



ARIANISM

Marilyn Dunn

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Introduction

What Was Arianism?

What was Arianism? Most people will only ever hear the word if they visit Ravenna in northeastern Italy and go into two of its stunning UNESCO world heritage sites: the church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, originally the palace church of Theoderic the Great, the Ostrogothic leader who was *de facto* ruler of Italy from 493 to 526; and its contemporary, the Arian Baptistery. Thanks to the internet, you can now visit them from the comfort of your armchair and marvel at the beauty of their mosaics.¹ On the Baptistery ceiling, a youthful and naked Christ stands in the River Jordan, flanked by John the Baptist on one side and on the other by a figure personifying the river; a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit pours light from its beak on to his head. Here are two persons of the Christian Trinity, Son and Holy Ghost: by implication the third, God the Father, is also present, as a voice declaring that Jesus is his beloved son in whom he is well pleased (Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23). Guides, guidebooks, and websites all note that Theoderic and the Goths were Arian heretics: Arius,

¹ See the virtual tours at www.turismo.ra.it/eng/Storytelling/Multimedia/Virtual-tours; www.turismo.ra.it/eng/Discover-the-area/Art-and-culture/Unesco-world-heritage/Basilica-of-Sant%27Apollinare-Nuovo; www.turismo.ra.it/eng/Discover-the-area/Art-and-culture/Unesco-world-heritage/Arian-Baptistery; www.turismo.ra.it/eng/Discover-the-area/Art-and-culture/Unesco-world-heritage/Neonian-Baptistery. All accessed August 30, 2020.

the heresy's founder, had denied the divine nature of Christ and thus the equality of God the Son with God the Father.

Arianism is commonly summed up in two or three phrases: "Arius denied the divinity of Christ" (or "the unity of the Trinity"); "Arianism was subordinationist: it made the Son a lesser God than the Father." But anyone attempting to dig deeper will swiftly become aware of the subject's complexity and breadth.

Modern approaches fall into three broad areas. The first covers Arianism's origins and emergence. This hinges on a basic narrative in which Arius, a priest of Alexandria in Egypt in the early fourth century, proposed a radical theology in which the Son was "not part of God and could never have been 'within' the life of God" but was "dependent and subordinate" (Williams, *Arius*, 177). He was condemned at the Council of Nicæa, called by the Emperor Constantine in 325, where the Nicene Creed, which said that Father and Son were "of the same substance," was proclaimed as the universal creed of the Empire. However, Arius's condemnation was swiftly followed by the removal of many of his opponents, in a conspiracy masterminded by his supporter, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. Arius's followers joined with the "Eusebians" in the 330s to engineer the downfall of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who had refused to re-admit Arius to the Alexandrian Church. Arianism was supported by Constantine's son, the Emperor Constantius II, who in 360 replaced the Nicene Creed by an Arian statement of belief; and by a number of other emperors. But in 381, the tables were turned when Arianism was outlawed as a heresy by the Emperor Theodosius.

The theology of Arius and the initial development of Arianism constitute a vast and intimidatingly technical field of scholarship populated by ecclesiastical historians, scholars of patristics (the study of the "Church Fathers"), and theologians, who analyze the intricate theological controversies and political manoeuvrings that followed Nicæa. Arianism is treated as a part of the "search for the Christian doctrine of God," a long-running intra-ecclesiastical controversy over the development of the doctrine of the Trinity that took place

within what I will call for convenience “mainstream” Christianity.

Arianism was also the Christianity of the Goths, the fore-runners of Theoderic’s Italian Ostrogoths. This second area has a chequered past: in an earlier era, German Nationalists and National Socialists attempted to claim that Arianism was the “real” Germanic Christianity: anti-Roman and anti-papal, even an expression of authentic Germanic religiosity; the remnants of such discredited nonsense still float around the murkier reaches of the internet. Nowadays, historians point firmly to the origins of Arianism within the Roman Empire. The prevalent discourse in works written in English is one in which the Goths accepted Arianism for political reasons, because it happened to be the creed of the reigning Eastern Emperor, Valens. In 376, he permitted a large number of Tervingi Goths—under pressure from population movements caused by the activities of the Huns further East—to cross the Danube and enter the Empire. Some historians suggest that their leader Fritigern had previously accepted Christianity in return for imperial support in internal power struggles among the Gothic tribes.

A substantial body of scholarship in several languages focuses on Ulfila (d. 383), often misleadingly referred to as the apostle of the Goths. Ulfila was the descendent of Cappadocian Christians who had been carried off into captivity in the third century by Goths. He was consecrated bishop to the Christians amongst the Goths by Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia in or before 341, only to be expelled from trans-Danubian Gothia after seven years. He and his followers were then settled in the province of Moesia Secunda by Constantius II. Ulfila’s major achievement was the development of a Gothic alphabet and the translation of the Bible into Gothic and he is credited not only with the conversion of Goths to Christianity before his expulsion but also with continuing his work from across the Danube in the Roman province of Moesia. He is regarded as an Arian partly because of his associations with Eusebius of Nicomedia and Constantius II, but mainly because his pupil Auxentius of Durostorum wrote a vivid

description of his opposition to the theology of the Nicene Creed and his support for a view of the Trinity consistent with the Arian creed backed by Constantius II.

The third area is post-381 Arianism, when it was classed by the Empire as a heresy and was officially sanctioned only in the “churches among the barbarians.” Exactly how and where Arianism was passed on by the Goths to other barbarian groups is usually treated as opaque and untraceable, a sort of conversionary osmosis. The Arian Churches of the barbarians within the frontiers of the Roman Empire in the fifth century—Visigoths in Aquitaine (later Spain and Septimania); Sueves in Gallæcia; Burgundians in Eastern Gaul; Vandals in North Africa; and Ostrogoths in Italy, are mostly assumed—apart from their Bible and liturgy in Gothic—to replicate on a reduced scale the Catholic Churches of their territories. Ostrogothic Arianism has been co-opted into debates about barbarian ethnicity and identity: at one extreme of the spectrum of opinion, it has been presented as having nothing to do with either, while at the other Arianism is described as a mark of Gothic national identity or defining force, a signifier of distinctiveness.

This book presents an alternative view of Arianism, taking into account recent trends and developments in history and theory.

The first is the changing narrative created by the study of early Christianities rather than early Christianity. In the fourth century, many groups identified themselves as Christian despite holding beliefs that might appear bizarre to modern Christians: for example, the view that the world had been created not by God but by a subordinate, ignorant, or malevolent divinity (Christian Gnostics); or that human beings were constituted of light imprisoned in dark matter (Manichaeans). What is now regarded as Christian orthodoxy was still evolving in Arius’s time and he should be seen in the context of a world in which many of the now “lost” Christianities which had grown up in the second and third centuries continued to flourish and attract adherents.

The second is our changing view of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt 328–83 and one of the most controversial

figures of early Christianity. As well as being its implacable opponent, Athanasius happens to be our single most important source for early Arianism. At one time he was regarded as an unimpeachable authority and accounts of the “Arian Controversy” were largely based on his writings. Modern scholarship is more sceptical, highlighting not just his use of violence to further his own ecclesiastical ends, but also his wholesale manufacturing of adversaries and conspiracies to explain his several depositions from office. It is also becoming clear that the traditional view of the Nicene Creed of 325 as a totem of orthodoxy is very much Athanasius’s construct: recent work emphasizes its problematic nature and the numerous attempts made to find a suitable replacement for it between 340 and 360.²

The third is theoretical: the development of the discipline of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) which presents new ways of looking at religion in history. As opposed to the application of theory from other disciplines *to* religion, this is theory rooted specifically *in* the study of religion, generating books, articles, and journals (see Further Reading at the end of this volume) over the last few decades. Its central postulate is that religious systems, as they are produced by similar human minds, share similar types of concepts and behaviours across cultures. This means that we can drill below the surface of religions to examine underlying concepts and behaviours at a structural level. While many—most?—readers might automatically think of religion in terms of doctrine and theology, a major tenet of CSR is that these are not necessarily its most important aspects and that we should look beyond or beneath them. Currently, we view Arianism in strictly theological terms—unsurprisingly as it was framed in terms of that most challenging of Christian theological concepts, the Trinity. But we can achieve a broader and deeper view through the application of some important CSR insights: the contrast between “doctrinal” and “imagis-

2 Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicæa in the Early Church Councils AD 431–451* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7–28.

tic” modes of religiosity to contextualize Arianism’s beginnings on one hand and the nature of intuitions of divinity and the dead to help us understand the take-up and character of so-called Arianism among the barbarian peoples on the other (all discussed at greater length below).

In the light all these developments, I am about to offer you a radically different view of Arianism. In it, Arius is not a heretic who sought to reduce Christ to the status of a lesser God but a pastorally active churchman, concerned to defend his Church against what he saw as the powerfully subversive views of the nature of God, of good and evil, darkness and light offered by contemporary Gnostic and Manichaean Christianities. The Athanasian version of events—for over a millennium the essential framework of our understanding of Arianism—is treated as a spectacularly unreliable narrative, a picture of heresy and conspiracy fabricated in an attempt to explain away his own depositions for misconduct; constantly reworked in response to events; and extended to cover the Homoian Creed of 360. This creed, commonly identified as Arian, is shown to have no connection to Arius. It was developed partly as a replacement for the formulas put forward since 340 as substitutes for the Nicene Creed and also as an aid to the Christianization of the Goths on the Danube frontier. The Homoian Creed is presented here as “entry-level Christianity,” representing the complex Christian doctrine of the Trinity in a way designed to resonate with the Goths’ intuitions of divinity, as well as their concerns about the fate of the souls of their unbaptized ancestors in the Christian afterlife.

This book also reassesses the rise and fall of barbarian Arianism, the Homoian Christianity of the Goths and other Germanic peoples. The emergence of militarized migratory groupings and their settlement in the Roman Empire led to the use of conversion and re-baptism, initially in an effort to establish Visigothic hegemony over other rulers and then, within individual kingdoms, to create socio-political ties that could transcend ethnic distinctions. At the same time, the Homoian Churches developed an organizational individuality

largely ignored in current work.³ In the fifth and sixth centuries Homoianism was woven into the fabric of barbarian states to such an extent that attempts by rulers to disengage and enter the majority Catholic world generated tensions with their military élites. In their different ways, the violent convulsions which shook Vandal North Africa in 484 and some (almost) contemporary representations of the last years of Theoderic's rule in Ostrogothic Italy both reflect attempts to neutralize these tensions through a conspicuous performance of Homoianism. In Burgundy, the reign of a Nicene convert, Sigismund, between 516 and 524 did not imply the kingdom's automatic transition to Catholic Christianity. In Suevic Gallæcia and Visigothic Spain, rulers were only able to turn Arian-ruled kingdoms into Catholic states after lengthy manoeuvrings, which in Spain included abortive attempts to establish a new-style Homoian theology and Church. Homoianism was ended by conquest in the first half of the sixth century (Burgundy, North Africa, Italy) and by royal policy in the second (Gallæcia, Spain). Even as it disappeared, another barbarian group, the Lombards, was misleadingly labelled Arian, as the term became one shorthand for Other against which orthodox Christianity would define itself in the Middle Ages.

Terminology

This introduction has made liberal use of the terms Arian—as well as its “antithesis,” Catholic—and Arianism. But no-one ever called themselves an Arian: Arian and Arianism are part of the terminology of opponents and heresy-hunters. We see the emergence of the pejorative Arian in the following chapter. The Greek *Areianismos* was coined in the fourth century

3 Conflicting opinions about Arian church organization: Ralf Mathisen, “Barbarian Arian Clergy, Church Organization and Church Practices”, 145–91, and Uta Heil, “The Homoians in Gaul,” 271–96, both articles in *Arianism*, ed. Berndt and Steinacher.

in a work in praise of Athanasius,⁴ turning into the neo-Latin *Arianismus* and the English Arianism (and its French and German equivalents) in the early modern period.

From now on:

1. the terms Arian and Catholic are avoided except in reference to heresiological writings of the period, or where they are used by modern scholars;
2. Nicene, rather than Catholic, is used for the supporters and theology of the Nicene Creed of 325 and its modified replacement, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381;
3. the modern terms Homoian and Homoianism are employed when referring to the followers and theology of the Homoian Creed of 360, which characterized God the Son as *like* (Greek: *homoios*) the Father and was labelled by opponents as Arian.

In other words, where previous writers might use the term “Arian(ism)” when writing about the period after 360, you will mostly find “Homoian(ism)” used here.

⁴ *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* 7 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 275.