

SEMINAR ON THE TRINITY

TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE IN FAITH LIFE

This seminar is committed to reflection on and exploration of ways in which, from its inception, the development of the Trinitarian doctrine was in touch with, and rooted in, the faith life of the Church, with the hope that such study will be of service in revitalizing Trinitarian faith.

Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh's *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), a significant new work calling attention to the soteriological rooting of much early Trinitarian thought, was the subject of study and discussion. Gregg and Groh's thesis is: "Early Arianism is most intelligible when viewed as a scheme of salvation. Soteriological concerns dominate the texts and inform every major aspect of the controversy. At the center of the Arian soteriology was a redeemer, obedient to his Creator's will, whose life of virtue modeled perfect creaturehood and so the path to salvation for all Christians" (p. x). The book is organized in five chapters, the first three treating Arian Christology, soteriology, and cosmology, while the fourth examines *The Life of Antony* as a test case for the competing soteriologies, and chapter 5 compares the two options developed in the debate. Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 5 were summarized briefly and then discussed in turn, with chapter 4 being referred to for illustrative material as necessary.

Summary and Discussion, Chapter One

Arian Christology presents a Son who is limited in authority and knowledge, and who is obedient. His authority is derivative because he stands as mediator not as an extension of the divine nature but as a creation of the divine will. Since the ontological relation between Father and Son is shattered, no natural knowledge between them can be presupposed. Rather, Arius proposes a proportionate knowledge vouchsafed to the obedient creature by God the Father. As obedient, the Son exercises free moral choice. Arius accepts the theoretical possibility of sin thus raised, but the thrust is to establish free will in the redeemer's nature. Athanasius rejects this, since he does not want a redeemer implicated in ethical instability but rather one who provides an ontologically secure model for human behavior. Arius views grace as the bestowal of divine approval on virtuous creatures.

Three main questions were raised in discussing this chapter. (1) What are the historical precedents for the orthodox position? Origen stands as predecessor of Athanasius, as well as of Arius. In him we find the human action of Christ constitutes salvation. (2) If God is Father, does not the exclusion of the deity of the Son constitute disrespect to the Father? Is the question not better put, then, as a question of ontology, of the being of God, rather than a question of soteriology, and so of the will of God? But to put will and being into opposition in this way is false. A soteriology stressing will corresponds to an ontology including stress on will; so a soteriology stressing new being corresponds to an ontology attending primarily to being. The true question to address to both systems is, "What is being?" (3) Granting that Gregg and Groh are interested in the orthodox here only as transmitters of the Arian position, still there are questions that must be faced with respect to the orthodox position in light of Arian assertions. In what sense may it be said that God has to have a Son? Athanasius explicitly denies that necessity binds God, yet at the same time he limits God's will in that if God does have a Son, the Son must be divine; he limits the Son's will in that the Son cannot foreswear divinity. The movement of thought is soteriological in that, beginning from the perception that human willing must be free from instability, Athanasius and Alexander conclude that the redeemer had to be capable of divine willing. Only so could he give us the moral stability we need. Arius—and later, the Pelagians—manifest greater confidence in the human will.

Summary and Discussion, Chapter Two

Arian soteriology speaks of an advancing (not a demoted) Son. If for Athanasius and Alexander the Son is the precise image of the Father, for Arius the Son is precisely a creature as we are, and this constitutes the ground of the faith and hope of believers. Salvation is by imitation. The adoption, changeability, and participation proper to Christ as Son are proper to us as sons and daughters. As Jesus and the Father enjoy a union of concordant wills, so do we and the Father. As the Son was granted his name by grace, and was raised by the Father to himself by adoption, so other creatures, faithful like Jesus, become recipients of the Father's grace and glory. Participation by grace has a note of obedience, whereby one remains good by free will while one chooses. The picture of the Redeemer offered by Arius avoids crude adoptionism, since there is in fact a beginning for the mediator before the incarnation. In his response to the Arians, Athanasius resists the possibility of change in Christ as eliminating

the possibility of salvation because stability is a basic note of salvation. For Athanasius, to be saved is to be deified which is to become God in a way like that proper to the Son; for Arius to be saved is to be deified which rests on the premise that as Jesus is Son, so are we; as Jesus is God by participation, so are we. In the first case the emphasis is on the commonality between the Son and God; in the second case on the commonality between the Son and us.

Discussion of this chapter centered on four topics. (1) A basic problem with the Arian thesis is that the Son is granted his "divine" status even before creation. Thus he is never a simple viator in the way we are. In this sense, the Arian Son is as unique as is the Athanasian Son. Or are we also predestined? Are we also to be redeemers? Is there perhaps some influence of the idea that the martyr can forgive sins? It seems that in the Arian view what Christ had was intercessory power deriving from his own martyrdom. Are we then to conclude, for example, that the martyr, having attained total identification with Christ, is therefore the same as Christ? What does it mean to be Christed? (2) We need to remember that Arius was theologically educated in Antioch, where he learned a Christology and cosmology significantly different from that which he encountered in Alexandria. Furthermore, there was political competition involved. Can it be said that Arius, by supporting the divine monarchy supported the human monarchy? If so, then while losing in theory he won in practice! (3) It seems that the experience of the Trinity is more basic than thought about it. Prayer at this time is in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. Only the early Middle Ages had prayer to the Trinity. But Basil did hold that prayer to the Father *and* the Son *and* the Spirit was possible: and, and, and. One gets the sense that Athanasius was looking to the Father, not the Son, to articulate thought about the Trinity. But we know that Father alone will not take us to Trinity. We already find "Father" in Israel, and "Father" plays an important role in various gnostic schemata. (4) Gregg and Groh make necessary a rethinking of Arius as a rationalist. They make him appear as much more empirical; it is the orthodox who appear as both mystical and highly theological.

Summary and Discussion, Chapters Three and Five.

In the traditional account of Arianism, there are two principal doctrines: (1) God, or the Unbegotten, is one; (2) the Son had a beginning in existence. The doctrine of God controls the description of the Son as posterior, secondary to God, and having a beginning. Both doctrines need to be re-examined, beginning with

the second. For the Arians *God* (not the *Father*) precedes the Son in existence. Before the Son's creation, God is God and not Father. The terms fatherhood and sonship pertain to priority of importance, sequence of time, and quality of relationship. This puts the second doctrine in proper perspective to the first. The distinction is between the sovereign God and the uniquely begotten Son who subsists by the Father's will. Category of will becomes central to the relationship between Father and Son. The assertion that the Son is brought into existence by the divine will is a statement about the character of God and the manner in which he acts; it also challenges Athanasius' distinction between separate modes of generation for the Son and for creatures. The divine volition and creaturely freedom to choose and act belong to a view of relationship featuring sovereignty and obedience.

Chapter five treats the divine will and the divine nature as Christological options. The Arian Christology is a Christology of divine will. It turns on the necessity of defending a doctrine of the "changeability" of the Son of God, so on the defense of the freedom of the Son's will to incline to good or evil. For the Arians, the Bible is a book about God whose nature is unknowable, and whose ways are made known in the revelation of his will for creatures. Nothing in creation results from the outworking of the necessities of the divine nature. All—creation and salvation—is a result of the divine will. The divine will created creatures through the agency of an obedient servant and destined them to freely obedient sonship. Christ as pre-existent servant and earthly redeemer models a scheme of salvation founded in a theology of the divine will. His perfection merits approval and promotion to the dignity ascribed to the only-begotten.

For Athanasius both the nature of divinity and the exigencies of salvation depend on the ability to distinguish between the divine nature which is unchangeable, and creaturely nature which is corruptible of substance and mobile of will. So God does not will to generate the Son, but the deity as such is generative. The basic relationship of Father and Son is ontological and not transactional. Athanasius' confidence in the stability of the divine nature over against his fears for the instability of human nature constitute the heart of his Christology and soteriology. Human nature was essentially affected by Adam's fall; death, mortality, and corruption are not external but essential to unredeemed human nature. Christ "gives us a physical nature redeemed from corruption by making available to human nature a grace that is irreversible" (p. 179).

Discussion centered on four areas, (1) Freedom and good seem to be the contrasting values here. Yet even for Arius, ad-

vance in virtue is salvation, so freedom is not absolutely primary. Still it seems that Arius has hold of a traditional insight: likeness has to be achieved, whereas Athanasius has the more audacious position: salvation involves a substantial change. Both Athanasius and Arius seek stability; Athanasius locates it in a changed substance or nature; Arius locates it in the free repetition of virtuous acts. The saving insight in Athanasius is the Incarnation; in Arius, fidelity to an end. (2) The advantage of the Athanasian position is that it sees God as involved directly with us; the Arian position stresses the importance of obedience, and links directly with an ascetical tradition. Thus the importance of Athanasius' project in *The Life of Antony* as presented in chapter four. (3) There are really two different conceptions of God involved in the struggle; Gregg and Groh do not stress this. Arius' position is monarchic, and the Alexandrian position allows for a pluralistic understanding. This raises the question of what views of salvation are directly compatible with Trinitarian doctrine. (4) Another problem is that suffering earns salvation for the Arian redeemer, and yet he somehow had it from the beginning. Arius begins with adoptionism and then seems to encounter a high Christology. Is there more development in Arius than the/these texts present? For instance, the death of Christ is not dealt with.¹

MARY ANN DONOVAN, S.C.
Jesuit School of Theology
Berkeley

¹Participants in the seminar were: Joseph Bracken, S.J., Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., J. Patout Burns, S.J., Agnes Cunningham, S.C.C.M., J. M. Dewart, Mary Ann Donovan, S.C. (Chair), Donald Gelpi, S.J., William J. Hill, O.P., Earl Muller, S.J., Wayne Reinhardt, Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., Robert T. Sears, S.J., Michael Slusser, and George Tavard.