

## THE COUNCIL OF NICÆA.

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**A**N organized body requires some means of expressing its collective mind. When the Church was small and scattered, intercommunication between the various parts was frequent. The letters we have from the second century are proof of this. But as it grew and men began to think about the rules that should regulate discipline, the conditions that determine intercommunion and the doctrine that lies at the root of all worship and service, the need became pressing for something more than a mere local expression of principles. Bishops of neighbouring communities met together to take counsel—at first these gatherings were irregular and probably were devoted to the solution of specific difficulties that arose. Afterwards when a matter was found to be a source of disturbance in different parts of the Church, separate Councils were held simultaneously, and at the end of the second Century we find Councils held concerning the date of the observance of Easter in Palestine, in Gaul, in Pontus and Oesrhene. The third century saw such assemblies as part of the general machinery of the Church, and Cyprian was the Bishop who utilized them for practical purposes to secure joint action.

When Constantine became Emperor and Christianity became a lawful religion, a new current appeared in Church life, and Councils represented a larger area. The Council of Arles in 314 was a General Council of the West summoned to end the struggles between the followers of Cæcilian and Donatus. Constantine, then Emperor of the West, showed his belief in the advantages to be derived from a united Christendom. When he became master of an undivided Empire he took the step of summoning an Œcumenical Council at Nicæa, where he brought together Bishops from many Provinces. We see in this development the fruit of the pressure of local needs and Catholicity—the determination to make Christianity a Christian Church, one in outlook, one in discipline, and one in doctrine. The genius of Constantine grasped the fact that for the peace and well-being of the Empire it was essential that the one religion which was represented everywhere should be at unity within itself. How far his policy was dictated by religious as distinct from secular motives

is still a matter of controversy, and the most diverse opinions are held as to his character and aims. Gwatkin says, " If it were lawful to forget the names of Licinus and Crispus, we might also let him take his place among the best (of the Emperors). Others equalled—few surpassed—his gifts of statesmanship and military genius. Fewer still had his sense of duty, though here he cannot rival Julian or Marcus. But as an actual benefactor of mankind Constantine stands almost alone in history " (*Studies in Arianism*, p. 110). Prof. Whitney writes, " He was a Christian Emperor from conviction as well as from political instinct, and the New Rome, which was to bear his name, was to be a Christian city from the start, unhampered as the Old Rome had been and was going to be by heathen traditions and worship " (*Theology*, June, 1925, p. 300). Dr. Adeney describes him as " at heart an eclectic theist with a distinct preference for Christianity and a measure of real belief in it ; and in these respects his state policy reflects his own ideas " (*The Greek and Eastern Churches*, pp. 39-40).

Councils were not as orderly in the fourth Century as Councils and Conferences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote in 382 that he never saw " any good end to a council nor any remedy of evils, but rather an addition of more evil as its result. There are always contentions and strivings for dominion beyond what words can express " (*Cambridge Med. History*, p. 166). No impartial student of the Councils of the fourth century can fail to share the feelings of Gregory. But Councils were at their worst a necessary evil. Their multiplication gave the Church too much of a good thing. There is point in the saying of Dr. Gwatkin—whose breadth of knowledge and keen insight make his opinion the more valuable. " If men do not care for religion they will find something else to quarrel over. ' Nations redeem each other ' and so do parties ; so that the dignified slumber of a catholic uniformity may be more fatal to spiritual life than the vulgar wranglings of a thousand sects " (*Studies in Arianism*, p. 207). The history of the Church has proved this saying to be true in both East and West. The *sensus communis* of the faithful must be obtained at certain stages of the Church, if peace with progress is to be gained. The spread of the Anglican Communion inevitably led to the summoning of the Lambeth Conferences and in a similar way the growth of Christianity from small communities into a large body. Harnack

holds that there were not much more than one in twenty of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire Christian in the time of Constantine, although he believes that the real age of Christian expansion was after Decius (250). And the main strength of fourth-century Christendom was in the East. Others give a far larger proportion, but the growth was sufficiently large to warrant the development of Councils as the one means of securing a common attitude on matters of universal as distinct from local importance.

As long as men are intent on propaganda, clear definitions do not become necessary. Christianity, like other religions, is caught rather than taught. The early Christians were united in a brotherhood that made them realize their oneness in Christ, whom they worshipped as God. They had in their hearts the witness of the Spirit, they found in the simple words of Scripture the food of their souls. Under the pressure of persecution they were driven together and the first great controversies had more to do with organization than with doctrine. Even in the very thick of the bitterness of the post-Nicene struggle, Nicenes and Arians united against the common enemy Julian. But men could not be always content without a reasoned basis of their faith. Greek philosophy had a hold over the thoughts of men, and the application of its principles to Christianity led Christian teachers to evolve views of the Person of our Lord that were at variance with those latent, it may be, but none the less really held by the great mass of Christians. A Synod held at Antioch in 269 marks an epoch in the Church, for it deposed Paul of Samosata for heretical teaching concerning our Lord's Deity. He held that the Divine Word—conceived of as a quality of God and not as a person—dwelt in our Lord as it dwells in other men. He possessed it in a unique degree, so that having been a man he became God. This aspect of theological thought is known as Adoptionism and it exists among us to-day. The Emperor Aurelian ratified the sentence of the Council. Since 269 the pre-existence of Jesus as the Word has been a dogma of the Church. The more we study the early centuries and their intellectual difficulties, the more striking is the similarity of their perplexities with those of our own day. The most modern of heresies is very often the most ancient.

Constantine was Emperor of all Rome. Alexandria was the second city in the world over which he ruled, and it was disturbed

by religious strife. For centuries Alexandria had been famous for its University and the keenness of its teachers. It was the intellectual centre of the world as well as the great emporium of the grain trade. Its Church Baucalis marked the tomb of St. Mark and in it the Alexandrian Presbyters elected their Patriarch from among themselves, and on election, like the Pope from the College of Cardinals, he undertook office and exercised spiritual authority and discharged Episcopal function without being consecrated by other Bishops. Its fame was enhanced by the knowledge of the greatness of Origen and Clement, and its Bishop Dionysus won prestige by his wisdom. Local trouble which led to schism disturbed the ecclesiastical peace of the City. The internal strife was embittered by another controversy which had much more importance than anything that could arise out of the treatment of lapsed Christians. Arius was a Presbyter of Alexandria who was remarkable for his personal magnetism and had won the respect of the Christian community. Like many other leaders of opinion that is opposed to the Revelation of God he united with heresy a high type of character. His views were largely determined by his philosophical outlook. It is said that "he could not understand a metaphor" and his trouble arose from his inability to see that the Son of the Eternal is not governed by the time relations we of necessity postulate in earthly parentage. Arius held firmly by the unity of God and was convinced that He existed from eternity, is alone good, almighty, without beginning and is hidden in eternal mystery. But he argued that the Son of God cannot be either eternal or equal to His Father. He is a creature and begotten. This carries with it the significance of created. He followed what he conceived to be logic and philosophy to the elucidation of the Divine mysteries. He argued that if Christ is God He is a second God. "But if the Churches did worship two gods, nothing was gained by making one of them a creature without ceasing to worship Him, and something was lost by tampering with the original fact that Christ was true man. As Athanasius put it, one who is not God cannot create—much less restore—while one who is not man cannot atone for man. In seeking a *via media* between a Christian and a Unitarian interpretation of the Gospel, Arius managed to combine the difficulties of both without securing the advantages of either. If Christ is not truly God, the Christians are convicted of idolatry, and if he is not truly man, there

is no case for Unitarianism. Arius is condemned both ways" (Gwatkin, *Camb. Med. Hist.* Vol. I, p. 118).

Arius had been highly esteemed by his Bishop, Alexander. He, however, charged Alexander with Sabellianism, that conception of the Godhead which argued that if Christ be God it follows that God is Christ, and this involved the view that God, even the Father, suffered and was crucified. After some time, as Alexander was unwilling to act, Arius was condemned by a full Council of Egyptian Bishops and was excommunicated.

He fled to Cæsarea and there he began a propaganda amid those who were ready to listen to him. Bishops came to his aid, and a Bithynian Synod convened by Eusebius of Nicomedia—a man of great astuteness and high in favour with the Emperor—demanded his recall. Eastern Christendom was divided and the Emperor tried to restore unity. Listening to the advice of Hosius—who had suffered in persecution—he wrote a joint letter to Alexander and Arius advising them to compose their differences, which in his opinion could easily be done. Men of mature age and responsibility should not, like ignorant boys and common people, quarrel about trifles. Hosius delivered the letter and saw for himself that vital questions were at issue. It required a great deal more than good feeling to bring together the conflicting elements. Something of an unusual character was required, and Constantine determined to summon a General Council of the Bishops at Nicæa in Bithynia. The name was auspicious, and he hoped that victory over disunion would result from its deliberations.

Whether or not before this Council sat, a Synod met at Antioch and showed itself politically opposed to Arius, is a question hotly debated since Prof. Schwartz called attention to the synodal letter discovered in a Paris Syrian MS. of the eighth or ninth century. If the Synod met it had only local importance, but it may have had influence on the reputation of some of those who took a leading part in Nicæa, whither Bishops from East and West flocked. The great majority of the Bishops were eastern. Most of them were men who had no great claims to learning. They did their work as pastors of Christ's flock, and their knowledge of theological subtleties was very limited. Some of them were held in high repute through their learning and statesmanship. Eusebius of Cæsarea is one of the great scholars of the Church, and Hosius of Cordova was looked upon

as a man of sound judgment and insight. There was present a young man of twenty-eight who had proved himself to be in Alexandria a debater of unequalled skill and a theologian of the first rank. The pronounced Arianizers were in a minority, only about twenty out of the 300, more or less, who attended. The group that stood firmly with Athanasius was small, too. The others were more anxious to stand in the old paths as they understood them to be, than to take share in any innovation which might engender further controversy and depart from the Faith of the Church. They had a part to take in the discussions and decisions, and it would seem that they recognized their responsibilities.

When the Emperor arrived he received a great packet of papers. These were the accusations made by Bishops against Bishops. These personal controversies are an unpleasing memory of the past, for the whole history of the Councils is marked by what we can only consider to be the rivalries of those who had to administer the affairs of the Church of Christ. Constantine listened to the addresses of welcome and stressed the duty of unity, "I, your fellow servant, am deeply pained whenever the Church of God is in dissension, a worse evil than the evil of war." He called on them to lay aside all personal enmities, produced the packet of accusations, which he burned in a brazier, reminding them of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness. The way was then cleared for the great doctrinal discussion. The Bishops felt that the time had come for putting forth a Creed which would be the Creed of Christendom. Up to then there was no universal Creed. The Churches had their own baptismal Creeds; there was a traditional Rule of Faith, and Holy Scripture was regarded by all as a final standard of doctrine. Constantine and the Council agreed on this point, and the work of settling the terms of the new Symbol began.

Eusebius of Nicomedia brought forward a Creed which was palpably Arian. To the surprise of the Arianizers the Bishops showed their anger and tore it to pieces. Only five stood by Arius. The rejection of Arianism was assured, but was it possible to draft a document that would avoid Sabellianism and affirm the true doctrine of the Person of Christ? Eusebius of Cæsarea, who stood high in favour with his brother Bishops, proposed that the Creed of his own Church, which he had learned as a Catechumen and taught as a Bishop, should be adopted. It is a short document which expresses

belief in " one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, Son only begotten, first born of every Creature, before all the ages, begotten from the Father, by whom also all things were made, Who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived among men, and suffered, and rose again the third day, and ascended to the Father, and will come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead. And we believe also in one Holy Ghost." He added a clause safeguarding the Faith against Sabelianism. Everybody could agree with this Creed. It is Scriptural, and calculated to secure unity without calling into operation too much criticism of its ambiguities. It had its origin long before the teaching of Arius had become known, and all could sign it without reservations.

But it had the fault of all compromising or comprehensive documents. It avoided affirming or denying anything that was in dispute. It was a formula that was admirable in itself, but had no settlement in it of the great questions at issue. Nothing was decided and all would be as it was before. No one dared to contradict the teaching of this Creed. The Arians were put to " shame by the arguments addressed against them : but withal they were caught whispering to each other and winking with their eyes, that ' like ' and ' always ' and ' power ' and ' in Him ' were as before, common to us and the Son, and that it was no difficulty to agree with them." Athanasius and his friends saw where they were drifting. Agreement could be purchased at too high a price. They had faced the great question whether our Lord is truly God or not. They had come to their conviction and could not leave it an open question for Bishops to teach as they thought fit. The very life of the Gospel was at stake. If Christ be not truly God then the Gospel is a hopeless message to a sin-stricken world. Something more than the affirmation of that which everybody agreed and was known to permit the proclamation of the false teaching of Arius was needed. The attitude of the Arian Bishops proved that their satisfaction would involve the retention of Arianism as legitimate within the Church. Some of the Bishops had been sustained during the trial of persecution by Creeds that were identical in substance with the Creed submitted to the Council. They did not wish anything new, and their conservatism was an element to be reckoned with by anyone who brought forward a new phrase or a suggestion that had the

appearance of requiring more from Bishops than they had been accustomed to proclaim as essential.

Athanasius and his friends were in a small minority. They knew, however, that they had Truth with them and that their doctrine was in full accord with New Testament teaching. They could not purchase peace by the sacrifice of truth—they would not rest content with a formula permitting interpretations that reduce the Lord of Glory to a creature. They had to discover a word that would place beyond dispute the Church's acceptance of the Divinity of our Lord, and they found it in *Homo-ousios*—which means of one substance—of one essence. This word carries with it the implication that that which makes God God, is possessed by our Lord Jesus Christ. The essence of a thing is that by which it is what it is—the particular existence as distinct from all else. The Son shares through being of one essence or substance with the Father all that the Father is in regard to His Deity. There is no escaping this conclusion, and the Nicene Council doubly assured that there would be no mistake by inserting a clause that is not in the Creed we recite “only begotten, that is from the essence of the Father.”

The Creed as it was adopted by the Council reads :—

We believe in one God, the Father all Sovereign,  
 Maker of all things both visible and invisible :  
 And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
 the Son of God,  
 begotten of the Father, an only begotten—  
 that is, from the essence of the Father—  
 God from God,  
 Light from light,  
 true God from true God,  
 begotten, not made,  
 Being of one essence (*homo ousion*) with the Father ;  
 by whom all things were made,  
 both things in heaven and things on earth ;  
 who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made  
 flesh,  
 was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day,  
 ascended into heaven,  
 cometh to judge quick and dead :  
 And in the Holy Spirit.  
 But those who say  
 that “ there was once when He was not ”  
 and “ before he was begotten He was not ”  
 and “ he was made of things that were not ”



or maintain that the Son of God  
 is of a different essence,  
 or created or subject to moral change or alteration—

Those doth the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematise.  
 (Gwatkin, *Cambridge Med. History*, pp. 121-2).

The Arians and those who wished for "no change" had something in their favour. The word homo-ousios had been condemned as used by Paul of Samosata and therefore had for Easterns a somewhat objectionable history. But Councils are not infallible. Their decisions may be revised and a word used in one connotation may have a different import in another. Athanasius and his friends argued that if the word was not found in Scripture the doctrine is. Whatever tradition may say, it must be judged by Scripture, and the appeal of Athanasius was always to Scripture. Paul of Samosata used the word in one sense and Arius denied it in another. "The Council paused. The confessors in particular were an immense conservative force. Some of them, like Hosius and Eustathius, had been foremost in denouncing Arius; but few of them can have been eager for changes in the faith that had maintained them in their trial. Now the plan proposed was nothing less than a revolution—no doubt in its deepest meaning conservative, but none the less externally a revolution. So the council paused" (Gwatkin, *Studies in Arianism*, p. 48). But the pause was broken. No other course was open to it, if Arianism was to be excluded. All other formulæ had broken down under the remorseless logic of the friends of Athanasius and their steady appeal to Scripture. The future of Christendom was in the balance. Its rigorous insistence on the Deity of our Lord as against the subtleties of Arianism—philosophical and theological—demanded a statement that could not be explained away. Some minds might, by that peculiar capacity which the human mind possesses, accept the critical words in a sense which honest thinking excludes. And it is plain from the after history of the Council that they did this. All in the end, with the exception of two Egyptian Bishops, signed. Arius and the two Egyptians were exiled and the Emperor ordered the writings of Arius to be burned. The age of liberty had not come, and the use of temporal power in support of spiritual effort had sad consequences in the immediate future.

We are not now concerned with the settlement of the date of Easter and the other matters dealt with by the Council. What

made Nicæa memorable was its Creed and its condemnation of Arianism. Its effects live in our own time. Thomas Carlyle, according to Froude, made a remark illustrating this, which is worth recording. "In earlier years he had spoken contemptuously of the Athanasian controversy—of the Christian world torn in pieces over a diphthong; and he would ring the changes in broad Annandale on the *Homoousion* and the *Homoiousion*. He now told me that he perceived Christianity itself to have been at stake. If the Arians had triumphed, it would have dwindled to a legend." And this is the verdict of history. Athanasius stood for the religion of the New Testament as revealed in the Person of Christ—Arius stood for the philosophy of his age regulating the religion of Christ as he conceived it ought to be in the light of his philosophy. The Church to-day is faced by dangers similar to that met and overcome by Athanasius. And there is a difference. We are in the presence of many philosophical theories. Current philosophy is Protean, and the solutions given to ultimate problems vary according to the minds of those who attempt to measure Eternal Truth by the rule of human capacity. Reason has its place in testing every proposition brought forward by the human mind, but it has its limits. We think to-day in terms of personality, not in terms of substance and essence, but the terms we use do not alter the great truth at stake. The Nicene decision is true because it is a faithful account of the revelation of God in Christ, and we are bound to hold by it in the face of all attempts to dethrone its meaning, "for the doctrine of Christ's Divinity gives reality and life to the worship of millions of pious souls who are wholly ignorant both of the controversy to which they owe its preservation and of the technicalities which its discussion has involved." It has been preserved because it is true, and it has stood the test of ages on account of its preservation of the central fact of the Incarnation.

It may be said that good work is being done by those who cannot accept the Nicene definition. Good work was done in the past by Ulphilas, who was under Arian influence. His work "is an abiding witness that faith is able to assimilate the strangest errors; and the conversion of the northern nations remains in evidence that Christianity can be a power of life even in its most degraded forms." "Streams rise above their source in mission work: we cannot judge of Ulphilas by Eudoxius and Demophilus, any more than we can of

Wilfrid and Boniface by the image-worshipping popes of the eighth century" (Gwatkin, *Studies in Arianism*, pp. 27-28). And when we see good work done in our own time by those who hold erroneous convictions, we must remember that the Spirit of God can work through anything but conscious untruth. It is for those who hold and love the Truth to contend earnestly and fearlessly for its maintenance, knowing that Truth alone is great and will prevail.

*Note.*—The main authorities for this *Résumé* are Gwatkin, *Studies in Arianism*—an invaluable work which is almost a classic—and *The Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. I. The Dean of Salisbury has published a learned and able little book entitled *The Council of Nicæa* (S.P.C.K. 3s. 6d.), which can be highly recommended. It contains matter that has been discovered since Gwatkin wrote, and an admirable chapter on "Our Nicene Creed."

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*Little Gidding and Its Founder* (S.P.C.K., 1s. net) is an interesting account of the religious community founded by Nicholas Ferrar in the seventeenth century. The author, Mr. Henry Collett, is connected by descent with the Ferrar family and writes with due veneration of the remarkable man who gave up positions of influence to lead the community life. The book is well illustrated and a useful bibliography of books dealing with the subject is added.

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An Analysis of the Sunday and Holyday Lessons, Epistles and Gospels, with notes on the Collects, etc., by the Rev. Meredith J. Hughes, B.D., is issued by S.P.C.K. under the title *Conspectus of the Revised Lectionary* (3s. 6d. net). The Editorial Secretary of the Society explains in the preface that the book contains neither sermons nor notes for sermons, but tries to give a bird's-eye view of the teaching of the Church of England for each Sunday and Holy Day. We have tested the brief statements for several Sundays and find that they answer the claim made for them. Although they are exceedingly brief they are wonderfully suggestive.

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Among the latest additions to the S.P.C.K. series of Little Books on Religion (2d. each) are St. Columba; Bishop Patteson, Missionary Bishop and Martyr; St. Augustine of Hippo; and The Christian View of Gambling. Many of the booklets in this series are very useful, and it is therefore with regret that we find that we cannot express approval of all of them. Some of those dealing with historical matters, and especially one on the Reformation, is marked by the Anglo-Catholic bias which endeavours to misrepresent that great movement as a mere attempt on the part of the English Church to throw off the yoke of Rome. Any further movement to restore the doctrine of the New Testament and of the Primitive Church is regarded as a mistake due to the influence of the foreign Reformers. This is simply a travesty of history.