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Leaders of the Ancient Church.

VI.

The Fourth Century: Athanasius the Great.

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I. Each of the early centuries of the Christian era can claim to be specially significant in the history of the Church, and it is not necessary to make an invidious comparison of momentous crises and issues. But in the first decades of the fourth century the Church, which had withstood successfully a long campaign of imperial persecution, was in the throes of a no less strenuous struggle against imperial protection. The plight of Christians, whose doctrine and worship brought upon them the heavy hand of the Roman Empire, was indeed pitiable, but harassed as they were they determined their own doctrine and worship. The time had come when the favours of politics endangered not their lives but their spiritual freedom.

The severe persecution of Christianity during the reign of Diocletian ended in failure and inevitably led to a policy of religious toleration. Galerius began it in 311, and Constantine continued it in his Edict of Milan (313). Christianity was now a *religio licita*, not the official religion of the Empire, but with rights equal to those of any official religion and assured of imperial protection for life and property. Constantine gained rather than lost popularity by his generous policy, and he was master of the Roman world in 323. His treatment of the Christians had not deprived him of the support of the pagans, so he persisted in his programme of goodwill and saw the vision of an empire more contented and more unified than it had been since the days of Cæsar Augustus. His success as an imperial statesman quickened his interest in a class which his predecessors had never appreciated, and paved the way for a policy of State religion on a grand scale.

Constantine may not have been an able administrator (see J. W. Thompson, *Middle Ages* [1931]), and, despite the eulogy of Eusebius, certainly was not a saint; but on occasion he displayed the art of statesmanship. Seven years after he became sole Emperor, he transferred the capital of his empire from Rome to the eastern city which bears his name, and few foundations have had a like significance in secular and ecclesiastical history. Constantinople was near the heart of the Christian world, was ideally situated to guard the deposit of Hellenic culture, became a defensive frontier against the Muhammadan, indirectly increased the strategic importance of Rome as the city of the Latin West, and made possible by its own decline the triumphs of a Hildebrand and an Innocent III. Seldom has political opportunism achieved such ecclesiastical consequences.

It was this man who summoned the bishops to Nicæa in 325, and was thus the author of the first Ecumenical Council of the Church. Whatever his personal creed may have been at the end of his life, Constantine was not a Christian in 325. He was still the *Pontifex Maximus*, the upholder of Roman religion and the architect of pagan temples, the patron of priest and bishop and philosopher. But he knew that emperor-worship had its limitations as a universal religion, and that there were distinct possibilities in the Christianity over which he had cast the mantle of imperial protection. Sectarianism in the Roman world might be remedied, if not cured, by his favour of another sect which once he had repudiated and persecuted. But Constantine was alert enough to see that Christianity could only accomplish what he hoped if it were undivided in its teaching and influence. Obviously there was a cleavage of opinion within the Church, and that cleavage had to be healed. Constantine had previously attempted by means of synods to compose sharp differences in the Church of North Africa, and, though he had not been conspicuously successful in dealing with the Donatists, he conceived the idea that the Church's own system of Councils might be used in the largest fashion to bring unity to the Church. Hosius, Bishop of Cordova, had attempted, at the instigation of the Emperor, to end a controversy which had been developing between Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, a presbyter of that Church (Eusebius, *Vita Const.* ii. 64 f.). But the quarrel had been too radical to be settled by an imperial epistle, and Hosius had to report his failure to his master. Constantine's next move was to summon the Nicene Council (Eusebius, *Vita Const.* iii. 6), an innovation in ecclesiasticism. In that Council, we

read, 'Athanasius with his Bishop Alexander took the most prominent part in the discussion' (Sozomen, *H.E.* I. xvii. 7). Athanasius, the deacon, had become the champion of the orthodox party in the Church.

II. There is abundant material, both ancient and modern, which has a bearing upon Athanasius, but most of it deals with Athanasius the theologian and with the controversies of his age, and too little of it concerns Athanasius the man. In particular, we have scanty records of his youth. He was born in Alexandria, some time between the years 296–98, and we know from the eulogy of Gregory of Nazianzus that he was a lad of good birth and considerable education. He had the privilege of attracting the attention of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria (313–28), who made him his secretary and a deacon (Sozomen, *H.E.* II. xvii. 10). As a youth he had been taught in theology, had a knowledge of Holy Scripture, and was acquainted with Greek learning. The Catechetical School at Alexandria, famed far and near for its teachers and its instruction, would complete his preparation for the work of the Holy Ministry. Origen himself, one of the great leaders of the Catechetical School, was not superior to Athanasius in theological erudition.

Athanasius gave early proof of his equipment, for he wrote two essays, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione Verbi*, when he could not have been older than twenty-one or twenty-two years of age. Newman called them 'standard works in theology,' and a modern writer declares that the second work is 'a masterpiece of Christian theology' (Kidd, *Hist. of the Church*, ii. 13). What is important in these first writings is that the young Athanasius revealed the secret of his life-work, a fervid and spiritual attitude towards the unseen and eternal. Religion was from the beginning the master interest of his life. Bright did not exaggerate when he wrote that in the *De Incarnatione Verbi* Athanasius proclaimed: 'what mankind needed, an Incarnate God could alone bestow, and Christ alone has bestowed it: the success of His work in the regeneration of humanity is a manifest proof of His Divine Sonship and true Godhead' (*Orations of St. Athanasius*, p. ix). Divine sonship and true Godhead were for Athanasius the cardinal verities of Christianity; for them he fought to the last, because of them he suffered exile time after time, and with them he won victory for the Faith.

It was not long before Athanasius was able to repay in intellectual and religious coinage some of his debt to the patron who had befriended him. Bishop Alexander was perturbed by the report of teaching which he deemed derogatory to the dignity of Jesus Christ (Sozomen, *H.E.* I. 15), and in the year 319 Alexandria was the scene of negotiation and then dissension between Arius, a presbyter of Baucalis, the oldest church in Alexandria, and his ecclesiastical superior. Alexander, sometimes called 'archbishop' or 'pope,' found that a private conversation was not sufficient to make Arius change his opinions and had to resort to more official methods before the recalcitrant priest took refuge in Palestine and found congenial company with Eusebius of Nicomedia. Arius was not led into the theological arena by the impetuosity of youth, for he was not young in 319, and he had much reputation in Alexandria for his oratory, his dialectical skill, and his disciplined life. He had been a pupil of Lucian of Antioch, as was Eusebius, and may be regarded as fairly representative of that school of thought (McGiffert, *Hist. of Christian Thought*, I. 247). Theodoret (*Hist. Ecc.* I. 3, 4) gives the main outlines of the teaching of both Alexander and Arius. The former, in a letter to the Bishop of Constantinople, declared: 'we believe . . . in one unbegotten Father, who of His being has no cause, immutable and invariable, and who subsists always in one state of being, admitting neither of progression nor diminution; . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten not out of that which is not, but of the Father, who is. . . . The Son is immutable and unchangeable, all-sufficient and perfect . . . and always existed of the Father.' Arius defined his own position in a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia: 'Alexander has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches; namely, "God is always, the Son is always; as the Father so the Son; the Son exists unbegotten with God; He is everlastingly unbegotten; . . ." But we say and believe and have taught and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the Unbegotten; nor from any substance, but that of His own will and counsel He has subsisted before time and before ages, as perfect God only begotten and unchangeable, and that before He was begotten or created or purposed or established He was not. For He was not unbegotten. We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a beginning, but that God is without beginning.' It seems true that Arius was much more a rationalist than a mystic, and that his interest in theology was pre-eminently intellectual. Monarchianism was in vogue in Antioch, and Arius was influenced by it in his insistence upon the unity of God. His nature cannot be shared, he

would have said, by any other person. All others were created and, therefore, had a beginning in time. The Son is the first and the most glorious of all created beings. He became incarnate in Jesus Christ and His soul was the Logos—as for His body, it was human. Christ could, and even should, be worshipped, but He was not really God.

To Constantine the whole controversy seemed petty and easily soluble. Accordingly, his plan of a great Council of Bishops was put into operation, and his hopes were that Nicæa should be an object-lesson in Christian unity and a real step towards religious orderliness within an empire which should henceforth be renowned for law and order in both Church and State. The genius of Rome and of a Roman emperor was to be justified to the world.

III. The consequences of the Nicene Council, religious and political, were more important than its proceedings; but something must be said about the latter, for they proved the value of a small group of theologians who knew their own minds and were convinced of the supreme importance of the matters at issue. That group had distinguished leaders in Alexander of Alexandria and Hosius of Cordova, the president of the Council and the man who brought the victorious watchword, ὁμοούσιον; but in the background of the group, and not even a constituent member of the assembly, was Athanasius, the champion of the Catholic faith. Towards the end of his life, he wrote: 'The Word of the Lord which came through the Ecumenical Council of Nicæa abides for ever' (*Ad Afros*, § 1); and it is only fair to say that Athanasius had no small part in securing the 'Word of the Lord' at Nicæa. Between two hundred and fifty and three hundred bishops, attended by many of the lesser clergy, were there; and, though the representatives of the West were few, the Council has always been regarded by the Church as entirely ecumenical and authoritative. There were at least three parties of theologians (Kidd, *Hist. of the Church*, ii. 26, mentions four)—the Arians, their opponents (sometimes called Catholics or Nicenes), and a middle party, led by Eusebius of Cæsarea. Arius on his defence made doctrinal statements with which the majority of the members had no sympathy, and his friend, Eusebius of Nicomedia, came to the rescue with a formulary of his own which was unacceptable. The real rescue came when Eusebius of Cæsarea advanced a creed (much of it the creed used in his own diocese) which he hoped should become the basis of negotiation, a negotiation helped by the fact that it was indefinite regarding the crucial points of debate. But Eusebius, who apparently had not previously known what Arianism really was, found that all parties accepted his Cæsarean creed, reserving for themselves the right to make amendments. The anti-Arians very shrewdly put forward no creed of their own and were in the end rewarded by accomplishing almost all they desired. The inadequacy of the Cæsarean symbol was largely made good by the acceptance, reluctant in some cases, of the Hosius overture of ὁμοούσιος. It was Constantine who proposed the solution, but the Emperor's knowledge of Christian doctrine must have been prompted by his ecclesiastical adviser, for, though it is held that many Nicene bishops were unlearned in theology, Constantine was surely the least theologian in the Council.

The additions and alterations may have been made out of respect for Antioch and Jerusalem, but, as Loofs has shown, they were due to the persistence and foresight of the Western delegates. They are of interest not only historically but as illustrations of 'the victory of Nicæa.'

It may be useful to give the original Nicene Creed and to show by the italicized phrases the amendments of the Cæsarean Creed which were adopted by the Council with but two exceptions:

> 'We believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ *the Son* of God, *begotten of the Father, only-begotten that is from the substance of the Father,* God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, *begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father,* through whom all things were made, both the things in heaven and the things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, *was made man,* suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and cometh to judge quick and dead; and in the Holy Spirit. *But those who say "There was once when he was not," and "Before his generation he was not," and "He was made out of nothing"; or pretend that the Son of God is of another subsistence or substance, or created or alterable or mutable, the Catholic Church anathematizes.*'

The Council of Nicæa had gained complete victory over Arianism. Without a possible doubt the Arians and their doctrines were repudiated, and the anathemas which concluded the creed were a commentary on the bitterness of the controversy and the absence of all toleration. The

two Bishops who refused to sign the document, Arius, and his friends were banished (Socrates, *H.E.* I. viii. 33), and Eusebius of Nicomedia before long shared their fate.

The close of the Council of Nicæa suggests some curious reflections. For the first time in the history of the Church a heresy of some magnitude had arisen from the very root of Christianity, the doctrine of God. Again, the Christians for more than two hundred and fifty years had suffered at the hands of heathen rulers, now there was to be persecution of Christians at the hands of the Church's rulers. Further, it was evident that in the discussion and even definition of Christian creeds politics were not to be excluded. The Church of Christ was to suffer from the foes of its own household.

IV. The incidents in the life of Athanasius were directly and indirectly mingled with the fortunes of the Arian controversy. In 328 he succeeded Alexander as bishop, archbishop or 'pope' of Alexandria (326 [Bright, *Orations of Athanasius*, p. xxi]) and about the same time wrote his *Expositio Fidei*, in which was a statement of the Christian faith and a repudiation of the heresies of the Sabellians, Tritheists, and other sects. The suggestion that his election was irregular and unconventional probably arose from his opponents, the chief of whom were the supporters of Meletius, who during the Galerian persecution had separated himself from Bishop Peter of Alexandria over the treatment of the *lapsi*, and the sympathizers with the exiled Arius.

Eusebius of Nicomedia was sufficiently powerful to obtain his own return to his See and sufficiently friendly to his fellow-student to work for the recall of Arius and the banishment of his victor. Arius, on the plea of having been misrepresented at Nicæa, offered to Constantine a new statement of his theological position (Socrates, *H.E.* I. xxvi.), and by a tactful reference to peace within the Church gained the ear of the Emperor. There was no question of the abrogation of the Nicene Creed, on that point Constantine was firm, but Athanasius was asked to receive Arius back into the fold. He refused, and after a series of Councils (about which we read in the *Apologia contra Arianos*, written *c.* 338) the Council of Tyre (335) deposed him (Socrates, *H.E.* I. xxxii.). Athanasius boldly interviewed the Emperor and asked that a new Council should be summoned. In the following year, at a Council held in Constantinople, Constantine in a fit of imperial impatience banished Athanasius to Trèves. Eustathius of Antioch had been deposed in 330, Athanasius was an exile, and the third leader of the anti-Arians, Marcellus of Ancyra, was deposed in 336. Only death prevented the re-admission of Arius and the fulfilment of the Eusebians' policy.

That was, however, only the first part of 'the tribulation' of Athanasius. When Constantine died in 337 it seemed true that, in Gwatkin's words, the victory of Nicæa was no 'solid conquest.' The Nicene faith was like to be shaken; the Christian population was growing, but much of it was very nominal; doctrinal controversy was becoming merged in imperial politics; and a Roman Emperor was assuming the mantle of theological criticism. At the accession of Constantius Athanasius returned to Alexandria but only for a short time, for he was exiled once more (339). Eusebius was promoted to Constantinople in the same year, but after his death the Emperors (for there were now two, one in the East and one in the West) called a Council which met at Sardica in 343, and Athanasius was exonerated from the charges laid against him at Tyre. It was only in 347, however, that he was permitted to return to Alexandria, though he had kept to some extent in touch with his people through his *Festal Letters*. But when Constantius was sole Emperor the fortunes of Athanasius ebbed once more, for if not Arian the East was certainly not in favour of Nicene theology, and in 356 the heroic prelate was driven out again. At Sirmium in the following year some bishops took the easy way of forbidding all use of the word οὐσία, and such words as the ὁμοούσιος of the Nicene party and the newer word ὁμοιούσιος of the so-called 'Semi-Arians.' But antagonism to the Nicene doctrine was the bond between the Arians, and when the offending phrase was removed the Arians became divided amongst themselves. The time came when Hilary of Poitiers could point out that what in the West was meant by ὁμοούσιος was exactly what the East meant by ὁμοιούσιος ('You condemn my faith, indeed, your own, when you condemn its synonym' [*De Synodis*, § 88]). Athanasius used his opportunity wisely, and though for a time the fashionable word at court and synod was ὁμοιούσιος, the dawn of conciliation was breaking. Toleration was permitted, and Athanasius returned to Alexandria in 362. Julian's reign helped him and did no service to the Arians whose weakness was made more pronounced by pagan rule. Athanasius and the more moderate Arian party, still loyal to Origen and fearful of Sabellianism, drew more and more together, and the very fact that the Nicene debate now emphasized

the doctrine of the Holy Spirit relieved some of the theological tension.

The fifth exile of Athanasius was short, and his closing years were made happier by the prospect of victory for the theological doctrines he had championed. The important element was the growth of the Cappadocian party, represented by Basil of Cæsarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. They paid homage to Athanasius and the Nicene Creed, though Origen was their master in theology, and they reinterpreted the old words in such a way that the Nicene faith was not lost to the Catholic Church. In particular, we owe to them the formula, μιὰ οὐσιά κατὰ τρεὶς ὑποστάσεις, which largely avoided the old confusion of *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Athanasius did not live to see the second Ecumenical Council of the Church, for he died in 373, eight years before Constantinople declared the victory of Nicæa.

V. The real clue to Athanasius' life and teaching is that he was essentially a religious man. He was more concerned with the doctrine of salvation than with that of creation. Probably that is why T. M. Lindsay draws a parallel between him and Martin Luther (*Hist. Reform*, i. 433, 470–471). He was not a profound thinker, but he had profound convictions in his religion and he believed that Arius and the Arians threatened the heart of the Christian Faith. Therefore, he battled against all who did not see Truth as he saw it, and for him Truth was the Divinity of Christ. Athanasius was no phrase-monger, and for the word always associated with him he had no special liking. His teaching had a practical aim, and, in the best sense of the words, his theology was experimental. 'He was made man that we might be made divine'—that is the real core of his message for mankind.

Missions: A Criticism of the Critics.

By Principal W. S. Urquhart, D.Litt., D.D., D.L., Calcutta.

Those who have read *Re-Thinking Missions*, and have perhaps been perturbed by some of its conclusions, would do well to read also '*Re-Thinking Missions*' *Examined*, by Dr. Robert E. Speer, Secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (Revell; 1s. net). They will agree with the critic in acknowledging the good faith and pure motives of the framers of the Report of the Appraisal Committee, contained in the first-mentioned volume. Nor will those who are immediately concerned manifest undue sensitiveness if they follow the guidance of Dr. Speer, for, as he says, 'The foreign missions enterprise criticises itself far more within than it is criticised without.'

The general trend of the Report is that while missions must be continued as a permanent obligation and privilege of the Christian Church, there is both room and need for radical change, and the effecting of this change should be made the condition of further enlargement of the enterprise. The judgment passed on the past history of missions is on the whole adverse. The earlier missionaries were too devoted to doctrine and had little or no social programme. The true motive of missions ought to be 'to seek with people of other lands a true knowledge and love of God, expressing in life and word what we have learnt through Jesus Christ, and endeavouring to give effect to his spirit in the life of the world.' Missionaries of the present day, according to the Report, although there are a few excellent exceptions, are, in respect of the majority, 'of limited outlook and capacity,' and they are too narrowly dogmatic, usually preferring evangelism by the spoken word to the silent witness of the permeating Christian life. There is need of a greater sense of the unity of the world's cultural and religious life and of a corresponding readiness to understand and conserve the heritage of other religions. 'The mission of to-day should make a positive effort, first of all to know and understand the religions around it, then to recognize and associate itself with whatever kindred elements there are. It is not what is weak and corrupt, but what is strong and sound in the non-Christian religions that offers the best hearing for whatever Christianity has to say.'

The Commission give an excellent survey of the widening scope of missions, and appraise with a certain amount of sympathy their education,