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ARTICLES

The Failure of Nicaea? Struggles of Faith in a Christianizing Culture

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Although the Council of Nicaea has given the year 325 something like canonical or even sacrosanct status in Christian history, it would in reality be several decades before the decisions of that council were acknowledged as truly authoritative. Particularly between the 350s and 370s, successive Roman emperors strongly favored rival positions, especially in the Homoian tradition. Not until after 378 did Nicene principles return in full force under the Emperor Theodosius. In understanding these changes, I stress the strongly providentialist views of the era, and the sense that the divine will could be discerned through great worldly triumphs or catastrophes, such as decisive battles, dramatic climatic events, or failed harvests. The fact that such interpretations were so strongly applied to understanding Christian theological controversies is powerful testimony for the rapid pace of Christianization during the fourth century and its establishment in vernacular cultures. This paper also stresses the very long continuity of anti-Nicene positions among the Germanic barbarian kingdoms that remained in existence though the early seventh century.

325 and All That

Historians like specific dates that can be presented as clear landmarks, and nowhere is that more true than in the early development of Christianity, where "Nicaea 325" is such an unavoidable fact. Apart from reciting the Nicene Creed regularly in liturgically oriented churches, we speak of Ante-Nicene Christianity and we consult the Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Nicaea is an era as much as an event. The dogmatic decision of that year is familiar enough, but in modern times the Council of Nicaea has become the focus for multiple mythologies. For many enthusiastic critics, it was the year that Jesus, hitherto regarded as a heroic martyred prophet, "became God." More generally, it marked the triumph of the hierarchical institutional church, which overwhelmed the effervescent Jesus Movement that had flourished before the dark times—before the *empire*. It also, supposedly, marked the point at which the Christian church decided to reject the many competing gospels that it had read up to that point and limited the canon to just the famous four. Everything, it seems, happened in 325, which almost appears as a second birth of Christianity. In that same model, the Emperor Constantine emerges as a second founder of the faith, almost equal to Paul.

However much scholars may scorn Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, that one book has done far more to disseminate awareness of Nicaea and 325 to a mass audience than a thousand responsible texts (Jenkins 2024a; 2025).[1]

Of course, none of those ancillary claims is even close to the truth, whether about the rejection of the alternative gospels or the divinity of Christ, and explaining the power of that mythology over the past century or so would require a whole lengthy paper in its own right. But even when that thorny undergrowth of legend has been thoroughly cleared, we are still left with a common assumption about Nicaea as a pivotal theological event, and one that shaped the whole subsequent history of the faith, so that 325 genuinely did mark a decisive turning point. In fact, that status is by no means clear, and arguably, it is as mythical in its way as claims about the lost gospels. In reality, the Nicene decision remained highly contentious, and its position within the empire remained fragile for a lengthy period. Within a generation or so, it was reasonable to see that Nicene solution as a thing of the past, almost irrelevant in a world that had largely moved on. Nor, apparently, was there any surging pressure to restore it. Only in long retrospect does Nicaea appear as anything other than a failure, a historical byway. Its triumph came only many years after 325, although historians have been remarkably modest in seeking the reasons for that comeback and the crucial series of events around 380 that permitted it.

In explaining that revival, that resurrection, I will inevitably refer to the happenstance of imperial succession and the whims of officeholders. But the revival also reflected deeper realities within the church and especially the culture in which that church operated. The Nicene victory was grounded in the ever-intensifying Christianization of the Roman world, in the new power bases that now emerged, and in the theological understandings that pervaded everyday life. I especially draw attention to the power of providentialism, and the very successful Christian annexation of the near-universal belief in signs, wonders, and auguries (Freeman 2009a; MacCulloch 2010; Heather 2022).

To reiterate, my emphasis throughout will be on the political and social forces that conditioned the eventual acceptance of Nicene belief, rather than on the theological or philosophical content of those ideas. The range of scholarship addressing such theological controversies is broad, and its quality extremely high. Having said that, many such books avowedly have little interest in political history or confessional struggles (e.g., Behr 2004; Ayres 2004; Anatolios 2018). My present article thus does not address the theological issues in anything like the detail that would be essential in other contexts.

1 For shifting views of heresy and its significance, see the essays collected in Flower (2025).

Nevertheless, the Arians Persisted

I have no need here to recapitulate the background of the Council of Nicaea or its immediate aftermath. Although the Nicene formulary prevailed, its enemies were numerous, and dissension continued in many specific cities and regions. "Arianism" itself became more sharply defined, with a variety of offshoots that were even more forthright in distinguishing between the Father and Son (Vaggione 2000; Parvis 2006; 2021; Wiles 1996; Williams 2002; Lyman 2008; Hanson 2006; Dunn 2021; Whelan 2025).

Typical of that continued resistance was Eusebius of Nicomedia (not to be confused with the pioneering church historian), a leading adviser of the great Constantine, and he may well have baptized the emperor on his deathbed in 337. Eusebius had also been a close friend and probably a fellow student of Arius himself. His career reminds us of just how fragile had been the apparent display of consensus at the Nicene assembly. Among those who voted for the new creed were some, and perhaps many, who thoroughly disagreed with it, but who would not publicly resist imperial decisions. Those covert critics were content to bide their time and to fight the battle for truth once more when occasion arose, and Eusebius was one of this group. He served as mentor of Constantine's son and long-serving successor, Constantius II, and in 339 he acquired the crucial position of Archbishop of Constantinople (Crawford 2016).

For present purposes, the great lessons of the Nicene gathering focused less on the theological outcome than on the means of debating and advancing the church's doctrine. Contemporaries learned the role of church councils in deciding contentious matters and the probability that such gatherings should be drawn from the whole empire or a large portion of it. At least as significant, the Nicene precedent clearly demonstrated the emperor's role in determining doctrine, both through summoning and guiding future councils and in influencing the selection of clergy, especially in the key urban centers (MacMullen 2006). If the empire was in no sense a systematic theocracy, emperors had huge latitude in determining church leadership and in purging dissidents. Just witness Athanasius, who notionally served as Patriarch of Alexandria for the forty-five years from 328 through 373, but seventeen of those years were spent in five different periods of exile, when he was shuffled around many distant corners of the empire. These successive exiles were imposed by no fewer than four different emperors. If emperors did not decide Christian doctrine by whim, they had immense power to shape its course (Cameron and Garnsey 1998; Wienand 2015; Barry 2019).

In the new political setup, then, the fate of Christianity depended on the political and religious outlook of the emperor, his family, and a tiny clique of people who had his ear. Eusebius's influence over Constantius II was therefore very important. At various times, several emperors shared the rule,

but Constantius was the dominant figure for most of the period until his death in 361, and he held a monopoly of power with the elimination of the usurper Magnentius in 353 (Baker-Brian 2022).

That struggle, which is thoroughly obscure to nonspecialists, had immense consequences for the Nicene settlement. Magnentius posed a real threat to Constantius, which was only averted by his victory at the Battle of Mursa in 351. This, incidentally, was one of the most important battles in Roman history, which resulted in horrific losses—some tens of thousands of fatalities on both sides. In purely military terms, which scarcely concern us here, it marked a key moment in an ancient revolution of military affairs, as heavy armored cavalry—*cataphractarii*—overwhelmed traditional Roman legions. While the battle was in progress, Constantius was visiting a saint's shrine in Constantinople, at which he received what appeared to be a prophetic announcement of the battle's outcome from the Arian bishop Valens of Mursa, who had reputedly received an angelic message. He took this as a clear divine sign, and Arian writers presented it as a virtual repeat of his father's victory and miraculous vision at the Milvian Bridge. With Valens as his spiritual guide, Constantius received a powerful sense of divine mission to reform the church's doctrine (Gibbon 1846, 2, 213–14).

From the mid-350s, the duly inspired Constantius began a counterrevolution in earnest. He put like-minded believers in important church positions in key cities while purging stubborn defenders of Nicaea. He also encouraged a series of councils that were ever more overt in their determination to overthrow Nicaea and which progressively dismantled the obnoxious Nicene formula. In practical terms, the fact that the bishops attending such gatherings were now considered to be on official public business meant that their expenses were covered, and the best communication facilities were made available to them. Together, this made it vastly easier for bishops to communicate with each other and to flock to distant cities where they might do the emperor's bidding. Edward Gibbon famously cited the complaint of Ammianus Marcellinus about such largesse: "The highways were covered with troops of bishops galloping from every side to the assemblies, which they call synods; and while they labored to reduce the whole sect to their own particular opinions, the public establishment of the posts was almost ruined by their hasty and repeated journeys" (Gibbon 1846, 2, 214). Arians and semi-Arians enjoyed repeated victories at those gatherings, surprisingly so in light of our common assumption that they were cranky heretics who were unable to understand the plain Trinitarian truth. In fact, the critics of Nicaea were asking excellent questions, focused particularly on that loaded word *homoousion/homoousios*. It had long been associated with the third century heretic Sabellius, who had denied the Trinity and who had seen the different divine Persons as parts or modes of one undivided deity. Critics charged that Nicaea had accepted this crude doctrine. Semi-Arians attacked what they saw as Nicene excesses, while resisting the temptation to demote Christ to the

status of a creature. Successive synods and councils agreed that such loaded terms as *homoousios* and *homoiusios* (of like essence) were confusing, and as such should be avoided, not least because that whole philosophical language had no biblical roots (Ayres 2004; Flower 2016; DelCogliano 2021).

The Triumph of the "Likers"

In 357, that position of "a plague on both your *ousia*" was accepted by the Third Council of Sirmium (in modern Serbia), which declared that the Father is greater than the Son. Among the Arian champions at this event was Valens of Mursa, whom we have already encountered. Allegedly, and controversially, even the Roman Pope, Liberius, signed the final document, which the orthodox termed "the Blasphemy." (If the evidence for his signing is debatable, the contemporary rumors that he had done such a thing were strong.) The orthodox father Jerome reported with horror that "the whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian. Some, therefore, remained in their own communion, others began to send letters to those Confessors who as adherents of Athanasius were in exile; several despairingly bewailed the better relations into which they had entered. But a few, true to human nature, defended their mistake as an exhibition of wisdom. The ship of the Apostles was in peril, she was driven by the wind, her sides beaten with the waves: no hope was now left" (Jerome, *Dialogue against the Luciferians* 19; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.30).[2]

Political currents were clearly flowing against that Nicene faith. A new assembly at Rimini in 359 drew four hundred bishops, significantly more than had attended Nicaea itself. This gathering initially endorsed the Nicene Creed, but political maneuverings led the delegates to approve a text that declared the Son *like* the Father, but not necessarily in substance. This is technically termed a Homoian stance, from *homoios*, meaning "like" or "similar" (D. Williams 2021; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.37). That formula became the basis of a new creed approved at a council in Constantinople in 360, where debates were firmly guided by Constantius himself. This gathering fell far short of Nicaea or Rimini, and attracted perhaps fifty bishops, but even so, it arrived at a weighty conclusion. The official creed proclaimed here declared, "We believe in one God, Father Almighty, from whom are all things. And in the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from God before all ages and before every beginning by whom all things were made, visible and invisible, and begotten as only-begotten, only from the Father only, God from God, like to the Father that begat him according to the Scriptures; whose origin no one knows except the Father alone who begat him" (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.41). So much of this looks like our familiar language, but we note the key differences. The Son is

2 All quotations of early church sources are from the translations in Schaff and Wace (1952).

"like to the Father" rather than of "one being with the Father"—that is, of the same substance, the same *ousia*. In fact, that whole philosophical language is conspicuous by its absence. As far as possible, they tried to settle the long controversy by agreeing not to talk about it.

If the long sequence of debates seems incomprehensible and even labyrinthine to modern nonspecialists, contemporaries were almost as overwhelmed. Here is Socrates the historian:

> And now as we have at length wound our way through the labyrinth of all the various forms of faith, let us reckon the number of them. After that which was promulgated at Nicaea, two others were proposed at Antioch at the dedication of the church there. A third was presented to the Emperor in Gaul by Narcissus and those who accompanied him. The fourth was sent by Eudoxius into Italy. There were three forms of the creed published at Sirmium, one of which having the consuls' names prefixed was read at Ariminum [Rimini]. The Acacian party produced an eighth at Seleucia. The last was that of Constantinople, containing the prohibitory clause respecting the mention of "substance" or "subsistence" in relation to God. (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.41)

Matters really were that complicated, and so protracted.

After the Council of Constantinople

Nicene fortunes did not benefit from the arrival of the "apostate" pagan emperor Julian in 361. Julian himself scorned the theological arguments and encouraged bishops to gather and debate for his amusement (Teitler 2017). But the orthodox faced a far sterner time under Julian's successors. When he came to power in 364, the new Western ruler Valentinian tried to balance competing interests, but his brother, the eastern emperor Valens, was aggressively Homoian, a "Liker." (To be clear, he was no relation to the Arian bishop Valens to whom I have referred earlier.) The orthodox historian Theodoret attributed the increasingly aggressive anti-Nicene stance of the imperial Valens to the views of his wife, Domnica, who "persuaded him to fall along with her into the pit of blasphemy." She led him to be baptized by Eudoxius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, whom the orthodox commonly blamed for Arian successes. By following the whims of a woman, Valens was evidently reproducing the sin of Adam, and a new satanic fall now loomed (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.11).

Despite rising challenges at home and beyond the frontier, the two emperors provided strong and fairly stable leadership, which promised to continue in a lasting dynasty. When Valentinian died in 375, he was succeeded by his young son, Gratian, which de facto gave Valens a dominant position in the empire as a whole (Lenski 2002). Allegedly inspired by Eudoxius,

Valens now began a persecution, "for from Antioch he expelled the great Meletius, from Samosata the divine Eusebius, and deprived Laodicea of her admirable shepherd Pelagius.... Him, too, Valens relegated to Arabia, the divine Meletius to Armenia, and Eusebius, that unflagging laborer in apostolic work to Thrace" (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.12). After their restoration to favor in 381, the orthodox prelates complained of their many sufferings: "Who could tell the tale of fines, of disfranchisements, of individual confiscations, of intrigues, of outrages, of prisons?" (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.9).

At this point, it is useful to contemplate how the Nicene debates might have been viewed from the height of that rule, say, around the year 370. There certainly were church leaders who favored that doctrine, but they had suffered some fifteen years of successive defeats and humiliations. If some bishops held frankly Arian doctrines (according to the common stereotype of that position), most were clearly satisfied with the Homoian compromise. Terminology becomes important here. In retrospect, we think of the Nicene adherents as the orthodox, those whose view was evidently correct. At the time, of course, they could aspire to no such status, and in some regions were dismissed as mere sectarians and dissidents, as one cranky group among many. In the crucial area of Syria, Arians were so powerful as to leave the Nicenes termed merely the "Eustathians and Paulinists" (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.21).

That is worth stressing in light of the standard assumptions of historical writing on this era, much of which pays insufficient attention to the problems we inevitably face with our sources. However often we assert that "the winners write history," it is difficult for moderns to recall just how totally the views of a losing side could be eliminated. Throughout the Roman and indeed Byzantine period, regimes were happy to suppress writing that had been judged false, seditious, or (increasingly) heretical, and the task of destruction was undertaken very effectively in an age before the arrival of printing. In consequence, we rarely have accounts of defeated schools of thought from those rival leaders themselves, and virtually all our available sources reflect the winning side.

Among other things, that one-sided survival means that we always have to be aware of some very common motifs in the partisan debates of the age. Of course, "we" are always orthodox and mainstream, while "they" are heretical and fringe, but the rhetoric goes beyond that. When describing the rival, "we" generally label "them" with the name of some prominent leader, suggesting that such abhorrent ideas must have been the work of one deranged or sinister individual pursuing his own vanity and only attracting a clique of like-minded individuals. Arius himself provided the blueprint for most later descriptions of supposed heresiarchs, and in turn, the anti-Nicenes denounced their rivals as Eustathians and Paulinists. As far as possible, "we"

never admit that the condemned "-ism" must be rooted in some larger community or population, and still less that it might have any plausible foundation. (I will return to this issue of locating mass public support.) Nor need we necessarily believe partisan accounts of who actually emerged victorious in particular debates (Gwynn 2007; Rohmann 2016; M. Williams 2017).[3]

In the context of the christological debates of the mid-fourth century, we can readily turn to prolific writers whose views would subsequently be affirmed as orthodox, notably Athanasius himself, Ambrose, and the Cappadocian fathers who did so much to formulate orthodox theology for centuries to come, particularly in the doctrines of the Trinity: the group included Basil of Caesarea ("the Great"), as well as Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Viewing affairs through their strongly partisan eyes, it is natural to see the anti-Nicene reaction as a tragedy, but one that ultimately would prove short-lived. Even if Nicaea was thoroughly in eclipse, as it certainly was for two decades from, say, 357 through 378, they would be reluctant to admit that fact. Knowing as we do the final outcome of the story, we tend to share their assumption that Trinitarian truth would soon prevail, and any developments that veered from this trajectory would prove to be short-lived. At the time, such a conclusion was far from obvious. The Cappadocians themselves were a distinctly embattled group who repeatedly had to confront imperial displeasure. If Valens had not respected him so much personally, and was properly afraid of provoking divine wrath, Basil might have faced martyrdom (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.16; D. Williams 1995).

The passage of time played its part. By the mid-370s, the intense debates over the *ousia* were fading into the past, and a rising generation knew the formula of Constantinople as the Christian standard. In contrast, the generation with any direct recollection of 325 was fading away: Athanasius died in 373. Apparently, there was little reason or incentive to restore the Nicene formula, which seemed so provocative.

How the Goths Saved Nicaea

The pro-Nicene cause was saved only by an event that lay far outside the realm of theology. This was the military cataclysm that befell the empire in 378, when Gothic forces defeated a Roman army at Adrianople and killed Valens. He was succeeded in the east by the Spaniard Theodosius, who for a brief period before his death in 395 ruled the whole reunited empire, and who became known as "the Great." In terms of Christian history, he was the most important Roman emperor that nonspecialists have never heard of (Williams and Friell 1995).

3 For applying labels to heresies, see Jenkins (2024b).

Theodosius actually accomplished many things that we usually attribute, wrongly, to Constantine. Not only did he believe firmly in the faith in its Nicene form, but he was much more willing to impose it by force if needed. According to modern mythology, Constantine had made Christianity the empire's official religion (rather than merely tolerating it), which must also have involved suppressing heretical variants of the faith and suppressing their scriptures. Many of those alleged deeds did come to pass, but in the 380s rather than the 320s, and they were chiefly the work of Theodosius rather than Constantine (Hebblewhite 2020).

For reasons that are still unclear, Theodosius was personally devoted to the Nicene cause.[4] In 381, he summoned the church's second ecumenical council, which was held at Constantinople and which definitively established Nicene doctrines. That new gathering expanded the original creed proclaimed at Nicaea to the longer version that we have said ever since, and which is technically known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Theodosius demanded acceptance not just of Christianity but of that faith in its precise orthodox and Nicene form as practiced in the great churches of Rome and Alexandria (Freeman 2009b; Giulea 2024). Here is his edict, in Gibbon's stately rendering:

> It is our pleasure ... that all the nations which are governed by our clemency and moderation should steadfastly adhere to the religion which was taught by St. Peter to the Romans, which faithful tradition has preserved, and which is now professed by the pontiff Damasus, and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the discipline of the apostles, and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe the sole deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, under an equal majesty and a pious Trinity. We authorise the followers of this doctrine to assume the title of Catholic Christians; and as we judge that all others are extravagant madmen, we brand them with the infamous name of Heretics, and declare that their conventicles shall no longer usurp the respectable appellation of churches. Besides the condemnation of Divine justice, they must expect to suffer the severe penalties, which our authority, guided by heavenly wisdom, shall think proper to inflict upon them. (Gibbon 1846, 2, 515–16)

Contrary to later triumphalist mythologies, Theodosius did not actually forbid paganism, except in a few regions, but the new and harsher religious environment made active pagan worship far more difficult. Led by fanatical monks, Christian mobs destroyed some of the key temples and shrines of

4 Orthodox historians attributed his faith to a divine vision received in a dream (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.6).

pagan antiquity, including the Serapeum in Alexandria. In 385, the Roman empire carried out (arguably) the first execution of a Christian heretic, the Spaniard Priscillian, although this was notionally for his sorcery and immorality rather than his deviant belief. (We might cite earlier instances of such actions against heretics, with the African Donatists, but Priscillian's death attracted far greater attention.) This was also the moment at which many of the alternative scriptures genuinely were destroyed or concealed. Again, the new monastics (literally) led the charge, taking full advantage of the new imperial commitment to orthodoxy to seek out and destroy vestiges of heresy. Many suspect scriptures were now concealed, including the famous collection that lay hidden until its rediscovery at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Other texts were presumably fed to the flames (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20–22).

By 390, then, the Roman Empire was officially Christian, catholic, and Nicene, and militantly so on all points. So accustomed are we to seeing the victory of Nicaea as inevitable that it is easy to understate the astonishing nature of the change during and after 378.

How Nicaea Triumphed (Eventually)

In explaining the religious debates of these years, it is tempting to confine ourselves to the world of court politics, in which counselors and spouses could play an inordinate role. Eusebius, for instance, had the ear of Constantius II, who therefore undertook the anti-Nicene reaction of the 350s. Valens happened to hate Nicaea. Theodosius, just as capriciously, happened to regard it as the basis of Christian truth, and the policies of the imperial church lurched from one position to another, depending on the accidents of marriage, birth, battle, and coups d'etat.

Although such elite attitudes must never be underplayed, they were not the end of the story, and that was all the more true during a tumultuous period such as the fourth century, when the whole culture of the empire was undergoing such a dramatic transformation. If in 325 Christianity was an extreme minority stance within most of the empire, by mid-century it had gained massively in public support and commitment. Scholars dislike the word "conversion" in such contexts, as that term usually implies a kind of interior shift of orientation about which outside observers can only comment very cautiously. But if not conversion, the pace of Christianization appears to have advanced very rapidly in the generation or so after 325, reshaping urban culture and education. That fact gave new opportunities to elites seeking to redraw the theological maps, but it also constrained them (MacMullen 1986; Longenecker and Wilhite 2023).

The evidence for such a process is diverse but convincing. Any modern audience might be bemused by the wholehearted commitment of large sections of late Roman society to theological causes, which one might rather

have expected to be the preserve of high clergy and scholars—of what we today might call specialists. To the contrary, we often hear of large public groups, elite or ordinary, driven to high excitement by the use of seemingly technical words in, for example, an address by a given bishop. Theology mattered profoundly.

But whatever people might have thought or believed, new structures promoted the adherence of urban publics to particular forms of faith. One was the nature of episcopacy and the emergence of bishops as centerpieces of government and society with strong roles in government and the capacity to distribute wide patronage. Especially after many years, figures such as Athanasius became venerated symbols of the pride and confidence of their cities, and emperors had to be cautious moving against even troubling dissidents. If the empire had operated as an unrestrained tyranny, then it would have been tempting simply to end the Athanasian problem by execution rather than by multiple exiles. However, authorities had to consider the attitudes of the cities those bishops ruled and also the less tangible but nevertheless critical matter of provoking divine anger by striking at his servants (Galvão-Sobrinho 2013).

Reading the church historians of this era, such as Theodoret and Socrates, one is often amazed at how overtly senior clerics disobeyed imperial commands and argued with the emperor's authority. Even the imperial power to impose candidates of his choice faced strict limitations. In the crucial city of Alexandria, Valens's attempts to install an Arian patriarch were so firmly resisted that two claimants to the position coexisted from 373 through 380, the Nicene Peter versus the Arian Lucius. The most celebrated example of episcopal resistance occurred during the time of Theodosius around 390, when imperial soldiers undertook a massacre in Thessalonica. Ambrose excluded the emperor from communion until he made restitution, an act that was often commemorated in later Catholic art as an object lesson to secular rulers: Rubens's painting of 1615 is the best-known example.[5]

In itself, the fact of growing episcopal power said nothing about the relative power of the Nicene or anti-Nicene positions. Alexandria was famously Nicene, while Constantinople leaned Arian under a sequence of influential bishops from Eusebius through Eudoxius. However, new institutions reinforced not just Christian loyalties and solidarity, but specifically benefited the Nicene side. I refer especially to the monks who became such a potent force in Egyptian society from the fourth century, and who gave significant paramilitary backing to orthodox positions. As Christians acquired deeper

5 For the confrontation between the emperor Constantius and Pope Liberius, see Theodoret's account in *Ecclesiastical History* 2.13. For Alexandria and Thessalonica, see Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.17–19; 5.17. The painting illustrating the episode is reproduced in the Web Gallery of Art. https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/dyck_van/3other/emperor.html.

roots, so emperors and bureaucrats had to be all the more cautious in challenging positions that were deeply entrenched in particular regions and cities (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23–24).

The Roof Tile from Nowhere

Just how low in the social scale such enthusiasms applied is open to debate. Any account of the theological struggles of this era infallibly quotes a passage from Gibbon, in which an orthodox visitor to Arian-leaning Constantinople in the 380s complains that "this city ... is full of mechanics and slaves, who are all of them profound theologians; and preach in the shops, and in the streets. If you desire a man to change a piece of silver, he informs you, wherein the Son differs from the Father; if you ask the price of a loaf, you are told, by way of reply, that the Son is inferior to the Father; and if you inquire, whether the bath is ready, the answer is, that the Son was made out of nothing" (Gibbon 1846, 2, 517). This very famous passage is problematic. Gibbon himself (who knew the original texts very well indeed) thought it derived from Gregory Nazianzus, although he could find no direct source from which this was literally translated. In reality, it stems from Gregory of Nyssa, and it is a loose paraphrase. Moreover, the passage in itself is purely anecdotal and can hardly be used to provide any kind of scientific survey of urban opinion (Cassin 2011).[6]

However, other texts do support this idea of a kind of mass involvement in the debates of these years. Again, we can learn much from pious tales and legends, not as objective truth, but as a standard currency of religious narrative. During Valens's repression of Nicene clergy, one prominent victim was the bishop Eusebius of Samosata, whom we have already encountered as a leading Nicene partisan, who was replaced by the "Arian" Eunomius. According to the orthodox historian Theodoret, Eunomius was thoroughly boycotted by the whole community: "Not an inhabitant of the city, were he herding in indigence or blazing in wealth, not a servant, not a handicraftsman, not a hind, not a gardener, nor man nor woman, whether young or old, came, as had been their wont, to gatherings in church. The new bishop lived all alone; not a soul looked at him, or exchanged a word with him" (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.13). Local inhabitants treated his bathwater as polluted by dint of heresy. Eunomius abandoned the city, but his successor was no more fortunate. When local boys were playing, their ball passed near the feet of the new Arian intruder. "The boys lit a fire and tossed the ball through the flames with the idea that by so doing they purified it." Again, the Arians surely had their own versions of such tales, but the stories are suggestive (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.13).

6 I am grateful to Alex Fogleman for this reference.

Most striking in Theodoret's narrative is the ultimate fate of that orthodox paladin Eusebius of Samosata, who outlived Valens and who returned to his own see in triumph before being martyred. I reiterate: he was martyred *after* the fall of Valens. That sequence of events might sound puzzling, but Eusebius actually fell victim not to an angry emperor or prefect, but to an ordinary Arian woman who dropped a roof tile on him as he passed in the street, fatally wounding him. This is one of the vanishingly rare occasions in which an orthodox historian actually admits the existence of pro-Arian popular sentiment in this era, and it is reasonable to assume that she was not the only lay person to feel incensed about the Nicene victory. Her aim just happened to be better than that of her neighbors. Did Arian partisans in that region constitute 5 percent of the lay public or 95 percent? We will never know (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.4).

The Hand of God

I have alluded to the providential interpretations of human affairs that were such a frequent component of the writing of this era. The power of such interpretations, and specifically in Christian form, played a very important role in deciding the ultimate victory of Nicene positions.

Evidently, pagan Romans or Greeks had needed no instruction in the vision of human affairs intertwining with the supernatural, as manifested through portents and the working of spiritual forces. The Christianizing empire very much pursued this tradition, but now annexed it wholly for the Christian worldview. That was reflected in the enormous significance of Christian wonderworkers in this era and the ever-present sense of divine intervention to reinforce particular moral or theological messages. Emperors were as prone to such interpretations as were humbler people. However trivial and even tiresome such accounts often seem to modern readers, these signs and wonders could have epochal effects in the real world. I have already described how Constantius II was so profoundly inspired by the apparent prophetic powers of Valens of Mursa.

Here, similarly, is Socrates recounting the multiple signs by which God expressed his fury over the subversion of Nicene principles after 364:

> On the second of June of the following year, in the consulate of Lupicin and Jovian, there fell at Constantinople hail of such a size as would fill a man's hand. Many affirmed that this hail had fallen as a consequence of the Divine displeasure, because of the emperor's having banished several persons engaged in the sacred ministry, those, that is to say, who refused to communicate with Eudoxius.... In the next year, when Valentinian and Valens were a second time consuls, there happened on the 11th of October, an earthquake in Bithynia which destroyed the city of Nicaea on the eleventh day of October.... Soon afterwards the largest

> portion of Germa in the Hellespont was reduced to ruins by another earthquake. Nevertheless no impression was made on the mind of either Eudoxius the Arian bishop, or the emperor Valens, by these occurrences; for they did not desist from their relentless persecution of those who dissented from them in matters of faith. (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.11)

To cite one instance from a great many, I note Socrates's story about the Emperor Valens and his consort, Domnica, and their encounter with Basil the Great. When the emperor's young son became dangerously ill, his mother told Valens that troubling visions had told her that the sickness was a punishment for his treatment of Basil. Valens urged Basil to pray for the child, but he replied that Valens must first accept his theological views, "cause dissension and disunion to cease in the Church," and then the child would live. Valens rejected the suggestion, and the child duly died. Theodoret tells the story a little differently, suggesting that what killed the boy was the decision to have him baptized by Arians rather than Nicene clergy. But the core message is identical: God cared deeply about deviations from orthodoxy, which he penalized by direct and potentially lethal action against individuals, families, and communities. The reality of the *ousia* mattered to God sufficiently for him to kill a child. We do not have to accept a word of this report as it stands as true, and Arians would assuredly have had their own body of legends about divine interventions in their cause. But on both sides, we see how Christianizing Romans of this era viewed disasters of all kinds (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26; Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.16).

That fact proved very significant in the crucial affairs of the late 370s and especially following the crisis of 378. Just how severe this was demands emphasis. Defeat as such was nothing new. In the mid-third century, the empire had suffered numerous defeats and disasters, and emperors had been slain or captured on the battlefield. But matters had improved massively from 270 onward, and both Persians and barbarians had largely been kept at bay. Yet suddenly, in 378, an emperor was killed, barbarian armies were marauding through the empire, and the widowed empress, Domnica, was scrambling to muster whatever reserves and militias she could scrounge together to save the East. And Constantinople itself was far more vulnerable than it would be a century afterward, with the construction of the great defensive walls that saved the city until the time of the Turks. Although this sequel is rarely recalled, the East Romans suffered another catastrophe at Gothic hands in 380 with the defeat at Thessalonica. Alarmingly, large sections of the Roman army, many of whom were themselves Germanic barbarians, simply defected to join the Goths. A total Roman collapse in the East was quite feasible. If that had happened, the potential conquerors would have been Gothic and Arian (Halsall 2007; Kulikowski 2019).

That story supplies an essential context for the religious reversal of the time. Although our sources do not permit us to say much about the factors motivating the imperial incumbents at this point, Theodosius and Gratian, it is reasonable to suggest that both were profoundly affected by the existential crisis that the Roman world now faced. In the context of the time, it was natural to see a divine role in such an act of judgment and to seek to avert God's future displeasure. A forceful reversion of Valens's distinctive religious policies would have been an obvious solution. Besides Theodosius's own theological inclinations, the western emperor Gratian also moved toward a Nicene stance, and he freed clergy whom Valens had persecuted. If we are seeking reasons for the Nicene victory within the empire, then the affairs of 378 must occupy center stage.

More broadly, we could usefully write the story of fourth-century Christianity within the empire—and the rise and fall of Arianism—according to three landmarks, each of which was a decisive battle: Milvian Bridge in 312, Mursa in 351, and Adrianople in 378—or rather, not the battles themselves, but the spiritual and prophetic significance with which each was vested. By such means, also, the whole Arian revival, and the deadly threat to Nicaea, can neatly be dated from 351 to 378.

The Long Withdrawing Roar of Arianism

After the 380s, the Roman Empire never again rejected the Nicene (or Niceno-Constantinopolitan) position, which became the indisputable foundation for all future debate. Two generations after 325, then, we think, the Council of Nicaea triumphed. Except, of course, that it did no such thing, and the anti-Nicene triumph of the 360s continued to have an impact that lasted several centuries. Not only did Arians survive, initially beyond the Roman frontiers, but they went on to conquer much of the world that Constantine had known. However rarely we view it in this way, Arian Christianity became a wildly successful missionary faith.

Through Rome's long wars with its neighbors, many ordinary people were carried off into slavery, and some of these served as unwilling witnesses to Christian faith. Around 310, a boy named Ulfilas was born to a Gothic father and a captive Greek mother in the barbarian lands around the Danube. Ulfilas became a Christian leader among the Goths, who among other things undertook a crucial translation of the Scriptures into this Germanic language. He was also an Arian Christian, and that theology spread widely among the Goths and among neighboring Germanic peoples. In the 350s and 360s, after all, this was the official creed of the still glorious Roman Empire, and Ulfilas personally attended the great Council of Constantinople in 360. Orthodox critics alleged that he was a client and ally of Archbishop Eudoxius, whom they so loathed. That religious fact acquired a massive new importance at the end of the fourth century when those barbarian peoples—the Goths, Vandals, and others—poured into the Western Empire. Most, by this point,

were Arian Christians. The Goths who sacked Rome in 410 were Arian, as were the Vandals who repeated the feat in 455 (Heather 1991; Berndt and Steinacher 2014).

By the late fifth century, much of Western Europe was dominated by Arian kingdoms, to the horror of a Roman papacy that found itself surrounded by these well-armed heretics. Arian Goths ruled Spain, Italy, and southern France; Arian Burgundians controlled the land that would later bear their name. Across much of Western Europe, the Latin-speaking heirs of Rome complained that their Nicene or catholic beliefs were despised and persecuted. When St. Augustine drew his last breath in 430, he did so in the North African city of Hippo, which was then under siege by Arian Vandals. Hippo fell shortly afterward, followed in 439 by Carthage, which the Vandals made the capital of their powerful kingdom, complete with its own Arian ecclesiastical hierarchy. Albeit sporadically, the Vandals bitterly persecuted Africa's Nicene catholics (Conant 2012, 154–57).

If, in the year 525, a historian had used the bicentennial to celebrate the triumph of the Council of Nicaea and its guiding documents, that would have seemed a very sick joke to much of surviving catholic Europe. Relief arrived, but only very gradually. Around 500, the Frankish king Clovis accepted the faith in its Nicene, catholic form, and his successors aggressively spread their power over their Arian neighbors. But this was no overnight process. Only very slowly were the Arian states defeated or converted, and the Lombard peoples of Italy remained Arian well into the seventh century. Europe's last Arian kings reigned in the 670s. The Council of Nicaea wound up in 325; a mere 350 years later, its principles were firmly established throughout Christian Europe.

That chronology alone should raise serious questions about how we frame the Nicene debates and their long aftermath. Even if we agree to ignore that very long barbarian "tail" (and there is no real reason that we should), then the Nicene struggles within the empire proper went on considerably longer than most nonspecialists assume. It is still remarkable to see how many books and essays about Nicaea and the supposed Arian crisis effectively end with the events of 325, which at least implies a kind of overnight decisive settlement that surely contradicts our experience of how such debates actually play out. If the issues under discussion at Nicaea were truly as important as commonly believed, then of course they took decades or even generations to resolve. How could it have been otherwise?

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