

***HENRY MELVILL  
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CONTROVERSY***

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# **The Arian Controversy**

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# CHAPTER I.

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## ***THE BEGINNINGS OF ARIANISM.***

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Arianism is extinct only in the sense that it has long ceased to furnish party names. It sprang from permanent tendencies of human nature, and raised questions whose interest can never perish. As long as the Agnostic and the Evolutionist are with us, the old battlefields of Athanasius will not be left to silence. Moreover, no writer more directly joins the new world of Teutonic Christianity with the old of Greek and Roman heathenism. Arianism began its career partly as a theory of Christianity, partly as an Eastern reaction of philosophy against a gospel of the Son of God. Through sixty years of ups and downs and stormy controversy it fought, and not without success, for the dominion of the world. When it was at last rejected by the Empire, it fell back upon its converts among the Northern nations, and renewed the contest as a Western reaction of Teutonic pride against a Roman gospel. The struggle went on for full three hundred years in all, and on a scale of vastness never seen again in history. Even the Reformation was limited to the West, whereas Arianism ranged at one time or another through the whole of Christendom. Nor was the battle merely for the wording of antiquated creeds or for the outworks of the faith, but for the very life of revelation. If the Reformation decided the supremacy of revelation over church authority, it was the contest with Arianism which

cleared the way, by settling for ages the deeper and still more momentous question, which is once more coming to the surface as the gravest doubt of our time, whether a revelation is possible at all.

Unlike the founders of religions, Jesus of Nazareth made his own person the centre of his message. Through every act and utterance recorded of him there runs a clear undoubting self-assertion, utterly unknown to Moses or Mahomet. He never spoke but with authority. His first disciples told how he began his ministry by altering the word which was said to them of old time, and ended it by calmly claiming to be the future Judge of all men. And they told the story of their own life also; how they had seen his glory while he dwelt among them, and how their risen Lord had sent them forth to be his witnesses to all the nations. Whatever might be doubtful, their personal knowledge of the Lord was sure and certain, and of necessity became the base and starting-point of their teaching. In Christ all things were new. From him they learned the meaning of their ancient scriptures; through him they knew their heavenly Father; in him they saw their Saviour from this present world, and to him they looked for the crown of life in that to come. His word was law, his love was life, and in his name the world was overcome already. What mattered it to analyse the power of life they felt within them? It was enough to live and to rejoice; and their works are one long hymn of triumphant hope and overflowing thankfulness.

It was easier for the first disciples to declare what their own eyes had seen and

their own hands had handled of the Word of Life, than for another generation to take up a record which to themselves was only history, and to pass from the traditional assertion of the Lord's divinity to its deliberate enunciation in clear consciousness of the difficulties which gathered round it when the gospel came under the keen scrutiny of thoughtful heathens. Whatever vice might be in heathenism, there was no want of interest in religion. If the doubts of some were real, the scoffs of many were only surface-deep. If the old legends of Olympus were outworn, philosophy was still a living faith, and every sort of superstition flourished luxuriantly. Old worships were revived, the ends of the earth were searched for new ones. Isis or Mithras might help where Jupiter was powerless, and uncouth lustrations of the blood of bulls and goats might peradventure cast a spell upon eternity. The age was too sad to be an irreligious one. Thus from whatever quarter a convert might approach the gospel, he brought earlier ideas to bear upon its central question of the person of the Lord. Who then was this man who was dead, whom all the churches affirmed to be alive and worshipped as the Son of God? If he was divine, there must be two Gods; if not, his worship was no better than the vulgar worships of the dead. In either case, there seemed to be no escape from the charge of polytheism.

The key of the difficulty is on its other *(2) with the* side, in the doctrine of the unity of God, *philosophers.* which was not only taught by Jews and Christians, but generally admitted by serious heathens. The philosophers spoke of a dim Supreme far off from men, and even the polytheists were not unwilling to subordinate their

motley crew of gods to some mysterious divinity beyond them all. So far there was a general agreement. But underneath this seeming harmony there was a deep divergence. Resting on a firm basis of historic revelation, Christianity could bear record of a God who loved the world and of a Redeemer who had come in human flesh. As this coming is enough to show that God is something more than abstract perfection and infinity, there is nothing incredible in a real incarnation, or in a real trinity inside the unity of God. But the heathen had no historic revelation of a living hope to sustain him in that age of failure and exhaustion. Nature was just as mighty, just as ruthless then as now, and the gospel was not yet the spring of hope it is in modern life. In our time the very enemies of the cross are living in its light, and drawing at their pleasure from the well of Christian hope. It was not yet so in that age. Brave men like Marcus Aurelius could only do their duty with hopeless courage, and worship as they might a God who seemed to refuse all answer to the great and bitter cry of mankind. If he cares for men, why does he let them perish? The less he has to do with us, the better we can understand our evil plight. Thus their Supreme was far beyond the weakness of human sympathy. They made him less a person than a thing or an idea, enveloped in clouds of mysticism and abolished from the world by his very exaltation over it. He must not touch it lest it perish. The Redeemer whom the Christians worship may be a hero or a prophet, an angel or a demi-god—anything except a Son of God in human form. We shall have to find some explanation for the scandal of the incarnation.

*Arius himself.*



Arianism is Christianity shaped by thoughts like these. Its author was no mere bustling schemer, but a grave and blameless presbyter of Alexandria. Arius was a disciple of the greatest critic of his time, the venerated martyr Lucian of Antioch. He had a name for learning, and his letters bear witness to his dialectical skill and mastery of subtle irony. At the outbreak of the controversy, about the year 318, we find him in charge of the church of Baucalis at Alexandria, and in high favour with his bishop, Alexander. It was no love of heathenism, but a real difficulty of the gospel which led him to form a new theory. His aim was not to lower the person of the Lord or to refuse him worship, but to defend that worship from the charge of polytheism. Starting from the Lord's humanity, he was ready to add to it everything short of the fullest deity. He could not get over the philosophical difficulty that one who is man cannot be also God, and therefore a second God. Let us see how high a creature can be raised without making him essentially divine.

The Arian Christ is indeed a lofty *His doctrine; Its* creature. He claims our worship as the *merits.* image of the Father, begotten before all worlds, as the Son of God, by whom all things were made, who for us men took flesh and suffered and rose again, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and remains both King and God for ever. Is not this a good confession? What more can we want? Why should all this glorious language go for nothing? God forbid that it should go for nothing. Arianism was at least so far Christian that it held aloft the Lord's example as the Son of Man, and never wavered in its worship of him as the Son of God. Whatever be the errors of

its creed, whatever the scandals of its history, it was a power of life among the Northern nations. Let us give Arianism full honour for its noble work of missions in that age of deep despair which saw the dissolution of the ancient world.

Nevertheless, this plausible Arian *its real* confession will not bear examination. It is *meaning*. only the philosophy of the day put into a Christian dress. It starts from the accepted belief that the unity of God excludes not only distinctions inside the divine nature, but also contact with the world. Thus the God of Arius is an unknown God, whose being is hidden in eternal mystery. No creature can reveal him, and he cannot reveal himself. But if he is not to touch the world, he needs a minister of creation. The Lord is rather such a minister than the conqueror of death and sin. No doubt he is the Son of God, and begotten before all worlds. Scripture is quite clear so far; but if he is distinct from the Father, he is not God; and if he is a Son, he is not co-eternal with the Father. And what is not God is creature, and what is not eternal is also creature. On both grounds, then, the Lord is only a creature; so that if he is called God, it is in a lower and improper sense; and if we speak of him as eternal, we mean no more than the eternity of all things in God's counsel. Far from sharing the essence of the Father, he does not even understand his own. Nay, more; he is not even a creature of the highest type. If he is not a sinner, (Scripture forbids at least *that* theory, though some Arians came very near it), his virtue is, like our own, a constant struggle of free-will, not the fixed habit which is the perfection and annulment of

free-will. And now that his human soul is useless, we may as well simplify the incarnation into an assumption of human flesh and nothing more. The Holy Spirit bears to the Son a relation not unlike that of the Son to the Father. Thus the Arian trinity of divine persons forms a descending series, separated by infinite degrees of honour and glory, resembling the philosophical triad of orders of spiritual existence, extending outwards in concentric circles.

Indeed the system is heathen to the *Criticism of it*. core. The Arian Christ is nothing but a heathen idol invented to maintain a heathenish Supreme in heathen isolation from the world. Never was a more illogical theory devised by the wit of man. Arius proclaims a God of mystery, unfathomable to the Son of God himself, and goes on to argue as if the divine generation were no more mysterious than its human type. He forgets first that metaphor would cease to be metaphor if there were nothing beyond it; then that it would cease to be true if its main idea were misleading. He presses the metaphor of sonship as if mere human relations could exhaust the meaning of the divine; and soon works round to the conclusion that it is no proper sonship at all. In his irreverent hands the Lord's deity is but the common right of mankind, his eternity no more than the beasts themselves may claim. His clumsy logic overturns every doctrine he is endeavouring to establish. He upholds the Lord's divinity by making the Son of God a creature, and then worships him to escape the reproach of heathenism, although such worship, on his own showing, is mere idolatry. He makes the Lord's manhood his primary fact, and overthrows that too by refusing the Son of Man a

human soul. The Lord is neither truly God nor truly man, and therefore is no true mediator. Heathenism may dream of a true communion with the Supreme, but for us there neither is nor ever can be any. Between our Father and ourselves there is a great gulf fixed, which neither he nor we can pass. Now that we have heard the message of the Lord, we know the final certainty that God is darkness, and in him is no light at all. If this be the sum of the whole matter, then revelation is a mockery, and Christ is dead in vain.

Arius was but one of many who were *Athanasius de* measuring the heights of heaven with their *Incarnatione*. puny logic, and sounding the deeps of Wisdom with the plummet of the schools. Men who agreed in nothing else agreed in this practical subordination of revelation to philosophy. Sabellius, for example, had reduced the Trinity to three successive manifestations of the one God in the Law, the Gospel, and the Church; yet even he agreed with Arius in a philosophical doctrine of the unity of God which was inconsistent with a real incarnation. Even the noble work of Origen had helped to strengthen the philosophical influences which were threatening to overwhelm the definite historic revelation. Tertullian had long since warned the churches of the danger; but a greater than Tertullian was needed now to free them from their bondage to philosophy. Are we to worship the Father of our spirits or the Supreme of the philosophers? Arius put the question: the answer came from Athanasius. Though his *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* was written in early manhood, before the rise of Arianism, we can already see in it the firm grasp of fundamental principles which enabled him so thoroughly

to master the controversy when it came before him. He starts from the beginning, with the doctrine that God is good and not envious, and that His goodness is shown in the creation, and more especially by the creation of man in the image of God, whereby he was to remain in bliss and live the true life, the life of the saints in Paradise. But when man sinned, he not only died, but fell into the entire corruption summed up in death; for this is the full meaning of the threat 'ye shall die with death.'<sup>[1]</sup> So things went on from bad to worse on earth. The image of God was disappearing, and the whole creation going to destruction. What then was God to do? He could not take back his sentence that death should follow sin, and yet he could not allow the creatures of his love to perish. Mere repentance on man's side could not touch the law of sin; a word from God forbidding the approach of death would not reach the inner corruption. Angels could not help, for it was not in the image of angels that man was made. Only he who is himself the Life could conquer death. Therefore the immortal Word took human flesh and gave his mortal body for us all. It was no necessity of his nature so to do, but a pure outcome of his love to men and of the Father's loving purpose of salvation. By receiving in himself the principle of death he overcame it, not in his own person only, but in all of us who are united with him. If we do not yet see death abolished, it is now no more than the passage to our joyful resurrection. Our mortal human nature is joined with life in him, and clothed in the asbestos robe of immortality. Thus, and only thus, in virtue of union with him, can man become a sharer of his victory. There is no limit to the sovereignty of Christ in heaven and earth and

hell. Wherever the creation has gone before, the issues of the incarnation must follow after. See, too, what he has done among us, and judge if his works are not the works of sovereign power and goodness. The old fear of death is gone. Our children tread it underfoot, our women mock at it. Even the barbarians have laid aside their warfare and their murders, and live at his bidding a new life of peace and purity. Heathenism is fallen, the wisdom of the world is turned to folly, the oracles are dumb, the demons are confounded. The gods of all the nations are giving place to the one true God of mankind. The works of Christ are more in number than the sea, his victories are countless as the waves, his presence is brighter than the sunlight. 'He was made man that we might be made God.'[\[2\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Gen. ii. 17, LXX.

[\[2\]](#) Ath. *De Inc.* 44: [Greek: autos gar enênthrôpêsen hina hêmeis theopoiêthômen]. Bold as this phrase is, it is not too bold a paraphrase of Heb. ii. 5-18.

The great persecution had been raging *its significance*. but a few years back, and the changes which had passed since then were enough to stir the enthusiasm of the dullest Christian. These splendid paragraphs are the song of victory over the defeat of the Pharaohs of heathenism and the deliverance of the churches from the house of bondage. 'Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously.' There is something in them higher than the fierce exultation of Lactantius over the sufferings of the dying persecutors, though that too is impressive. 'The Lord hath heard our prayers. The men who strove with God lie low; the men who overthrew his

churches have themselves fallen with a mightier overthrow; the men who tortured the righteous have surrendered their guilty spirits under the blows of Heaven and in tortures well deserved though long delayed—yet delayed only that posterity might learn the full terrors of God's vengeance on his enemies.' There is none of this fierce joy in Athanasius, though he too had seen the horrors of the persecution, and some of his early teachers had perished in it. His eyes are fixed on the world-wide victory of the Eternal Word, and he never lowers them to resent the evil wrought by men of yesterday. Therefore neither lapse of time nor multiplicity of trials could ever quench in Athanasius the pure spirit of hope which glows in his youthful work. Slight as our sketch of it has been, it will be enough to show his combination of religious intensity with a speculative insight and a breadth of view reminding us of Origen. If he fails to reach the mystery of sinlessness in man, and is therefore not quite free from a Sabellianising view of the Lord's humanity as a mere vesture of his divinity, he at least rises far above the barren logic of the Arians. We shall presently have to compare him with the next great Eastern thinker, Apollinarius of Laodicea.

Yet there were many men whom *Attraction of Arianism* suited by its shallowness. As *Arianism: (1.)* soon as Christianity was established as a *For superficial* lawful worship by the edict of Milan in 312, *thinkers.*

the churches were crowded with converts and inquirers of all sorts. A church which claims to be universal cannot pick and choose like a petty sect, but must receive all comers. Now these were mostly heathens with the thinnest possible

varnish of Christianity, and Arianism enabled them to use the language of Christians without giving up their heathen ways of thinking. In other words, the world was ready to accept the gospel as a sublime monotheism, and the Lord's divinity was the one great stumbling-block which seemed to hinder its conversion. Arianism was therefore a welcome explanation of the difficulty. Nor was the attraction only for nominal Christians like these. Careless thinkers—sometimes thinkers who were not careless—might easily suppose that Arianism had the best of such passages as 'The Lord created me,'<sup>[1]</sup> or 'The Father is greater than I.'<sup>[2]</sup> Athanasius constantly complains of the Arian habit of relying on isolated passages like these without regard to their context or to the general scope and drift of Scripture.

<sup>[1]</sup> Prov. viii. 22, LXX mistranslation.

<sup>[2]</sup> John xiv. 28.

Nor was even this all. The Lord's divinity (2.) *To* was a real difficulty to thoughtful men. *thoughtful* They were still endeavouring to reconcile *men.* the philosophical idea of God with the fact of the incarnation. In point of fact, the two things are incompatible, and one or the other would have to be abandoned. The absolute simplicity of the divine nature is consistent with a merely external Trinity, or with a merely economic Trinity, with an Arian Trinity of one increate and two created beings, or with a Sabellian Trinity of three temporal aspects of the one God revealed in history; but not with a Christian Trinity of three eternal aspects of the divine nature, facing inward on each other as well as outward on the world. But this was not yet fully understood. The



problem was to explain the Lord's distinction from the Father without destroying the unity of God. Sabellianism did it at the cost of his premundane and real personality, and therefore by common consent was out of the question. The Easterns were more inclined to theories of subordination, to distinctions of the derivatively from the absolutely divine, and to views of Christ as a sort of secondary God. Such theories do not really meet the difficulty. A secondary God is necessarily a second God. Thus heathenism still held the key of the position, and constantly threatened to convict them of polytheism. They could not sit still, yet they could not advance without remodelling their central doctrine of the divine nature to agree with revelation. Nothing could be done till the Trinity was placed inside the divine *nature*. But this is just what they could not for a long time see. These men were not Arians, for they recoiled in genuine horror from the polytheistic tendencies of Arianism; but they had no logical defence against Arianism, and were willing to see if some modification of it would not give them a foothold of some kind. To men who dreaded the return of Sabellian confusion, Arianism was at least an error in the right direction. It upheld the same truth as they—the separate personality of the Son of God—and if it went further than they could follow, it might still do service against the common enemy.

Thus the new theory made a great *Arianism at Alexandria*, and it was not *Alexandria* without much hesitation and delay that Alexander ventured to excommunicate his heterodox presbyter with his chief followers, like Pistus, Carpones, and

the deacon Euzoius—all of whom we shall meet again. Arius was a dangerous enemy. His austere life and novel doctrines, his dignified character and championship of 'common sense in religion,' made him the idol of the ladies and the common people. He had plenty of telling arguments for them. 'Did the Son of God exist before his generation?' Or to the women, 'Were you a mother before you had a child?' He knew also how to cultivate his popularity by pastoral visiting—his enemies called it canvassing—and by issuing a multitude of theological songs 'for sailors and millers and wayfarers,' as one of his admirers says. So he set the bishop at defiance, and more than held his ground against him. The excitement spread to every village in Egypt, and Christian divisions became a pleasant subject for the laughter of the heathen theatres.

The next step was to secure outside *And elsewhere.* support. Arius betook himself to Cæsarea in Palestine, and thence appealed to the Eastern churches generally. Nor did he look for help in vain. His doctrine fell in with the prevailing dread of Sabellianism, his personal misfortunes excited interest, his dignified bearing commanded respect, and his connection with the school of Lucian secured him learned and influential sympathy. Great Syrian bishops like those of Cæsarea, Tyre, and Laodicea gave him more or less encouragement; and when the old Lucianist Eusebius of Nicomedia held a council in Bithynia to demand his recall, it became clear that the controversy was more than a local dispute. Arius even boasted that the Eastern bishops agreed with him, 'except a few heretical and ill-taught men,' like those of Antioch and Jerusalem.

The Eastern Emperor, Licinius, let the *Constantine's* dispute take its course. He was a rude old *interference*. heathen soldier, and could only let it alone. If Eusebius of Nicomedia tried to use his influence in favour of Arius, he had small success. But when the battle of Chrysopolis (323) laid the Empire at the feet of Constantine, it seemed time to get the question somehow settled.

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