

a man, and as you have sinned as a man so you must repent. No angel can forgive you. God alone can forgive you, and He forgives those who repent."

Ambrose refused the emperor's Communion until he had confessed his sin. For a while Theodosius stayed away from church, but in the end accepted Ambrose's terms. In front of a crowded congregation he took his splendid imperial robes and asked pardon for his sins. He had to do so on several occasions until at last, on Christmas Day, Ambrose gave him the sacrament.

It required unusual courage to humiliate a Byzantine emperor, who had hit upon the weapon—the threat of excommunication—which the Western church would soon use again and again to humble princes. At the center of the Christian empire, in Constantinople, no bishop stepped so far out of line.

Today, as Bamber Gascoigne points out, "In the Milan church after St. Ambrose, the services are Roman Catholic—recognizably Roman from the form of worship associated with the Byzantine emperors. We now know as Greek Orthodox. But orthodox merely means orthodox catholic is a word for universal. We might equally well refer to them as Greek Catholic and Roman Orthodox." It was just a case of each side in the East and West, claiming to have the right form of Christianity. In their opposing attitudes toward the Christian emperors, however, we have a splendid illustration of their diverging destinies.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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SPLITTING IMPORTANT HAIRS

OF ALL the things that Christians say about God, the most distinctive is that God is three persons. Worshipers stand and sing:

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea;

Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!

God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

No other major religion confesses or worships a three-in-one deity. Muslims and Jews find the doctrine offensive; Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses find it deplorable.

Christians themselves are hard pressed to explain what they mean when they sing of the "blessed Trinity." Most are content to treat the doctrine as a piece of sublime mystery.

It wasn't so in the early church. Fourth-century Christians felt a nagging restlessness about the doctrine, like scholars who have a piece of unfinished research. Three in One and One in Three, each identical and yet different? With such mysteries to disagree upon, it wasn't long before everyone was calling somebody else a heretic.

One bishop described Constantinople as seething with discussion: "If in this city you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether God the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that God the Father is greater, God the Son is less. If you suggest that a bath is desirable, you will be told that 'there was nothing before God the Son was created.'"

This is the age that formulated the doctrine. But what did they mean by Trinity? What is the orthodox Christian understanding of the Triune God?

MAKING SENSE OF MYSTERY

The belief assumed major importance after Constantine's conversion. When the emperor turned to the Christian faith he counted upon the church to bring new life into the weary empire. But, to do that, the church itself had to be united. A quarreling, divided Christianity could not bind the crumbling empire together.

That is why Constantine was troubled by reports from all quarters of the bitterness Christians were displaying over theological issues. The same believers who, while Diocletian and Galerius ruled, had been the victims of terrible persecution, were demanding now that their fellow Christians who differed from them on points of doctrine be suppressed or banished from their churches by the power of the state. Constantine had no choice but to intervene to stop this constant bickering, or worse, and to make his Christian subjects agree on what their own beliefs were.

The most troublesome dispute in the East centered in Alexandria, where Arius, pastor of the influential Baucalis Church, came into conflict with his bishop, Alexander. Sometime around 318, Arius openly challenged teachers in Alexandria by asserting that the Word (Logos) who assumed flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:14) was not the true God and that he had an entirely different nature, neither eternal nor omnipotent. To Arius, when Christians called Christ God, they did not mean that he was deity except in a sort of approximate sense. He was a lesser being or half-God, not the eternal and changeless Creator. He was a created Being—the first created Being and the greatest, but nevertheless himself created. In explaining his position to Eusebius, the bishop at the empire's capital of Nicomedia, Arius wrote, "The Son has a beginning, but . . . God is without beginning."

Such teaching appealed to many of the former pagans; it was so much like the religion of their youth. Gnosticism, for example, as we have seen, taught that there is one supreme God, who dwells alone, and then a number of lesser beings, who do God's work and pass back and forth between heaven and earth. Converts from paganism found it hard to grasp the Christian belief that the Word existed from all eternity, and that he is equal with the Father. Arius made Christianity easier to understand. It seemed more reasonable to think of Christ as a kind of divine hero, greater than an ordinary human being, but of a lower rank than the eternal God.

Arius' views were all the more popular because he combined an eloquent preaching style with a flair for public relations. In the opening stages of the

conflict, he put ideas into jingles, which set to simple tunes like a radio commercial, and the school children of the city.

Bishop Alexander, however, would have none of it. He called a synod at Alexandria about 320, and the assembled churchmen condemned Arius' teaching and excommunicated the former pastor. Arius turned to his friend, Bishop of Nicomedia, and won his backing. Thus, the theological quarrel became a test of strength between the two most important churches in the East: Nicomedia, the political capital, and Alexandria, the intellectual capital. With the backing of his friends, Arius returned to Alexandria, and riots erupted in the streets.

Constantine recognized that the explosive issue had to be defused. So, in 325, he called for a council to meet at Nicea not far from Nicomedia in Asia Minor. What a vivid picture that first imperial synod made! Most of the 300 or so bishops had fresh memories of the days of persecution. Many could show the scars of suffering and prison. One had lost an eye during the persecution. Another had lost the use of his hands under torture. But the days of suffering seemed over now. The bishops did not set out for Nicea secretly, as they used to do, fearing arrest. They did not painfully walk the long miles as once they did. They rode in comfort to the council, all their expenses paid, the guests of the emperor.

In the center of the conference hall at Nicea sat Constantine, who had at first thought that the whole issue was a mere difference in terms. Presiding over the early sessions, he appeared as a glittering figure in his imperial robes, which were no longer the austere purple garment worn by the emperors in Rome but were the jewel-encrusted, multicolored brocades thought proper to an Eastern monarch.

He spoke briefly to the churchmen, reminding them that they must come to some agreement on the questions that divided them. Division in the church, he said, was worse than war. Having made his point, he stepped aside, committing the resolution of the conflict into the hands of the church leaders.

TRUE GOD OF TRUE GOD

The struggle with Arianism itself was settled quickly. The main question was whether Bishop Alexander's condemnation of Arius would stand. Arius was called in as defendant, and although he had little support, he was

courageous enough to state his views in the most uncompromising terms. The Son of God was a created being, made from nothing; there was a time when he had no existence and he was capable of change and of alternating between good and evil. Blasphemy! The assembly denounced it.

In the course of the debate that followed, the most learned bishop present, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, a personal friend and admirer of the emperor and a somewhat half-hearted supporter of Arius, put forward his own creed—perhaps as evidence of his own questioned orthodoxy.

Most of the pastors, however, recognized that something more specific was needed to exclude the possibility of Arian heresy. For this purpose they produced another creed, probably from Palestine. Into it they inserted an extremely important series of phrases: "True God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father."

The expression *homo ousion*, "one substance," was probably introduced by Bishop Hosius of Cordova (in today's Spain). Since he had great influence with Constantine, the imperial weight was thrown to that side of the scales. After more days of inconclusive debate the impatient emperor intervened to demand that this statement be adopted. Thus, there emerged that Nicene Creed, which to this day is the standard of orthodoxy in the Roman, Eastern, Anglican, and some other churches:

I believe in one GOD THE FATHER Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one LORD JESUS CHRIST, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

All but two bishops present signed the creed; and these two, along with Arius himself, were soon afterward sent into exile. Meanwhile, Constantine

was joyful, thinking the issue settled. He held a great banquet. Such an event defied the Christian imagination. The head of the empire and the bishops of the church sitting together, celebrating the coming happy days of the Church of Christ?

"No bishop was absent from the table of the emperor," Eusebius of the Caesarea wrote enthusiastically. "Bodyguards and soldiers stood guard, with sharp swords drawn, around the outer court of the palace, but among them the men of God could walk fearlessly and enter the deepest parts of the palace. At dinner some of them lay on the same couch as the emperor, while others rested on cushions on both sides of him. Easily one could imagine this to be the kingdom of Christ or regard it as a dream rather than reality." Bishop Paphnutius, from Egypt, who had lost one eye under the Emperor Diocletian, was singled out for special honor by the new emperor. As a sign of friendship between the empire and the church, Constantine kissed the bishop's eyeless cheek.

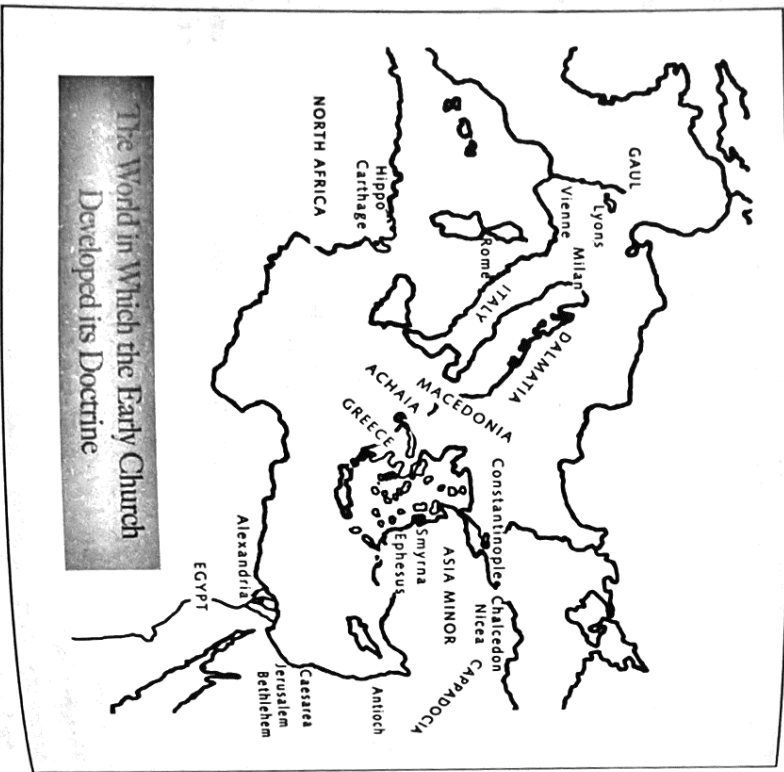
After Nicea, however, first Constantine and then his successors stepped in again and again to banish this churchman or exile that one. Control of church offices too often depended on control of the emperor's favor. The court was overrun by spokesmen for some Christian party. As a result, the imperial power was forever ordering bishops into banishment and almost as often bringing them back again when some new group of ecclesiastical advisers got the upper hand in the palace.

No career better illustrates the way in which imperial power took over actual control of the church than that of Athanasius. As a young advisor to Alexander, he had won a resounding victory at Nicea over his elderly opponent, Arius. Soon after that, at the age of 33, he succeeded Alexander as bishop of the great see of Alexandria. For the next 50 years, however, no one could predict who would win in the struggle with Arianism. During these decades, Athanasius was banished no less than five times, each banishment and return to Alexandria representing either a change in emperors or a shift in the makeup of the palace ecclesiastical clique that had the emperor's ear. At times Athanasius was so completely out of imperial favor that he felt deserted by all his supporters. During one such hour he uttered his famous defiance, *Athanasius Against the World*. He would stand alone, if need be, against the whole empire.

These 50 years continued the heated debate over the Arian question. Not long after the Council of Nicea a moderate group, sometimes called the Semi-Arians, broke away from the strict Arians and attempted to give a new interpretation to the "one substance" statement. They defended the use of *homoios*, meaning "similar," to describe the Word's relation to the Father.

reveal his true character. It is clear that when we think of the Trinity, we should not try to think of three persons in our sense of the term, but three personal disclosures of God that correspond to what he is really like.

A bit later Augustine, Bishop of Hippo near Carthage, used the psychological analogy. He believed that if man is created in the image of God, he is created in the image of the Trinity. His analogy for the Trinity, then, was from the human mind. God, said Augustine, is like the memory, intelligence, and will in the mind of a man. In short, we do not have to think of three persons when we think of God; we may think of one person. Of course, Augustine made it clear that this was only an analogy; he was far too



profound a thinker to suppose that God was a glorified man sitting in heaven. But if we speak about the mystery that is God, we must speak in analogies, and the analogy for the Trinity is not three men but one.

As it turned out, then, Athanasius was not all alone against the world. He lived to see the triumph of the cause he championed. When he died at the age of seventy-five, his death was peaceful. He had been at last secure in his office as bishop of Alexandria in the closing years, and—what mattered more to him—he could rest assured that the creed he had fought for at Nicea and ever afterward was the creed of the church. “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”

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