

# The Significance of the Homousios in Patristic Thinking and in Our Time

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In the year 325 C.E., the Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicea as to deal with a controversy sparked off by the teaching of one called Arius, a presbyter of the Church in Alexandria. It was about the year 318 that Arius began to make his influence felt in Alexandria. It would appear that his fundamental assertion emphasised of God the Father as the absolutely unique and transcendent being, the unoriginate Source. For him the Father alone is unbegotten, alone eternal, alone without beginning, and alone ruler and judge. Arius took monotheism very seriously, and wanted to rule out any possibility that Jesus might be another divine being. The Old Testament prophetic tradition had witnessed against the polytheism of the ancient world, and there could be no going back on that. Arising out of this is the belief that the being of God cannot be communicated to another, His *ousia* or substance is unique, transcendent, and indivisible. For if any being were to participate in the Father's divine nature, then there would be a duality or even plurality of divine beings. God would then be divisible and not unique.

From the above Arius deduced yet

another proposition which, when taken to its logical conclusion has far reaching theological implications. If God is unique and indivisible, then everything else which exists must have come into being not by way of communication of his being to another, but by an act of creation. Since God the Father alone is uncreated, and since he created all else besides, not out of his own being, but out of nothing, then it follows that the Son is also a creature called into being out of nothing. Arius did allow a measure of difference between the Son, and the rest of Creation. The son alone, he maintained, was created outside time, though of course he could not be co-equal with the Father, as that would entail two self-existent and unoriginate sources. There would then be no ultimate source of being, no first cause, and God's sovereignty would be called in question. The Son therefore must be a finite being who cannot comprehend the infinite God. His famous way of putting is: "There was when he was not". Athanasius quotes the following from Arius: "The Father remains ineffable to the Son, and the Word can neither see nor know His Father perfectly and accurately ... but what He

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knows and sees He knows and sees in the same way and with the same measure as we know by our own powers".<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the title 'Son of God' is for Arius, merely a symbol which designates the bestowal of honour upon one who led a perfect and meritorious life.

Faced with all this, the Nicene Fathers had to repudiate Arius, and condemn his teaching, and in response to it, to construct the orthodox answer. There are a number of issues involved in the dispute between Arius and the Council. The first and most important one is his doctrine of the Person of Christ which cut across the church's affirmation that he is the Son of God pre-existently from all eternity, and, as such, very God of very God. The church had arrived at this position after a long process of careful and prayerful reflection upon the teaching of Holy Scripture as a whole, and upon its own life of worship and witness to the incarnate life of the risen and ascended Lord. The Arian doctrine of the Person of Christ therefore called in question not only the outcome of the Church's reflection, but more seriously, the fountain from which it derives its life and inspiration.

It could be argued that Arius did not challenge the authority of the Scriptures themselves, but only particular interpretations of the Scriptures which were current in the Church of his time, and which did not, in his opinion, have the monopoly of the truth. One has to admit that the Arian doctrine of the Person of Christ is an attempt to give expression to certain fundamental biblical affirmations. The one is the strict monotheistic faith which Christianity inherited from

Judaism, and the other is the fact of Jesus' humanity.

It was his attempt to reconcile these two principles which led Arius to his theological position. However, the weakness of the Arian position is that it does not adequately account for the impression made by Jesus on his followers, that, in what he said and did, and supremely in what he was, he radiated uniquely to man, God's love for the world, and his sovereign rule over it. The claims which Jesus made for himself could only be made by one who either had an intimate relationship with the Father, one who could address God as Abba, or by a crank with delusions of grandeur. If Jesus had been the latter, no more would have been heard about him after what would have been a mighty crash and an open exposure on Good Friday. On philosophical grounds the Arian heresy simply cannot stand up to scrutiny. For if Christ is before time and yet a creature, he is a kind of demiurge, a sort of cross between divinity and creatures. Monotheism is thereby undermined by one such lesser deity. Once the floodgates are opened, what is there to stop the postulation of other lesser divine beings brought into being in the same way, and entrusted with a plethora of responsibilities to be undertaken between creation and consummation?

The second question raised by Arius' teaching has to do with soteriology. Athanasius thought of salvation as divinisation. The Son of God in other words became man in order to make humanity divine. It is a nice thought for the oppressed and the underprivileged to entertain. But it is an idea to which I personally do not subscribe. I

1. See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 233

do not, however, propose to go into all my reasons for not accepting the idea of salvation as divinisation because that is not the issue at stake. Whether one understands salvation as divinisation or as humanization, the point at stake is that it comes from God. We have to go back therefore to the Athanasian affirmation that for salvation to be real, Christ must have been fully human and fully divine. Amongst many other things, salvation must entail the restoration of man to full communion with God, an act which calls, not just for a divine decree, but for a personal involvement of God with his creation. The work of salvation comes from above, but it has to be accomplished within the ambiguities of space and time. It is only as God with us and as one of us that he can rescue us from the quagmire of sin, and the punishment of death, and so restore our brokenness. This is the work of God himself which he cannot delegate to another, lesser being. The Athanasian formula therefore that Christ is and has to be fully human and fully divine meets the requirement that the initiative for salvation is God's, but that he has to work it out and accomplish it in our situation as one of us, Immanuel. The Arian Christ does not meet this requirement because, according to his scheme, God is out there, and in his remoteness he is not able to reach us. Jesus is yet another messenger, one of the prophets perhaps, but he is not God with us and for us.

The third difficulty raised by the teaching of Arius is that it reduces God to a monad, and thereby undermines the doctrine of the Trinity. For if Christ is not God the Son in the fullest sense, neither is the Holy Spirit. To reach such a position one needs to do a lot of explaining away of what the New Tes-

tament has to say, a procedure which, I suspect, would put a considerable strain on the evidence.

The fourth and final issue has to do with the fact that God in the Arian scheme of things becomes the recipient of Christ's meritorious work. It's Pelagianism before Pelagius, and in no sense can one say that it is God acting graciously in Christ for the benefit of his creatures. There is no room for grace, but salvation has to be attained through good works.

In dealing with the teaching of Arius and all that it entails, the Council of Nicea had dual task; first of stating that the Arian position was not consonant with the thinking and the formulations of the primitive church, and secondly the task of reformulating the earlier affirmations in contemporary idiom in order to meet the new situation adequately. Here was a challenge to be relevant and contextual. The Council Fathers found that they could no longer rely upon the method of using certain biblical passages to settle the issue, because the Arians had a way of interpreting those same passages to suit their case. The Arians approached Scripture with a set of presuppositions which were quite different from those of the Orthodox party, and the latter found the exercise of direct appeal to what had been considered to be weighty evidence a futile exercise. A different kind of strategy had to be devised. Consequently, the full weight of the Council's response to Arius rested upon its interpretation and usage of the word *homoousios*, a word which had some unfortunate associations, and therefore a measure of stigma attached to it. The first stumbling block was the fact that Arius himself had used it in his denial of the Son's divinity. The Son, Arius asserted, does not share the *ousia* of the

Father. Maurice Wiles observes that this distinction of the Son from the Father was for Arius "the necessary means of giving expression to the essential transcendence of the Father over everything else, including the Son".<sup>2</sup> Another person to use *homoousios* was Origen who borrowed it from the gnostics, through whom it had joined the currency of Christian terminology. Origen used this term in a generic sense when he referred to the "community of substance" between the Father and the Son. He maintained that the emanation is *homoousios* with the body from which it emanates. Therefore, the Father and the Son participate in the same kind of essence or reality. There is a certain measure of subordination in Origen's doctrine of God which is exploited to the full by Arius. He speaks of the Father as the *Arché* or Source, and of the Son as *deuteros Theos*, God by participation in the Father's essence. But in his own thinking *homoousios* designates kinship between Father and Son.

Another group of people who used this term, and whose association with it is unfortunate, are the Sabellians. They are reported to have made a formal complaint to the Pope against Dionysius of Alexandria in which, amongst other things, they accused him of failing to describe the Son as *homoousios* with the Father.<sup>3</sup> The Sabellians who emphasized both the unity of the Godhead and the divinity of Christ regarded Jesus and the Holy Spirit as but temporary manifestations of the one divine being. For them *homoousios* became a watchword to safeguard their two concerns. *Homoousios* before the Council of Nicea then had come to be associated with Ori-

gen's subordinationist doctrine of the Person of the Trinity, the Sabellian idea of numerical identity, and of course the Arian assertion that the Son is not *homoousios* with the Father. Professor Wiles<sup>4</sup> argues that what determined the use of *homoousios* by the Council of Nicea was the fact that Arius had used it, and that therefore any attempt to counter his teaching would leave his position intact, if it did not enter his own battle ground, and make use of his own weapons. He says that it was not a happy choice, but "rather it was admitted with reluctance as being the only available means of excluding Arianism".<sup>5</sup> What then were the positive results which the Council achieved by including *homoousios* in its credal statement?

Arius had insisted that the Son is not *homoousios* with the Father, but that on the contrary he is a creature brought into being out of nothing. On the other hand, the Orthodox teaching upheld by the Council was that the Son is fully divine, co-eternal with, and equal to, the Father. The Son is not merely like the Father, but is identical with the Father in all respects, except in his filial relationship with him. In his earthly ministry, God the Son renders total obedience to the Father, and by so doing cancels man's disobedience and restores him to communion with God. God the Son in his humanity accomplishes God's work of recreation and renewal.

Secondly, *homoousios* dealt Sabellianism a severe death blow. For the term in its generic sense implies a plurality of beings who nonetheless belong to the same category. It implies a plurality of hypostases because a member of a particular species can

2. See Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 34-35

3. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 133

4. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 33-36

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 33

only be said to be *homoousios* when it is compared with other beings of its kind.

Thirdly, once the Church had accepted a modified version of monotheism, the way was opened for the Cappadocians in a subsequent era to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity more fully. Once it had been established that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who shares the *ousia* of the Father, the Church could now turn to the exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately of the Triune God. It could now do this without fearing to damage the fundamental assertion that God is one. For it had established that the diversity of the Persons of the one Godhead is within the context of a single undivided will to be the external reservoir of love which unites and makes life possible and meaningful.

God, the Council of Nicea teaches, is not one but three persons who together constitute reality in the ultimate sense.

Fourthly, *homoousios* created a much healthier climate for soteriology to flourish. It is, I believe, a mistake to presuppose that the chief concern of Arius was not soteriological, but philosophical and speculative. For the rest of the Church had its Christological affirmations heavily influenced by the salvation motif. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that Arius, presbyter, differed from the rest of the Church in that, having begun with a different perspective of the work of salvation from that of the Orthodox school, he arrived at a different Christological picture. If he rejected the notion of salvation as divinisation, he could well have had the idea that all that one needs is an intermediary through whom God out there reaches

out to man down here. But, of course, as Athanasius so aptly puts it, "created beings cannot be saved by one who is himself a created being".<sup>6</sup>

God, in order to reach us, had to extend his own hand to us, and not the hand of one of his creatures. This, I believe, is the crux of the matter. Only the sovereign Creator can effect recreation and renewal. *Homoousios* has to do with the primacy of God's initiative and of his grace. As such it not only dealt with Arianism, but it also prepared the ground for a decisive victory against Pelagius in a subsequent encounter with heresy. We are saved not by pulling ourselves up by our own boot strings, but by God's graciousness to us, and the power which he himself supplies, to enable us to make the response of faith and thankful acceptance of what he has accomplished for us, in and through the life, death, and resurrection of his incarnate Son.

When *Nicea* used *homoousios* it planted a seed which was to take some time to grow and come to fruition. One of the reasons for this is the fact that in the patristic period, this word had another meaning which was prevalent at the time. It was a term used for individual substance, what Aristotle had intended by his "primary substance". In this sense, *ousia* was for all practical purposes treated as the equivalent of *hypostasis*. So for example Marcellus of Ancyra spoke of three *ousiai* in the Godhead, and St Basil's own formulation concurred with this.<sup>7</sup> The equation of these two terms in theology accounts for the fact that after *Nicea*, though the storm had subsided, the dust did not settle immediately. A polemic debate continued between Athanasius on the one hand, and Marcellus on the other. For Marcellus, to

6. See Wiles, *op. cit.*, p. 97

7. See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 244

say that there are three *ousiai* in the Godhead was another way of saying God is three hypostases or Persons. Marcellus and his party therefore saw in the insistence by Athanasius upon *homoousios*, a tendency towards Sabellianism. On the other hand Athanasius regarded the teaching of Marcellus as polytheistic and therefore pagan. The debate was bedevilled by the fact that on both sides *ousia* and *hypostasis* were being used or understood as synonymous terms.

At the Council of Alexandria in 362 the impasse was not resolved, but at least the two sides explained to each other their respective positions, and so created an atmosphere of good will and better understanding. Athanasius explained how he was not a Sabellian, and the party led by Marcellus explained how they were not tritheists. It was the Cappadocian Fathers who made a positive advance in this debate by adopting the formula "one *ousia* in three *hypostases*".<sup>8</sup> It is therefore imperative that *homoousios* should be used in this context in the generic sense only, and that it be separated from *hypostasis*.

It is now sixteen and a half centuries since the Council of Nicea met and settled the dispute between Arius and the Orthodox party. The Council condemned Arianism, and came down firmly on the side of Athanasius by endorsing his teaching that the Son is of one substance with the Father. It is of course true to say that a lot of water has gone under the bridge since Nicea, but the debate concerning the uniqueness of Christ continues in at least two areas. On the one hand, faced with the phenomenon of flourishing world religions, the Christian Church has had to re-evaluate its claims for Christ, and modify some of its wild, and

perhaps over zealous assertions. The assumption made by people like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the previous generation that outside the Church there is no salvation, has had to give way to a more eirenic approach. Perhaps one of the characteristic features of our time is expressed in Eugene Hillman's 'The Wider Ecumenism' in which the author pleads for a new assessment of the position of Christianity in the contemporary religious scene. Dialogue with people of other religions, and the need for a common engagement with them on the socio-economic and political front, calls for a greater sensitivity and generosity, as well as for faithful witness to the Gospel. The one requires an acknowledgement of the fact that the Church is not itself the Kingdom, but only a provisional manifestation of the presence of God's rule on earth, while the other compels Christians to bear witness to Christ the light, and to invite non-Christians to participate more fully in the accomplished work of God in Christ. The wider ecumenical context therefore is one area in which there has to be a facing up to the implications of the statement that Christ is *vere Deus*, and as such, he confronts all people with the call of God to which the answer can only be a yea or nay.

On the other hand the search for an authentic expression of humanity with its tendency to focus more upon the Antiochene approach, calls for a full investigation of the extent to which Christ can be said to be human. For some people, the qualification 'without sin' poses a problem, seeing that sin is a key element in the understanding of empirical personhood. But then how could God's holiness and honour be party to human sin? There is a real dilemma here. For

8. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 264

others who come in at a slightly different angle there is the matter of his natural sonship, and ours by adoption and grace. Maurice Wiles for instance argues in 'The making of Christian Doctrine' that *homoousios* becomes problematic at the point where it separates our humanity from Christ's. He maintains that if he is the unique Other, then surely his otherness must be one in degree and not in kind.

It is true that we cry with him 'Abba Father', and that as the New Adam, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood. But then it is precisely because he is one of us that he is able to be God with us, Immanuel. And it is his authority as God's Son which makes it possible for him to be the mediator of a new Covenant. In and through this man, God stands where we stand, and does his great work for us. Christ is not simply a channel through which God's grace comes to us, but he is God in action, loving and treating us graciously. As the New Adam, he is our brother, the first born among all creatures. But as the Eternal Word made flesh he is God in his majesty and sovereignty, the One who stands over against us as the Eternal Thou. This is the paradox of him who though rich yet for our sake became poor, the King whose crown is the crown of thorns and whose throne is the cross of shame. And here, I believe, is, for us the disenfranchised and dispossessed, the crux of the matter. The cross is such a powerful symbol to us precisely because it represents God himself suffering with us and for us. It is a constant reminder that his victory is heralded by the words of the man dying on the cross, his power is manifested in weakness. God himself

knows what it is to suffer pain, anguish, and rejection. He knows this not by standing somewhere on the periphery of human experience as a dispassionate observer, but as himself the recipient of the cruellest forms of torture and torment. The Cross therefore is a sign of hope because the Son of God suffered and died there victoriously.

Suffering without hope can be cruel, obscene and seemingly pointless. Such was the agony and dying of the impenitent thief on Good Friday. But it can also be used by God in his overall plan for the world's healing, if it is borne in the name of Christ, and in hope. The faith of those who suffer makes all the difference because they know that the crucified Christ shares their affliction, and is therefore able and ready to give them a helping hand in their struggles. They know too that he is reliable and faithful to his promises, and will not let them down. For many generations Christians have leaned on this Rock, and have not been disappointed. That is why we in our generation are able to affirm the Nicene teaching that this man is God with us, Immanuel. He is the Good Shepherd who works tirelessly for the sheep. His name is 'Steadfast love' because we know him as the One who is always for us and will never turn against us even when he comes to us in judgement. We may not like Athanasius's choice of the word *homoousios*, but the fact of the matter is, it represents the truth that Jesus is equal to the Father as touching his divinity. A lesser being simply won't do either philosophically or for purposes of man's salvation.

**J.N.D. Kelly:** Early Christian Doctrines  
Early Christian Creeds

**G.L. Prestige:** Fathers and Heretics  
God in Patristic Thought

**Maurice Wiles:** The Making of Christian Doctrine