld, and so we can infer his theology as being the *opposite* of Alexander's Christology from this picture:

...the bishop greatly wastes and persecutes us, and leaves no stone unturned against us. He has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches, namely, God always, the Son always; as the Father so the Son; the Son co-exists unbegotten with God; He is everlasting; neither by thought nor by any interval does God precede the Son; always God, always Son; he is begotten of the unbegotten; the Son is of God Himself.

From this we deduce that Arius opposed the ideas that the Son was always God, and that the Son had the same divine essence as the Father, that the Son was *eternally* generated by the Father, that the Son always existed. In Arius' mind, 'begotten' indicated the state of being *secondary* and was equivalent to 'created': 'But for him begetting and creation were identical, and both always meant dependence.'

Hence his insistence that if the Son was begotten – as Arius most definitely believed – then He was secondary in terms of time to God's eternal existence, and thus was a creature. In other words, God always existed; the Son did not always exist, but came into being at the will of God. In contrast, the orthodox position was that the Son was eternally begotten, not created, and His generation was *essential* in the sense of being necessary (i.e. not a choice), rather than being volitional (i.e. a matter of the Father's will).

It must be emphasised that Arius was not insisting

upon any idea that Jesus had only a *human* nature. Indeed, his theology had little to say about the Incarnation, virginal conception, etc.: Hanson refers to Arius' 'rare utterances about the Incarnation.' Arius' concerns focussed on the pre-existent origins of the Son, and more specifically, a defence of the position that controverted claims that the divine essence could be sundered, as with Monarchianism, as we can infer from what Arius goes on to say to Eusebius:

But we say and believe, and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; and that He does not derive His subsistence from any matter; but that by His own will and counsel He has subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, only begotten and unchangeable, and that before He was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, He was not. For He was not unbegotten. We are persecuted, because we say that the Son has a beginning, but that God is without beginning. This is the cause of our persecution, and likewise, because we say that He is of the non-existent. And this we say, because He is neither part of God, nor of any essential being.

The phrase 'He is of the non-existent' means that Arius asserted that the Son came from 'non-being', i.e. that He was created out of nothing, that there was a time that He did not exist. He also denies the Monarchian idea of the Son being of one essence with the Father.

However, we can also see from the letter that Arius regarded the Son as *begotten*, and was even prepared to call Him 'God' in some sense. On all three counts – regarding Him as the 'Son', as being 'begotten' and being willing to call Him 'God', Arius' theology is totally at variance with Islamic doctrine concerning Allah: Surah Mumineen 23:91: 'No son did Allah beget nor is there any god along with

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Him...’ In Arius’ theology, the begetting of the Son, though not eternal, precedes the general Creation – again, contradicting Islamic theology: Surah Al-Ikhlās 112:3 – ‘He begets not nor is He begotten’. All these facts underline that Arius was not some kind of proto-Muslim.

### Arius’ Confession of Faith to Alexander of Alexandria

If we look at the Confession submitted to Alexander, we find an elaboration of what has been stated in Arius’ letter to Eusebius. Firstly, we encounter the idea that God ‘began an Only-begotten Son before eternal times, through whom He has made both the ages and the universe’. This further demonstrates that in Arius’ mind the Son, though not the eternal God, was begotten before the general Creation, and indeed, that the Son was in fact the *Agent* of Creation. Clearly, the Son was no ordinary creature, and this indicates that in Arius’ estimation Jesus was not merely a man – ‘perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures’. However, Arius later qualifies this by emphasising the Son’s distinction from the Father:

...but the Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, was not before His generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father. For He is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate with the Father, nor has He His being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, introducing two ingenerate beginnings, but God is before all things as being Monad and Beginning of all. Wherefore also He is before the Son...

The essential points which led to Arius being excommunicated by Alexander are that the heresiarch denied that the Son was co-eternal with

the Father, and that He shared the same divine essence. To a large extent it would seem that Arius’ thought was propelled by concern that defining the relationship of Father and Son in any other way would be to give credence to the concepts of the Valentinian Gnostics or of the Sabellian Monarchians:

...offspring, but not as one of things begotten; nor as Valentinus pronounced that the offspring of the Father was an issue; nor as Manichæus taught that the offspring was a portion of the Father, one in essence; or as Sabellius, dividing the Monad, speaks of a Son-and-Father; nor as Hieracas, of one torch from another, or as a lamp divided into two; nor that He who was before, was afterwards generated or new-created into a Son.

Hence, when we read of Arius denying the consubstantiality of Father and Son (i.e. being of the same divine essence), or of being a ‘portion’ of God, we must not anachronistically imagine that he was reacting against the orthodox position of the Church as later detailed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Definitions, but rather that he was concerned that certain concepts could give support to the heretical positions that he listed here.

For example, the Valentinians, holding to Gnostic beliefs, essentially held that the Supreme God ‘emanated’ what are called ‘*aeons*’ from Himself – in layman’s terms, lesser deities progressively projected out from the original divine essence and thereafter each other, continuing the process. This obviously involved a *division* of the divine substance, and so we must understand that when Arius denied that the Son was *eternally* divine, he was reacting to what he saw as the pitfalls in orthodox Christianity that could be read in a Valentinian way.

In regard to Mani, the third-century Persian who

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produced a syncretistic quasi-Gnostic theological system, Hanson represents Arius' objections being towards 'Mani's idea that bits of God are to be encountered in all sorts of places, even in vegetables and food' and so Mani's Christology involved the Son being 'a broken-off piece of the Father'. We have already examined Sabellius' views. Given that Sabellius held to Modalistic Monarchianism, believing that there was only one Person in the Godhead who passed through successive modes, it is perhaps questionable to present him the way Arius does as 'dividing the Monad', but from his perspective it meant making 'two out of one'. Later in the Confession Arius returns to this concept, denouncing any idea that the texts from Romans 11:36; Psalm 110:3; John 16:28 could be understood in this way:

But if the terms 'from Him,' and 'from the womb,' and 'I came forth from the Father, and I am come' be understood by some to mean as if a part of Him, one in essence or as an issue, then the Father is according to them compounded and divisible and alterable and material, and, as far as their belief goes, has the circumstances of a body, Who is the Incorporeal God. 'One in essence' here translates *homoousios* ('same substance'), and Williams indicates that Arius' understanding of the term has reference to the sense of it 'designating a compound substance that can be resolved into its constituents'. Hanson observes that Arius disliked any statement that the Son is 'from' the Father because it implied that the Son was a 'consubstantial part of him and like an issue', which meant that God was 'composite and divisible and mutable and even corporeal'. Of course, orthodox advocates always rejected any idea of the unity of the divine essence connoting a compound structure: it

was never their position that the divine essence could be sundered, holding instead to what was later termed *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling and inter-penetration of the Three Persons in the Godhead), which totally undermines such a concept.

Hieracas was an insignificant late third to early fourth-century Egyptian heretic who 'questioned the resurrection of the body', demanded universal Christian celibacy, denied the salvation of infants, and had 'strange views on the Holy Spirit'. Whilst his Christological views do not appear to have been especially heterodox, Arius saw him as advocating a bifurcated divine essence by virtue of the analogies Hieracas employed, and thus he fitted in with the other heretics named. Moreover, since his other views were so blatantly heterodox, Arius probably utilised his name to defame majority Christological views – i.e. guilt by association.

### Arius' denial of Co-eternality

Williams characterises Arius' essential thought as involving the denial that God and the Son 'co-exist'. What emerges from this is that Arius seems to have believed that if the Father and the Son were co-eternal, that proposition in some way implied that the divine essence had splintered, and thus the Father was somehow diminished in His deity, as implied by Arius comment in his Confession: 'For the Father did not, in giving to Him [*the Son*] the inheritance of all things, deprive Himself of what He has ingenerately in Himself'. Such a consequent position was clearly intolerable to Arius – as indeed it was to the orthodox party.

The difficulty for the majority of Church leaders at Nicæa was Arius' proposed solution: his idea that

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the divine essence was never sundered because the Son was a *creature* of the Father, and thus temporally subsequent and of a different essence. The majority party at the Council of Nicæa likewise believed that the divine essence was never separated, but they held rather that Father and Son were of one substance and co-eternal, that the ‘generation’ of the Son was eternal, rather than temporal, and that therefore the Son was not a creature.

The consequent Christological and Theological doctrines with which these concerns left Arius amounted to the following:

Thus there are Three Subsistences. And God, being the cause of all things, is Unbegun and altogether Sole, but the Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, was not before His generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father... So far then as from God He has being, and glories, and life, and all things are delivered unto Him, in such sense is God His origin. For He is above Him, as being His God and before Him.

Whilst acknowledging that the Son was brought into being ‘before all ages’, and that He is ‘a perfect creature’, Arius denied that He was ‘timelessly self-subsistent’. Again, ‘The Son did not always exist’. Thus, Arius believed that in some way the Son was a ‘lesser’ divinity – enough for Muslims to accuse him of Shirk (‘associating beings with God’ – i.e. polytheism). What is especially interesting is that Arius in some way acknowledged a Triadic relationship between Father, Son and Spirit: the ‘substances... of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separate in nature... having no participation ... with each other’. Incidentally, this indicates that Arius, unlike Jehovah’s Witnesses, held to the personality

of the Spirit. It is doubtful that the Libyan Heresiarch would have found himself at home in either a Kingdom Hall or a mosque.

### Arius’ Letter to Constantine

Towards the end of 327, Arius and Euzoius issued a letter professing their faith, and loyalty to the catholic Church to Constantine, which, however, given its ambiguity, and failure to denounce their previous errors, can scarcely be designated as a ‘recantation’. The relevant points are as follows:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty: and in the Lord Jesus Christ his Son, who was begotten of him before all ages, God the Word through whom all things were made, both those which are in the heavens and those upon the earth; who descended, and became incarnate, and suffered, and rose again, ascended into the heavens, and will again come to judge the living and the dead. [We believe] also in the Holy Spirit, and in the resurrection of the flesh, and in the life of the coming age, and in the kingdom of the heavens, and in one Catholic Church of God, extending from one end of the earth to the other.

‘This faith we have received from the holy gospels, the Lord therein saying to his disciples: “Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” If we do not so believe and truly receive the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as the whole Catholic Church and the holy Scriptures teach (in which we believe in every respect), God is our judge both now, and in the coming judgment.

It can be seen from Arius’ previous writings that everything he says here about the ‘divinity’ of the Son is wholly compatible with what he affirmed before the Council. That is, Arius does not avow here that the Son, though being ‘God the Word’, is of one essence with the Father. What is interesting is that Arius feels that he can state that the Son

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'became incarnate, and suffered, and rose again, ascended into the heavens'. It follows therefore that Arius believed that the Son was somehow simultaneously 'divine' and human – implied in the comment that He 'became incarnate'. Clearly, this puts his position at odds with Islam. Further, the statement that Christ 'suffered, and rose again' implies that Arius believed that Jesus died on the Cross – a position Muslims generally deny.

### Arius' *Thalia*

In his *De Synodis* ('*On the Councils*'), Athanasius, at first a young deacon at the break of the controversy, quoted from the poem *Thalia* by Arius where the latter outlined his beliefs. We must be more cautious about this than the preceding writings, although most commentators, such as Williams and Hanson, attribute more authenticity to this than to other quotations of *Thalia*, and at any rate, we shall see that the doctrines contained therein echo those we have already examined:

God Himself then, in His own nature, is ineffable by all men. Equal or like Himself He alone has none, or one in glory. And Ingenerate we call Him, because of Him who is generate by nature. We praise Him as without beginning because of Him who has a beginning. And adore Him as everlasting, because of Him who in time has come to be. The Unbegun made the Son a beginning of things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to Himself by adoption.

In this passage Arius describes the attributes of God with reference to the Son. Because the Son is generated or begotten (which in Arius' view amounted to 'created'), God is Ingenerate/ Unbegotten – *agenēctos*. This and the subsequent descriptions of the Son as having 'a beginning' demonstrate the temporal reference points for Arius'

Christology – that the Son was not eternal. Again, we note the fact that Arius presents this Being created by God as the pre-existent Son – which means that Arius' position on both counts contradicts Islam. 'The Son' is not so designated because He is a creature – i.e. He is not described in this way because all human beings can be characterised as 'sons of God' – but rather because He is a unique Being, specifically adopted as the Son. This is incompatible with Islam. The quote from the *Thalia* continues:

He has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence. For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him. Wise is God, for He is the teacher of Wisdom. There is full proof that God is invisible to all beings; both to things which are through the Son, and to the Son He is invisible. I will say it expressly, how by the Son is seen the Invisible; by that power by which God sees, and in His own measure, the Son endures to see the Father, as is lawful.

From this we can see that Arius denied the full deity of the Son: He was not equal to God, nor was He of the same essence – *homoousios*. The Son did not have innate knowledge of the Father. It followed from this that Arius did not believe in the classic idea of the Trinity, although, and this must be emphasised, he did believe in some form of Triadic relationship between Father, Son and Spirit:

Thus there is a Triad, not in equal glories. Not intermingling with each other are their subsistences. One more glorious than the other in their glories unto immensity. Foreign from the Son in essence is the Father, for He is without beginning. Understand that the Monad was; but the Dyad was not, before it was in existence. It follows at once that, though the Son was not, the Father was God. Hence the Son, not being (for He existed at the will of the Father), is God Only-begotten, and He is alien from either. Wisdom existed as Wisdom by the will of the Wise God. Hence He is conceived in numberless

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conceptions: Spirit, Power, Wisdom, God's glory, Truth, Image, and Word. Understand that He is conceived to be Radiance and Light.

Hence, there was first only God – the Monad, the single entity, but then through His generation/creation of the Son there came about a Dyad, and finally through the (implied) creation of the Spirit, a Triad was established. At this point we should note that Arius' theology is contrary to Islamic doctrine on the Trinity. This is what Islam states on the subject: Surah An-Nisa 4:171 '...say not "Three"... - Allah is only One Allah'; Surah Al-Maida 5:73 'They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no Allah save the One Allah'; Surah al-Ikhlās 112:1 'Say: He is Allah, the One and Only'.

Yet Arius uses the word Trias (i.e. Triad) in regard to the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. Thus, in Islamic terms, Arius was a heretic. Moreover, the usual Christian response to the Qur'anic portrayal of Christian Trinitarianism is to state that Christianity does not affirm belief in three gods, but rather in One God, consisting of Three Persons – not a compound unity, but rather a true unity of essence. Obviously if all Three Persons share the same divine essence, it then follows that God is numerically One – there is not a plurality of deities.

The latter proposition would only be true if the Three Persons had *distinct* divine essences. Yet this is exactly what Arius believed: 'the three existing realities are unlike in their substances (ousia). The union which makes them a Trinity is a purely moral one, a unity of will and disposition.' He denied that the Three had the same essence: Kelly comments that Arius was even willing to 'speak of the holy

Triad, in speciously Origenistic language, as consisting of three Persons', but the Three were 'entirely different beings, not sharing in any way the same nature or essence'. Arius also implicitly rejected what would become known as *perichoresis* – the mutual indwelling of the Persons. True, the Son and Spirit were *inferior* 'deities' to the Father, but Arius still designates the Son as 'God Only-begotten', *monogenēs* theos. It follows that essentially, Arius was advocating tritheism, belief in three deities, the very position that the Qur'an denounces.

Athanasius was to attack Arianism on this point, by claiming that to attribute some form of divinity to the Son if He were not of one essence with the Father led to belief in polytheism – a devastating argument in a pluralistic society. Prestige comments that Arius recognised 'the divine Son as an inferior deity... by allowing worship to be offered to the Christ whom he thus regarded as a demi-god, altogether separate from God the Father, he revived the spiritual errors of paganism.' Certainly, if he were around today Muslims would accuse Arius of the unpardonable sin of *Shirk* – associating a creature with God, and of claiming that in some sense at least God had a Son.

Arius concludes by reaffirming the inferiority of Son to Father, to the point that the Father is incomprehensible to the Son, and that the Son was created at the will of the Father, yet Arius can still speak of the Son as a 'strong God' (*ischuros theos*) or 'Mighty God', reflecting Isaiah 9:15:

One equal to the Son, the Superior is able to beget; but one more excellent, or superior, or greater, He is not able. At God's will the Son is what and whatsoever He is. And when and since He was, from that time He has subsisted

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from God. He, being a strong God, praises in His degree the Superior. To speak in brief, God is ineffable to His Son. For He is to Himself what He is, that is, unspeakable. So that nothing which is called comprehensible does the Son know to speak about; for it is impossible for Him to investigate the Father, who is by Himself. For the Son does not know His own essence, For, being Son, He really existed, at the will of the Father. What argument then allows, that He who is from the Father should know His own parent by comprehension? For it is plain that for that which hath a beginning to conceive how the Unbegun is, or to grasp the idea, is not possible.

Thus, Arius' position, far from being consistently monotheistic, is in effect, and certainly by default, polytheistic. The Son and the Spirit are simply 'lesser' deities when compared to the Father, and unlike Him are not eternal beings. Hence, the orthodox party at the Council of Nicæa were not just fighting for the Scriptural position of the true Deity of Christ, they were actually battling for genuine monotheism against Arius' polytheistic tendencies.

### Arius on the role of the Son in salvation

We have so far examined the *Ontological* character of Arius' Theology/Christology – the nature of the *Being* of God and Christ. However, it is important to also consider the consequences for the *Functional* aspect of Christology – what Christ does. This was also a crucial point for the Council of Nicæa, as can be seen from the Creed: 'true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, *who for us men and for our salvation* came down and was made flesh'. Arius, as we have seen, denied that the Son was 'true God from true God', but he agreed with the Creed that

the Son was the Agent of Creation - 'through whom all things came to be'. If Arius' theology of divine functionality necessitated that God the Father be distanced from the act of Creation, we should not be surprised that He would also be removed from direct involvement in Redemption. That is, whereas the orthodox majority party believed that God the Son ('true God') took human nature with a view to redeeming mankind, Arius' theology inevitably insisted that only a lesser 'God' could do so.

Hanson notes that 'almost all the actual words of Arius... are concerned with the Son's relationship to the Father', but 'two of the remarks attributed to Arius by Constantine in his letter to Arius... certainly refer to the incarnate Son, and the second... suggests that Arius' doctrine of the Incarnation was designed to protect God the Father from being exposed to human experiences.' This refers to a letter from the Emperor to Arius written some time after the Nicene synod, where Constantine quotes some of the Heresiarch's correspondence to him. The words in question are these: *apage ou boulomai ton Theon 'egô 'ubreôn pathei enegechesthai* – 'Away! I do not wish God to be subjected to the suffering of [*violent*] outrages'. Arius explicitly declared: *ho Christos... di hēmas pepontben* – 'Christ... suffered for us.' It should be noted that this means that Arius contradicted the majority Muslim view of Surah An-Nisa 4:157: 'they killed him not nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them', which most Muslims take as denying the crucifixion of Jesus.

We should remember that Arius had a horror of Sabellianism, a consequence of which was *Patripassianism* – the idea that 'the Father suffered' (i.e. on the Cross). Sabellianism, of course, held to

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the unipersonality of God – that there was only one Person in the Godhead, who experienced successive roles. The error of Arius was in the opposite direction – that there were three distinct divine essences. Thus, through his insistence of the different and inferior ‘divine’ essence of the Son from that of the Father, Arius sought to protect God the Father from the heresy he feared. Hanson comments about these quotes in Constantine’s letter to Arius: They must all be taken as warnings of the consequences of describing the Son as consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father; you are bound, if you do so, Arius thinks, to compromise God by exposing him to suffering in the Incarnation. The last quotation must refer to God the Father, not to the Son; so at least Constantine takes it when he replies to it in his letter.

Hanson later comments that these remarks suggest that ‘Arius’ doctrine of the Incarnation was designed to protect God the Father from being subject to human experiences.’ He goes on to observe that this intention ‘is certainly present in the theology of Arius’ early supporters. They regarded the Son as an instrument expressly designed to do the suffering that was necessary in order to carry out God’s plan for saving men.’ Hence, their views on divine ontology reflected their concerns for the Son’s functionality – the fact that He was to suffer on the Cross:

They achieved this position by constantly putting forward two doctrines. First, the human limitations and weaknesses of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, were a sign of his divine inferiority; his divinity was reduced enough to be able to encounter suffering without ceasing to be divine. And secondly, they insisted that in becoming incarnate the Son had taken to himself, not a complete human individual, but what they called a *sōma apsychon* - a body without a soul. This meant not only a body without a human psychology or a human animating principle, but

also a body without a human mind. The Word directly animated and directed the body, dwelling in it (*katoikwn*).

It can be seen that not only did Arianism offer a reduced ‘God’ in regard to the Son, but also a Christ whose human nature was essentially a sham:

This doctrine is regularly characteristic of Arianism after Arius, and it is the logical outcome of the view which he and his followers held about the relation of the Son to the Father. They wanted to have a God who could suffer, but they could not fit this picture to their idea of God the Father. God the Son must therefore be the God who could suffer, whose divinity was reduced enough to endure suffering... A ‘mere man’ ... could not have redeemed us by his Passion. Somehow God must have suffered.

Hanson notes that Lucian of Antioch is said to have held these views about the *sōma apsychon* of Jesus, and he thinks it likely that Arius also held the same ideas as the early Arians in this respect. Perhaps we should add that the very fact that the synodal Creed has the clause ‘became man’ may reflect the concern to protect the true humanity of Christ from the consequences of Arius’ ideas, just as the affirmation of Christ’s true deity defends Him from the attacks on His genuine divinity. Hanson comments that Arians could only achieve their doctrine of the Incarnation through in effect proposing ‘two unequal gods, a High God incapable of human experiences, and a lesser God who, so to speak, did the dirty work for him.’ It need hardly be said that the Arian position on the humanity of Christ does not correspond with Islam any more than it does canonical Christianity.

It follows from all of this that it is wrong to view the Council of Nicæa as being held just to defend

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(let alone to assert) the true deity of Christ: the orthodox party also had to protect His true humanity, not least for the sake of the salvation of mankind. Only a truly divine-human Being could be the Saviour. The Arian Christ was neither true God nor true Man. Likewise, Arius' God was not the unique deity of Biblical tradition.

### **Conclusion: A summary of Arius' heresy**

Arius presents us with a Triad of gods, rather than the Triune God. The divinity of the Son is real, but inferior to that of the Father, who alone is uncreated and eternal. Arius speaks of the generation of the Son, but this generation is not eternal or necessary (the orthodox position was the reverse). The Son is at least potentially mutable, unlike the Father. The Son is the Agent of Creation and Redemption, whilst the Father is distinct and distant from the created order. It follows that the creation of the Son was really a necessary act, despite Arius presenting it as an act of the Father's will, displaying a contradiction in Arius' theology. Christ's humanity was as reduced as His divinity. However, Christ did actually suffer on the Cross. It can be seen that Arius contradicted Islam as much as he did orthodox Christianity.

Given texts such as John 1:1, where we read that the Word was God, and was with God at the beginning, and in Matthew 11:27 where we encounter the statement 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' the reader may ask how Arius, who did not believe in a separate canon of Scripture, arrived at his position? It should be noted that Bishop Alexander made

this very point about the mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son – that Arius' position contradicted the New Testament, specifically John 10:15:

As to their blasphemous position that 'the Son knows not the Father perfectly,' we ought not to wonder at it; for having once set themselves to fight against Christ, they contradict even His express words, since He says, 'As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father.' Now if the Father knows the Son but in part, then it is evident that the Son does not know the Father perfectly; but if it is not lawful to say this, but the Father does know the Son perfectly, then it is evident that as the Father knows His own Word, so also the Word knows His own Father Whose Word He is.

There are several aspects in the answer to this question. Firstly, we must remember that the East had a horror of Sabellianism. To Arius, it seemed that Bishop Alexander was guilty of this since he 'insisted on the unity of the Triad', conceived of the Word as a 'Person', and that the Son was 'co-eternal with the Father'. Secondly, Arianism offered a simple, rationalist answer to the question of the relationship between the Father and the Son, although the Arian solution was influenced by existing Greek philosophical concepts:

The views of Arius and his opponents were all partly shaped by continuing debates among philosophers, whose writings were known to some of the Christian theologians, about the eternity of the world and the relation between form and matter. Does the world have a beginning? Did God exist without a created universe? Can intelligible form exist apart from the material which embodies it? Origen had envisaged a world of created rational spirits coeternal with God (which corresponded to the Platonic realm of ideas or forms), and transient physical worlds in which they are embodied. So for him the eternity of the Son, as Logos, went with an eternal created universe of pure intelligence which could inform

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matter. Like Origen's Christian critic Methodius, Arius cannot accept a created order sharing God's eternity. The universe and its time-spans exist only in the Son, who is brought into being absolutely as God wills: 'Wisdom existed as Wisdom at the will of a wise God' (Thalia II.24 [NE 331]); 'He made him to subsist at his own will' (*Letter to Alexander* {NE 326}). So for Arius what subsists before the Son and the creation is only the timeless God, whose will produces the Son, and with him all time and creation.

Hanson sees some influence from Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, and also from the Christology of Origen (c. 185-254), an Egyptian theologian who held to the subordination of the Son to the Father (though not to distinct essences), but he views the use of these patterns of thought as tools to answer the theological issues he addresses. Most probably, Arius' position arose out of a concern to defend God from Sabellian-type ideas; unfortunately, his solution caused as many difficulties as the problem it sought to answer.

Perhaps the greatest lesson to learn from Arius' heresy is that when addressing the mystery of the eternal relationship of Father and Son, human reason has its limits, because we are dealing with transcendent phenomena. Certain points are not explained to us in Scripture, and any attempt to reduce the eternal mystery of the divine relationship to human terms will fail. In terms of the contemporary situation, we can say that Arius was not a precursor of Islam, Socinianism or the Jehovah's Witnesses, and neither did he hold the position that *The Da Vinci Code* indicates that the Nicene synod was called to confute, both in terms of Christology and Biblical Canonicity. Since Arius did not believe that Jesus was merely a mortal man, nor subscribe to a different canon of Scripture to that of his opponents, it follows that the Nicene Council did not establish the opposite at the synod. Conspiracy theorists will have to hunt elsewhere.