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God or god?: Arianism, Ancient and Modern

Ancient heresies have a habit of recurring in the Christian church. Although this article deals with eighteenth century tendencies, it may help to alert readers to the danger of comparable phenomena in contemporary theology and their effects on the teaching of the church.

Belief in the Deity of Jesus Christ is well warranted by the canonical scriptures of the Christian church. When we move, however, from exegesis and biblical theology to the realm of systematic reflection we soon find ourselves struggling. The statement 'Jesus Christ is God' (or any statement linking such a subject to such a predicate) raises enormous problems. What is the relation of Christ as God to God the Father? And what is his relation to the divine nature?

These questions were raised in an acute form by the Arian controversy of the 4th century. The church gave what it hoped were definitive answers in the Nicene Creed of 325 and the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, but, despite these, Arianism persisted long after the death of the heresiarch.

This article looks briefly at 4th century developments, but focuses mainly on later British Arianism, particularly the views of the great Evangelical leaders, Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge.

Arius

It is a commonplace that history has been unkind to heretics. In the case of such men as Praxeas and Pelagius we know virtually nothing of their teaching except what we can glean from the voluminous writings of their opponents (notably Tertullian and Augustine). Arius (probably born in Libya around 256, died 336) is in little better case. References to him in the works of such adversaries as Athanasius need to be treated with the greatest care, not least because the reputation of Athanasius the Great is not quite what it used to be. Recent scholarship has raised serious questions as to his personal integrity. R. P. C. Hanson, for example, accuses him of

equivocation, mendacity, sharp practice and treason¹ and this generally unfavourable verdict is endorsed by other contemporary scholars such as Professor Rowan Williams.² It is doubtful if these judgements express the last word on this particular Christian hero, but they certainly underline our misfortune in having so little direct knowledge of what his opponents, especially Arius, actually taught. As Hanson points out³ the heresiarch himself wrote only ephemera, his alleged heirs and successors hardly ever quoted him and 'we have no more than three letters, a few fragments of another, and what purport to be long quotations from the *Thalia*, verses written in the Sotadean metre or style to set forth his doctrines.' Among his early supporters were the historian Eusebius of Caesarea and his namesake Eusebius of Nicomedia. In the next generation something very similar to Arius's views were set forth by Eunomius, calling forth a massive reply from Gregory of Nyssa⁴.

Recent scholarship has also been much less confident than that of the past as to what Arianism actually was. According to Rowan Williams⁵, for example, 'The time has probably come to relegate the term "Arianism" at best to inverted commas, and preferably oblivion with all its refinements of early, late, neo or semi (which last does appear to have vanished from serious scholarly discussion).' Williams is doubtless right about the refinements, but it seems premature to conclude that the Nicene Council, Athanasius and the great Cappadocian theologians were tilting at windmills. However difficult it may be at our point in history to secure clarity on the details (particularly with regard to the *homoian*- or semi-Arians) the main points of Arius' own teaching can be stated with some confidence; and the fourth-century Fathers certainly thought that Arianism was an identifiable phenomenon.⁶

First of all, Arius denied the self-existence and eternity of the Son. 'The Son,' he wrote, 'has an origin, but God is unoriginated.'⁷ This

¹ *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1988), 244-246.

² *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 45, Number 1, 107. Cf. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London, 1963), 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴ *Against Eunomius*, (written between 381 and 384). See *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979), Vol. V, 33-248.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶ See Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians and Arian History*; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Third Edition, London, 1965) 226-231; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Second Edition, London, 1965) 231-234; Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 3-5; Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London, 1890).

⁷ Hanson, *Op. cit.*, 6.

did not preclude pre-existence: the Son was begotten timelessly, before aeons. Yet, 'There was when he was not'; and 'before he was begotten, or created or determined or established he did not exist.'⁸ He owed his existence to the Father's will, 'having received life and being from the Father and various kinds of glory, since he gave him existence alongside himself.'⁹

Secondly, Arius denied that the Son is equal with God. The Son was a creature, the Father was Creator and consequently they were totally unlike in substance. This was the gravamen of a letter written in 319 by Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, to explain why he had excommunicated Arius. Arius, he alleged, held the Son to be a creature (*ktisma*) and a product (*poiema*); and he went on to say, 'And he is not like in substance (*homoios kat' ousian*) to the Father nor is he the Father's true *Logos* nor the *Logos* by nature, nor his true Wisdom, but he is one of the products (*poiematon*) and of the things which came into existence (*geneton*), and is only called *Logos* and Wisdom broadly . . . Therefore he is mutable (*treptos*) and alterable (*alloiotos*) in his nature as are all rational beings. The *Logos* is alien and different and separated from the substance (*ousia*) of God . . . he was made for our sake, in order that God should create us through him as through an instrument. And he should not have come into existence if the Father had not wished to make him.'¹⁰ Clearly, Arius denied outright that the Son was consubstantial with the Father: 'They are unlike (*anhomoioi*) altogether in their substance (*ousia*) . . . he is not equal . . . far less is he consubstantial with him.'¹¹ On the contrary, the Son was a creature, made out of nothing. Yet the blatant impiety of worshipping a creature was obscured by the fact that to Arius the Son was no *ordinary* creature. As we have seen from Alexander's Letter, he was a special creature produced so that through him God could produce the rest of creation. Qualifications of this kind naturally had the effect of confusing the faithful and prolonging the controversy. After all, it could be said, Arius' Christ was a magnificent being; and the role Arius ascribed to him in creation could even claim the support of scripture: 'through whom also he made the ages' (Heb. 1:2). In the last analysis, however, the idea of the Son as a mediating creature is redolent only of Gnosticism, as if it were beneath the dignity of the true God to meddle with matter in the dirty business of creating.

The history of Arianism in the years immediately after the death of

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Arius himself is not easy to trace. Gibbon, in a famous jibe, made fun of the church dividing over an iota, as if the point at issue had been whether Christ was consubstantial (*homoousios*) with God or merely like (*homoiousios*) him. But this was not the question at Nicea. Arius rejected *homoiousios* as firmly as he did *homoousios* and held instead that the Son was *heteroousios* (of another and alien substance from the Father). Whether there ever was a party using the slogan *homoiousios* is open to doubt. The label is certainly attached to a particular party in the Second Sirmian Creed, but the men in question (such as Basil of Ancyra) do not appear to have used it themselves. They preferred to speak of the Son as the image (*eikon*) of the *ousia* or as *homoios kat' ousian* ('similar in substance'). The position is further complicated by the fact that Athanasius himself uses *eikon* and occasionally (even after Nicea) *homoios*. Only later did these terms become party labels.

Whatever the uncertainties, however, it is clear that in the church of the early fourth century there was a substantial body of theological opinion which regarded the Son as a creature, produced in time, out of nothing, and distinguished from other creatures only by his existing before this world was made and by his being indwelt by the Logos in a unique way. As far as his nature went, he was utterly different from God.

Anglican Arianism

By the close of the fourth century this school of opinion had been effectively excommunicated from the church. But it has never been totally extinguished. As far as the Western church is concerned it reared its head again after the Reformation, not least in England, although early English Arians tended to be inconsequential figures who simply reproduced the arguments of their more substantial Continental counterparts. The most important of these was the Dutch Socinian, Sandius, who reproduced the argument of the Jesuit Petavius to the effect that the ante-Nicene fathers would not have supported the terms of the Nicene Creed. Petavius' own trinitarianism is not in question: his concern was to establish the right of the church (that is, the Roman Catholic Church) to formulate new doctrines. But his argument obviously suited Arians well since it allowed them to present orthodoxy as a late novelty. Sandius' arguments were taken up by several forgotten figures in English theology, such as Dr. Bury of Exeter College, whose book *The Naked Gospel* was published at Oxford in 1690.

It was to refute the thesis of Petavius and Sandius that George Bull, later Bishop of St. Davids (Menavia, in Wales) published in 1685 his

Defence of the Nicene Faith (the original title was, of course, in Latin). Bull sought to establish one point, namely, that, 'what the Nicene fathers laid down concerning the divinity of the Son, in opposition to Arius and other heretics, the same in effect (although sometimes, it may be, in another mode of expression) was taught, without any single exception, by all the fathers and approved doctors of the Church, who flourished before the Council of Nice, even from the very times of the Apostles.'¹²

Effective as Bull's *Defence* was, however, the controversy continued. Thinkers such as William Whiston, who succeeded Isaac Newton as Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, continued to propound Arian views (Whiston was deprived of his professorship for his pains). Various Anglican dignitaries, endeavouring to clarify the Nicene teaching, found that their subtle speculations served only to raise questions as to their own orthodoxy. Dr. Robert South accused Dr. William Sherlock of tritheism only to find himself accused in turn of Sabellianism. In the University of Oxford Sherlock's views were publicly banned and prohibited. This produced further irritation 'and such was the unbecoming heat and acrimony with which the controversy was conducted, that the Royal Authority was at last exercised, in restraining each party from introducing novel opinions respecting these mysterious articles of faith, and requiring them to such explications only, as had already received the sanction of the Church.'¹³

But trinitarianism soon faced a more formidable adversary in the person of Dr. Samuel Clarke, a London Rector who published his *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* in 1712. Clarke did not regard himself as anti-trinitarian and to some extent his objections to orthodox doctrine were methodological rather than substantial. He rejected the authority of the Fathers on such matters and argued that everyone, including Arians, should be allowed to subscribe to the formularies of the Church of England in his own sense. 'Every person,' he wrote, 'may reasonably agree to such forms, whenever he can in any sense at all reconcile them with Scripture.'¹⁴ More important, Clarke distinguished between *god* and the *supreme God*. Christ was god, but he was not the supreme God. The Son was divine only in so far as divinity could be communicated by the Father, who

¹² *A Defence of the Nicene Creed* (A New Translation, Oxford, 1852) x-xi.

¹³ *The Works of the Rev. Daniel Waterland, D.D.*, Oxford, 1823, Vol. I, 41-42. The quotation is from the *Review of Waterland's Life and Writings* prefixed to this edition.

¹⁴ Waterland, Vol. I, 45, quoting Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), 21.

alone is unoriginated and is the final source and first cause of all that the Son and Spirit do.¹⁵

The Arian tendencies of Clarke's position were quickly recognised and his work was condemned by Convocation in 1714. But this failed to settle the dispute. Others, notably Daniel Whitby, took up a position similar to Clarke's; and orthodoxy found an outstanding champion in Daniel Waterland (1683–1740).¹⁶

Arianism in Scotland

Unsettledness on the doctrine of the trinity was not confined to Anglicanism, however. The Church of Scotland, too, had its problems. John Simson, Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, was accused of denying the necessary existence of Christ at three successive General Assemblies between 1827 and 1829. When the Assembly finally shrank from deposing him, Thomas Boston dissented, on the ground that the decision failed to express 'this Church's indignation against the dishonour done by the said Mr. Simson to our glorious Redeemer, the great God and our Saviour.'¹⁷ The failure to deal with Simson's Arianism was also one of the grievances which led to a substantial secession from the Church of Scotland in 1743.¹⁸

Arianism in Nonconformity

But far more serious developments were taking place in English Nonconformity, where Arianism spread rapidly in the 18th century. The reasons for this lay, largely, in the historical context. Dissenters inherited from such men as Richard Baxter an aversion to 'human impositions' and this was exacerbated by the disabilities imposed on them by the Test Act (passed by Parliament in 1673), which bred a loathing of all theological tests and led to a reluctance to subscribe to even the most ancient creeds of the church. Along with this went a passion for theological freedom and a general feeling that churches must reserve to themselves a total liberty to reform their doctrine, worship and discipline according to the scriptures.

¹⁵ See J. A. Dorner, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1872), Vol. II, 358.

¹⁶ See his *Vindication of Christ's Divinity*, 1719; *Eight Sermons in Defence of the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 1720; *The Case of Arian Subscription Considered*, 1721; *Second Vindication of Christ's Divinity*, 1723; *Critical History of the Athanasian Creed*, 1723; *A Farther Vindication of Christ's Divinity*, 1724; and *The Importance of the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Asserted*, 1734.

¹⁷ See Boston's *Memoirs*, New Edition, Glasgow, 1899, 402.

¹⁸ See Adam Gib, *Display of the Secession Testimony*, Edinburgh, 1744, Vol. I, 44.

To all this was added the confused and disorganised state of nonconformist churches, particularly the presbyterians. Presbyteries found themselves unable to exercise proper supervision over preachers and congregations and even less able to supervise theological education, which was conducted for the most part in private academies. Even the laws governing the ownership of Dissenting churches contributed to the problem. Every such property had to be vested in a trustee, and these trustees tended to be wealthy lay-men, reluctant to incorporate any theological statement into their trust deeds, and stipulating only that the building be used 'for the worship of God by Protestant Dissenters'. Add the influence of Anglican Arianism, plus the cold rationalism introduced into English religion by John Locke, and it becomes easy to understand how Arianism could make rapid progress even among the heirs of the Puritans.

By 1718 matters had become so critical that the problem was referred to a Leaders' Conference¹⁹. This 'Salters' Hall Conference', as it came to be called, debated a proposal that ministers be required to subscribe to a traditional orthodox formula. Tragically, the Conference divided into 'subscribers' and 'non-subscribers': a division which marked a watershed in the history of Nonconformity. By the end of the century there were 200 Unitarian chapels in England and the movement as a whole had acquired significant influence through such men as Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), whose spiritual pilgrimage saw him move from Calvinism to Arminianism to Arianism. Priestley's *Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* was published in London in 1770.

Isaac Watts

Among the non-subscribers at the Salters' Hall Conference was Isaac Watts. David Fountain dismisses the question of Watts' views on the trinity in less than a page (and an even briefer appendix)²⁰ but this does not do justice either to the labour Watts bestowed on this doctrine or to the suspicion it aroused²¹. Watts' output on the subject

¹⁹ See Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason* (Penguin, London, 1970) 137.

²⁰ *Isaac Watts Remembered* (Worthing, 1974) 79.

²¹ See Augustus Toplady's comment in his *Outlines of the Life of Dr. Isaac Watts*: 'Gladly would I throw, if possible, an everlasting veil over this valuable person's occasional deviations from the simplicity of the gospel, relative to the personality and divinity of the Son and Spirit of God. But justice compels me to acknowledge that he did not always preserve an uniform consistency with himself, nor with the scriptures of truth, so far as that grand and fundamental article of the Christian faith . . . The inclusiveness (to call it by the tenderest name we can) of his too wanton tamperings with the doctrine of the Trinity, have been largely and

of the trinity occupies almost the whole of Volume VI of his collected works (nearly six hundred closely printed pages). That is surely sufficient to allow a balanced assessment of his position.

Watts clearly saw himself as an orthodox trinitarian. For example, he applauded the work of Bull, Pearson and Waterland: 'I reverence the name and memory of Bishop Bull, and Bishop Pearson, whose excellent writings have effectually proved, that those primitive fathers did generally believe the true and eternal Deity of Christ. And I pay all due honours to the learned labours of the reverend Doctor Waterland.'²² In accordance with this, his work, *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*, abounds with citations from these authorities. It is clear, too, that Watts was fully aware of the defects of Arianism and argued strongly against it: 'it is that scheme which represents the blessed Jesus as an inferior god, and thus brings him too near to the rank of those inferior gods or heroes in the sense of the heathens; whereas the scripture places him in a vastly superior character, as *God over all blessed for ever*, and as one with God the Father.'²³ Nor does Watts leave us in any doubt as to his personal belief in the Deity of Christ: 'since the studies of these last years I think I am established afresh in the belief of the Deity of Christ, and the blessed Spirit, and assured of it upon sufficient grounds, that they are one with the Father in godhead, though they are represented in scripture as distinct persons.'²⁴ In accordance with this Watts argues, over many pages, that divine names, titles, attributes, works and worship are ascribed by the New Testament to Christ.²⁵

Yet it is easy to see why Watts' attempts to explain and defend his position brought him under suspicion. He had a curiously conciliatory approach to Arianism: 'I would not,' he wrote, 'willingly call every man an enemy to Christ, who lies under some doubts of his supreme godhead.'²⁶ He was also reluctant to confront Arianism head-on and sought instead to lead those who held Arian sentiments to belief in the divinity of Christ by 'soft and easy steps';²⁷ and in the process of doing so he always felt bound to reassure them that he did not expect them to accept the whole orthodox package. In a typical

irrefragably demonstrated by more hands than one . . . Notwithstanding this declension, I am happy in believing that the grace and faithfulness of the Holy Ghost did not permit our author to die under the delusions of so horrible and pernicious a heresy.' (*Works*, London, 1841, 487). Compare Dorner, *Op. cit.*, 330-333.

²² *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts*, D.D., (Leeds, 1813), Vol. VI, 274.

²³ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 124ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

statement he wrote: 'Now I ask leave to try whether it is not possible to lead one who has favoured Arian sentiments toward belief of *the chief parts of this doctrine*, which for some ages past has obtained the name of orthodoxy, though I confess *there are some other parts of it which are not so defensible*.'²⁸

Watts also shared, of course, the aversion to credal formulations and theological tests which was prevalent among the Dissenters of his day. This explains why he took his position with the non-subscribers at the Salters' Hall Conference. It explains, too, his consistent reluctance to endorse the details of historical orthodoxy: 'as to the various particular explications of this doctrine, and incidental arguments that attend it, I desire to believe and to write with a humble consciousness of my own ignorance, and to give my assent but in proportion to the degrees of light and evidence.'²⁹ The same reluctance to commit himself to traditional formulations appears in Watts' attitude to the personality of the Holy Spirit. He felt quite free to speculate on this question: 'the Spirit seems to be another divine power, which may be called the Spirit of efficiency: And though it is sometimes described in scripture as a personal agent, after the manner of Jewish and eastern writers, yet if we put all the scriptures relating to this subject together, and view them in a corresponding light, the Spirit of God does not seem to be described as a distinct spirit from the Father, or as another conscious mind, but as an eternal essential power, belonging to the Father, whereby all things are effected.'³⁰

But the real problem lay in Watts' speculations on the Person of the Son. He had serious misgivings about the eternal sonship of Christ: 'Though it has been an opinion generally received, that the sonship of Christ belongs to his divine nature, supposing it to be really derived from the Father by eternal generation, yet the scripture does nowhere assert this doctrine, but it is drawn only by supposed consequences'³¹. Along with this went a peculiar belief in the pre-existence of the human soul of Christ. Watts regarded this as the most natural and obvious sense of many scriptures and he even expressed his opinion in language reminiscent of the 4th century Arians: 'if we can believe that it was formed the first of creatures before the foundation of the world, and was present with God in the beginning of all things, which is no hard matter for an Arian to grant, then we may also justly believe this union between God and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 215 (italics mine).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 220 fn.

man to have begun before the world was, in some unknown moment of God's own eternity'.³² It was in this sense, Watts asserted, that Christ was the first-born of every creature: 'For his complex person had a being before the creation was formed; and, perhaps, this may be the best way of expounding the doctrine of the most primitive fathers concerning the ante-mundane generation of Christ, that is, his becoming the Son of God in a new manner just before the world was made.'³³ This involved the idea that 'his person as God-man existed before the foundation of the world',³⁴ which in turn explained how, as God-man, he had some hand in creation. To complete the picture, 'The human soul of Christ being thus anciently united to the divine nature, did about seventeen hundred years ago, assume a body that was prepared for it by the Father through the peculiar operation of the Holy Spirit.'³⁵

Wow! We must remember the motivation behind this treatise, entitled *The Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith*. In it, Watts was struggling to find common ground with Arianism, to be as conciliatory as possible and to meet Arian scruples as far as he could. But even J. A. Dörner was astonished, declaring, 'From this view to Arianism was but a short step'³⁶. Watts, however, did not take that step. Instead he saw his position as depriving Arianism of its force, because it allowed him to argue that all apparently subordinationist references to Christ applied only to his pre-existent human soul. The underlying problem was that in his determination to avoid bondage to ancient credal formularies Watts embarked upon the very kind of speculation which had made these formularies necessary in the first place.³⁷

Philip Doddridge

The name of Philip Doddridge is often bracketed with that of Isaac Watts in discussions of English Arianism. For example, in a letter to Dr. James Denney, Sir William Robertson Nicoll asked Denney

³² *Ibid.*, 221.

³³ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 331.

³⁷ William Robertson Nicoll claimed that Watts went further than appears in his published works: 'Isaac Watts had a theory which is correctly described in Dörner. But I have read a posthumous book of his in the British Museum which goes further than that, and Lardner, a very fair-minded and scholarly man, declares that Watts became before his death completely Unitarian.' (T. H. Barlow, *William Robertson Nicoll: Life and Letters*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1925, 361-362).

whether he had read the history of Arianism and went on to say: 'I read it up pretty fully a long time ago. There is a meagre and not very accurate account of it in Dorner. Briefly, there was a powerful section led by Watts and Doddridge in the 18th century. They endeavoured to find a middle term between Trinitarianism and Arianism.'³⁸ Referring more particularly to Doddridge, Nicoll declared: 'As for Doddridge, he was virtually, I think, an Arian. At least, he recognised the Arians as brothers, though he admitted some modifications. Principal Gordon, who is biassed but well informed, says that the majority of Doddridge's students became Arians, and he is rather disposed to think that Doddridge himself was.'

Unfortunately, Nicol does not document his claims. Doddridge's treatment of the trinity and related issues is much less extensive than that of Watts, and it is presented at two different levels: the popular and the academic.

The popular is found in the *Family Expositor*, a paraphrase and exposition of the New Testament written towards the end of Doddridge's life³⁹ and designed, in his own words, to 'promote family religion'. The format gave Doddridge an excellent opportunity to express his opinion of the key texts on the Deity of Christ and in every instance his exposition is unashamedly, indeed aggressively, orthodox. For example, writing on Acts 20:28 he rejects the variant *kuriou* (for *theou*) and declares, 'this passage must be allowed as an incontestable proof that *the blood of Christ* is here called *the blood of God*, as being *the blood of that man* who is also *God with us, God manifest in the flesh*.'⁴⁰ He writes to similar effect on Rom. 9:5, arguing that there is no authority for the rendering, 'God who is over all be blessed for ever!' and asserting that the passage is 'a proof of *Christ's proper Deity*, which I think the opposers of that doctrine have never been able, nor will ever be able, to answer.'⁴¹

The strongest comments, however, are to be found in Doddridge's notes on Jn. 1:1. Here he faces the argument of Clarke and others that the word *theos* is used in some inferior sense (*god* rather than *God*). His response is emphatic: 'it is to me most incredible that, when the Jews were so exceedingly averse to idolatry, and the Gentiles so unhappily prone to it, such a plain writer as this apostle should lay so dangerous a stumbling-block on the very threshold of his work,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

³⁹ The Preface to the first volume is dated 27 November, 1738. The last volume was published posthumously. Quotations in this article are from *The Family Expositor: or, A Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament*, Five Volumes, Leeds, 1810.

⁴⁰ *The Family Expositor*, Vol. III, 210.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 472 fn.

and represent it as the Christian doctrine, that *in the beginning* of all things there were *two gods*, one supreme and the other subordinate'.⁴²

However, Doddridge also appears to be aware that he himself had been suspected of holding the very sentiments repudiated in his exposition. He replies with feeling: 'Nothing I have said above can, by any means, be justly interpreted in such a sense; and I here solemnly disclaim the least intention of insinuating one thought of that kind, by anything I have ever written, here or elsewhere.'⁴³

Doddridge's more academic pronouncements on the doctrine of the trinity are to be found in his two-volume *Course of Lectures on the Principal Subjects in Pneumatology, Ethics and Divinity*. Here, again, he argues cogently for the pre-existence of Christ and, like Watts, enumerates in proof of Christ's divinity the divine names, titles, attributes, works and honours which are ascribed to him in the New Testament, concluding that 'such divine worship is required or encouraged to him, as is elsewhere appropriated to the one eternal and ever-blessed God.'⁴⁴

On closer examination, however, it becomes easy to understand how Doddridge fell under the suspicion of heresy.

In the first place, although in these lectures the arguments for Christ's Deity are clearly stated, the relation between him and the divine nature remains ambiguous: 'God is so *united* to the derived nature of Christ, and does so dwell in it, that by virtue of that *union* Christ may be properly called *God*, and such regards become due to him, as are not due to any *created* nature, or mere creature, be it in itself ever so excellent.'⁴⁵

Secondly, Doddridge endorsed Watts' idea of the pre-existence of the human soul of Christ: 'there is reason to believe that Christ had before his incarnation a *created* or *derived* nature . . . though we are far from saying he had *no other* nature'⁴⁶. It is of this being, possessed of a derived or created nature, that Doddridge speaks as 'this glorious spirit or Logos'⁴⁷ to whom scripture ascribes the work of creation. It is not clear whether the Logos had a distinct personal existence prior to his union with the created nature or whether the Logos is only the result of the Father's uniting himself to this created nature.

Thirdly, Doddridge gave the impression of being uncommitted on

⁴² *The Family Expositor*, Vol. I, 24.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴ *A Course of Lectures on the Principal Subjects in Pneumatology, Ethics and Divinity* (4th edition, London, 1799) Vol. II, 168.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

the question of the *personality* of the Holy Spirit. He contents himself with summarising the arguments of those who assert, on the one hand, that the Spirit is a *person* and of those who assert, on the other, that he is but a divine *power*.⁴⁸

Fourthly, Doddridge deliberately cultivated an indefinite, non-dogmatic style of theological teaching. His general practice was to list for students the various views that had been held on a given question, refer them to the relevant literature and leave them to decide for themselves. J. B. Priestley, who studied under Doddridge's pupil, Caleb Ashworth, recalled the experience with relish: 'The general plan of our studies, which may be seen in Dr Doddridge's published lectures, was exceedingly favourable to free enquiry, as we were referred to authors on both sides of every question, and were then required to give an account of them.'⁴⁹

This, of course, is the standard approach in modern academic institutions. But these are secular institutions, where neutrality on the part of the teacher and free enquiry on the part of the student are *de rigueur*. Doddridge worked in a totally different environment, where he was charged with training men for the ministry and expected to give them clear guidance on fundamental Christian doctrines; and where dogmatism on such matters as the Deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit would have been accepted as a matter of course. If, in such an environment, he pursued a course completely different from that of a Calvin, an Athanasius or a St Paul, it is tempting to conclude either that he did not have firm views of his own or that he did not think orthodoxy important, even on fundamental doctrines. It is one thing for a ministerial academy to encourage open-mindedness on the distinctives of Calvinism and the peculiarities of Baxterianism. It is quite something else to encourage such liberalism with regard to the Trinity. The fact that the trinitarian controversy was at its height during Doddridge's student days and continued throughout his life⁵⁰ serves only to make his muted pronouncements all the more surprising.

Finally, and most important of all, Doddridge seems to have been governed throughout his life by an overriding concern to maintain his theological freedom; and, as a corollary to this, by a profound aversion to human creeds. In this, he was, of course, following in the footsteps of later Puritans such as Richard Baxter and (to a lesser

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 180–182.

⁴⁹ Cited in G. F. Nuttall, Ed., *Philip Doddridge 1702–51: His Contribution to English Religion* (London, Independent Press, 1951), 132.

⁵⁰ Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, 133.

extent) John Howe.⁵¹ This attitude is reflected in many aspects of Doddridge's life and ministry. He could have had a place at either Oxford or Cambridge but declined because he could not conform to Anglicanism. In 1723, when he became a minister in Leicestershire, he did not accept ordination or subscribe to any statement of faith.⁵² In 1724 he declined to become a candidate for the pastorate of Girdlers' Hall, London, because the position involved subscribing to the (Westminster) Assembly's Catechism.⁵³ And while his *Lectures* certainly describe Arianism as a heresy⁵⁴ the *homoousion* received only the barest mention and the post-Nicene fathers are damned with faint praise. 'After the time of this celebrated council,' he writes, 'they ran into several subtilties of expression, in which one would imagine they studied rather to conceal than to explain their sentiments'.⁵⁵ Doddridge rightly deprecated the squalid feuding which was such a feature of the 4th century Arian controversy, but he does not seem to have grasped the gravity of what was at stake. His conclusion tells us more about himself than it does about the subject: 'Considering the excellent character of many of the persons abovementioned, whose opinions were most widely different, we may assure ourselves, that many things asserted on the one side and on the other relating to the trinity, are not fundamental in religion . . . We may hence learn to be cautious, how we enter into unscriptural niceties in expressing our own conceptions on this doctrine, which is by all allowed to be so sublime and so peculiar to revelation.'⁵⁶

Subscription

Doddridge gave a formal deliverance on the question of subscription to human Forms and Standards in *Part VIII, Proposition CXXXVIII* of his *Lectures*.⁵⁷ He rejected the practice for five reasons: first, if

⁵¹ See Howe's comment in *A Calm Discourse of the Trinity in the Godhead*: 'I only wish these things might be considered and discoursed with less confidence and peremptory determination; with a greater awe of what is divine and sacred; and that we may confine ourselves to the plain words of Scripture in this matter, and be content therewith.' (*Works*, Vol. V, 112).

⁵² Doddridge was ordained in March, 1730, on his moving to Northampton, but the confession of faith he then made has been described as 'not so much a creed to which a young man might assent, but an account of his experience after seven years in the ministry.' (G. F. Nuttall, Ed., *Philip Doddridge: his Contribution to English Religion*, London, 1951, 111).

⁵³ Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, 144.

⁵⁴ *Lectures*, Vol. II, 190.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁷ Vol. II, 241-247.

such Forms had been necessary scripture itself would have provided them; secondly, it is inconceivable that 'weak and passionate' men could express themselves more appropriately than the apostles; thirdly, far from bringing unity, such formularies had brought great division to the church; fourthly, they would deter those who had the greatest tenderness of conscience (the very kind of men the church needed); and, fifthly, they would not secure the desired uniformity of belief because men of little integrity would subscribe to them for the sake of remaining in the church, even if this meant 'putting the most unnatural sense on the words.'

This is plausible and, no doubt, honest. But it remains unconvincing. First, it represents an attempt to escape from history. Arius posed a question (indeed a series of questions) to which every subsequent generation of Christians must reply: what is the relation between God the Son and God the Father? Is he different in essence (*heteroousios*) or is he one and the same in essence (*homoousios*)? Is he begotten, or is he made? Is he a creature, or is he the Creator? Did he have a beginning, or is he eternal? These questions form part of the context of Christian theology not only in the 4th century, but in all ages afterwards. They were certainly part of the context in which Doddridge worked in the 18th century.

The historic answer to Arius was given in the Nicene Creed and this, too, remains an enduring part of our theological context. We need to discriminate, however. Doddridge, as we have seen, was less than fulsome in his praise of the Nicene Fathers, but no one was (or is) expected to subscribe to all the sentiments of such men as Athanasius and the Cappadocians. Subscription is to the Creed alone. That Creed gave a clear answer to Arius: Christ was begotten, not made; he was begotten of the Father's essence, not of his will; he was the Creator of all things in heaven and earth; and he was *homoousios* with the Father.

The question being put to Doddridge was not simply, 'Do you believe in the Deity of Christ?' but, 'Are you on the side of Arius or on the side of Nicea?' It is hardly surprising that his attempt to distance himself from both sides (although not equally) brought him under suspicion.

Secondly, Doddridge's attitude reflects an excessive individualism. He recognised that a congregation had a right to know, for example, the theological position of its pastor, and when he himself was ordained at Northampton in March, 1730, he drafted a Confession of his own faith. It was, however, emphatically personal.⁵⁸ It was not one of the great ecumenical creeds or one of the great Protestant

⁵⁸ Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, 111.

confessions or even a statement drafted by the congregation itself. It was entirely individual.

The difficulty with this is that the church is a community and that the study of theology is a communal activity. Certainly, the paramount consideration is whether the preacher's words accord with those of the prophets and the apostles. But if he is at all competent theologically he has also studied with the Fathers and with the Reformers and with the theological community down through the ages and all over the world. Is he unable to express his agreement (and acknowledge his debt) in a common Formula? And is his church so distinctive that it needs a creed all its own?

Thirdly, Doddridge's approach reflects a simplistic biblicism. There is nothing whatever in the Reformation slogan, *sola scriptura*, to preclude the use of creeds and confessions in the church.⁵⁹ In fact, Doddridge himself repeatedly used non-biblical language, including some of the technical terms with which he was so uneasy. He affirmed, for example, his belief in the *trinity* (a non-biblical word) and even used the concepts *substance* and *person*. Besides, the New Testament itself, in the judgement of modern New Testament scholarship, contains several confessions of faith which were quoted (rather than composed) by the writers of the Epistles and which circulated as a 'form (*hypotyposis*) of sound words' (2 Tim. 3.13) before the completion of the canon. There is good evidence that Philippians 2.5–11 represents such a creed, that Romans 1.3f. represents another and that 1 Timothy 3.16. represents yet another.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Calvin wrestled with the problem of the use of non-biblical language in connection with the trinity in the *Institutes*, Book 1, Ch. XIII, 3–5. While insisting that we must speak of God as reverently as we think of him, he argued, nevertheless, that, 'if they call a foreign word one that cannot be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretation not patched together out of the fabric of Scripture.' He also argued that the historic terminology 'becomes especially useful when the truth is to be asserted against false accusers, who evade it by their shifts.' (quotations from Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Edited by John T. McNeill, Translated and Indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Lutterworth, London, 1949); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Third Edition, Longman, New York, 1972), 1–29; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1975), 57; R. P. Martin, *An Early Christian Confession* (Tyndale Press, London, 1960); George W Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992), 182f. Martin's work refers to Phil. 2:5–11, but in a later publication, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge, 1967) he espoused the prevailing view that Phil. 2:5–11 is *hymnic* in form. Cf. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991), 186–193.

If this is so, then the practice of creed-making has clear apostolic sanction. Provided such creeds are drafted in submission to scripture and live under its constant scrutiny they pose no threat to the authority of the canon. After all, it was one of the greatest of all creed-composing gatherings, the Westminster Assembly, which declared that, 'the Word of God, given in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us' (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer 2).

But the real difficulty with Doddridge's appeal to the sufficiency of scripture is that the writers of the New Testament never faced the precise issues raised by Arianism and therefore made no pronouncement upon it. This is further complicated by the fact that the very point at issue was the meaning of the biblical statements about Jesus. What did John mean when he said that the Logos was *God*? Or Paul, when he said that Christ was 'the first-born of all creation'? Such questions could not be answered by the mechanical citation of biblical texts. They required clear answers as to the way the texts were understood. From this point of view, nothing could be more serviceable than the *homoousion*, a hermeneutical axiom which forbids any exegesis inconsistent with the fact that Christ has the same divine nature, functions and prerogatives as God the Father.⁶¹ We cannot object to the use of the idea of substance (*ousia*) merely on the ground that it is unbiblical. The Arians themselves introduced the idea of substance by arguing that Christ was of a different substance from the Father. It was entirely appropriate that the orthodox should counter this in cognate terminology, insisting that Christ was one and the same in substance with the Father.⁶²

Finally, Doddridge's attitude to doctrinal formulations (and particularly to the Nicene Creed) reflects a deficient sense of

⁶¹ This does not mean that the *homoousion* itself is above scrutiny. It must be kept under constant review, in the same way as physics must be alert to the possibility that some day Einstein's theories of relativity may be superseded. In the meantime, however, both Einstein and the *homoousion* provide indispensable working hypotheses.

Similarly, the *homoousion* may undergo further clarification. See, for example, Donald Mackinnon's distinction between Christ as *homoousios* with the divine and Christ as mere *simulacrum* of the divine: 'if we say that Christ's invitation to the heavy laden is not a *simulacrum* of the divine invitation but is *in fact* that invitation made concrete, are we not involved in something very close to the *homoousion*?' (from an essay, "'Substance' in Christology—a cross-bench view" in *Christ, Faith and History*, Ed. Sykes and Clayton, Cambridge, 1972, 290). The same point can be made by distinguishing between Christ as *simulacrum* of the divine and Christ as *parousia* of the divine.

⁶² Cf. Donald Mackinnon: 'the question whether or not theology can dispense with the notion of substance is closely related to the question whether or not theology can dispense with propositions.' (*Op. cit.*, 289).

theological proportion. A Calvinist, such as Doddridge was, can be understandably uneasy about excluding from the ministry of the church an Arminian such as John Wesley or an Amyraldian such as Richard Baxter. Neither of these deviations from the Calvinist norm is life-threatening to the body of Christ. But Arianism (or Unitarianism) is a different order of error altogether. It illegitimizes the worship of Christ. Doddridge does not seem to have reckoned with this difference in scale. In one of his letters he pays an oft-quoted tribute to a former teacher, John Jennings: 'He does not entirely accord with the system of any particular body of men; but is sometimes a Calvinist, sometimes a Remonstrant, sometimes a Baxterian, and sometimes a Socinian, as truth and evidence determine him'.⁶³ But this is inept. Arminianism and Socinianism (modern Arianism) do not belong together. Arianism deserved not Doddridge's languid tolerance but Athanasius' obsessive determination to expel it from the church.

Conclusion

It seems fair to conclude that Arianism, feeding on the plea for simplicity and riding on the band-waggon of protest against non-biblical jargon, is endemic to the church. The concept of God as undifferentiated monad will always have its appeal, while attempts to explain the relations between co-equal divine persons can easily be portrayed as special pleading. Yet, for all its plausibility, Arianism is fatal to Christianity. We cannot call a creature, however glorious, *Lord!* For this reason, Arianism falls outwith the range of theological pluralism tolerable within the church.

Abstract

This study begins with an attempt to derive from 4th century discussions a definition of Arianism. It then notes the re-emergence of Arianism after the Reformation and traces its development within both the Church of England and English Nonconformity, focussing particularly on Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge. It looks at the factors which account for this development, including the aversion to human creeds which so deeply influenced the Nonconformist mindset. The study concludes that men like Doddridge, passionately committed to theological freedom, underestimated the threat which Arianism poses to Christianity.

⁶³ Quoted in Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, 132.