

Arianism

Arianism was a 4th century heresy named after Arius (c.250-336), a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt, who taught that the Son of God was not co-eternal and consubstantial with His Father, but rather a created being with a definite origin in time. In Arius's words, "*there was [a time] when he (the Son) was not.*" This led to the calling of the First Ecumenical Council, which condemned it and its author and established the Orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity as taught by Arius's chief opponent, St. Athanasius the Great. Though it managed to hang on among some of the Goths and other Germanic tribes in the West, Arianism had vanished by the seventh century.

Arianism should be clearly distinguished from "Aryanism", which formed the core of Nazi racial ideology during the twentieth century, and which had nothing whatsoever to do with Arius or his teachings.

Origins

Although Arianism carries Arius's name, its doctrines did not entirely originate with him. Lucian of Antioch, Arius's teacher and mentor, was accused by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria of being the source for Arius's heretical teachings—not so much that Lucian had taught Arianism *per se*, but rather that he held certain heretical tendencies which he passed on to his pupil, Arius.^[1] Indeed, the noted Russian historian Alexander Vasiliev refers to Lucian as "*the Arius before Arius*".^[2]

According to Church historian Socrates Scholasticus, Arius entered into a dispute with Bishop Alexander in 318 over his teachings about God's divine Sonship and substance. Alexander had endeavored to instruct his clergy on the unity of the Holy Trinity, but Arius—whether through misunderstanding, or from a "love of controversy", as alleged by Socrates—opposed his bishop's teaching as smacking of Sabellianism.^[3] Arius proffered his own syllogism: *If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence. From this it is evident that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows that he had his substance from nothing.* This, of course, denied the essential unity and consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity, and caused an uproar among Arius's listeners that quickly spread throughout the Church as Arius insisted upon disseminating his views.

The heresy

As stated above, Arius denied the full deity of the preexistent Son of God, the *Logos* who became incarnate as our Lord Jesus Christ ("*the Word (Jesus Christ) became flesh*" John 1:14 - NKJV). He held that the Son, while divine and like unto God, was created by God as the agent through whom He created the universe; thus that there was a time when the Son "*was not*".

In explaining his actions against Arius, Alexander of Alexandria wrote a letter to Alexander of Constantinople and Eusebius of Nicomedia (where the emperor was then residing), detailing the errors into which he believed Arius had fallen. According to Alexander, Arius taught:

That God was not always the Father, but that there was a period when he was not the Father; that the Word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing; for that the ever-existing God ('the I AM'—the eternal One) made him who did not previously exist, out of nothing; wherefore there was a time when he did not exist, inasmuch as the Son is a creature and a work. That he is neither like the Father as it regards his essence, nor is by nature either the Father's true Word, or true Wisdom, but indeed one of his works and creatures, being erroneously called Word and Wisdom, since he was himself made of God's own Word and the Wisdom which is in God, whereby God both made all things and him also. Wherefore he is as to his nature mutable and susceptible of change, as all other rational creatures are: hence the Word is alien to and other than the essence of God; and the Father is inexplicable by the Son, and invisible to him, for neither does the Word perfectly and accurately know the Father, neither can he distinctly see him. The Son knows not the nature of his own essence: for he was made on our account, in order that God might create us by him, as by an instrument; nor would he ever have existed, unless God had wished to create us.^[4]

The Church's response

While Arius developed a following among some Syrian prelates, an Alexandrian synod of some 100 bishops summoned by Bishop Alexander condemned him in 321. He was excommunicated, and fled to Palestine. There he entered into a friendship with Eusebius of Nicomedia. Arius, a proficient writer, produced many compositions in both prose and verse defending his belief, including a poem that he called the *Thalia*. Most of these writings were destroyed as being heretical, though portions of the *Thalia* and a few other Arian texts survive.

The Roman emperor Constantine the Great, desiring the restoration of peace and unity to the Church, publicly called upon Arius and Alexander to settle their dispute; however, the issue was such that no genuine compromise was possible. As the debate continued to rage between supporters of each man, the emperor finally decided to call a great council of all Church bishops to resolve the dilemma. This First Ecumenical Council, held at Nicæa in 325, was led in its teachings by Athanasius, at this time a mere deacon in the Alexandrian church. The council condemned Arianism and maintained that Christ was "*God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made (not created), and One in essence with the Father.*" (*homoousios* / *ὁμοούσιος* "of the same essence" rather than Arius' heretical *homoiousios* / *ὁμοιούσιος* "of a similar essence"). It then incorporated these words into the first version of the Nicene Creed.

Aftermath

Although the ecumenical council had spoken, Arianism continued to exert itself in the Church long afterwards, almost to the end of the fourth century. This was often the fault of the Roman emperors, including Constantine (who vacillated between Arius and his opponents to the end of his life), and most notably Constantius, who succeeded him. During this period Arianism fragmented into a number of sects:

- The **Anomoeans** continued Arius' heresy, led first by Aëtius then later by Eunomius. This heresy continued to preach Arius's *animoios* (unlike) doctrine and maintained the strict position that Christ was not of the same essence as the Father.
- The **semi-Arians**, led by Eusabian, took a middle ground that challenged the Nicean Creed's *homoousios* with a middle position of *homoiousios*, that is, "of similar essence".
- The **Acacians**, led by Acacius, took a position not that different from the semi-Arians, by preaching that Christ was *homoios*: "similar to"—not identical in essence—with the Father; thus they avoided using either *homoousios* or *homoiousios*.

During the final decades of the fourth century the arguments of the two Gregories, of Nyssa and Nazianzus, together with those of Basil the Great and Hilary of Poitiers, brought about the reconciliation of many semi-Arians with Orthodoxy and swayed the theological momentum back to the Nicæan Creed, which was reaffirmed and expanded upon at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381.

Arianism today

Today, a so-called "Holy Arian Catholic and Apostolic Church" in England claims to proclaim Arius's teachings, even "canonizing" him in 2006. However, this body differs with its namesake on several crucial points, including its rejection of the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of Christ, which Arius himself never questioned. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon sects are often accused (especially the former) of being Arian; while both certainly exhibit doctrines which tend toward Arianism—which are rejected by the Orthodox Church as being heretical, along with many other teachings—each sect's Christology differs somewhat from classic Arian doctrine.

No remnant of any of the Arian sects established in Western Europe or elsewhere is known to exist today.

Some forms of modern Protestantism appear to espouse a form of Arianism, referring to Jesus Christ as essentially distinct from God in terms which suggest that, as the Son, He is ontologically distinct from, and inferior to, the Father.

Notes

1. ↑ Vasiliev, A. Arianism and the Council of Nicaea, from *History of the Byzantine Empire*, Chapter One. Retrieved on 2010-02-02.
2. ↑ Vasiliev, A. Arianism and the Council of Nicaea, from *History of the Byzantine Empire*, Chapter One. Retrieved on 2010-02-02.
3. ↑ Socrates Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 1, Ch. 5.
4. ↑ Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories, Chapter VI. Retrieved on 2010-02-02.