

THE POLITICS OF HERESY

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Abstract

There is a growing contingent of church historians and scholars who look to downplay or even condemn the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Orthodoxy is painted as the big, bad bully of the early church, and the church fathers as its hitmen. Deviant forms of Christianity, historically considered heretical, are portrayed as the poor, innocent victims of the orthodox political machine which is out to, and eventual does, crush them under its wheels of insatiable hunger for more power and control. For this paper I want to concentrate narrowly on one aspect of this overall picture, that being the events surrounding the Orthodox struggle against Arianism around the time of the Council of Nicaea (325) through the reign of Constantius (361). This paper will be addressing the main question: 'Was Arianism suppressed for solely political reasons?' I will endeavour to show that it was actually Arianism which had the upper hand politically and that, for many orthodox leaders, it was political suicide to support the orthodox position.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the Christian faith is full of lies and errors, cover-ups and conspiracies. The brand of Christianity which ultimately won the nasty fights in the early history of the faith is really not the religion that Jesus and his early followers taught. That genuine Christianity was suppressed by powerful church leaders bent on maintaining their positions of authority, who succeeded in labelling the real teachings of Jesus 'heresy', and who adroitly replaced it with their own counterfeit teachings. If we want to find the real teachings of Jesus, we must look in places like Gnosticism, Arianism, and the like.

Those historians who see a conspiracy among the orthodox fathers normally follow the political strand in this way:

Apostolic Father → Justine Martyr → Irenaeus → Tertullian → Athanasius → Augustine

This is the strand through which the theory is built that Orthodoxy politically squeezed out all competing views of true Christianity. Athanasius, as the chief proponent of the orthodox position during the battle with Arianism, has been consistently attacked by the detractors of Orthodoxy as nothing more than a 'gangster' who 'organized an ecclesiastical mafia' (Barnes 1981:230).ⁱ

Arianism has been argued to be a truer picture of the historical Jesus than the supernatural God-man of Orthodoxy.ⁱⁱ The conclusion would be that Arianism was right, but was suppressed for political reasons by Orthodoxy.

Certainly, religion can become politically charged and motivated, and very clearly this has been the case in many instances in Christian history. But the popular premise that it must be politically motivated is an unfair assumption, as is the assumption, for example, that ecclesiastical historians must be lying or distorting the evidence, and so on. Sometimes they most certainly may have done that, but not always. My ecclesiastical motivation for such a study is to show that the traditional picture of the development of orthodox theology and its struggles with heresy, although certainly skewed in some minor ways, overall is still the correct one.

2 TERMINOLOGY, METHODOLOGY, ASSUMPTIONS AND SOURCES

I will be using the terms 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' (and derivations of these words) in the traditional sense of the terms. Putting it in a practical framework, 'orthodoxy' refers to the party which won the ecclesiastical battles and became the church proper, and 'heresy' refers to the party which lost and was declared anathema. 'Orthodoxy' refers to the system of beliefs that propounds Jesus as fully man and fully God, 'homoousios' with the Father, begotten and not made. 'Heresy' in this context would be any system or belief that contradicts or in any way detracts from the view just described as orthodox.

'Politics' refers to the use of power and influence to effect an outcome. In the context of this paper, then, someone seeking to promote a theological position through power and influence (as opposed to citation of Scripture, tradition, or truth) could be said to be operating politically. If the desired outcome is primarily to increase the power and influence of an individual, school, or party, then one could conclude a political motivation.

The study of Arianismⁱⁱⁱ is a fertile breeding ground for the removal of the supernatural elements of the life of Jesus. The orthodox position that Jesus was 'very God of very God' actually become man is at powerful odds with Arianism and the 'non-supernaturalism' of so much Christian theology today. Coupled with Gnostic teachings concerning the person of Jesus, and bridged by the works of church fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, Arianism can be portrayed as a natural outflowing of 'authentic, primitive' Christianity which was put down by Orthodoxy for political reasons.

This paper does not profess to declare that there were never any political motivations at work in the solidification of Orthodoxy, as some on the 'far right' might state. But equally we oppose the picture of the 'far left' found in the works of Elaine Pagels and others where it seems the sole purpose of Orthodoxy in combating heresy was for political gain. Surely the answer is somewhere in between.

We should also recognise the common assumption made by many liberal theologians that the church fathers are not to be trusted. Timothy Barnes

makes a telling statement relating to this opinion: “Any attempt to reconstruct either Constantine’s ecclesiastical policies or ecclesiastical politics in general during the years in which Constantine ruled the East (324-337) must accordingly discard the narrative of the ecclesiastical historians ... “ (Barnes 1993:53). His reason is obvious. These people may have lied for their own personal gain. They may have ‘deliberately altered’^{iv} the documents from which they quoted. Of course, this position is unavoidable if one is to achieve the conclusions that Barnes and others reach.

Whereas this view certainly does have some merit and wisdom attached, do we ‘discard’ the ecclesiastical historians altogether? Part and parcel of virtually every ‘conspiracy theory’ is the notion that the persons labelled ‘conspirators’ are evil liars and cheats who will do absolutely anything and everything they can to protect their own self-interests. Much of modern historical scholarship relies on exactly this notion. Far too often certain sectors of scholarship have, under the guise of being scholarly and objective, called the church fathers liars.^v

Of course we are not going to naively accept every word that falls from their lips or pens as the complete, unadulterated truth of the matter, without consulting counter reports and comparing them. If a church leader can be seen to be duplicitous in his character as clearly portrayed by his actions, then we have every reason to wonder about the integrity and veracity of his words. But if we have no such evidence, it is indefensible to assume that these men are liars.

Many ancient ecclesiastical histories are now either wholly or in very large part lost. Six ancient historians recorded events involving the time of our study, but the works of Philippus Sidetes and Hesychius have been entirely lost, and only a few fragments of the writings of the Arian historian Philastorgius are preserved for us in the tenth-century historian Photius’s writings. The histories remain of Theodoret, which begins with the rise of Arianism and ends with Theodore of Mopsuestia (429), Sozomen, which basically covers the years 323 to 423, and Socrates.

These histories are of vital importance to our thesis, but are they reliable? Whereas Theodoret and Sozomen are accused of being too heavily biased against the non-orthodox, Socrates has generally received praise for his objectivity. Von Harnack said this about his work:

The rule to be applied to Socrates is that his learning and knowledge^{vi} can be trusted only a little, but his good will and straightforwardness a great deal. Considering the circumstances under which he wrote and the miseries of the times, it can only be matter for congratulation that such a man should have been our informant and that his work has been preserved to us. (Schaff 1910:xv)^{vii}

It is for this reason that we will rely mostly on Socrates’s history in this study.

3 NAG HAMMADI AND THE NEO-GNOSTICS

The crisis event in relation to such matters was the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945.^{viii} No longer were we limited to the views of the Gnostics as found in the writings of their detractors; we could now read their works (at least some of them) for ourselves. This event opened the floodgates of speculation regarding the early church and 'primitive' Christianity. Perhaps the traditional understanding of what really occurred in those early centuries had been entirely wrong? What if, the Gnostics and other 'schismatics' were actually the ones who had it right? Perhaps they were the true carriers of the truth as taught by Jesus and the 'orthodox' merely the victorious religious and political schucksters?

Why did Orthodoxy win out? It had the political power of Rome behind it. Scholars like Pagels, Helmut Koester, James M. Robinson and others have staked their claim to fame on this very idea.

Walter Bauer in his *Orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity* (1971) attacked the long-held notion that Christianity began with one unified system of belief from which heresies later broke. His thesis was that early Christianity was fragmented from the start. Koester says of Bauer's work: "This brilliant and pioneering monograph inaugurated a new era of scholarship in the study of the New Testament and Christian origins" (Bauer 1971: back cover). Koester in turn relies heavily on Bauer's work in his *Trajectories through early Christianity*, co-authored with Robinson.^{ix} Koester notes in *Trajectories* that "a thorough and extensive reevaluation of early Christian history is called for" (Robinson & Koester 1971:114).

Elaine Pagels, in her influential work *The Gnostic gospels*, works hard to support this very notion that Orthodoxy is not to be trusted. Under the guise of objectivity (1979:180) Pagels takes every chance she gets to portray the Orthodox Church fathers as power-hungry politicians interested in nothing more than protecting their bases of power. For instance, in their defence of the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, Pagels never even hints at the possibility that Jesus may actually have risen from the dead and that the fathers, believing this implicitly, were simply attempting to defend the truth of the matter.^x Instead she notes: "... the doctrine of bodily resurrection serves an essential political function: it legitimises the authority of certain men who claim to exercise exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostle Peter" (Pagels 1979:7). Not only in her discussions concerning Christ's physical resurrection, but also in her discussions concerning the monotheism of Christianity, the passion of Christ, the structure of the church, and how a person is saved, Pagels consistently falls back on the notion that the Orthodox fathers defended what they defended not for religious reasons but for political ones.^{xi} Little chips such as these are taken piecemeal out of the armour of Orthodoxy and the traditional picture we have had of the early church and its struggles against heresy, until the entire fabric of the Christian faith itself is called into question.

4 FROM GNOSTICISM^{xii} TO ARIANISM

A direct theological line can be seen from early strains of Christian belief such as Gnosticism down to Arianism (Hanson 1988:60f). The main strand involves the issues of the person of Jesus and the nature of salvation. The Catholic Encyclopaedia states: "But the Arian, though he did not come straight down from the Gnostic, pursued a line of argument and taught a view which the speculations of the Gnostic had made familiar. He described the Son as a Second, or inferior God, standing midway between the First Cause and creatures."^{xiii}

A more recent work to make the connection between Gnosticism and Arianism, a work which has received a fair amount of attention, is *Early Arianism: A view of salvation* (Gregg & Groh 1981). In this thorough treatment of key Arian texts, the authors offer their thesis that the orthodox struggle against Arianism had as much if not more to do with the issue of salvation than with the person of Jesus.

Christian theologians since the Gnostic crisis had thought in both ontological and covenantal categories. They had lived with the language of being and essence and the language of willing and electing. By the opening volleys of the Arian controversy these categories had become competing options for Christology, soteriology, and in fact, ecclesiastical parties. (Gregg & Groh 1981:194)

The authors make the bold conclusion that the sonship of Jesus is no different in essence from the sonship that any creature can attain through living a holy life. In their chapter entitled, 'Adoption as salvation: Common to us and to the Son', they conclude, "Should Paul and Peter also make good with respect to this [life of discipline], nothing would distinguish their sonship from his [the Logos]" (Gregg & Groh 1981:53). This closely follows the strand of soteriological teaching found in Gnosticism and Adoptionism. It is no wonder, then, that Athanasius spent such a considerable amount of time arguing on soteriological grounds why Jesus had to be 'homoousios' with the Father.

5 THE POLITICS OF ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Athanasius of Alexandria is a man who inspires awe and hatred, admiration and condemnation. There is no want of material or opinions on the life of this key fourth-century bishop and theologian. There are some who see him as "a power-hungry politician concerned with nothing more noble than his own status" (Barnes 1993:3).^{xiv} They can see nothing virtuous or attractive in the man, unlike others who see him as a champion of orthodoxy and have labelled him Saint Athanasius. Even historians openly hostile to Christianity like Edward Gibbon reserved for Athanasius comments of highest regard.^{xv}

Duane Arnold (1991:11-23) covers the landscape of Athanasian studies over the last two centuries in his highly-enjoyable and thorough work, *The early*

episcopal career of Athanasius of Alexandria, AD 328-335. He contrasts the positive evaluations of Athanasius in the 19th century with the increasingly hostile evaluations of the 20th century, noting that there really has not been any new material with which to work in studying Athanasius. There have been some small discoveries since the 19th century but, for the most part, the material the theologians of the 19th century had at their disposal was the same material we have today. Why the drastic change in attitude toward Athanasius?

I would submit that this change has not resulted in attitudes toward Athanasius alone but in the general notion that Orthodoxy as a whole is no longer to be trusted. The increasingly critical approach feeds itself, even if no substance is ultimately produced to substantiate the initial claims. We will attempt to look more closely at the specifics of various charges laid against Athanasius and see if the negative picture of Athanasius the 'political warlord' is tenable.

There is no need here to go into a fully fledged recounting of the events leading to Athanasius's ordination as bishop of Alexandria. We know that, as a presbyter under the bishopric of Alexander, Athanasius had already gained notoriety for his staunch opposition to Arianism and that he was an influential participant in the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. A few years after that council, Alexander died and Athanasius became the bishop of the highly influential see of Alexandria in 328.

Unfortunately for Athanasius, he entered his bishopric facing problems that had existed long before he was even a presbyter in Alexandria. During the Great Persecution in the early years of the fourth century, the Egyptian bishop Melitius denied the faith and sacrificed during the persecution. He was subsequently stripped of his office by Peter, bishop of Alexandria.

Much like the Novatian and Donatist controversies, after the persecution ended, the problem of how to handle the 'lapsed', came to the fore. The 'hard-liners' did not want to allow these people back into the church, or they prescribed very long and hard forms of penance before they could re-enter the church. The 'soft-liners' were more lenient and gracious in this matter and sought to allow the lapsed back into fellowship, normally after a comparatively short time of discipline. A schism formed and the Melitians broke away from the church and formed their own congregations. From that time onward, the Melitians consistently attempted to regain their status in the church but with little success (Socrates, Book I; Brakke 1995:5f; Stevenson 1960:379; Arnold 1991:48f; Gibbon 1960: 311f). This problem had been brewing for over 20 years when Athanasius took his office. When it became obvious that Athanasius was not going to succumb to the pressures of the Melitians, they began to look for ways to oust him from his office.

Athanasius had already had considerable dealings with the Arians by the time he took the see of Alexandria, and in a cyclical letter to bishops throughout the region, Athanasius condemned Arius and his teachings, naming Eusebius of Nicomedia specifically as a person not to be trusted (Schaff 1910:68-72 vol 4).^{xvi} Eusebius had been one of the priests who had been implicated in the

anathemas of Nicaea because of his close contact and support of Arius. Socrates reports that Eusebius began to look for a way to repay Athanasius for his dealings against the Arians, and the best way to do this was to form a coalition between the Arians and Melitians. Eusebius put a recantation in writing to the emperor, was reinstated to his seat in Nicomedia, and almost immediately looked for a way to have Arius return to Alexandria and have Athanasius removed from his see (Socrates, Book I, ch XIV & XXIII).^{xvii}

The emperor Constantine had participated in the proceedings at Nicaea and had subsequently issued a statement of condemnation toward Arius and his followers, but many have argued persuasively that Constantine was much more interested in unity in the Empire than in actually being concerned with doctrinal purity in the church. As the years passed, the emperor softened toward Arius and his followers. Through a variety of circumstances, Constantine became favourable toward Arius, who had an audience with the emperor and put in writing that he conformed to the Nicene Creed. Constantine then sent Arius back to Alexandria with his approval, commanding Athanasius to reinstate him. Athanasius refused.

The time now became ripe for Eusebius of Nicomedia, the Arians, and the Melitians to act. Several accusations were made against Athanasius. All these charges eventually led to the Council of Tyre in 335.^{xviii} Note that none of the charges had anything at all to do with right or proper theology. We do not, for example, find in these charges arguments against his theological and christological positions. The enemies of Athanasius had no ability to do that, because Athanasius was clearly in line with the Nicene conclusions. Their only recourse was to attempt to remove him in other ways, political ways.

Athanasius defended himself against the charges and many of them were proven untrue or were simply retracted. Arsenius, the man supposedly murdered by Athanasius, reappeared and actually participated in the Council of Tyre. He was also shown to have both his arms as well!^{xix} As Socrates so tersely put it, "Thus by an extraordinary course of circumstances, the alleged victim of assassination by Athanasius, was found alive to assist in deposing him" (Socrates, ch XXXII).

It is almost impossible to find a historian, present or past, who views the Council of Tyre as anything other than a partisan council specifically designed to impugn the bishop of Alexandria by any means necessary.^{xx} Even Athanasian critics who are eager to prove true some of the charges against Athanasius admit that much foul play occurred at Tyre. As history records, the charges against Athanasius were not proven true and yet Tyre called for his removal from Alexandria. Athanasius fled to Constantinople to state his case before Constantine and reached him before the contingent from Tyre was bringing the verdict to the emperor. Constantine recognised the trumped-up nature of the council and disallowed its verdict, only to have the soon-arriving contingent devise more charges on the spot against Athanasius, ones mainly dealing with Athanasius's supposed contempt for the emperor and his rule specifically as it related to the stoppage of grain shipments from Alexandria to the new capital Constantinople. Constantine, obviously fed up with Athanasius and the troubles surrounding him, sent him into exile in Gaul.

This was the first of five exiles during the career of Athanasius. During his years at the head of the see of Alexandria from 328 to 373, Athanasius spent close to twenty years in exile:

First Exile	-	335 to 337
Second Exile -		339 to 346
Third Exile	-	356 to 362
Fourth Exile -		362 to 363
Fifth Exile	-	365 to 366 ^{xxi}

Things might have been considerably easier for Athanasius had he embraced the Arians, but since his main focus was not political gain but theological integrity, he chose not to do so. Thus, we are hard-pressed to make the case that Athanasius spoke out against Arian teachings in order to further his own power and influence in the church, when actually doing so worked against him and resulted in several exiles from his seat of power.

6 THE POLITICS OF ARIANISM

It is at times mind-boggling that those who claim political aims alone on the part of the Orthodox, and subsequently claim that they fought against 'authentic' Christianity when they did so, rarely if ever discuss the political motivations of the heretics. Their argument can be followed easily enough: Jesus and his followers taught the true teachings concerning salvation to a select few who, in groups such as the Gnostics, attempted to spread this truth. But certain politically-minded people, namely the Orthodox Church fathers, were not interested in the truth at all but were solely concerned with keeping and expanding their positions of power. As these supposedly authentic teachings of Jesus spread through other groups like the Gnostics, Montanists, and Arians, or through the teachings of people like Origen, the Orthodox fathers perceived them as threats to their power base and fought to eliminate them. Thus, a doctrine like that of Arius was condemned, even though it was the true faith as passed down from Jesus himself.

Such a premise may be interesting, but in all of the works I have seen that support such a notion, they all ignore the possibility of the opposite angle, namely, that the heretical groups participated in political manoeuvrings and power plays to further their own strongholds, regardless of the 'truth'. Stating it differently, these modern detractors of Orthodoxy use as their main stick the political motivations of the Orthodox and from those conclude that what the Orthodox taught was not true Christianity. But they conveniently fail to use this same measuring stick against the non-orthodox or heretical groups, the groups they claim to be those which carried the true teachings of Jesus. For instance, nowhere in *The Gnostic gospels* does Pagels imply or state that the Gnostics were disseminating false teachings for political gain, but why does she choose to ignore such a real possibility?

The above-mentioned manoeuvrings of Eusebius of Nicomedia and others

give us ample evidence that the Arians were politically savvy in their attempts to foil Orthodoxy. Another such example around the same time involved the deposition of Eustathius of Antioch.^{xxii} The charges against Eustathius resembled closely many of the charges later laid against Athanasius by these same people, charges that had nothing to do with right theology and faith.

7 THE MOTIVATION OF CONSTANTINE

Some of the common assumptions among detractors of the traditional picture of Christendom are that Constantine ran roughshod over the Council of Nicaea, actually proposed the term 'homoousios' in regard to the Son,^{xxiii} and everyone feared incurring the wrath of Constantine by dissenting with Nicaea. This popular view may have some validity, but do we really believe that the emperor who originally called the Arian problem a 'theological trifle' would then propose a solution to that trifle that nearly 250 bishops would agree to on the spot for fear of their lives?^{xxiv} Recall, many of these same men had seen incredible persecution and had not buckled. Further, none of our reports from the eyewitnesses to the Council support such ideas. In fact, when ecclesiastical historians like Socrates or Sozomen report instances of emperors running roughshod over councils, they report Arian emperors doing it.^{xxv}

Throughout the pages of these two church histories [Socrates and Sozomen] occur statements indicating an overwhelming desire for the *unity* of the church. Heresies were regarded as bad, often more because they broke this unity than because they distorted the truth of the faith. Chestnut 1977:230, emphasis in original)

Constantine called the Council of Nicaea more to obtain unity in the church and hence his Empire than to really be concerned with theological integrity. Practically speaking, such a council was supremely reasonable and logical. Already numerous smaller councils had declared contrasting views; Alexandria declared Arius's teaching invalid, and other councils declared it acceptable. With such fragmentation and factions, Constantine saw the practical need for a council that was truly ecumenical and could therefore speak for the whole church. There was no theological hidden agenda with this man. The notion that he would run roughshod over a council comprised of many persecution-hardened churchmen also does not jibe with the many letters he wrote later about his participation in the council, letters written to these same bishops and presbyters and priests who attended the council. Do we really intend to believe that Constantine participated in Nicaea like a prison warden, but then in his letters to these same men spoke in humble terms about his participation?

Similar speculation exists concerning Constantine's judgment on sending Athanasius to his first exile. The historical facts relay that Constantine actually did not accept the Council of Tyre's decision and yet exiled Athanasius anyway, and that the punishment did not include deposition of his see but mere banishment, with retention of his dignity as a bishop. In other words,

Athanasius was exiled but a replacement for him in Alexandria was not allowed by Constantine. As Arnold (1991:172) writes:

The sentence in itself may argue that Constantine was convinced less of the bishop's wrongdoing than of his being an impediment to structural unity within the church.

In fact, upon the death of Constantine and the return of Athanasius, Constantine the Younger wrote a letter reinstating the bishop to his see in Alexandria, stating that the reason his father sent Athanasius into exile was to protect Athanasius from his violent enemies. No mention is made of any of the former charges against Athanasius as reason for Constantine's decision to exile the bishop (Socrates, Book II, ch III).

The goal of unity, then, was Constantine's primary, perhaps even only, concern. But as Barnes (1981:225) points out, "The Council of Nicaea failed to bring harmony to the Eastern Church. On the contrary, it sharpened divisions and inaugurated a new phase of ecclesiastical politics." Constantine began to soften toward the heretics as he realised that Nicaea did not accomplish the unity he had hoped for. The history of these events does not in any way accord with the premise that Orthodoxy had the political upper-hand because the emperor was orthodox, and it is for this reason that Arianism was condemned. In fact, the exact opposite is closer to the truth, that despite the emperor, Arianism politically had the upper-hand. Constantine moved from his harsh words about burning the writings of Arius, to accepting what was obviously a carefully worded 'recantation' by Arius, to threatening Athanasius, the 'champion of Nicaea', with exile if he did not allow Arius back.

Many of the emperor's closest confidants were of Arian persuasion near the end of his life, and Eusebius of Nicomedia attained the highly influential position of being Constantine's personal chaplain (Frend 1984:528). Instead of having a picture of a strongly orthodox emperor enforcing a creed at the expense of 'authentic' Christians, Von Harnack's (1957:254) evaluation is much more in line with the facts: "In 337 Constantine died, really approving the promulgating ... of hostile doctrines."

Arianism was opposed at Nicaea not for political reasons but for theological ones, and it was actually Orthodoxy that afterward was 'on the run' politically. "When Constantine died in 337, though the heresiarch was dead, Arius's supporters enjoyed a supremacy in the Eastern Church which appeared almost complete" (Barnes 1981:225). Athanasius opposed this heresy not solely for political reasons, but because it did not accord with the truth as handed down from the apostles.

8 AFTER THE DEATH OF CONSTANTINE

The battle between Orthodoxy and Arianism continued for several decades after the death of Constantine, and at many times it looked like Arianism had certainly won the war. The Council of Nicaea had only served to aggravate the

situation, and the Arians, seizing their political advantage in the East, moved swiftly to remove the most troublesome defenders of the Nicene statement. Larson notes that between 325 and 367, twenty-eight synods were held of which only four were orthodox (Larson 1961:572).

The sons of Constantine ruled the Empire for the next twenty-four years after the death of their father. "Constantine initiated a series of practical measures designed to restore the fortunes of the Arians ... After his death, his sons continued the policy of favouring the Arians; Constantius, who lived the longest, was a zealous partisan of Arianism" (Brown 1984:120).

Constantius ruled from 337 to 361 and for the last eleven years of that reign ruled the entire Empire, while his brothers Constantine II (337-340) and Constans (337-350) ruled for a considerably shorter time and only a portion of the Empire.^{xxvi} As the Arian controversy was contained almost entirely in the East, from where Constantius ruled, his reign as a pro-Arian had the greatest impact, politically, on this controversy.

The political fortunes of the defenders of Nicaea were clearly in jeopardy during the next generation following Nicaea. "Arian sympathizers occupied all the important Eastern sees by 340 and the most celebrated defenders of the Nicene position were all in exile" (Brown 1984:120). Constantius forced conclusions on church councils that were clearly politically motivated. One main example should suffice to show how politically charged the heretics were during this period.

Alexander, the bishop of Constantinople, had held the see of that city for twenty-three years, but in the summer of 337 he died at the age of 98 (Socrates, Book II, ch VI through XXVI; Hanson 1988:279-284). He had recommended two men as his possible successor, Paul and Macedonius, the former orthodox and the latter an Arian. The people elected Paul as the new bishop, but the emperor Constantius discovered this and was 'highly incensed'. He convened 'an assembly of bishops of Arian sentiments' and had Paul removed. He then moved Eusebius from the see of Nicomedia and appointed him as bishop of Constantinople.

Eusebius died shortly thereafter and the people again elected Paul, while the Arians elected Macedonius. Rioting occurred in the city and Constantius again expelled Paul from his office. Julius the bishop of Rome (337-352) reviewed the case of Paul and reinstated him, only to have Constantius remove Paul for a third time and in this instance send him into exile. Macedonius was installed as the bishop of the capital. During this same period Constantius made open threats toward Athanasius who, fearing for his life, fled Alexandria and went to Rome, this was his second exile. Marcellus of Ancyra, Asclepas of Gaza, Lucius of Adrianople, all Nicene defenders, was also expelled from their respective sees.

With the death of Constantine the Younger in 340, Constans assumed two-thirds of the Empire and, for the time being, garnered more power than his brother did in the East. Constans was a staunch supporter of Nicaea and coerced his brother Constantius to convene a council in Sardica (just inside

the western half of the Empire) in 343 to resolve the matter once and for all.

The growing rift between East and West was obviously recognised by Constantius. The ping-ponging of councils - one in Tyre condemning Athanasius, another in Egypt acquitting him, one in the East calling for his deposition, another in the West demanding his reinstatement - was causing considerable confusion in the church. With Sardica, all the aforementioned 'homoousians' - Marcellus of Ancyra, Asclepas of Gaza, Lucius of Adrianople, Paul of Constantinople, and Athanasius - were reinstated to their respective sees and all returned to them.

This 'compromise' was short-lived. In just a couple of years, Constantius died and Constantius assumed complete control of the entire Empire. The Arians saw their chance to rid themselves of the troublesome Athanasius once and for all. Claiming that Athanasius was attempting to 'subvert all Egypt and Libya', the Arians convinced Constantius to again remove the Nicene defenders, this despite a council of bishops in Egypt which convened and reaffirmed the conclusions of Sardica. Constantius promptly moved to eject them all again, this time with some drastic consequences: Lucius died in prison, Paul was sent into exile and was strangled on the way, Marcellus was booted from Ancyra to never again return to his seat, and the command was sent forth to have Athanasius put to death. Athanasius shrewdly fled to the desert country of Egypt before this could occur, this his third exile.^{xxvii} It is no doubt for these reasons that Athanasius later referred to Constantius as "assum[ing] the character of AntiChrist" (Stevenson 1966:42).^{xxviii} Athanasius remained in exile until the death of Constantius, when Julian the Apostate rose to the throne and, hoping to throw the church into turmoil, called back all exiled church leaders.

9 THE APPARENT TRIUMPH OF ARIANISM

Constantius, enjoying the luxury of being emperor of the entire Empire, pushed for Arianism in the West, something he could heretofore not do. Through two councils in the West, Constantius sought the condemnation of the staunch Nicene Athanasius, and through this attempted to place Arianism firmly in the West. "Bishops who supported him [Athanasius], were sent to the mines" (Brown 1984:123). Ossius of Cordova in Spain was exiled and Paulinus, bishop of Treves in Gaul, Dionysius, bishop of Alba in Italy, and Eusebius of Vercellae in Italy, who all had dissented to the condemnation of Athanasius at Milan, were also sent into exile by Constantius (Socrates, Book II, ch XXXI; Hanson, 334-338). Liberius, the bishop at Rome, was deposed in 356 for not signing his name to the condemnation of Athanasius found in the first Sirmium statement (Sozomen, Book IV, ch. XI; Hanson, 1988:338-341), but after two years under great duress 'lapsed' and was returned to his seat (Stevenson 1966:34).^{xxix}

It remained now for Constantius to make his final strike. In 357 he convened the Council of Sirmium, actually a continuation of the first council at Sirmium

held six years earlier. Constantius hoped to make the victory of Arianism complete and it was the creed of the council in 357 that Hilary of Poitiers labelled the 'blasphemy of Sirmium'. In the creed, the term 'homoousios' was strictly forbidden, a shocking turn from the ecumenical Nicene creed. The Arians had the upper hand politically and the 'blasphemy of Sirmium' carried the day.

Constantius and his willing Arian cohorts had worked hard over two decades to accomplish what had now been accomplished - the expulsion of the Nicene declaration that the Son was of the same essence as the Father - and the seemingly sure victory against its chief proponent, Athanasius.^{xxx}

10 FROM CONSTANTIUS TO CONSTANTINOPLE

The confusion which ensued with the teaching of Arius and the declaration of Nicaea would not be totally eliminated until the Council of Constantinople (381), through the work of the Cappadocian fathers and the steady stand of Athanasius. After the death of Constantius, the political fortunes of the Arians took a drastic turn. No longer were they able to count on the emperor and his might to push through their political and theological agenda. The church then had the opportunity to argue the points of theology without the muscle of the state leaning on its neck. Without this external pressure from the state, the bishops were able to get back to the theological truths. Twenty years after the death of Constantius, the church moved decidedly away from the politically motivated Arianism of the East and strongly back to the Nicene declaration that the Logos was 'homoousios' with the Father.

It is also interesting to note that the West experienced none of the problems over Arianism that the East had experienced. Constantius had consistently stayed out of the affairs of the church except in the instance of Sardica where he perceived things had gone too far. And yet, we do not have in the West a serious backlash of bishops against the orthodox emperor Constantius. Had Arianism truly been the authentic teaching concerning the person of Jesus, one would expect struggles in the West, bishops calling for the church to ditch Nicaea and 'return' to the 'true' faith. But we do not.

The absence of any struggle in the West over Arianism speaks volumes. In the West was an emperor who kept his nose out of the business of the church and allowed it to govern itself. In the absence of any external political pressure from the state, the church in the West always remained Nicene. Not so in the East, where the political might of the state worked to bolster Arianism. But once that political power was gone, the church there also moved quickly back to a Nicene position. The notion that Arianism, as a natural outflow of Gnostic teachings, was the genuine view of the faith as coming from Jesus and the Apostles, yet was for political reasons eliminated, holds no water when comparing the situations between East and West during this pivotal period.

11 CONCLUSION

There seem to be two main thrusts that the modern-day detractors of

Orthodoxy posit, and concerning these two points we have several comments to make, judging from the history of the events.

- *Orthodoxy had the political weight of 'Rome' behind it, thus capturing the condemnation of heresies such as Arianism. The main thrust of this claim lies in the role Constantine played as the 'first Christian emperor', being decidedly orthodox in his leanings.*
 - We have pointed out that Constantine was much more interested in unity in the church and hence his Empire and not in theological integrity or even in supporting the orthodox position per se.
 - It is doubtful that Constantine exercised as much authority over the conclusions of the Council of Nicaea as the detractors of orthodox history would have us to believe.
 - Constantine, instead of being a staunch defender of Orthodoxy, near the end of his life softened considerably to the Arians to the point of favouring them.
 - Constantine's role in the Council of Nicaea and the years immediately following it has been overblown and, in comparison to the numerous synods and councils dominated by Constantius, can be said to have been relatively minor compared to the Arian emperor's role in defending heresy.
 - It would be much better to say that Orthodoxy won despite the politics of the day, not because of them.
- *Orthodoxy was much more interested, even solely interested, in its political wellbeing and not in actually defending the theological truths of the faith.*
 - The defenders of Orthodoxy spent a great deal of time attacking the theological inconsistencies of Arianism, while the heretics were almost solely motivated by political attacks.
 - Athanasius, Eustathius of Antioch, and Paul of Constantinople, arguably the three most influential pro-Nicene bishops during the time following Nicaea, were deposed for political, not theological motivations. While holding the political power in the East, the Arians removed virtually all pro-Nicene leaders from their positions of authority from the death of Constantine through the reign of Constantius, rarely citing theological concerns.
 - For the 36 years after the Council of Nicaea, the Arians clearly had the upper-hand politically, not the Orthodox.

In defending Orthodoxy, the orthodox fathers and leaders were interested in the cosmic significance of the person of Jesus Christ and how that related to theology and soteriology. They were concerned with theological integrity and, although certain political motivations may have been involved, these played a

minor role in comparison with their desire to maintain the unity of the apostolic teaching as found in the Scriptures and as handed down through the church. To either state or imply that the church fathers were solely interested in protecting their political power bases, and would go to any lengths to do so, ignores entirely the facts of the matter. It is actually more correct to say that it was the heretics who were more politically motivated in their practices and dealings. The heretics had virtually no theological weight to their position, signified by their rapid demise when their political strong-arm tactics were no longer effective.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 "Like a modern gangster he evoked widespread mistrust, proclaimed total innocence and usually succeeded in evading conviction on specific charges" (Barnes 1981:230).
 - 2 See for example Gregg & Groh, *Early Arianism: A view of salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).
 - 3 By Arianism we mean the teaching originally coming from Arius in AD 324 which taught that the Logos was the first creation of God and that the nature of Jesus was dissimilar to that of the Father, a view flatly condemned by the 'homoousios' position of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.
 - 4 Incredibly, Barnes relies heavily on the reports of the ecclesiastical historians in all of his works, especially when what they report seems to support his own theories and assumptions.
 - 5 "Athanasius may often disregard or pervert the truth, but he is a subtler and more skilful liar than Schwartz realized" (Barnes 1993:3).

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- 6 In the context of his statement, what Von Harnack means here is that Socrates is not a first class theologian as far as his analysis of theological issues is concerned, but he is a reliable, objective historian who can be trusted in accurate reporting of the facts.
 - 7 Schaff has this to say concerning Socrates: "Of all the Christian writers of his day he is the fairest towards those who differed from the creed of his church" (vol II, xv). Schaff also has a good section on the errors which have been found in Socrates's history (vol II, xiv).
 - 8 Pagels covers this discovery well in the introduction to her *The Gnostic gospels*.
 - 9 Robinson was the editor of the translations in *The Nag Hammadi Library* and gained first mention in Pagels' acknowledgments in *The Gnostic gospels*.
 - 10 Given her liberal presuppositions, such a possibility is *a priori* excluded.
 - 11 Ibid, 11, 16, 29, 32, 40, 45, 118, 161 for this consistent theme. Her reasoning concerning the monotheism of Orthodoxy as opposed to Gnosticism, and how the fathers defended it in order to defend their mono-episcopacy, makes one wonder if Pagels has forgotten the Jewish roots of Jesus Christ.
 - 12 Gnosticis/m was a highly complex theological system. For our purposes here, we note that Christian Gnosticism posited two gods, the physical creator god of the Old Testament and the spirit god of the New. Jesus was sent by the latter to teach humanity how to free the good soul from the evil body.
 - 13 From the Catholic Encyclopaedia, copyright © 1913 by the Encyclopaedia Press. Electronic version, copyright ©1996. Article on Arianism. It can be found on the Internet at <http://www.knight.org/advent/cathen/>.
 - 14 Barnes speaking of Schwartz's view.
 - 15 Gibbon (1960) writes: Athanasius possessed "a superiority of character and abilities which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy".
 - 16 'Deposition of Arius' by Athanasius. Alexander had done this very thing earlier (see Socrates Book I, ch VI).
 - 17 All subsequent quotations from Socrates come from the same section in Schaff, Book I, ch XIV to XLI, and will not be consistently endnoted from this point forward.
 - 18 The accusations included violent behaviour, destruction of church property and the emperor's statue, causing people to perjure for him, torturing those who opposed him, treason against the emperor, having the house of the Melitian bishop Arsenius burned to the ground, cutting off his arm for the purposes of magic and ultimately murdering him, and giving gifts to a woman for immoral purposes, a woman Athanasius supposedly later raped. Socrates, Book I, ch. XXVII and XXX; Theodoret, ch. XXV; Gibbon, 324f; Stevenson, 385f; Arnold, 107f; Hanson, 259-262; Barnes, *Early Christianity* 62 and *Constantine and Eusebius* 232f . (Actually, two separate incidences of charges were laid against Athanasius during this time.)
 - 19 Socrates quoting Athanasius, "Arsenius, as you see, is found to have two hands: Let my accusers show the place where the third was cut off" (Book I, ch XXX).
 - 20 "Nobody can pretend that the proceedings at Tyre were a model of just dealing", (Hanson 1988:262).
 - 21 The first two exiles were spent in the West, the latter three in hiding in Egypt.
 - 22 We do not have the space to cover this incident in detail, so the reader is referred to the relevant sources (Socrates, Book I, ch XXXIII; Theodoret, ch XX and XXI; Stevenson, 'History of the Arians' by Athanasius, 382). Barnes comments concerning the removal of Eustathius: "By 330, therefore, the metropolitan see of Antioch was firmly in the Arian camp, and Flaccillus could ensure that any new bishop in Syria would sympathize with the Arian cause" (Barnes 1993:229).
 - 23 Jaroslav Pelikan (1971:202) touches upon this matter and the notion that Constantine forced the use of the term 'homoousios' on the Council, but notes

that the term is "usually attributed to Western sources, mediated through Osius of Cordova".

- 24 "Despite the familiar image of Constantine seated among the bishops and presiding over their discussions, the evidence makes it clear that the emperor was not technically a member of the council at all: he took part in its discussions as an interested layman who was present, but he was not a voting member of the assembly" (Barnes 1993:169).
- 25 Socrates, Book II, ch 7, 13, 16, 26, 29, 34, 37, 41; Sozomen, V 4. 9 - 5.1, 5. 6-7.
- 26 Constantine II, also known as Constantine the Younger, ruled the West, while Constans ruled Illyricum and Africa.
- 27 It should be noted that these events did not move as quickly as they would appear to have moved. Between his second and third exiles, basically from his return after his acquittal at Sardica to his condemnation at the Council of Milan, Athanasius served at his see in Alexandria for ten years.
- 28 Both Von Harnack and Gibbon reserve only bleak words for the character of Constantius (see Hanson 1988:318).
- 29 As reported by Athanasius in 'The history of the Arians'.
- 30 "The whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian." Jerome, commenting after the Council of Constantinople in 360.