

For Val

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CENTURIES

Philip Rousseau



An imprint of Pearson Education

London • New York • Toronto • Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore • Hong Kong • Cape Town
New Delhi • Madrid • Paris • Amsterdam • Munich • Milan • Stockholm

Pearson Education Limited

Head Office:

Edinburgh Gate
Harlow CM20 2JE
Tel: +44 (0)1279 623623
Fax: +44 (0)1279 431059

London Office:

128 Long Acre
London WC2E 9AN
Tel: +44 (0)20 7447 2000
Fax: +44 (0)20 7240 5771
Website: www.history-minds.com

First published in Great Britain in 2002

© Pearson Education Limited 2002

The right of Philip Rousseau to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

ISBN 0 582 25653 4

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book can be obtained from the Library of Congress

All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the Publishers or a licence permitting restricted copying in the United Kingdom issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0LP. This book may not be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of trade in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published, without the prior consent of the Publishers.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in 11.5/14pt Garamond by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Malaysia

The Publishers' policy is to use paper manufactured from sustainable forests.

CONTENTS



Preface	vi
1 Giving a shape to early Christian history	1
2 Paul and the Jewish past: an apostle and his world	23
3 Jesus of Nazareth: portraits of a saviour	47
4 Individual virtue and its social setting	84
5 Churches as learning communities	124
6 Heroes and survivors: Christians engage with the world	153
7 The Christian empire, a contested experiment: Constantine and his successors	187
8 A crisis of authority	237
9 An ancient legacy and its post-Roman future	280
Epilogue: the price of success	313
Further bibliographical notes and acknowledgements	320
Index	323

since the early third century, and the problem of the *lapsi* had been particularly pressing after Decius's reign (awakening cautious sympathy in Cyprian; prior to his own death under Valerian, and contributing to the intransigence of Novatian). The principles that fuelled the Donatist and Melitian controversies were not, in other words, new. And Constantine's interference, especially in the Donatist affair, could not have been, as I say, immediately reassuring to those who thought they had survived oppression by the state in matters of religion. The Melitians would be swept up generally in the turmoil over Arius; but the Donatists provided Constantine with an early opportunity to browbeat reluctant bishops, not least by forcing them (with some help from Miltiades, bishop of Rome) to create and then abide by conciliar decisions, which he was not ashamed to influence and was eventually required to enforce. He showed in the process a hasty desire for agreement rather than a well-judged assessment of religious principle. To make matters worse for the Donatists' opponents, the rigorism of the dissenters showed every sign of flourishing, even when the pressures that had first encouraged it were released; and they were able to translate their unbending morality into a potentially more permanent theology of the church. One could argue, indeed, that supporting Constantine in his new engagement with the practicalities of Christian order represented a considerable gamble. What might be taken later as a 'triumph' for Christianity was at the time (around 316) simply another phase in the symbiosis between heroic witness and judicious conformity. The more forgiving among the bishops had now invested in a way of relating belief and power that they had previously resisted. The power was still the empire's power – the power of Diocletian's empire, which had fathered Constantine and was still the only power that believers could look to.

The Arian controversy

There is a simple way of describing the Arian conflict, in which Arius is all villain and Athanasius all hero; but such simplicity is unproductive. It has been encouraged, perhaps, by the fact that Arius's mentors and achievements are hard to uncover. He may have been influenced, like his later patron Eusebius of Nicomedia, by Lucian of Antioch (of whom more shortly). Peter of Alexandria seems to have identified him with the Melitians (and he was certainly an ascetic), but he was able to re-establish himself in Alexandria under Peter's successor, gain ordination as a priest, and acquire a reputation as a preacher in the city. He developed what was technically a 'subordinationist' view of the Trinity – placing Jesus below the Father in rank, on the grounds, as he seems to have put it, that 'there was a time when he was not';

the existence of the second person of the Trinity was in some sense subsequent to that of the Father. Some have seen in that argument a connection with the Platonist triad, as interpreted by the school of Plotinus: the One, Mind and the World Soul (the last being the equivalent, therefore, of the Holy Spirit). Alarmed by Arius's views – or rather, perhaps, by the unrest they were fomenting among churchmen – Constantine convened a great meeting of bishops in 325, which he intended to draw from the whole Roman world (the *oikoumenē* – whence our term 'ecumenical'), and which met at Nicaea (modern Iznik), a hundred or so kilometres from the later site of Constantinople. Thanks to the loss of the relevant documents, it is difficult to know exactly what the assembled bishops subscribed to, at least in relation to the Trinity. They certainly condemned Arius. They seem to have thrown themselves behind an existing creed; but they also introduced the unbiblical term *homoousios* ('consubstantial', as westerners traditionally put it, although the modern phrase 'one in being' – literally, 'the same in being' – is probably closer to the Greek). The implication was that the Father and the Son partook of one divine *ousia*. Several problems were thus left unresolved, with fatal results, as we shall see. First, there was the problem of how to describe the *distinct* qualities (if that was the right term) of Father and Son; and second, the Council remained vague about the Holy Spirit. Resort to the term *hupostasis* (which we now translate as 'persons'), and unequivocal acceptance of the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit, were left to the next generation. The Council, in other words, created as many opportunities for argument as it resolved.

Athanasius spent the rest of his career, until his death in 373, fighting to see Nicaea upheld and suffering exile in that cause five times for a total of over twelve years – in 336, 339 (when he went to the West), 356, 362 and 365. From 330 onwards, there followed a sorry tale of dispute, not helped by the fact that Constantine remained ambivalent about the theological issues involved (he allowed himself, when close to death, to be baptized by an Arian). Historians have often deplored the ferocity, and therefore doubted the sincerity, of the antagonists, who fought among themselves as well as against the state. Virulent rhetoric; riotous destruction; refusal of obedience; falsehood, intrigue and murder: these became the norm as the century progressed. Imperial agents were not shy to impose their own sanctions: the eminent were constantly exposed to exile – a deprivation that could break and even kill – and their subordinates were subjected to casual torture. The controversy also seems, in many eyes, to have been marred by futile argument over terminology. Supporters of Arius insisted eventually that the Son was 'entirely unlike' the Father, *anomoios*. Supporters of Nicaea were happy to

remain faithful to the view that the Father was 'the same in being' as the Son, *homoousios*. Various other parties suggested, amid bewildering refinements, that he was 'similar in being', *homoiousios*, or just 'similar' *homoios*.

Those arguments generated a long series of mutually abusive councils. The significant opening salvo was the deposition of Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra in 330. (The recurrence of Antioch in the story was not, as we shall see, accidental.) Marcellus lived until 374 (longer than Athanasius) and provided a constant rallying-point for malcontents. His condemnation reflected animosity towards so-called Sabellianism, which, although at odds with the Arian position, obscured the distinction between the Father and the Son that Nicaea had been careful to preserve. Two councils – one at Antioch in 341, the other at Serdica in 343 – set the agenda for much that followed. While Antioch accepted the moderate and shifting adjustments of Eusebius of Nicomedia, Serdica came to symbolize an intransigence that supported Marcellus and the exiled Athanasius. A more centrist position, espoused by the emperor Constantius, was outlined at Sirmium in 351 but rejected by western bishops at Arles in 353 and Milan in 355. A further compromise, built around the simple *homoios* formula, was hammered out at Seleucia and Ariminum in 359. Much of the momentum of the debate was disturbed by the brief reign of Julian, who had little interest in resolving it. Valentinian I was lukewarm in his commitments. Only Valens continued to adopt an unrelenting Arian policy, which failed to satisfy, however, a new generation of combatants. Theodosius was determined, from the time of his accession in 379, to put an end to the matter, which the Council of Constantinople appears to have done in 381, although the Gothic settlers, now active within the empire and embroiled in Roman politics, had been converted by Arian missionaries, had identified with the faith of Valens (who first brought them across the Danube), and remained faithful to those traditions for some two hundred years.

What one can too easily forget is that there were antecedents to the whole debate. In the first place, opponents of both the Arian and the Sabellianist positions sharpened their theology precisely because they felt that theological reflections in earlier centuries had been too imprecise to meet current requirements; were no longer adequate to express truth and expunge error. It may have seemed in particular that Clement and Origen, concerned with other matters, had given too little attention to the theology of the Trinity. The received wisdom among many Christians in the fourth century was that too much philosophy, too much emphasis on the 'spiritual', had impeded a full understanding of Jesus's humanity; and, as we shall see in the next chapter,

it was Origen's reputation that suffered most as a result. Nevertheless, one is struck by the strength of the Alexandrian theological tradition, which weathered the contest well. The major defenders of the anti-Arian position – Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers and Basil of Caesarea – were, each in a different way, students of Origen.

The issue at stake had already been identified by Tertullian, in his treatise *Against Praxeas*. Praxeas, an easterner who had suffered persecution and had established himself in Rome (like his contemporary Sabellius), was a vigorous opponent of Montanism. In his anxiety to safeguard the unity of God, he had, as Tertullian put it, 'crucified the Father' – a position attributed by Hippolytus, only shortly afterwards, to the theologian Noetus. There lay at the core of Praxeas's theology a deep unwillingness to limit incarnation to the *Logos*, for not only was the godhead thus threatened with division but God's willingness to identify with, and thereby redeem, humanity was, in part at least, called into question. The repugnance of Tertullian and Hippolytus show, therefore, that 'Sabellianism', in one form or another, had become a major source of anxiety. In the East, matters were carried another stage further by Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch from roughly 260 to 268, who also leaned towards a tightly knit Trinity (Father, Wisdom and Word) – at least before the creation: he appears to have been less explicit about the situation at the end of time (none of his writings have survived). A stricter Sabellianist, like Marcellus later, would have supposed that the persons of the Trinity would become once again less distinct. In the interim era of time, the Father's power, for Paul, rested upon the human Jesus – potentially a subordinationist position, akin to that of Arius. Paul has even been thought of as a precursor of Nestorius (whom I shall discuss further in the next two chapters). He was vigorously opposed by followers of Origen – the first time that the term *homoousios* was disputed (and, by Paul's critics, rejected). The complexities and obscurities of Paul's position show that Arius's later declarations were rooted in a longer debate, and are likely to have been more subtle than they were made to appear. An uncertain series of influences linked Arius with Paul, one possible intermediary being Lucian, also from Antioch, who was martyred in 312 (laying claim, therefore, to that sacred prestige) and was perhaps the most notable biblical scholar between Origen and Jerome. His reputation for critical revision and strict interpretation provides an important context for Arius's unwearying attachment to verses of Scripture that, taken literally, supported his theology.

So, once we escape from the bitter and almost deafening polarities created by Athanasius and his admirers, we gain a more accurate impression of what

the *furor* was really about. First, it was concerned with meaning. Biblical exegesis was subjected to new and immense pressures, since 'proof texts' were scrutinized and dissected in ways never ventured before. The result, especially later in the debate, was a fresh understanding of the limits of language; of the extent to which human words could capture aright the essence of God and the relation between God and creation. Basil's *Against Eunomius* and John Chrysostom's treatise *On the Incomprehensibility of God* exemplify the progress made. Second, therefore, the churchmen involved carried to a further stage an ancient interest in cosmology – how a world distinct from God could come into being and be held there; and the part played in that process by the *Logos*, the Son. A firm belief in God's transcendence had long been a source of moral as well as logical pain: was it possible to 'know' so distant a God? Thus, the Arian controversy provided a new and characteristically distinct opportunity to revisit the gnostic tendency. Basil's great sermons *On the Six Days of Creation* (the *Hexaemeron*) show how much the Arian debate had refined the traditions set in place by Clement and Origen; and the 'Eusebian' view of the past, given a further twist by the policies of Constantine, continued to provide its antidote to more mythical interpretations of Genesis. Third, if both the humanity and the divinity of the *Logos* could be assured, together with his role in creation, then it would be easier to understand the mechanics of redemption – first, as something creation stood in need of; second, as something that gave creation eternal dignity. Jesus was not merely a teacher or an example, although he was both: he was an instrument of genuine divinization. Fourth, baptism and the eucharist, now visibly part of a city's life, regained a cosmic identity. They were events that brought time into the realm of the timeless and reflected on earth the inner dynamism of the Trinity itself.

Those were old preoccupations, and they serve to emphasize further the extent to which tensions at the heart of the Christian body were not created solely by Constantine, or by any other believing emperor. However, in addition to its specifically theological significance, the Arian controversy did reflect political realities. With few exceptions, the imperial authorities were intent upon compromise and consensus – typical instruments of government. Many of the churchmen involved appear to have been intransigent, sticking to irreconcilable positions; but official pressure in the cause of re-examination and adjustment meant that positions did change over time. By the end of the fourth century, some clarity had been achieved that was less obvious in the 320s (especially in relation to the role of the Holy Spirit). A capacity for growth in understanding was deeply characteristic of Christian

history. Adamant formulae, whether an emperor's or a bishop's, rarely achieved the unanimity they aspired to. Argument was the rule, acquiescence in monolithic authority the exception. That meant additionally that there were more dissidents than heretics. It was in the interests of the assertive party to tar all opponents with the one brush; but the confusion of the debate shows that there were frequently more than two points of view in contention.

The great champions of the Nicene cause were all, as I say, influenced by Origen; but they were drawn away from leisured reflection on the nature of the Trinity and thrust into a maelstrom of negotiations, appeals and condemnations. Athanasius, Hilary and Basil were each marked by a species of displacement. Athanasius became almost a professional exile and Hilary was banished to the East by Constantius for some four years from 356 (he died in 367); but Basil (d. 379) was also a surprisingly isolated man, who found it constantly difficult to gain and keep allies. (John Chrysostom, priest of Antioch as well as, from 398, bishop of Constantinople, was a comparably uprooted individual.)

Athanasius had proved his ability to formulate ideas in his work *On the Incarnation*; but most of his life after his consecration in 328 was an attempt to set up a circle of likeminded bishops, who would create the cultural space within which sound ideas could be articulated and protected. He wanted to impress upon the emperor and his associates both the logical coherence of his own ideas and the emperor's obligation to be consistent in supporting Constantine's initiative at Nicaea. He was particularly successful in the West, where his presence in the 340s stiffened the resolve of Roman bishops like Julius (d. 352) and Liberius (d. 366). Hilary and Basil (like Chrysostom later) were anxious to retain that strong support, although they did not always attract complete agreement from their potential allies. The long Roman episcopate of Damasus, 366–84, represented a more intransigent but ultimately more successful resistance, which probably did much to enhance the authority of the see, especially once Ambrose of Milan had died in 397. Hilary, an ardent philosopher in the Neoplatonist tradition before his full acceptance of Christianity, marshalled that talent against the Arians in his twelve books *On the Trinity*, showed a fresh subtlety in exegesis (his *Commentary on Matthew* was a novel effort in the Latin world), took advantage of his exile in Phrygia to familiarize himself with the development of eastern asceticism and still found time for a meticulously compiled history of the Arian conflict to date. Basil's chief contribution to the dispute was a highly developed theology of the Holy Spirit – certainly, something required. While one has to acknowledge his deep concern over divisions in the church at Antioch and his abundant

correspondence in the anti-Arian cause, what strikes one most about Basil is his ability to rise above vitriol and myopia (not to mention his own depression) and to create a broad, tolerant view of church life and human dignity. His sermons and his spiritual counsel count for more than his polemics.

There is a moderate but revealing irony in the fact that all three men subscribed to a novel exercise in universality, the Council of Nicaea (which had at least wished to be 'ecumenical', although only half-a-dozen westerners were present). Ever afterwards, appeal was made, in both East and West, to the '318' bishops who had attended. (That was an insecure and inflated estimate – we have no entirely reliable list of signatories – but asserted later by Athanasius in the cause of symbolism: 318 armed retainers had assisted Abraham when he avenged Lot's capture at Siddim.) The irony resided in the fact that all Nicene leaders in the following half-century attempted to isolate and denigrate the champions of what they regarded as a false, politically motivated unity. It remains true, however, that their refusal to conform allowed them to rise above local interest. Instead, they had recourse to history – particularly, in their case, the history of the debate itself and of the declarations and documents that had emanated from both church councils and the imperial court. Appealing to the past in defence of one's own opinion was by now a traditional ploy, especially effective against highly conceptual theologies; but the bandying of documents, much in the spirit of Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, was a new inflection of the old discourse.

The understandable wish to argue on a high plane does not, however, alter the fact that the controversy was also deeply embedded in the politics of the empire's great cities. Constantine could not have anticipated that the Arian conflict would at least influence heavily, if not govern, the fourth-century agenda for working out in practice the proper relations between cities and emperors. It certainly mirrored in religious terms a range of broader problems that affected those relations. Widespread corruption among officials and endemic evasion among those whom they governed helped to expand the urban class that suffered from injustice and material hardship. That class in turn provided a new and disorderly constituency for less scrupulous Christian leaders. The tensions generated for and against the Arian position impelled many bishops to appeal as much to those below them socially as to potential allies among the imperial élite. One must add to that the rivalry between the cities themselves. The pretension and privilege represented by Constantinople after 330 signalled not just a shift in the empire's centre of gravity but also a bitter and damaging affront to what were, among other things, older centres of religious authority. Here we can return to Antioch,

recalling all that I said above about developments through the third century into the age of Lucian and Eustathius. It was Leontius of Antioch, bishop from 344 to 357, who first offered succour to Eunomius, the great Arian theologian of the next generation; and Eunomius was eventually championed by Leontius's successor Eudoxius, who subsequently captured the see of Constantinople. Connections of such a sort were essential to the survival of the Arian position. And this was the Antioch dangerously divided in its episcopal loyalties, the rumbustious Antioch of Julian, the Antioch so vividly displayed in the writings of Libanius, the Antioch that rioted perilously in 387, the Antioch that housed the prefecture of the East and commanded and supplied the armies that countered Persia. On a smaller scale, many cities displayed an analogous range of tensions and engagements – one thinks easily of Alexandria in the East and of Milan and Rome in the West. Within such settings, the writing of a treatise *On the Trinity*, even if not precisely so named, was almost a sine qua non for anyone ambitious for episcopal consecration – a proof of his fitness for leadership. And where the sources are sufficiently informative – in the correspondence of Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine, for example – we quickly gain a full picture of a bishop's dependence on the laity of his city and region; a convergence of interests that Arianism did much to both test and foster.

The death of the persecutors?

All the tensions characteristic of the Arian conflict were compounded by the reign of the emperor Julian. He proved, as we have seen, that not only could an emperor, while cast in the image of Constantine, propagate error (as Constantius had done in the eyes of the Nicene party): he could attack Christianity itself. In less than two years, Julian set in motion a process of disenchantment. Quite apart from being a member of Constantine's dynasty, Julian aped so many of the man's ambitions: single rule and the conquest of Persia, but also a sense of intimacy with the divine and a wish to set up an all-embracing culture that echoed perversely the Christian religion – in its theology, its priesthood and its social concern. Julian's 'apostasy' put a different spin on his religious diligence, when compared with Diocletian or Galerius. Christians experienced again the fears and disciplines of the martyr's world (for he did make martyrs); and Julian's youthful familiarity with Christian belief and practice made his persecution even more horrifying. Then, by his famous ordinance forbidding Christians to hold teaching positions, he forced them to reassess in starker terms their dependence on classical forms and images. They embraced the Bible with a new enthusiasm, as the undisputed