

THE EFFECTS OF THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY ON THE LITURGY OF THE POST-NICENE CHURCH

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I. Introduction

Before the conversion of Constantine, our knowledge of the church's liturgy is somewhat patchy. After the Church "went public," as Geoffrey Wainwright puts it, from the latter half of the fourth century onwards, we are given much more detailed information about Christian worship.¹ In this paper I would like to examine the effects of the Arian controversy on the liturgical practices of the Post-Nicene church. I will focus on three main areas - the use of creeds in the liturgy, the use of Trinitarian doxologies, and the development of the church calendar. The way in which the Christological disputes of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Church shaped each of these usages will be examined.

II. The Use of Creeds

The Creed we now know as The Apostles Creed originally began as a simple expression of praise before the Lordship of Jesus Christ.² By the second century, creeds were being used as a symbol or rule of faith for believers. Justin Martyr insists on the candidate for baptism

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Periods of Liturgical History," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, SJ, and Paul Bradshaw, eds. *The Study of Liturgy*. (London: SPCK and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

² Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 535. Cf. D. Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*. trans. by Percy Scott (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1962), 88; Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. by A. Steward Todd and James B. Torrance (London: S.C.M. Press, 1953), 23.

professing to believe and live by the truth.³ Irenaeus speaks of “the canon of truth which everyone received at his baptism.”⁴ Creeds were also used in connection with the rite of baptism. In both Hippolytus and Tertullian we find descriptions of a three-fold dipping corresponding to a three-fold interrogation oriented around the three persons of the Trinity. The candidate replies *Credo* (“I believe”) after each question is put.⁵ In the fourth and fifth centuries this threefold interrogation began to be elaborated into a rudimentary creed.⁶

The Nicene Creed was based on these earlier baptismal confessions, “amplified with Christological and pneumatological specificities to establish *orthodoxis* (true worship) against the false worship of the Arians...As such the Nicene Creed became a mark of catholic and orthodox identity, but it was also deeply evangelical because it summarized the gospel story of Jesus.”⁷

Though the recitation of the Creed has its origins in the baptismal rite, in the struggles against the Christological heresies it came also to be inserted into the Eucharist celebration.⁸ In the Byzantine liturgy it was recited after the Great Entry, always recited by the people, and never sung, as it would come to be in the West. The Western Syrian version of the Byzantine liturgy added the Nicene Creed in 476 AD, as a way of pledging Monophysite allegiance to the Council of Nicaea.⁹ The custom of reciting the Creed in the eucharistic liturgy soon spread to the West, especially after the Arian Visigoths were restored to the Catholic faith at the end of the sixth century, though here it was recited before the Lord’s Prayer in preparation for communion.

The Mozarabic liturgy inserted the Nicene Creed after the anaphora and fraction, and before the Lord’s Prayer by decree of the Council of Toledo in 589, as a means of countering the Arian confession. This is the earliest documented instance of the use of the Creed in the Western liturgy.¹⁰ In the eight century, Charlemagne

³ *First Apology* LXI, LXV, cited in James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources*. (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992), 147.

⁴ F.E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Ante-Nicene Church*. 2nd ed. rev. (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1912), 57.

⁵ K.W. Noakes, “From New Testament Times Until St. Cyprian,” in Jones, Wainwright et al, 122.

⁶ E.S. Yarnold, SJ, “The Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” in Jones, Wainwright et al, 137. Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*. 3rd ed. (Longman, 1972), 30-52.

⁷ Senn, 535.

⁸ Peter G. Cobb, “The Liturgy of the Word in the Early Church,” in Jones, Wainwright et al, 228.

⁹ Senn, 172.

¹⁰ Senn, 146.

would introduce the *filioque* clause after the Gospel reading, at Aachen, a practice which spread throughout the West and was adopted eventually by Rome in 1014.¹¹

While the insertion of the Creed originated in polemical purposes, it need not serve this purpose today. Luther, for example, who retained it in his *Formulae Missae*, spoke of it as a *sacrificium laudis* (“a sacrifice of praise”).¹² It may still serve for us as an expression of praise to the Triune God we adore, quite apart from any polemic against Arianism.

III. The Trinitarian Doxologies

The Arian controversy raised many questions for the public worship of the church. How should the prayers of the liturgy be organised? If Christ is not God, how then can prayer be addressed to him? If he is divine, in what ways should the church’s address to him be differentiated from that to the Father, or to the Spirit? Such questions were all the more vital because the liturgical prayers in use from the Ante-Nicene period included expressions that could be understood in either an Arian or a Catholic sense.¹³

Tertullian [had earlier] admitted that “the simple people...who are always majority of the faithful...shy at the economy,” that is, at the distinction between Father and Son. He conceded that even orthodox believers could speak of the relations within the Trinity in such a way as to emphasize the monarchy at the expense of the economy. This judgment is substantiated by the sources, especially if one pays attention to what has been called “the hymnological theology of the congregation, whose characteristic is to revel in contradiction.”¹⁴

For all their insistence on the Logos as a created being, the Arians in fact addressed prayers to Christ, finding such a practice an “unavoidable element of Christian worship.” Athanasius pointed out

¹¹ Cobb, 228.

¹² Senn, 535.

¹³ Josef A Jungman SJ, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*. Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 189.

¹⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Vol. 1 in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 177.

that “by this inconsistency between their dogmatic principle and their liturgical practice the Arians were in effect saying: ‘Abandon the worship of the creature, and then draw near and worship a creature and a work’.” Ambrose called upon the Arians, “if they do not worship the Son, [to] admit it, and the case is settled, so that they do not deceive anyone by their professions of religion.”¹⁵

The *Gloria Patri* as prayed by the Catholics (*Gloria Patri per Filium in Spiritu Sancto*) supported, so it was claimed by the Arians, their subordinationist position. The Catholics began to drop this usage in order to avoid being identified with heresy, choosing instead to pray *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto*. The dispute in the East took a similar shape, leading to a similar change - δια (through) του Υιου, εν (in) αγιω πνευματι becoming μετα (with) του Υιου, συν (together with) αγιω πνευματι.

St. Basil began to use both the older and the newer doxologies in the church at Caesarea. A storm of controversy broke out, Basil's adversaries accusing him of contradicting himself. In 375 he wrote his treatise *De Spiritu Sancto* giving a thorough exposition of both formulas. We are to pray both through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, as in the older formula, thus preserving a proper *oikonomia* within the Godhead, and at the same time we can pledge, through the newer formula, equal honour and glory to the three Persons, without fear of contradiction.

Nowhere did the controversy rage more fiercely than in Antioch of Syria. Bishop Leonitus felt hamstrung over the issue, not knowing which formula to use in his cathedral service. He began to pronounce the words so softly that they were inaudible to the congregation. He knew this was not an adequate solution and, in connection with this problem, one day somewhere around 350 AD, he pointed to his head of white hair and declared, “after this snow has melted away, there will still remain a lot of mud.”¹⁶

By the end of the fourth century the issue was resolved in the East, in favour of the Catholic party, in part because the Byzantine emperors no longer supported the Arians as Constantius and Valens had done. In the West, however, Arianism would survive longer, among the Teutonic tribes that had been evangelised by Arian

¹⁵ Pelikan, 199. Interestingly, the same phenomenon occurred in the sixteenth century among the unitarian Socinians. Rejecting the deity of Christ, they retained prayers to him and worship of him, thus becoming, if they were to apply their own theology to themselves, in effect, idolators.

¹⁶ Jungman, 192-94.

missionaries. The ultimate victory of the Nicaean settlement did, however, have its down side. The true humanity of Christ tended to be obscured behind the stress on his divinity. “[T]he whole religious mentality of the people was deeply affected by the change, at least in the Oriental Church. For stress was now placed not on what unites us to God (Christ as one of us in his human nature, Christ as our brother), but on what separates us from God (Christ’s infinite majesty).”¹⁷

There is also a decline in attendance at Holy Communion in the fourth and fifth centuries which may also be connected with the rejection of Arianism and an almost docetic tendency in Christology. St. Ambrose complained of it in Milan, likening the decline to a similar situation in the East. St. Chrysostom bemoaned, “In vain do we stand before the altar; there is no one to partake.” Jungman suggests that this reticence to come to the Lord’s Table may have been due to the increased fear and reverence felt in approaching the Divine Host.

Even before [Chrysostom], St. Basil the Great and other Greek Fathers had been using a language calculated to inspire awe and fear in the recipient. The pertinent chapter in Basil’s *Shorter Rule* is captioned “With what fear...we ought to receive the body and blood of Christ.” Chrysostom speaks about “the terrible sacrifice,” and about the “shuddering hour” when the mysteries are accomplished, and about the “terrible and awful table.” Those who approach the table of God may do so only with fear and trembling. Is it any wonder that the ordinary faithful, conscious of the pressures of their daily occupations, conscious too of their unworthiness before the divine majesty, lost courage?¹⁸

With the stress on divinity came a corresponding stress on the *rights* of divinity - on the crown rights of Jesus over his subjects to judge the living and the dead, and assign their fate in eternity. This thesis might be confirmed by the case of the Monophysites, who in their rejection of the two natures Christology, leaned heavily toward the divine nature of Christ, and who perhaps more than any other group gave the most intense expression to the fearfulness with which one was to approach the sacrifice of the altar.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jungman, 195.

¹⁸ Jungman, 197.

¹⁹ Jungman, 198.

IV. The Church Calendar

The Council of Nicaea raised several questions surrounding the Christian calendar and the worship practices with which it was connected. Kneeling on Sundays and during the season of Pentecost was forbidden.²⁰ It also urged the celebration of Easter everywhere on the same day and date.²¹ By fixing Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon of Spring, the Council gave to the church calendar a certain lunar quality. The primordial pattern of night followed by day came to be expressed in fourth century Jerusalem, for example, in Holy Week followed by Easter Week.²² The ritual separation of Christ's death and resurrection was preserved in the forty days of Lent, called for in the fifth canon of Nicaea. Fast would be followed by feast, mourning by rejoicing. This practice spread throughout the church in the fourth century, though local variations took place.

By defining the divinity and humanity of Christ at Nicaea (325) and then later at Constantinople (381), and at Chalcedon (451), the way was now open for the development of the seasons of Epiphany (in the East) and Christmas (in the West). In both seasons, the theme of the Incarnation of the God-Man is pervasive. In the fifth and sixth centuries greater and greater elaboration became apparent, including a more central role for Mary as Θεοτοκος.²³ The development of the Theotokos idea precedes the Arian controversy, however, as Pelikan makes clear.

In the conflicts with Gnosticism, Mary had served as proof for the reality of the humanity of Jesus: he had truly been born of a human mother and therefore was a man. But as Christian piety and reflection sought to probe the deeper meaning of salvation the parallel between Christ and Adam found its counterpart in the picture of Mary as the Second Eve, who by her obedience had undone the damage wrought by the disobedience of the mother of mankind. She was the mother of the man Christ Jesus, the mother of the Savior; but to be the Savior, he had to be God as

²⁰ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 196.

²¹ Thomas K. Carroll and Thomas Halton. *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*. Vol. 21 of *Message of the Fathers of the Church*. (Willmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 103-4.

²² Carroll and Halton, 207.

²³ Carroll and Halton, 170. Cf. Jungman, 195-96.

well, and as his mother she had to be “Mother of God.”...[I]n its fundamental motifs the development of the Christian picture of Mary and the eventual emergence of a Christian doctrine of Mary must be seen in the context of the development of the doctrine of Christ.²⁴

Of course, once the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed had been established, the idea of the Theotokos also provided a means by which the divine and human natures of Christ are united in the Incarnation. In the *communicatio idiomatum* neither Christ's birth nor his crucifixion, nor his salvation could be attributed to one nature without the other.²⁵

Nestorius became Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 and asserted that the Logos and Jesus were two distinct persons united in the Christ. When one of his priests openly preached against referring to Mary as “the Mother of God,” the implications of his teaching become apparent to the defenders of the Athanasian orthodoxy. “The Catholic rejoinder was an increased devotion to Mary. The whole of the East arose to atone for the indignity to the Mother of God.”²⁶ St. Epiphanius had made it clear that the orthodox were not to worship Mary as a goddess, and generally this warning was heeded. There was, however, an “increased solemnity” in the celebration of the glories of Mary. Churches were built to honour her, and at the Council of Ephesus, St. Cyril of Alexandria preached before the Fathers assembled there what some regard as “the greatest Marian sermon in the whole of antiquity.”²⁷

A number of feasts connected with Mary were added to the Church calendar. The *Dormitio*, or *Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* was in place before 500AD, originating in Bethlehem and extended through the whole of the Eastern Empire by the Emperor Maurice. The feast of the *Nativity of Our Lady*, of the *Annunciation* (nine months before Christmas), and of the *Purification* (forty days after Christmas) also arose. These feasts retain a Christological focus, however, and are not entirely focused on Mary. The Annunciation is the annunciation of Christ, and the Purification focuses on the manifestation of the Word to aged Simeon. Thus, the four great feasts of Mary that originated in the fourth and sixth centuries are

²⁴ Pelikan, 241.

²⁵ Pelikan, 241-42.

²⁶ Jungman, 196.

²⁷ Jungman, 196.

direct outgrowths of the Christological disputes arising, first out of Gnosticism, then Arianism, and finally Nestorianism.

V. Conclusion

The Arian Controversy and the great Councils that arose in response to it, contributed to the liturgy of the church in the following ways:

1. A greater use of creeds in worship, and in particular the addition of the Creed to the Eucharist, whereas formerly its place had been more or less confined to the baptismal rite.

2. Revision of the *Gloria Patri* so as to ensure a proper stress on the coequality of each Person of the Holy Trinity.

3. A tendency to overstress the Divine Majesty of Christ, and his role as Judge, at the expense of his Humanity, and his role as Redeemer, with a corresponding drop in the numbers attending the Eucharist, for fear of offending the Royal Host.

4. Establishment, through a link with the Lunar cycle, of the forty days of Lent with its ensuing pattern of darkness and light, Holy Week and Easter Week, fasting and feasting.

5. Development of the festivals of Christmas and Epiphany, with a stress on the Incarnation of Christ.

6. Greater devotion to Mary as *Theotokos* and the four great Marian feasts of the Assumption, the Nativity, the Annunciation, and the Purification, each couched in a profoundly Christological setting.