

## Preface

For all that has been written about him, Arius remains a rather obscure figure in history. Few people today know anything more of him than that he was a fourth century Christian heretic, and perhaps that his heresy was the moving force behind the adoption of the Nicene Creed that, in a slightly modified form adopted a half-century later in Constantinople, nearly a billion worshippers still recite in church on a regular basis. Precisely because they are deemed heretical, Arius's teachings are presumed by most Christians—at least by most trinitarian Christians—to be unworthy of consideration. That his views must have been accepted by or at least attractive to a great many in the church of his time (would the Council of Nicaea have been convened otherwise?) likely never occurs to them. The harsh judgment of history has effectively squelched his antitrinitarian theology, and that is enough for the average believer; no need to consider how that theology came to be branded as heresy, or how what now passes for orthodoxy triumphed. Indeed, many are content simply to assign the Trinity to the category of unfathomable mystery. As Sir Isaac Newton once commented, “It is the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion ever to be fond of mysteries, and for that reason to like best what they understand least.”

As one of those billion regular creed reciters, first as a Roman Catholic and later as an Episcopalian, I have always found the phrase “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being (*homoousion*) with the Father” to be a rather vague expression of the nature of the Son of God, yet one whose meaning ought to be understood if it is to be recited as part of a profession of faith. Questions such as what “begotten” means in this context, and whether the Father and the pre-incarnate Son are two separate beings

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or two expressions of a single undivided being, strike me as important ones to answer.

This novel was written on the premise that I am not alone in this view, that professions of faith are, for all of us, meaningful and valuable. Of what value is a profession of faith if its meaning is not understood by those professing it? I learned to recite a pledge of allegiance to the American flag by rote at the age of five, and could be forgiven for not appreciating its meaning then. But I am not five years old today.

At any age, memorizing a mantra inevitably shifts significance from the meaning of the words to the bare fact of their expression. Creeds can easily become mantras, which may explain why it is rare for Christians today to reflect on their beliefs about the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to the Father, even as they pledge them aloud. How far we have come from the state of affairs described by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote of Constantinople on the eve of that city's Council in 381 CE:

Throughout the city everything is taken up by such discussions: the alleyways, the marketplaces, the broad avenues and city streets; the hawkers of clothing, the money-changers, those selling us food. If you ask about small change, someone would philosophize to you about the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you inquire about the price of bread, the reply comes: "The Father is greater and the Son is a dependent." If you should ask: "Is the bath prepared?" someone would reply, "The Son was created from not-being."

Indeed, such Arian notions had so permeated Christianity by this time that Saint Jerome lamented, with only mild exaggeration, that "the world awoke to find itself Arian." This was an era when people wore their religion on their sleeves and talked with each other about their beliefs regularly, to an extent nearly unfathomable today.

Burning issue it may have been then; but history is written by the winners, and the winners in the Arian controversy did their best to ensure that Arius's own writings, at least in their original imprint, would not survive to re-stir the controversy for future generations. Reliance on his detractors' accounts of what he taught necessarily makes researching Arius somewhat difficult and uncertain—but not impossible. What emerged from my own research was a man whose doctrine was essentially a conservative reaction to a liberal group of Alexandrian church fathers whose Platonist sentiments and allegorizing tendencies were getting the better of them.

Placing Arius as a conservative voice in a liberal era requires abandoning our modern notions of what is theologically conservative or liberal, notions colored by centuries of evolution in Christian theology, which in the West got something of a complete overhaul by Augustine just as the Arian controversy was dying down. The march of Christianity outward from Palestine into the Greek world inevitably resulted in a cultural and philosophical disconnect, as tales told and texts written from a Jewish/messianic perspective were being interpreted by men imbued in a Greek philosophical tradition. Those few scattered passages in the emerging New Testament canon that could arguably be deemed binitarian or (far less frequently) trinitarian yielded no coherent picture of the Son's participation in the Godhead, and two centuries of patristic thinking were occupied by the effort to weave that idea into a doctrine that was consistent with Scripture. It was thus natural that Greek philosophy, which had long sought to locate an ontological bridge between the One and the Many, between the realm of soul/spirit and the material world, would provide the looms for this tapestry. Particularly in Alexandria, Christianity was discovering its affinity with middle-Platonism and using it as a lens through which to view Christian concepts, furnishing the early church fathers with a template for reworking Jewish monotheism into a trinitarianism that could successfully resist devolving into tritheism.

If this seems somewhat foreign to us, it is because we are so far removed, theologically as well as temporally, from the early church fathers. For them, the conundrum of a melding of divine and human natures overshadowed the Incarnation's status as a necessary step in the plan of salvation. In Arius's time the manger rather than the cross was at the center of the theological roundtable; today that focus is reversed, due in no small part to the Reformation's hoisting of Paul's epistles, which point almost exclusively to Christ's death rather than his birth, up the masthead. By the time of the Reformation, the "problem" of Christ's dual nature was long since taken as solved. We cannot appreciate Arius in context today without sloughing off sixteen centuries of rather thick bark, and that is not easy to do.

It is even harder to put aside modern notions of "equality" and "identity," concepts that today have a mathematical tinge (if  $F = G$  and  $S = G$ , then  $S = F$ ), and adopt third-century Greek understandings of these concepts in order to see how Father and Son might both be thought of as God, and yet as distinct, without doing violence to the tenet that God is One. Some appreciation of this "higher" math is needed in order to set the Arian stage,

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and that takes a bit of effort for the modern mind—and not *just* the modern mind; many pre-Arian heresies, such as Adoptionism (which emphasized the Son's distinction from the Father) and Sabellianism (which emphasized their identicalness), arose because their adherents couldn't quite do the math here either. As the Latin apologist Tertullian bemoaned well over a century before Nicaea, "The simple, indeed (I will not call them unwise and unlearned) who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation (of the Three in One) . . . They are constantly throwing out against us that we are preachers of two gods and three gods."

This is hardly an unnatural reaction to Trinitarian teaching even for the wise and learned. Thinking of two beings as distinct, and yet as sharing the same substance or essence, the same *ousia*, presents no difficulty unless that substance or essence or *ousia* is itself the unique and absolute self-subsistence of the Mosaic "I AM"—for by definition only one being can have *that* as its essence. At least today we would see this as a definitional problem; then, it was viewed as a relational one. Efforts in Arius's time to solve the dilemma—and the first three centuries of the Christian era were marked by an astonishing array of such efforts—are best understood from this perspective.

I found my own thinking on all of this easier to explain in the form of a novel. Perhaps that was inevitable given that I am not a theologian. But I do think that when writing a novel on a theological subject, a lack of theological training is no disqualifier. Henry James, in his essay *The Art of Fiction*, attributes to the novelist the ability "to guess the unseen from the seen." James was not describing the essence of religious or theological study, but he may as well have been; for what other field of study is more engaged in precisely such a pursuit?

Moreover, because they are by nature indirect explications, stories have a capacity to stir the imagination that is not found in academic treatises. From earliest times stories have been the primary tools for conveying theological concepts, as was perhaps required by the subject matter, for which direct experience and thus direct language was lacking. This imaginative stirring has inevitably fostered greater understanding of the subject. The divine "story" was and is a collaborative one, told amongst ourselves again and again, augmented in imaginative ways. The use of story still serves that function.

This particular story would have been impossible without the encouragement of my wife, Linda. She *does* have theological training (a masters

degree in divinity from Harvard), and if, at times, she has vaguely suspected that this book might have been an attempt to upstage her, I am confident that her suspicions are dispelled by the final product; such an attempt was clearly too feeble ever to be workable. I knew that all along. I dedicate this book to her.

# Acknowledgments

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Quotations from the Epistle of Barnabas, the Second Epistle of Clement, the writings of Ignatius, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Dionysius of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus, Origen; the various letters of Alexander, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Constantine; the Edict of Milan; the Creed of Eusebius of Caesarea and his letter to his diocese after Nicaea are from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Roberts and Donaldson, eds., 1886), and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II* (Schaff, et al., eds., 1890). Arius's letters to Alexander and to Eusebius of Nicomedia are taken from *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church*, vol. II (Kidd, ed., 1923). Quotations from Philo are from Yonge, *The Works of Philo Judaeus* (1855), and those from Plotinus are from MacKenna and Page, *Plotinus: The Enneads* (rev. ed. 1930). Constantine's speech at Nicaea is taken from Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1884). The Nicene Creed itself is from R.P.C. Hanson's *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (1988), used by permission. Quotation from *The Didache* is from Anthony Jones' *The Teaching of the Twelve* (2009), used by permission. The creed of the Synod of Antioch is from Rowan Williams' *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (rev. ed. 2001), used by permission.

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# Chapter 1

She always arrives just before dusk, perching on the same branch, watching, waiting. Compared to other Pharaoh eagle-owls I have seen, she is on the smallish side, but with those piercing yellow-orange eyes that take everything in, missing nothing—including me. We have an understanding, she and I. It is simply this: we are to keep our respectful distance.

Several times have I seen her take flight, soaring with a grace that belies her deadly purpose. When she hunts for rodents in the failing light, she is awesome to watch: a silent, devastating dive toward her prey, seizing it with talons far too strong to permit any consideration of escape (as if her victim could consider anything at all in the shock of the moment), snatching it from the ground and up ever higher into the terrifying sky with the fearsome beating of her powerful wings.

But I do not come here to watch a hunter.

I come to pray. Here on the outskirts of Alexandria, on the western shore of Lake Mareotis, its cool waters fed by canals from the Nile, I pray aloud. I pray that God hears me. But what does he hear? Is it my words only, or the thoughts of my heart that words can but poorly express? Does he see in my heart a genuine desire to be submissive to his will, or only a conditional one, tempered by human frailty and restricted to that which is not too difficult, not too inconvenient? I know which. God sees all. More than this owl sees.

How hard it is to pray sincerely sometimes! All too often I find my words encumbered by other thoughts. Even when those words are divinely scripted, even as I pray as the Lord taught us to pray, I find that I cannot slow my mind from distractions. I pray aloud, “Thy will be done on earth,

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as it is in heaven,” but I think to myself, is God’s will not *always* done? Scripture reports that Job said to God, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Doesn’t that make it pointless to pray that God’s will be done? Who can resist it? Yet I know that the Lord would never institute an irrelevancy. He wants us to desire the same things as God. He asks us to conform our wills to God’s. And stilling the mind is always the first step toward discerning God’s will.

I am young, and unskilled in the art of meditation. The cares of my world intrude, and weigh heavily on my shoulders—my studies at the Catechetical School, my secretarial service to the Bishop, my writing, my duties as a new deacon. Somehow I must find a way to cast them all aside for a moment. Here, now, sitting under this tree, I must put them out of mind and trust that God will call out to me. I know that he sees me sitting here. The way Jesus saw Nathanael sitting under the fig tree before Philip called out to him to “come and see” the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael got up, came and saw, saw that Jesus knew him already, knew there was no deceit in his heart; and Nathanael asked in bewilderment *how, how* did Jesus know him. “I saw you under the fig tree,” was Jesus’ simple answer. Nothing more. At once Nathanael replied with a declaration that defied all logic, a conclusion that could not rationally be drawn from Jesus’ mere vision of him under the tree: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!”

Jesus waits for my like reply. Will it form on my lips as readily as it did on Nathanael’s? Will it rise up from my heart? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” Paul wrote to the Romans. Let it be so!

And so I pray. I pray to confess in my heart that Jesus Christ is truly God, to *feel* its truth in the depths of my being. No mere intellectual assent to the conclusion, as though it were a geometrical proof distilled from undoubted axioms, will suffice here. No amount of study, whether of the Scriptures or of the writings of church fathers—all of which I have scrutinized extensively for many years—can yield the certainty I seek. That can come only from the Spirit. Inspiration, not logic, sparked Nathanael’s conclusion, and must spark mine as well. If, as Paul declared to the Corinthians, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit,” how much more is the Spirit’s guidance needed for one to say “Jesus is *God*.” How much more blessed are those who, not having seen, yet believe, and declare with Thomas that Jesus is “My Lord *and my God*.”

At the Catechetical School many of my fellow deacons argue that Thomas’ twofold declaration was redundant, that “Lord” and “God” are

functionally equivalent. They point to the Hebrew Scriptures' use of the word "Lord" as a stand-in for the unutterable name of God, time and again—and they argue from this that Jesus' divinity must be entailed by his lordship. They quote David's Psalm, "The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool,'" and insist that David must have used "my lord" as a title of divinity. But the Hebrew word that the Greek renders as "my lord" is regularly employed to describe an earthly rather than a divine being. David is no exception; even after Saul anointed him king, David referred to Saul as "my lord." How, then, can we know whether "my lord" in his Psalm was intended to refer to a divine being or a human one?

I think of Simon Peter's quotation of the same Psalm when he proclaimed at Pentecost that "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified," and wonder how the Jews who were converted that day understood his words. God made him *Lord*? Perhaps so; lordship can be granted or inherited. But God made him *God*? The very concept would have been almost unintelligible to any Jew! Surely Simon Peter, no less than the Jews in his audience, understood that "God" and "Lord" were not equivalent concepts. One refers to the Supreme Being; the other is simply an acknowledgement of sovereignty and dominion, equivalent to "master." The logical leap from "Jesus is Lord" to "Jesus is God" is as great as Nathanael's.

If anything, Simon Peter's words widen the logical gap for me. If God *made* him Lord, doesn't that suggest he was *not* Lord to begin with, and received power and glory only later as a reward for his obedience to the Father's will? Yet that is precisely what the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah implies: God allotted him "a portion with the great" for agreeing to die for our sins. Paul's Letter to the Philippians likewise teaches that "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross. *Therefore* God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." The Letter to the Hebrews is even more explicit, suggesting that Christ endured the cross "for the sake of the joy that was set before him," and now "has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." And that is where Simon Peter's speech at Pentecost places him, "exalted at the right hand of God." But this notion of exalting Christ as a reward troubles me. After all, if he was truly God, he could not have been *made* Lord; that station would already have been his automatically, and not a reward for

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sacrifice. How could it be otherwise? Suppose the cup *had* passed him by; what would have happened *then*? An empty seat in the throne room of heaven?

Once again, I am being too analytical. I must find a way to halt this cascading river of rationalization running through my mind, before it deprives the day of its prayerful possibilities. Prayer is a contemplative journey, and like any other journey it requires preparation—but unlike physical journeys, this one requires us not to pack but to unpack. So much baggage! The gentle lapping of the lake at the shoreline soothes me as I strive to empty my mind of distractions and open myself to the Spirit, to the chance for inspiration, for insight. A soft breeze dances off the water, bending the tips of the reeds in the shallows; I inhale it deeply. Relaxing every part of my body, I close my eyes and breathe slowly, dispelling all thoughts until even my consciousness of waiting for insight is gone.

Suddenly what washes over me instead—or perhaps this *is* the insight—can only be described as a premonition, yet one so palpably real it is as though I am hearing Christ's words speaking to me aloud. They are words of warning:

*There is danger approaching, Athanasius!*

My eyes tighten shut even more; I hold my breath. Yes, Lord, I can sense something. I can feel it in the pit of my stomach, almost sickening me!

*Someone is coming to attack us!*

Yes, Lord; but who *is* it? Is a new persecution about to be mounted by Rome? No, somehow I sense that this is different. More insidious. My pulse races and my skin grows clammy. I try to concentrate, but the effort is self-defeating; the contours of this peril to the Faith become more elusive the more I try to bring it into focus, like a shadowy imperfection on the cornea, just off center, floating away as the eye vainly attempts to follow it and pull it back from the periphery. I cannot make it out clearly.

The cryptic warning fades as quickly as it arrived, and the wave of nausea passes. Still shaking, I exhale deeply, my quivering palms pushing beads of sweat from my brow up over my scalp. If infidels are truly arriving to storm the gates of Christ's kingdom, I will not be able to discern them today.

But perhaps it was nothing. Just as dreams can reveal either truth or fantasy, this might have been fantasy. One can all too easily mistake the surfacing of one's own latent fears for divine insight.

Darkness overtakes the day. The owl soars somewhere above; I have lost sight of her. It is time to return to the city.