

**The Council of Nicea 325 AD and the Concept of *Homoousios*  
in the Struggle for Monotheism and the Divine in Christ**

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**Examination of the Arian controversy will reveal that it was only part of a larger struggle for precision of confessional language whose goal was to relate accurately the confession of the divine in Christ to the Church's equally ancient monotheistic confession. In order to accomplish this and reject the Arian error, the church redefined and made use of Platonic philosophical terminology in the *homoousios*, which was in itself ambiguous and had previously been rejected as heretical.**

In 325 AD the Emperor Constantine called together a synod of bishops at Nicea in order to discuss and solve the pressing Arian controversy within the church. The doctrine Arius proposed called into question the appropriateness of the church's basic confession of Jesus Christ as God in order to maintain the church's equally ancient confession of monotheism. This question of how the church's confession of a divine Christ related to the confession of monotheism was not new; only Arius' answer was new. Examination of the Arian controversy will reveal that it was only part of a larger struggle for precision of confessional language whose goal was to relate accurately the confession of the divine in Christ to the Church's equally ancient monotheistic confession. In order to accomplish this and reject the Arian error, the church redefined and made use of Platonic philosophical terminology in the *homoousios*, which was in itself ambiguous and had previously been rejected as heretical.

Before the Arian struggle could take place, 150 years of dealing with the question: "How can we worship Jesus as God and the Father as God and yet believe there is only one God?" were to set the stage. The tension between these two confessions can be traced back to the first century. The church inherited its monotheistic confession from the Jewish faith in which the Shema confesses: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."<sup>1</sup> At the same time the essential elements of the Church's Christology were expressed already in the earliest years after the resurrection in the form of the New Testament confessions which designate the risen Jesus to be Christ, Son of God, and Lord.<sup>2</sup> Although the formula "Jesus is God" is not used originally in the same way as these other primitive confessions, the titles ascribed to Him are of such weight that it is not surprising that already in the New Testament Jesus Christ is called "God."<sup>3</sup> The liturgical clues in the New Testament only confirm the witness of Pliny in 112 AD that Christians gathered

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 6:4.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:8; Mark 8:29; Matt. 3:17. That these confessions arose in the first years after the Resurrection has been shown among others by Larry W. Hurtado in *One God One Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), by M. Hengel in "The Crucified Son of God," *The Messiah, Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* ( Charlesworth, James H. ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992: 425-448), and by I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 9:5; Acts 20:28; John 1:1ff; 1 John 5:20.

and sang hymns to Christ “as unto a god.”<sup>4</sup> Parallel and related to these was the equally important and fundamental Christian idea of the threeness in God as expressed in the ancient liturgical Baptismal formula, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These basic doctrinal pillars were sufficient for the church in the separation from the Synagogue. They were even sufficient in the earliest doctrinal struggles with docetism and gnosticism. Coming out of these controversies in the middle of the second century “Christians were sure that the Redeemer did not belong to some lower order of divine reality, but was God himself.”<sup>5</sup> But by the second half of the second century questions were raised as to how these basic Christian convictions related to one another. How was it possible to reconcile strict monotheism with the confession of Jesus as God? The power of this question was to fuel the speculations of the Neo-Platonist theologians in Alexandria, the Sabellian heresy, the heresy of Paul of Samosata, and the fourth century controversies started by Arius.

The attempts of the third century to answer this question established the boundaries within which the battle of the fourth century would take place. Praxeus was one of the first to attempt to explicitly answer this difficult question. Praxeus seems to have been the student of a certain Noetus who had come to Rome from Smyrna preaching that, “Christ was the Father himself and the Father himself was born, suffered and died.”<sup>6</sup> This theology is often called Modalistic Monarchianism because its adherents protected the “monarchy” of God by stressing the identity of the Son and the Father as simply different modes of God's appearance.<sup>7</sup> This was their way of protecting the monotheistic faith of the church.<sup>8</sup>

It was in response to these ideas that Tertullian wrote his famous work *Against Praxeus* which in large part established the Latin terminology on this question for the West.<sup>9</sup> Tertullian tried to explain the

<sup>4</sup> Pliny, *Letter to Trajan*, as quoted in Pelikan, p. 173. Clearly in the early years of the second century it was common to ascribe divinity to Jesus calling him God. Ignatius *ad Eph.* 7 & 19; *ad Rom.* 3; *ad Smyr.* 1; 2 Clem. I. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Pelikan, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 343.

<sup>7</sup> Pelikan, p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> Aland, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 499.

mystery of the Godhead in terms of physical images, “For the monarchy belongs principally to him by whom it was communicated to the Son and, being exercised by two, who are so closely united with each other, it remains a monarchy.”<sup>10</sup> If the monarchy is thus preserved it does not answer to the language of monotheism in which God is said to be One. To accomplish this Tertullian stated that there was only one *substantia* in God but at the same time there are three *personae*. To make sense of this Tertullian again resorts to physical images to explain the distinction of the Father and Son:

In what respect or form of God was he (the Son) then? Certainly in some form or aspect, not in none: for who will deny that God is a body, although God is a spirit? For a spirit is a body *sui generis*, in its own form. And if those things which are invisible have, in God’s presence, their own bodies and shapes, by which they are known to God alone, how much more shall that which was emitted from his own substance be not without substance. And so, whatever the substance of the Word was, that I call a person; and for that person I claim the name of Son and, acknowledging the Son, I hold that he is a second (person), other than the Father.<sup>11</sup>

So Tertullian took up the language of the Son being an “emission” from the substance of the Father. The problem was that Valentinus, a gnostic heretic, had used this language too to describe his plethora of Aeons as emissions (προβολάς) from their father.<sup>12</sup> So already in Tertullian’s day Greek philosophical terminology, as used by those outside of the church, was affecting the way the church’s doctrine was taught and developed. Tertullian tried to redefine the term by saying that Valentinus made his “emanations” so separate from their source that they did not know their father but

as we explain it, the Son alone knows the Father. ... The Word, therefore, being always in God, says, I am in the Father; and because he was always with God it is written, And the Word was with God. He was never separated from the Father, never other than the Father: for I and the Father are one. This is Truth’s emission [ προβολή ], which safeguards the unity of God; for we say that the Son was emitted from, but not separated from the Father.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Adv. Prax.*, 3; 91, 28ff. Quoted in Lonergan, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Adv. Prax.*, 7; Quoted in Lonergan, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Adv. Prax.*, 7, Quoted in Lonergan, p. 44-45.

Tertullian's language is that of physical reality and conceives of the relationship between the Father and the Son as an organic unity and undividedness. He did accomplish his goal against the Monarchians, providing a terminological model to explain that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, that both are God and yet there is only one God. And yet it is important to note that his model contains a certain implicit subordinationism in that the Son is but a part of the substance of the Father, and as a result the substance of the Father had been divided or become less, and further that the emanation of the Son was not eternal but one that started in time.<sup>14</sup>

While Tertullian's model served the Latin West it was Origen of Alexandria who provided the East with their terminological model. Origen's language was developed not in direct contest with the Monarchians but in battle against the Gnostics and in an attempt to present the Christian faith in the clothing of Platonic philosophical language. In speaking of the generation of the Son, Origen rejected "any account that appealed to the analogy of human or animal generation, and he characterized as absurd fables the kind of extrusions from the Godhead that some people pictured to themselves."<sup>15</sup> In this respect he would not have accepted Tertullian's model. He said the Persons are numerically distinct but not in a local sense: "For to ascribe division to an incorporeal substance is the act not only of extreme impiety but of the dullest folly." Origen rejected ideas of emanations and projections and all other spatial images using terms such as "united" and "separated".<sup>16</sup> Opposed to Tertullian, the generation of the Son is not something that started in time but is an eternal process.<sup>17</sup> It is wrong to say that there was a time when he was not (ἦν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ).<sup>18</sup> Having rejected all material images Origen has more difficulty speaking

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<sup>14</sup> Tertullian considered this emanation of the Son to have occurred not in eternity but in time: "There was a time when there was neither sin to make God a judge, nor a son to make God a Father." *Adv. Hermogenem*, 3. Lonergan, p. 48. This idea will play a major role in the Arian controversy.

<sup>15</sup> Lonergan, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Lonergan, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Bigg, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> *De Princ.*, i. 2, iv. 38. As quoted in Schaff, p. xxvi.

positively. “We worship the Father of Truth, and the Son who is Truth, Two in person, but One in agreement and concert and identity of will.”<sup>19</sup> He introduces the term *hypostaseis* (ὑποστάσεις, persons) to speak of that which is distinct or plural within the Godhead and, less consistently, uses the term *ousia* (οὐσία, substance or essence) to speak of the unity of the Godhead. The Father and the Son are two hypostases, one of which, coming from the other, is related to its source as image to exemplar.<sup>20</sup> Origen also sought to express the unity and trinity of the Godhead with language distinguishing “the God” from “God”. Commenting on John 1:1 Origen says:

Herein lies the solution to the problem that disturbs many people who, professing their love for God, and fearful of saying that there are two gods, fall prey to false and impious doctrines, either denying that the Son is really distinct from the Father, because he whom they call the Son is only God with another name, or else denying the Son’s divinity, saying that his nature and essence are quite different from the Father’s. To them we say that αὐτόθεος is indeed *the* God [God himself], which is why our Saviour, praying to the Father, says 'that they may know you, the one true God.' whatever else, other than him who is called αὐτόθεος, is also God, is deified by participation, by sharing [μετοχή] in his divinity, and is more properly to be called not *the* God [ὁ θεός] but simply God [θεός]. This name, of course, is his in a special way, who is first-born of all creation, being the first to be with God, drawing the divinity to himself.<sup>21</sup>

In this way Origen used Plato's notion of participation to find a middle way between Sabellianism and Adoptionism.<sup>22</sup> All in all, Origen’s ideas are complex and multifaceted. His system of thought, based on Platonic ideas, led him to teach the eternity of the creation and pre-existence of the soul and other items which were never accepted by the church. In his language he, like Tertullian, created a terminological model that explained the basic questions at hand but at least implied a subordination of the Son to the Father. And some of those in the East, who were Origenists but followed a reductionism of his ideas, would increase this subordination to the point that it only required the logic of Arius to generate the controversy of the fourth century.

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<sup>19</sup> *Contra Celsum*, viii. 12, Quoted in Bigg, p. 178.

<sup>20</sup> Lonergan, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> Origen, *In Joan.*, II, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Lonergan, p. 61.

The Monarchian ideas did not go away quickly. Sometime around 220 Sabellius appeared and made the language of the Monarchian position more subtle. Sabellius argued on the basis of Isaiah 44:6 that if there is only one God then the words of this text applies to Christ: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no other God.” Sabellius invented the term Sonfather (υἱοπάτωρ) to designate this one God.<sup>23</sup> This position was branded a heresy and named Sabellianism. At about the same time another flavor of Monarchianism arose. It suggested that Jesus was a mere man until his baptism when the Spirit descended upon Him enabling Him to perform miracles. Then after his resurrection Jesus was adopted into the Godhead. This is called Adoptionist Monarchianism or simply Adoptionism.<sup>24</sup> It will appear again importantly later in the third century in Paul of Samosata.

Monarchianism arose again c. 255 AD among the Christians of Cyrenaica in the form of the Sabellian “Sonfather.” Importantly, they also introduced the term *homoousios* to indicate that the Father and Son were numerically identical, the Son is the Father. In response Dionysius, now bishop in Alexandria (233-265), apparently a man whose language at times lacked some consistency and precision, wrote a refutation in which he called the Son a “creature”, said he had been “made”, that “there was a time when he was not” ( ἦν ποτε ὅτι οὐκ ἦν ) and rejected the *homoousios*. At the time certain orthodox churchmen complained about this, writing to his namesake, Dionysius, bishop of Rome. The bishop of Rome wrote to Dionysius of Alexandria informing him of the complaints concerning his statements. Dionysius of Alexandria then wrote a “Refutation and Defense” which ended the controversy at that time. But more importantly, it seemed to represent a progressive tendency among some to take Origen’s doctrine further down the subordinationist road and 70 years later the Arians would appeal to Dionysius’ original work against the Sabellians as presenting the Arian position and as rejecting the Nicene terminology.

Finally, of interest and importance is the election of Paul of Samosata as bishop of Antioch in c. 262. He taught that Jesus was a normal man until the Spirit who inspired the prophets descended upon

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<sup>23</sup> Pelikan, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 344.

him at his baptism; that is, he taught a form of Adoptionist Monarchianism. But he also spoke of the Logos (Word) which played a large part in the Origenistic Christology, not as having become flesh but as an activity of God apart and separate from the earthly Jesus. And in this fashion he also used the term *homoousios* to indicate that the Word was not essentially connected with Jesus but was of one essence with the Father in the manner that a man's speech is of one essence with himself. So Paul concluded that “the Lord did not pre-exist in an individual existence of his own before the incarnation, nor did he have a divinity of his own but only his Father's indwelling in him.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Paul's use of *homoousios* was different from the way that the Sabellians had used it, yet it was equally accurate in its role within his theology. This served to make the word all the more suspicious in the East. In 264 Dionysius of Alexandria condemned Paul's ideas and soon there were a series of synods held. After careful questioning by one of his own presbyters, who was also a leader of Antioch's school of rhetoric, Paul's differences from the orthodox were clearly delineated: there was no essential unity between Christ and the Word; Christ was not preexistent; Substance ( *ousia* ) and participation were not the same.<sup>26</sup> Paul was condemned. The ‘theology of Paul of Samosata’ became one of the standard accusations of heresy in the following years.

Looking back on the late second and third centuries we see that the young church was challenged by new and sophisticated teachings based upon parts of the church's own confession. The Christological confessions long taken up into the liturgy, the Trinitarian baptismal confessions<sup>27</sup> and the monotheistic assertions which accomplished the separation from Judaism were no longer explicit enough to meet the questions of the day. The heresies of Paul of Samosata and of Sabellianism came from within the church itself and represented the thoughts of many who were trying to solve the “How can this be” of the church's established faith and confession in rather simplistic ways. In answering the question, perhaps without

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<sup>25</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 384-385.

<sup>26</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 385-386.

<sup>27</sup> See J.N.D. Kelly's discussion of the second century and the creedal forms present at that time.

realizing it, they had put forward language or terminology that was inconsistent with or even contrary to other parts of established orthodox confession.

The important terminology already introduced into the debate by the beginning of the fourth century included the West's *substantia* and *personae*, Origen's ὑποστάσεις and οὐσία, and the introduction of *homoousios* used largely by the Adoptionists and Sabellians. Further, the West and the East did not always communicate well because the standard Latin translation for the Greek *hypostaseis*, which the East used to designate the individual persons of the Godhead, was *substantia*, which the West, following Tertullian, used to designate the common unified essence of God. Another problem which was to make the Arian struggle that much more difficult was the sheer ambiguity of these terms which were being used. In the philosophy from which they arose *hypostaseis* and *ousia* were largely synonymous being distinguished perhaps only by one being Stoic and the other Platonic. The church's later distinction between them as "person" and "substance or essence" came only as the result of its own definitions, not from the words themselves.<sup>28</sup> The ambiguity of *ousia* is indicated already in Aristotle's *Categories* which speak of a πρώτη οὐσία (first essence) and a δευτέρα οὐσία (second essence) as the distinction between an individual (being) on the one hand and a genus or species (common essence) on the other hand. G.C. Stead argues this is only a beginning and is able to identify 28 possible semantic meanings of the word.<sup>29</sup> *Homoousios* then is ambiguous also, meaning on the one hand "identical individual essence," as the Sabellians intended it, or on the other hand, "same essence," as two individual people can be said to have the same human essence. In light of this, the orthodox theologians found it much easier to recognize error and condemn it (Negative Theology) than to provide a doctrinal formulation that adequately expressed the "How" of what had gone before (Positive Theology). Only with the increasing precision of thought and language that had come in time and with the impetus given by Arius was the church able to express normative positive answers to the questions of how the earlier established doctrines of the church related

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<sup>28</sup> Bigg, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Stead, "The Concept", p. 10.

to one another. But this would only happen with decades of struggle and, as it turned out, in the context of imperial political maneuvering.

The difficult internal struggles of the third century were topped off as it were by the persecution of Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth. At first only the churches and Christian books were targeted, then the clergy, and finally, in 304, all Christians. In 305 Diocletian and Maximian abdicated their offices as Augusti and the fires of persecution subsided.<sup>30</sup> In 312 Constantine seized control of the empire as senior Augustus with the help of his divine protector. Constantine's conversion to Christianity and especially his conversion experience have received a multitude of interpretations.<sup>31</sup> However, without doubt Constantine quickly took a great interest in the affairs of the church with a view of gaining unity in the church and in the Empire. With the benefits and official recognition he lavished on the church he set in motion great changes for church and for empire. Already in 313 Constantine tried to deal with the Donatist schism in North Africa first through tribunal and conciliar decisions and finally by imperial order. But by 321 Constantine had learned that he could not rule the church or eliminate its divisions by decree. He would have to seek the ecclesiastical unity he so desired by other means.<sup>32</sup>

Against this background then, what follows is the history proper of the Arian controversy. This history does not begin or end with the council of Nicea in 325 AD, but rather begins with dissension in the church of Alexandria in 318 and ends no sooner than the council of Constantinople in 381. It includes more than just two parties, the Arian and the orthodox. The landscape is complex and includes the Arians as an easily identifiable innovation, the "conservative" Eastern bishops who were largely Origenistic and subordinated the Son to the Father and hated Sabellianism, the Anti-Arians led by Athanasius, who hated Arian doctrine as the destruction of salvation, and the new Sabellians who came out of the Anti-Arian party. This all leads to a complex history which with additional documents discovered in the twentieth century has even been significantly reinterpreted in places.

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<sup>30</sup> Frend, *Rise*, pp. 456-463.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Eadie's *The Conversion of Constantine*

<sup>32</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 492.

In Alexandria in 318 Arius was functioning as a professor of scriptural exegesis in the school there and as presbyter in the church under bishop Alexander. It seems likely that the entire Arian matter began as a controversy over the exegesis of Proverbs 8:22ff.<sup>33</sup> Arius opposed his bishop and reasoned that “If the Father begat the Son, He that was begotten has a beginning of existence; and from this it is evident, that there was when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows that He had His essence from the non-existent”<sup>34</sup> Once Arius’ views were in the open the controversy widened. Arius gained some supporters among the laity and clergy. Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, convoked a council of one hundred bishops which condemned and deposed Arius.<sup>35</sup> Alexander sent out a letter in 319, apparently written by his deacon Athanasius<sup>36</sup>, signed by 80 of his clergy, condemning the Arians. In it, Arius’ errors are listed as teaching: 1 - God was not always a father, but there was when He was not a father and there was when the Son was not (ἦν ποτε ὅτι οὐκ ἦν), 2 - The Word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing; 3 - therefore, the Son is a creature and a work. He is not like the Father in essence, nor his true Word or Wisdom which are in God; 4 - The Son is by nature mutable and susceptible of change; 5 - the Father is invisible and unknown to the Son.<sup>37</sup> For Arius, Christ was the first of all the creation through whom all other things were made but He was not true God. Through letters and the writing of his famous *Thalia*, Arius’ ideas were quickly spread about and sometime around 320, Arius, in a letter to Eusebius bishop of Nicomedia, claimed the support of Eusebius of Caesarea and “all the bishops of the East” because they joined him in saying “God has existence without beginning, prior to His Son.”<sup>38</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, who are often confused, would continue to play a major role in the Arian controversy for years to come. In a letter to his bishop Alexander, Arius

<sup>33</sup> Pelikan, p. 193. See Euseb. *Vit.*, ii. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Socrates, *H.E.*, I.5., in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 340.

<sup>35</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 495.

<sup>36</sup> G.C. Stead, *Athanasius’ Earliest Written Work*. This conclusion is also hinted at in Schaff, p. xvi. The letter is preserved in Socrates, *H.E.*, I.6.4ff.

<sup>37</sup> Socrates, *H.E.*, I.6.4ff., in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 342.

<sup>38</sup> Theodoret, *H.E.*, I.5.I-4; Epiphanius, *Haer.*, 69.6, quoted in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 344.

makes clear that he thinks he is defending the Oneness of God by rejecting the *homoousios* and the Sonfather of the heretics. The Son was begotten “before time” but “not eternal or co-eternal.” In good Origenistic manner, he simply rejected all ideas of His being consubstantial with the Father because for him this implied the Father is “divisible and alterable and material.”<sup>39</sup> In yet another letter Alexander rejected the idea that Arius’ doctrine was the same as his own. He said that the Arians were driven mad by the devil, and that Arius’ heresy was like that of Paul of Samosata.<sup>40</sup>

Both sides of the controversy were obviously fishing about for the support of bishops throughout the East and the East was soon split in its opinions concerning the controversy. Apparently, Arian doctrine had made large inroads in the provinces of Bithynia, Asia, and Cyrenaica. The Historian Sozomen reports that Eusebius of Nicomedia called a council in his See which found in Arius’ favor.<sup>41</sup> As Logan points out, Eusebius of Caesarea and others were making propaganda tours through these provinces in favor of Arius. Marcellus bishop of Ancyra, another important character in the controversy for years to come, criticized Eusebius of Caesarea for preaching in Ancyra that the people ought believe as he did in “two οὐσίαι and πράγματα and δυνάμεις and θεοί.”<sup>42</sup> This rather remarkable way of speaking seems to be Arianism, though not attested by Arius himself, for the Arians adopted Origen’s language of three hypostases in the Godhead<sup>43</sup> and at the same time denied the Father and the Son were alike in *ousia*. It was only a natural conclusion, therefore, to speak of two *ousiai*.<sup>44</sup> To Marcellus, who was critical of

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Alexander of Alexandria, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 346.

<sup>40</sup> Circular letter of Alexander of Alexandria, Theodoret, *H.E.*, I.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 347-349.

<sup>41</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 495.

<sup>42</sup> Eusebius, *Cont. Marc.*, I. 4. 45 f., quoted in Logan, p. 436. “two substances and things and powers and Gods.”

<sup>43</sup> Letter of Arius to Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, *On the Synods of Ariminm and Seleuceia*, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 346.

<sup>44</sup> Davies, p. 611-612. The phrase “two Gods” while at first sight shocking seems not to have been an Arian phrase. It seems to have derived from Plato’s discussion of “first and second gods” and was applied to the relationship of the Father and the Son by theologians even in the West where it was confessed the Father and Son were of one *substantia*. This manner of speaking would be condemned later in the Arian controversy. See Davies, p. 613 and n. 18. Davies entire article, “Constantine’s Editor”, seems to show that Eusebius put the Arian phrase “two ousiai” into the mouth of Constantine by editing Constantine’s address, *Oratio ad Coetum Sanctorum*, after the Emperor’s death, at the time that he appended it to his *Vita Constantini*.

Origenism and viciously opposed the Arians, this was unacceptable, even amazing. At the time, Marcellus criticized Eusebius. Later, with things more in his favor Eusebius would return the favor by writing an entire work against Marcellus. With such disruption and division in the church of the East, it was only a matter of time before Constantine became involved.

In 324 Constantine made his first inquiry into the Arian matter by sending Hosius, bishop of Cordova, as an imperial agent to Alexandria. Constantine clearly did not yet understand the severity of the controversy. In a letter sent with Hosius, Constantine stated that he had heard the dispute was about “a certain passage of the law,” that the controversy was a scholarly disagreement that should have been kept among learned men instead of disrupting the unity of the church, and that since no heresy respecting the worship of God was involved they should “therefore well join in communion and fellowship. For as long as you continue to contend about these small and very insignificant questions, I believe it indeed to be not merely unbecoming, but positively evil, that so large a portion of God’s people which belongs to your jurisdiction should be thus divided.”<sup>45</sup> Constantine wanted peace in the church. But Hosius found the matter different upon investigation and was intent on looking into the Arian matter further. He was a western bishop with no affinity to Origenistic language and certainly no toleration for Arian doctrine. His influence was to be felt shortly in an anti-Arian synod in Antioch.

That there had been a council in Antioch only months before the Council of Nicea was literally unknown for centuries until its synodical letter was discovered and published in 1905. This letter has significantly altered the way the Nicene council and events there are viewed.<sup>46</sup> In December 324 one of Alexander’s supporters, the bishop of Antioch, died. Eustathius, an energetic anti-Arian, was elected the new bishop of the apostolic see of Antioch and on this occasion a council was held there in January of

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<sup>45</sup> Letter of Constantine to Alexander and Arius, Contained in Eusebius’ *Vit.*, II.63-72, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 347-349.

<sup>46</sup> Holland, p. 163. He states: “Selten wurde in der Kirchengeschichtsschreibung die Interpretation eines bedeutenden Zeitabschnittes so vollständig von einem einzelnen Dokument beherrscht wie das Bild von der Nizänischen Epoche, das man sich im 20. Jahrhundert aufgrund des Rundschreibens der Synode von Antiochien macht.”

325.<sup>47</sup> Hosius was again on the scene as the Emperor's agent and was questioning suspected Arians. Perhaps under the influence of Marcellus' report of Eusebius' language, Hosius questioned Narcissus of Neronias whether he, like Eusebius of Caesarea, believed in "two *ousiai*." Narcissus replied that he in fact believed in three!<sup>48</sup> The result of the synod was an anti-Arian confession of faith and the exclusion of Eusebius of Caesarea, Narcissus, and another bishop from fellowship of the attending bishops because of their refusal to sign the synod's proclamation. The confession spoke in common Origenistic phrases but rejected the Arian propositions that the Son was begotten "from that which is not" (i.e. made from nothing) and that he was "made" instead of begotten. It rejected Arius' contention that the Son was a product of the Father's will (i.e. the Father simply chose to make him) and also rejected Paul of Samosata's adoptionistic theology which Alexander had accused Arian of teaching. The confession closed by anathematizing those who think the Son is a creature or that there was a time when he was not.<sup>49</sup> Holland argued that there was nothing in this confession that Eusebius could not sign but Abramowski and Logan have countered that it was not so much the Origenistic positive confession that would have been a problem for Eusebius but the rejection of Arius and his followers when Eusebius had recently been promoting their views.<sup>50</sup> The synodical letter was closed by commending the excommunicated bishops to the "great and priestly synod" about to take place at Ancyra, the see of Marcellus.<sup>51</sup> It seems plausible that at some point in his investigation Hosius had written to Constantine on the serious nature of the Arian controversy and Constantine had reacted by scheduling the great ecumenical council in Marcellus' see of Ancyra.<sup>52</sup> At any rate, for some reason, Constantine had decided to hold the synod in Ancyra and then

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<sup>47</sup> Friend, *Rise*, p. 497.

<sup>48</sup> Logan, p. 431. The three being Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As to the suggestion of Marcellus' influence on Hosius see p. 435.

<sup>49</sup> Synodal Letter of the Synod of Antioch, 325, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 354-357.

<sup>50</sup> Holland, pp. 167-171. Abramowski, pp. 364-366. Logan, p. 435.

<sup>51</sup> Synodal Letter of the Synod of Antioch, 325, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 357.

<sup>52</sup> Logan, p. 434.

changed his mind and moved it to Nicea where the Emperor and over 200 (perhaps 300) bishops met to resolve the divisions plaguing the East.<sup>53</sup>

On May 20, 325 the Council of Nicea opened. It was known beforehand as the “great and priestly synod”; afterwards it would be known as the first of the church’s seven ecumenical councils. It marked the first major effort at leading the church by a Christian Emperor. In the following centuries this would be commonplace, even necessary, in the East and its theology. But now only twenty years after Diocletian’s persecution, some of the attending bishops still bore scars on their bodies from the Empire’s latest attempt to crush the church. The emotional and psychological impression of seeing the Roman Emperor playing such a major role in such a large gathering of bishops must have been enormous. The emperor came to gain unity by excluding the innovation causing division; the orthodox bishops came to preserve orthodox doctrine by condemning heresy. Arius himself and the main Arian propositions had no chance.

We do not have an exact record of the official proceedings of the council. What we have must be pieced together from accounts given by some who were there or from comments of others who seem to have had access to information no longer available. Three main parties can be identified at the council: 1 - the Arian party proper made up of those who were Arians by conviction, 2 - the strict anti-Arian party which supported Alexander, and finally 3 - what has been called the “conservative party” made up of the average Eastern bishops who were Origenistic in theology. The Arian party was few in number: Arius himself, Eusebius of Nicomedia, the aforementioned Narcissus of Neronias and perhaps 15 or so others. The anti-Arian party too was a minority of bishops. It was made up largely of the Alexandrian and Egyptian bishops plus those Eastern bishops who were critical of Origen’s theology and exegesis including names such as Marcellus and Eustathius, and the Western bishops, especially Hosius of Cordova. The conservative party was the majority at the council and was made up of Eastern bishops who had inherited Origenistic language and theology. While not approving of Arius’ innovative

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<sup>53</sup> Constantine’s Letter of Summons to Nicea, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 358.

propositions, they feared Sabellianism as much and were very uncomfortable with the anti-Arian party's *homoousios*, which to them carried all kinds of implications of a change or loss in the *ousia* of the Father. Schaff makes Eusebius of Caesarea the most outstanding member of this group even if he leaned more toward Arianism than against it.<sup>54</sup>

Once the synod had assembled and taken care of preliminary business, attention was turned to the Arian problem. The precise order of things is uncertain. Apparently early in the discussions or even before the council the conservative majority had largely concluded that the Arian doctrine was unacceptable. When Eusebius of Nicomedia arose and presented a confession of faith representing the Arian teaching, the statement so agitated the gathered bishops that they shouted Eusebius down and the document containing his confession was torn to shreds in front of everyone! Apparently this powerful response was enough to cause some defections and the Arian party dwindled to five.<sup>55</sup>

According to Athanasius, the synod wished to denounce the Arians with a creed using only words of scripture itself such as confessing that the Son is "from God" (John 1:13), and is the "Word" and "Wisdom." But the Arians accepted such phrases by understanding them in their own manner. For example, they understood "from God" in the sense of 1 Cor. 8:6: "There is one God from whom are all things."<sup>56</sup> For this reason the synod decided that they had to more clearly express their doctrine in a way that the Arians could not accept. Eusebius of Caesarea, still under provincial excommunication, came forward and presented the traditional local creed used in his church. It was a creed standard in the East.<sup>57</sup> It was certainly acceptable but did little to solve the Arian difficulty and so the Emperor suggested the addition of the term *homoousios*.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For this whole system of classification which seems fairly well agreed upon, see Schaff, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>55</sup> Schaff, p. xix. cf. Athanasius, *de Decretis*, I. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Athanasius, *de Decretis*, 19. Schaff, p. 162.

<sup>57</sup> See Kelly, chapters VI and VII.

<sup>58</sup> Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to His Church, Socrates, *H.E.*, I.8; Theodoret, *H.E.*, I.12; in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 364-368.

The term *homoousios* at this point had a very questionable pedigree. It had been used by the Sabellians to declare that the Father and the Son were one and the same. And because of the philosophical term *ousia* this term had very strong materialistic connotations so that its use, if not Sabellian, indicated a diminishing or a dividing of the *ousia* of the Father in the generation of the Son. For these two reasons the term was extremely suspicious to most Eastern bishops who used Origen's language of three *hypostaseis* in the Godhead. And it was especially in light of the materialistic sense that Arius himself had rejected the term in his explanation of his doctrine. The term had also been used by Paul of Samosata to indicate that the Logos or Word was of one essence with the Father but not with Jesus, who was a mere man later adopted into the Godhead. In the third century, when Dionysius of Alexandria had rejected the term *homoousios* as used by the Sabellians of Cyrenaica, the bishop of Rome had not done so and Dionysius, in his *Defense*, had to admit to a right use of the term though it was not Scriptural. The word was thus fraught with difficulties and the reason for its introduction into the council as a solution to the Arian problem can almost certainly be traced in large part to the Arians' great distaste for the word rather than to any previous careful and thoughtful use or definition of the term by the orthodox.

Constantine, then, is responsible for introducing this Trinitarian watchword into the debate at Nicea. The question arises, then, as to how the Emperor had latched upon this word in order to suggest it into the midst of this fervent debate. Schaff answers, "We cannot but recognize the 'prompter' Hosius behind the Imperial recommendation."<sup>59</sup> It has been thought by many scholars that the word was thus a Western intrusion into an Eastern creed, namely, that of the Eusebius' church of Caesarea, which was overhauled to include the new word and three additional anti-Arian phrases. But J.N.D. Kelly has shown that it was not Eusebius' creed which was edited to hold the new confessional phrase.<sup>60</sup> And as for the *homoousios* itself, it is less than clear that an Eastern bishop like Marcellus might not have suggested the phrase to Hosius

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<sup>59</sup> Schaff, p. xix.

<sup>60</sup> Kelly, pp. 217-230.

who then passed it on to the Emperor.<sup>61</sup> The historian Philostorgius reports that Hosius and St. Alexander reached an understanding together before the council on using this terminology.<sup>62</sup> However it occurred, the synod adopted the word desired by Constantine by inserting it along with several other anti-Arian phrases into an Eastern creed and adopting it as a test of orthodoxy. The following is the text of the creed with the anti-Arian phrases emphasized:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible,  
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten,  
THAT IS, FROM THE SUBSTANCE OF THE FATHER, God from God, light from light, TRUE GOD FROM  
TRUE GOD, BEGOTTEN NOT MADE, OF ONE SUBSTANCE WITH THE FATHER, through whom all things  
came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and  
because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and  
rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the  
dead  
And in the Holy Spirit. (Kelly, p. 215-216)

At Nicea the anti-Arian party had its way. Constantine tried to put aside the fears of the conservative bishops toward the new phrases which had never appeared in their creeds before nor were to be found in Scripture. He explained that the *homoousios* was not to be understood in a material sense by which the Father's essence was diminished or divided.<sup>63</sup> With this explanation everyone signed the document excepting two bishops of the Arian party. Arius and his two faithful followers were sent into exile.<sup>64</sup> When Eusebius of Nicomedia and another bishop, three months after the council, were found to be supporting Arius in some fashion they too were sent into exile.<sup>65</sup> All seemed well for the anti-Arian party. For Constantine the "fearful enormity of the blasphemies which some were shamelessly uttering

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<sup>61</sup> Logan, p. 444.

<sup>62</sup> Kelly, p. 252.

<sup>63</sup> Letter of Eusebius to his Congregation, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 365.

<sup>64</sup> Schaff, p. xx.

<sup>65</sup> See Schaff and Wace, p. xx and Frend, *Rise*, p. 499.

concerning our Saviour”<sup>66</sup> had been defeated and the “truth as expressed by the Council” had been established.<sup>67</sup>

The events immediately following the Nicene Council have proven difficult for scholars to reconstruct with certainty. Constantine appears to have firmly believed in the doctrinal solution arrived at in Nicea. In a letter to the Alexandrian church he claimed that the Nicene decision was “in accurate conformity to the truth expressed in the laws of God” and spoke of the “enormity of the blasphemies of Arius.”<sup>68</sup> He had exiled Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognius and wrote to another bishop that he should carefully take note of what had been done to them by “Divine Providence,” “who has now demanded from them a worthy satisfaction and will take greater vengeance upon them for the future throughout eternity”, lest the bishop find himself falling prey to Arian ideas.<sup>69</sup> But while the doctrine stated at Nicea had clearly rejected the Arian doctrine, as so often in church history, it was the policy of discipline that was to fuel the controversy shortly thereafter. It was enough for this Emperor if a bishop signed the statements of the council and did not teach or support Arian doctrine openly any longer. Constantine’s desire for unity and his subsequent requirements for readmission of the exiled bishops, namely, signing and silence, were not satisfactory to the anti-Arian party. Arius was soon recalled and appeared before a council and before the Emperor perhaps even willing to admit to the *homoousios*.<sup>70</sup> Constantine wrote to Alexander asking him to receive Arius whom he now considered to be one in faith with Alexander, back into the church.<sup>71</sup>

Alexander refused. Eusebius of Nicomedia, seeing that things had gone well for Arius, petitioned Constantine that he might return also and was restored to his see.<sup>72</sup> Eustathius, bishop of Antioch and energetic anti-Arian, was deposed from his see apparently for some mixture of being too vigorous in

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<sup>66</sup> Letter of Constantine to the Alexandrian Church, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 371.

<sup>67</sup> Letter of Constantine to the Nicomedian Church, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 374.

<sup>68</sup> Letter of Constantine to the Alexandrian Church, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 371.

<sup>69</sup> Letter of Constantine to Theodotus, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 374-375.

<sup>70</sup> Elliott, p. 184. Coleman-Norton, pp. 158-159. Also Lorenz, pp. 36-39.

<sup>71</sup> See the letter in Elliott, p. 181.

attacking Arian clergy in his see and for what was taken as Sabellian views.<sup>73</sup> The anti-Arian juggernaut was derailed.

For Athanasius, who had become the new bishop of Alexandria in 328, and others of the anti-Arian party this policy of discipline was unacceptable. They would not accept the heretics back; they were convinced that the Emperor had been fooled.<sup>74</sup> As early as 328, Constantine threatened Athanasius with exile if he didn't accept the Arians back. This has led many scholars to assume that Constantine had changed his mind concerning Arius' doctrine and now supported it under the influence of the Eusebii. But in 333, after Arius wrote a letter of complaint about not yet being readmitted in Alexandria, Constantine wrote a blistering attack on Arius, exiled him, condemned his writings and proscribed the death penalty to anyone who was found hiding any writing composed by Arius.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, Athanasius' enemies, who did not dare to openly espouse Arianism, continued to try to get him deposed and finally succeeded at the council of Tyre of getting him convicted and deposed on account of certain misdemeanor charges. On November 7, 335 he was exiled.<sup>76</sup> Constantine's plan for unity had just stopped Athanasius' plans to crush the Arians. The results of the Emperor's policy of discipline had resulted in the partial reversal of the results of Nicea and ends the first period of the Arian controversy.

Constantine died in 337 without having attained the unity in the church he so desired but having instead made a formal submission to the *homoousios* necessary and having made illegal the open declaration of the Arian doctrine. But the controversy would not stay settled in this fashion. In his current exile Athanasius appealed to the Roman bishop and in 341 the Pope accepted him back into fellowship and condemned the findings of the council of Tyre. This soon established the atmosphere of the Arian

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<sup>72</sup> Letter from Exile of Eusebius of Nicomedia to Constantine, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 376-377. For the results of this letter see Frend, *Rise*, p. 502.

<sup>73</sup> Hanson, "The Fate", pp. 178-179.

<sup>74</sup> Frend, *Rise*, pp. 502-503.

<sup>75</sup> See Letter of Constantine in Coleman-Norton, pp. 185-194 and the accompanying law given on p. 182. It is easy to see why we have no Arian writings from the period of 325 to Constantine's death in 337. Elliott, p. 190.

<sup>76</sup> Frend, "Athanasius", p. 25. See also Frend, *Rise*, p. 527.

controversy as the West aligned with Athanasius against the East. The West was clearly anti-Arian and regarded the Eastern bishops as Arians because of their Origenistic language of “three *hypostases*”.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, it took two decades before the West could really understand the Arian controversy because the primary sources were all in Greek and inaccessible to the Latin West.<sup>78</sup> During this time the East considered the West Sabellians, supporters of Paul of Samosata, and disturbers of peace in the East.<sup>79</sup> The East and West would be at odds until some understanding could be reached. What Nicea had accomplished, in reality, was not a statement of positive theology but rather the task of negative theology in the rejection of the original Arian propositions.<sup>80</sup> As we have seen earlier, the negative task was always the easiest. Strangely, for years after Constantine’s death, the post Nicea battle was not about the term *homoousios* itself but about Arianism versus Sabellianism. The West desperately wanted a clear rejection of Arianism but without proper concern for Sabellianism while the East wanted to steer a middle course of traditional Origenism between Arianism and Sabellianism but without due consideration of the weakness of the Origenistic language which had led to Arianism in the first place.<sup>81</sup> In the midst of it all was the term *homoousios* which had been accepted at Nicea almost taking a back seat for some time.

All along we have seen how the conservative Origenist party in the East feared the *homoousios* because they understood it in a material sense and they also realized it had been used by Sabellian heretics to express their ideas of how the divine in Christ relates to the divine Father, namely, that Christ is the Father. Athanasius condemned the Sabellian heresy but did not fear it like the Arian heresy. He felt that Sabellianism was averted simply through the use of the terms Father and Son as supplying all the distinction necessary. The rest of the East did not agree. As it turned out, the majority in the East were largely correct. I have already noted above that Eusthatius of the anti-Arian party was deposed from

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<sup>77</sup> Frend, *Rise*, pp. 529-531.

<sup>78</sup> Kelly, p. 261. Hilary of Poitiers, c. 356, swore that he had never heard of the Council of Nicea! Pelikan, p. 210.

<sup>79</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 531.

<sup>80</sup> Kelly, p. 259.

<sup>81</sup> Kelly, p. 274.

Antioch supposedly in part for a Sabellian theology. But even more dramatic and important was the deposition of Marcellus of Ancyra. Marcellus was the bishop who criticized Eusebius of believing in two *ousiai* and seems to have played an important role in preparing Hosius for the Council of Antioch of 324 and perhaps Nicea. He was a major player in the anti-Arian party. But his theology was not beyond questioning. Against the “two Gods” and “two *ousiai*” language of the Eusebius, he insisted on a strict monotheistic language. For Marcellus, “*ousia*” and “*hypostasis*” were synonyms and thus he did not approve of the Origenistic language of “three *hypostaseis*” in God because to him it indicated tri-theism.<sup>82</sup> He made an inadequate attempt to explain the church’s triadic confession with his own theory of successive, temporary economies saying, “it is impossible for three existing *hypostases* to be united by a monad unless previously the trinity has its origin from the monad.”<sup>83</sup> His theology stressed the unity of the Godhead so far as to become indistinguishable from Sabellianism. After he had expressed these views rather clearly in a treatise dating to c. 335 he was soon deposed.<sup>84</sup> But he continued to be Athanasius’ friend appealing with him to the Roman bishop and being received into fellowship in 341. This so angered the East that Marcellus was condemned by name at the Dedication Council of Antioch in 341 and in 342 at the Council of Sardica the Eastern bishops would not even sit with him.<sup>85</sup> But Marcellus’ views gained a strong following in the East causing alarm even among the pro-Nicene bishops there.<sup>86</sup> This whole episode heightened the suspicion of the East regarding the *homoousios* and the West, and it vindicated the charge that “the Nicene formula needed revision and amplification to clarify what was meant by the One in God.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Lienhard, p. 160.

<sup>83</sup> Lienhard, p. 159. See this fragment in in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. .

<sup>84</sup> Logan, p. 445.

<sup>85</sup> Lienhard, p. 158.

<sup>86</sup> Hanson, “The Source”, p. 265.

<sup>87</sup> Pelikan, p. 208.

The process of revision and amplification can be observed in the results of a series of councils held in the following decade. In 341 the so-called Dedication Council was held in Antioch consisting of those bishops who agreed with the Eusebian ways of thinking and were offended at Rome's acceptance of Athanasius and Marcellus. The official creed produced revealed the continuing Eusebian attempt to overcome the entire Arian problem by using only the language of Scripture, rejecting certain Arian propositions, and clearly condemning the Sabellianism of Marcellus.<sup>88</sup> It represented a middle course of traditional Origenism speaking of the Godhead as "three in *hypostasis*, one in agreement."<sup>89</sup> There were also three other creeds associated with this council and the last is called the Fourth Creed of Antioch. It clearly condemned Arianism and more clearly expressed the Western point of view than anything the East had thus far produced, although, as with all the Eastern creeds at this time, it did its best to reject the Marcellan opinions.<sup>90</sup>

In 342, a synod was convened at Sardica at which the Western bishops outnumbered the Eastern with the venerable Hosius as their leader. The Eastern bishops would not be seated with Marcellus and Athanasius and eventually they left the council and formed their own rival council which produced a version of the Fourth Creed of Antioch expanded with additional anathemas at the end further rejecting certain Arian and Sabellian language.<sup>91</sup> The Eastern bishops also explicitly condemned the West for accepting Athanasius and Marcellus.<sup>92</sup> The Western bishops were not deterred however and carried on to condemn many Eastern bishops as Arians and to produce what is known as the Western Creed of Sardica. This creed clearly condemned any speaking of three *hypostaseis*, which was so prevalent in the Origenism of the East. It stated that there was only one Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and one *hypostasis* which is the one *ousia*. The creed stated that the *hypostasis* of the Son is one and the same as that of the

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<sup>88</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 530.

<sup>89</sup> Kelly, p. 266-271. See the entire text of the creed here.

<sup>90</sup> Kelly, p. 271-272.

<sup>91</sup> Kelly, pp. 275-276.

<sup>92</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 531.

Father and yet “we do not say that the Father is the Son, or again that the Son is the Father: the Father is the Father, and the Son of God is Son.” But in what way they are distinguished was not stated.<sup>93</sup> It was an aggressive anti-Origenistic statement reflecting Marcellus’ influence and clearly open to Sabellian interpretation.<sup>94</sup> The schism between East and West was growing.

Neither side of the controversy wanted permanent schism, however. In 345 a council was held in Antioch at which the Eastern bishops drew up the Creed of the Long Lines. The creed avoided the terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* and rather tried to find the right way by describing the three persons as “three things and three  $\rho\rho\upsilon\sigma\omega\rho\alpha$  (persons)” while still condemning Marcellus.<sup>95</sup> It also said that Christ was “like the Father in all things.”<sup>96</sup> Importantly, a new element was introduced into the controversy when this council condemned Photinus, bishop of Sirmium. He had been a deacon of Marcellus of Ancyra earlier and his condemnation now for Sabellian and Adoptionist views seems to have had a role in getting the West to finally take this danger more seriously.<sup>97</sup> This creed was carried by several Eastern bishops to the Western Augustus, who was supporting Athanasius at this time. The creed was an obvious concession to the West. But the West demanded the renunciation of the language about “three *hypostaseis*” which the Eastern bishops obviously could not do and so they returned home mission unaccomplished.<sup>98</sup> However, the West did make one important concession, Photinus was condemned as a heretic as in the East.

In 351, the Second Council of Sirmium met. The creed produced by this council, the First Creed of Sirmium, was the previously-mentioned Fourth Creed of the Dedication Council expanded with 26 anathemas at the end. These anathemas condemned the strictly Arian language the West despised and the

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<sup>93</sup> Kelly, pp. 277-278.

<sup>94</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 531.

<sup>95</sup> Kelly, pp. 279-280.

<sup>96</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 532.

<sup>97</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 532.

<sup>98</sup> Kelly, pp. 280-281.

language and propositions of Marcellus and Photinus. This council brings to an end the second period of the Arian controversy.

What is so striking in observing the previous two decades of struggle over the Arian question is how little the Nicene formula *homoousios* played a part. It is there in the background and it is not explicitly rejected even in the East. But none of the creeds, of the East or West, spends any words on its rejection or defense. The language of Athanasius is important to observe in this regard. Having a reputation among colleagues of being a bully and a meddler<sup>99</sup>, he seemed to show a certain theological tact in rarely using the *homoousios* in his own writings for many years after Nicea. He instead made use of synonymous phrases like “His oneness with the Father”, “the single indivisible nature of Father and Son”, “identity of Godhead and oneness of substance” etc.<sup>100</sup> This seems to reflect an understanding of the difficulty in the eyes of many Eastern bishops of accepting the Nicene formula with its Sabellian overtones. But all of this strange silence by both sides concerning the *homoousios* would soon change.

In August 353, Constantius, the Eastern Augustus, finally disposed of his rival in the West and became sole Emperor. He would rule until 361. During his rule pressure was applied to find the widest possible agreement in the church and, for the first time, an open rejection of the Nicene creed was possible. Radical Arians arose who were called Anomoeans because they taught that Christ was “unlike in essence” (αἰνόμοιος) to the Father. As Photius was to the West so the Anomoeians were to the East in that they helped the more moderate Eusebian bishops see the real danger of the Arian theology. In the West, the rise of such a radical party so directly opposed to Nicea caused a reaction toward explicit use of the *homoousios*. It was in this period of time that Athanasius turned to passionate explicit Nicene *homoousian* terminology as opposed to his previous reticence.

Explicit attention having turned back to the Nicene decision and to the *homoousios* terminology (same or identical in essence) gave opportunity to explore its relationship to the term becoming common

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<sup>99</sup> Frend, “Athanasius”, pp. 21-24.

<sup>100</sup> Kelly, pp. 260-261.

in the East *homoiousios* (like in essence). Ever since the Photian issue, although data is lacking, the relationship between Athanasius and Marcellus seems to have become less warm and opportunity now existed for the East and West to find common ground.<sup>101</sup> In 357, a small council was called at the emperor's Danube frontier fortress on the Danube where bishops from the East and West attempted to work through these terminological problems. The statement produced rejected the language of "two Gods", having been used in the East and in the West. It also clearly taught that there is only one God and yet that the Godhead is a trinity. However, amazingly, it forbid the use of both *homoousios* and *homoiousios* because "no one can explain the nativity of the Son." It subordinates the Son to the Father and leaves uncondemned certain Arian ideas like the creation of the Son from nothing.<sup>102</sup> What was supposed to be a rapprochement of the West and the conservative East turned out to be quite Arian in flavor. St. Hilary called its prudent agnosticism "the blasphemy."<sup>103</sup> Such a solution was bound to fail.

Though the solution of 357 had failed, the imperial pressure was high to find an acceptable solution. Yet another party arose which rejected the Arian Anomoeans and yet avoided the term now in question: *ousia*. These Homoeans taught that the Son was *homoios* to the Father (like the Father). But by 358 the traditional Eastern bishops had found a new leader in Basil of Ancyra who supported the *homoiousios* solution. Basil thought that an agreement was now possible, given the general atmosphere, and pressed Constantius to hold a general council. Constantius finally sanctioned that two twin councils would be held, one in the West in Rimini in Northern Italy, and another in the East at Selucia. In the meantime, a committee met at Sirmium and in the Emperor's presence drafted a creed, later named the Dated Creed, to be submitted to the twin councils for their discussion and approval.<sup>104</sup> It tried to take the Homoean position in avoiding *ousia*, suggesting its avoidance as a word not found in scripture, and instead declared the Son "like the Father in all things" (ὁμοιον τῷ πατρὶ κατὰ πάντα). The creed

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<sup>101</sup> Kelly, pp. 283-284.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, pp. 285-286.

<sup>103</sup> Friend, *Rise*, p. 539. See Hilary *de Syn.* 10 (P.L. 10, 486)

<sup>104</sup> Kelly, pp. 288-290.

would be signed with reservations in the East and eventually under duress in the West at Nice, amazingly, with the “all things” removed from the “like” and with the phrase “one *hypostasis*” condemned along with *ousia*.<sup>105</sup> This creed was then approved at a common universal council held in 360 at Constantinople. For the first time since 325, East and West had been united at least officially under one creed and one that was later considered Arian.<sup>106</sup> It was the doctrine of this creed of Constantinople that was transported among the barbarians and characterized their ‘Arian’ or ‘Semi-Arian’ beliefs. Although it must be noted that this creed explicitly condemned the Anomoian position and did not confess any of the classical Arian propositions from two decades earlier. But its simple *homoios* was such that it allowed Christians with a number of points of view to recite it, each with their own interpretation.<sup>107</sup> And under this umbrella, unfolded in the main by the Emperor, the East and West were united in 360, though not the satisfaction of most of the West, of Athanasius and the Homoousians, or Basil and the Homoeousians of the East. The entire episode shows how, just as in 325, the power of the Emperor could at times force an external solution to a controversy without in any way bringing it to an end. Later events would demonstrate how few real changes of heart had occurred.

After Constantius, the progress in the Arian controversy was again tied closely to what happened in the Empire. In February 360, some of Constantius’ troops mutinied and declared Julian as Augustus in the West. In 361, Julian marched east and by November 361, Constantius was dead and the fear of a pagan Emperor came upon the church. In reaction, Athanasius gathered a small council of 21 bishops in Alexandria in February 362 which contained bishops of the *homoousios* and the *homoiousios* parties. Apparently, in light of the recent loss of position through the creed of Constantinople and with the possibility of complete reversal because of the new pagan emperor, the two parties considered once again their differences. In his work *de Synodis*, Athanasius had already suggested the solution:

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<sup>105</sup> Kelly, pp. 290-291.

<sup>106</sup> Jerome would state twenty years later that “the whole world groaned and wondered to find itself Arian.”, *Dial. con. Lucif.*, 19 (P.L. 23, 172).

<sup>107</sup> Kelly, pp. 194-195.

Those who deny the Council (of Nicea) altogether are sufficiently exposed by these brief remarks; those, however, who accept everything else that was defined at Nicea, and doubt only about the *homoousios*, must not be treated as enemies; nor do we here attack them as Ariomaniacs, nor as enemies of the Fathers, but we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers who mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word. For, confessing that the Son is from the essence of the Father and not from other substances, that He is not a creature nor work, but His genuine and natural offspring, and that He is eternally with the Father as being His word and Wisdom, they are not far from accepting even the phrase, '*homoousios*.' Now such is Basil, who wrote from Ancyra concerning the faith. ... Since they say that He is 'of the essence' and 'Like-in-essence' what do they signify by these but 'coessential.'<sup>108</sup>

At this synod in 362 the *homoousios* was accepted with the explicit proviso that no Sabellianism was implied and the Origenist distinction of the *hypostaseis* of the Persons was to be acknowledged.<sup>109</sup> The main gulf had been bridged at last, at least terminologically. The Homoeousians became the "New-Nicenes." And as quickly as it came, the threat that helped propel them to agreement passed over, as by July 363 the Emperor was dead. At this point, the messy divisions of terminology had been largely cleared up and the choices were two, a syncretistic Homoean confession or the Nicene Homoousian confession with appropriate disclaimers. It would be Ambrose and his fight with the Arian Germans that solidly established the *homoousios* in the West. In the East, it was the work of the Cappadocian fathers that established the agreement of 362.

Basil of Caesarea, one of the so-called Cappadocians, accepted the *homoousios* of Nicea. But being a Homoeousian at heart he realized the disclaimers that were needed and spoke of the three *hypostaseis* in one *ousia*. "It must be clearly understood", he said, "that anyone who does not acknowledge the community of essence falls into polytheism; so he who does not grant the individuality of the persons is carried off into Judaism."<sup>110</sup> Basil was followed in this line of thought by his brother Gregory of Nyssa and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, known collectively as the Cappadocian Fathers. It was a major step forward towards unity when these Origenist theologians could come to use the

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<sup>108</sup> Athanasius, *de Synod.*, 41, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, p. 472.

<sup>109</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 605.

<sup>110</sup> Frend, *Rise*, pp. 631-632.

*homoousios*. Things seemed to be proceeding well toward some type of universal agreement. But even with differences in terminology having been minimized a new episode in an old Antiochian controversy shows how much things remained the same.

In 363, Bishop Meletius of Antioch had called a synod which acknowledged the Creed of Nicea and reluctantly the *homoousios*. But word *ousia* was still a concern. Athanasius went to Antioch to seal the agreement of 362 with the bishops but for some reason Athanasius was sent away without communion and as a result he then recognized another man, Paulinus, as the rightful bishop of Antioch. This was a revival of an old schism dating back to the deposition of Eustathius in Antioch shortly after Nicea. The New-Nicenes and the Old were not yet ready to be brothers.<sup>111</sup> So Basil of Caesarea and the East supported Meletius of Antioch while the West and Athanasius supported Paulinus. Things were made worse in that Basil wrote several letters to Athanasius trying to get an explicit condemnation of Marcellus from the West.<sup>112</sup> This would give explicit approval to his anti-Sabellian interpretation of *homoousios* as being equivalent to *homoiousios*. Basil was convinced that even now the West did not understand the dangers of Sabellianism. And worse yet, the clergy in Ancyra, who for years had remained loyal to Marcellus, sent a delegation to Alexandria with a confession which Athanasius approved as orthodox.<sup>113</sup> The schism would remain unsolved until Athanasius' death in 373. Basil then appealed to the bishop of Rome to condemn Marcellus but by 375 complained that the pope was "stuck up and haughty, ... unable to hear those who were telling him the truth."<sup>114</sup> Basil would not get his way while alive. The official acceptance of the Alexandrian agreement of 362, the Nicene formula with Origenistic footnotes, would have to await a new Christological controversy to dominate the church's attention, a new Emperor, a new council and a new

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<sup>111</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 616.

<sup>112</sup> Lienhard, p. 161.

<sup>113</sup> Lienhard, p. 162.

<sup>114</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 633.

generation when many who had taken part in the Arian controversies in the fifty years since Nicea were dead including Hosius, Marcellus, Athanasius and Basil.

In 381, Theodosius, the new Emperor, called a council in the East at Constantinople to confirm the decisions of Nicea.<sup>115</sup> At this council the creed now called “Nicene” was officially accepted in the East with its *homoousios*. The same council’s condemnation of the Marcellan heresy is the last we hear of it.<sup>116</sup> New controversies were now taking center stage as this one drew to a close. The conclusion of the Arian controversy proper saw the Nicene formula, a term using Platonic philosophical terminology and adopted at the insistence of the Emperor Constantine, adopted as a positive normative statement of the church’s faith of the divine in Christ and the oneness of God. This could only occur after many long painful debates concerning the appropriateness of the philosophical term *ousia* and what exactly was meant by the oneness of the Godhead and with the explicit rejection of the Sabellian error.

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<sup>115</sup> Frend, *Rise*, p. 637.

<sup>116</sup> Lienhard, p. 163.

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