

## THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND HISTORICAL PERSONS OF NICAEA.

BY PROF. A. M. FAIRBAIRN, OXFORD UNIVERSITY, ENGLAND.

In the controversy which is named after its great protagonist, Arian, and which broke out in Alexandria in 318 or 319, the deepest theological problems were formulated. The problems were not new; only the sharp and definite terms in which they and the alternative solution were stated. They were essentially involved in the primitive facts and principles of the Christian faith. Their historical source and symbol was the person of Christ; their ultimate object and endeavor was the conception of God. If Christ was what the church believed Him to be, how must God be conceived? If He was not what the church believed him to be, what right had the Christian religion to live and claim the lordship of the whole man? The incarnation was the ultimate fact of faith; the word which was in the beginning with God and was God had become flesh and dwelt among us; the only begotten Son of the Eternal Father had been born of a woman and born under the law. But now if Christ must be conceived as Word and Son, what was His relation to the Father and the Father's to Him? If deity must be ascribed to both, how could God be thought and spoken of as one? Was not the affirmation of more than one divine Person equal to the denial of the divine unity?

These problems which harassed the speculative spirits of the early church were problems the church must either solve or die. For it could not surrender its belief in the deity of Christ without surrendering its right to be and to be believed; and it could not sacrifice its faith in the divine unity without abdicating its place in history and adding another to the many impotent polytheisms of the world. And so many attempts at premature solution

had been made, with no other result than on the one hand to multiply heresies, and, on the other, to show the difficulty of the problem and the necessity of a sufficient solution. Some sought their way to one by emphasizing the divine unity, and substituting a plurality of manifestations for one of persons, God exhibited as creating and maintaining, being named the Father, as suffering and redeeming, the Son, as renewing and sanctifying, the Holy Spirit. God still remained in these different aspects or relations one Person. Hence come the Patripassian and Sabellian heresies, which sought to affirm the divine unity by abolishing all personal distinctions in the Godhead. But thus saving the unity they lost out of the conception of the Godhead all the realities and truths which were creative of the Christian religion, the affections and activities that are possible only as personal relations are real and realized in deity. Others attempted to find a solution through the Person of Christ, either by placing Him as created in subordination to the Father, or by resolving His human personality into a mere form or mask for the divine. Hence came, on the one hand, the various subordination theories both of Alexandrian and Antiochine Fathers, and, on the other, the several types of Dokerism, all agreeing in the ascription of a thoroughly unreal or merely apparent humanity to Christ. But these were not so much solutions as the hurried affirmations of impatient and disloyal thought. An unreal divinity or an unreal humanity for Christ meant an unreal Christianity, the translation of its cardinal facts into a series of shows or semblances, or its cardinal truths into a series of finely imagined, but unauthoritative dicta. Without the unity of God and the divinity of Christ the church was but one among many religious societies, not the creation and vehicle of the Absolute Religion.

The period of the controversy was critical, for it was the period when the church passed from proscription and persecution to royal favour and political power. The position was full of danger, for on every side new forces

of good and evil were suddenly evoked and precipitated into the sharpest conflict. The sudden passing from poverty and humble service to opulence and authority was to prove a fateful change to the Christian religion. The men who had grown holy and heroic in the presence of the dungeon and death were now to face the deadlier because more alluring temptations of imperial policies and episcopal wealth. The emperors, too, though in name Christian were in fact Roman emperors still, conquering and commanding through the cross rather than conquered and commanded by it. They simply changed their religion, were not changed by it. They rather regarded their relation to the new faith through the customs and associations of the old religion than apprehended it with all the duties and possibilities of their position through the words and purpose of Christ. The heathen religions had been affairs of State, determined in doctrine and ritual worship and order, fast and festival by the imperial will. And what had been was meant to be—the changed religion did not mean a changed authority. Constantine thought he had as much right and ought to have as much liberty to regulate the new as former emperors had had to deal with the old religion. He held himself to be not simply “Imperator,” but also “Pontifex Maximus,” the supreme spiritual as well as the supreme civil power, able to settle questions of doctrine and discipline like matters of polity or statecraft, by an imperial decree. The consequent danger was immense, the emancipated church, as it seemed, being sorely tempted to be grateful to subservience to its benefactor, and it had not yet learned by bitter experience that the rule of a Christian might be more calamitous to it than the rule of a pagan Cæsar.

The change in the relation of Church to State was soon to raise many new questions, and unhappily, in the worst possible form the church was, as we have seen, divided. The controversy as to the most vital of all matters, the conception, on the one hand, of God, on the other, of the person of Christ, had long agitated all minds, and the

most opposite and sharply antithetical doctrines were now wrestling for a foothold within the church. Two things embittered and lengthened the controversy—the action of the revived heathen philosophy, which at once opposed and imitated Christian theology, and the action of the State, whose interference was most disastrous and depraving, for it attempted to settle the question by outraging the liberties of the church, but succeeded only in turning the highest truths of faith not so much into statutory matters or affairs for civil legislation, as into subjects for court intrigue. Hence the theological confusion became more confounded by the various winds raised by policy and passion. In 323 Constantine, first at Hadrianople then at Chrisopolis, defeated Licinius; in 324 he was undisputed emperor of East and West. But the fierce divisions in the church troubled him, for they seemed to threaten disaster to both religion and the State. He would deal with them as if they were imperial questions; his will would make peace in the church and put an end to the controversy which convulsed it. An imperial letter was issued, rebuking its chief representatives, commanding them to be reconciled, to desist from questions too high for them, to differ quietly as to accidents since they agreed as to essentials. But the imperial voice was unheeded, was hardly heard, indeed, amid the storm. So other means to subdue it were tried; a council was convoked which met on May 20th, 325 at Nicæa.

In this council, Bishops, in number, Eusebius says, over 250, Athanasius, about 300, or more exactly, 318, attended by a multitude of priests, deacons and underacolytes, assembled at the command and under the presidency of a semi-Christian emperor to decide the subtlest, yet most vital point of faith. Of the 318, the immense majority are utterly forgotten, many are mere names, a few are still known to the historian, and only one or two bear names honored and imperishable. The most famous then are among the least known now. Theodoret says:

“Many were illustrious from apostolic gifts, and many bore in their bodies the marks of Christ.” In the crowd we mark Paphnutius, from the upper Thebaid, with ghastly eyesocket, devoutly kissed by the emperor, out of which the eye had been torn in Maximin’s (Days) persecution; Patamon, of Heraclea, one-eyed, too, and from the same cause; Paul, of Neocæsarea, with the marks of the red-hot branding irons still on his hands; Spiridion, the shepherd Bishop of Cyprus, said to possess a wonderful gift of miracles, so protected by God that robbers attempting to carry off his sheep were bound in invisible bonds till his prayers released them, so gifted with spiritual sense as to hear his dead daughter speak to him from her tomb. On the other side stood the Arian group, headed by Eusebius, of Nicomedia, a man skilful in courts, potent, or wishful of potency in State affairs, using theological questions as political agencies, agitating craftily, in the diplomatist’s way, to have his belief declared the faith of the church. Between the Arians and the orthodox stood Eusebius, of Cæsarea, learned and observant, courtly and garrulous, distrustful of extremes, hateful of fanaticism, wishful to find in the simpler creed of older and soberer times a golden middle way in which all parties might walk, if not in perfect concord, at least in serene good fellowship. But the person at the council manifestly greatest was Constantine, the emperor. He opened it in a speech that praised peace and advised conciliation; and later he showed how peace was to be reached by casting into the fire a sealed packet containing all the complaints which had from the various sides been made to him, saying to the bishops, “You cannot be judged by men; God alone can decide your controversies.” “Christ has commanded man to forgive his brother, if he would be forgiven himself.” But the matter was not to be so easily settled; compromise was impossible, for even the most suservient there held the honour of Christ greater than the will of Cæsar.

But besides the emperor, who was manifestly great,

other two notable men were there, though neither could boast any episcopal dignity. The first of these was the man who has given his name to the controversy. Arius was a Libyan by birth, who had been educated at Antioch, and was in 319 a preacher in Alexandria. The cities, Antioch and Alexandria, were theological rivals, their schools alike famous, but in principles and methods most dissimilar. Antioch was critical, devoted to grammatical and historical exegesis, to literal and realistic interpretations; but Alexandria was more imaginative and speculative, loved to find allegories in history, to discover double meanings, outer and inner, carnal and spiritual senses in plain narratives and simple texts. Antioch liked clear definitions, doctrine that could be built into a system that would satisfy the logical understanding, but Alexandria, more lofty of reason, strove after the discovery and articulation of truths faith demanded, though logic might be unable to define or prove. In the third century the most famous teacher in the school of Antioch was Lucien, in the school of Alexandria, Origen. In the former, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicæa, and Arius were educated; and their doctrinal affinities throughout life show how much they owed to the school. There the idea of subordination reigned; Father and Son were not equal, but subordination was essential to the one, superiority and supremacy to the other. Arius carried these ideas to Alexandria; here another order of thought reigned. Devout minds were looking toward a notion that would, as it were, co-ordinate Father and Son, making each eternal, necessary to the very conception of God. Hence, while Lucien had seized on the ideas of supremacy and subordination implied by the two terms, Origen had speculated as to the process they implied, and had striven to reconcile the plurality of persons with the unity of essence by formulating the idea of Eternal Generation. Now this conflict of mind and thought could not but affect Arius, forcing him either to modify or develop his own ideas. The latter was the way he took, being roused into re-

sistance rather than subdued into harmony by his new conditions. In personal appearance he was tall, severe of aspect, with head covered by a mass of unkempt hair. He was austere in character, yet of agreeable address, ascetic, yet popular, tenacious, persistent, with a disposition his foes thought quarrelsome, but his friends most winsome and steadfast. He was without speculative genius, but of immense logical ability; skilful in dialectic, but deficient in the spiritual vision that ever distinguishes the true divine. His gifts were altogether of the order that could bring the loftiest problems into the region of popular debate, that could find terms for the inexpressible level to the common understanding, coining formulæ that made it in no degree intelligible or known, yet allowed it to become a matter of familiar controversy. The phrases that became the Arian watchword in the conflict were phrases that bore the very image and superscription of his dialectical adriotness and speculative impotence "God was not always Father, but there was a time when He became one." "The Son did not always exist, for He was not before He was begotten." "He is not of the essence of the Father, but as created a creature," "not existing by necessity of nature, or essence, but by the choice or will of God." And Arius adopted the most effective means of making these easily handled and most intelligible formulæ matters of common currency. While without imagination or the faculty and vision of the poet, he yet had enough rhetorical skill to write what seemed poetry to those degenerate days. In his "Thalia," or Banquet, written in the sotadic metre that was so offensive to his devouter opponents, he justified himself and his doctrines. Athanasius has preserved its opening stanzas for us, and there we read how he praised himself as one who had learned from the possessors of wisdom, the well cultured, the divinely taught, and now going along harmoniously with them, he suggested much for the glory of God, learning while he suffered. Besides his "Thalia," he had songs for sailors, millers and way-

farers; and these scattered among all classes, enabled the most ignorant to enjoy the rare privilege of arguing, even while they sang, with the most learned. And so as Socrates brought philosophy down from the clouds; Arius called theological controversy from the schools into the streets. The discussions suited the Alexandrian wits; the people rushed into the fray with a fine sense of their ability for it. Wharfmen and porters, buyers and sellers, serving men and maids held strong debate on generated or ungenerated being, on the *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας* or *ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων*, on the *ὁμοουσιον*, the *ὁμοιουσιον*, or the *ἀνόμοιον*. As Athanasius himself witnesses, the Arian man, anxious to puzzle the orthodox woman, would not, too modestly inquire, "Hast thou a son before thou didst bear? If thou hadst none, how can God have one before He begets?" Or the Arian would demand of the Athanasian, "Is there one ungenerated Being? or are there two? How can the Unbegotten and the Begotten be alike eternal and alike necessary in their existence? If the Begotten is one who begins to be, how can He have been from eternity?" Gregory of Nyssa has given us a characteristic sketch of the Constantinople of his day, but it describes even more accurately the Alexandria of our period, "every corner, every alley of the city was full of those discussions—the streets, the market-place, the drapers, the money-lenders, the victuallers." Ask a man, (how many oboli?) and he answers by dogmatizing on generated and ungenerated being. Inquire the price of bread, and you are told, (the Son is subordinate to the Father). Ask if the bath is ready, and you are told, (the Son arose out of nothing).

There are two stories as to the origin of the controversy. One makes the Patriarch or Bishop of the city, Alexander, go out of his way in a meeting of his clergy to declare the Son equal in eternity and essence with the Father, which Arius at once and hotly contradicted; the other makes Arius voluntarily assume the offensive against the orthodox faith. Both are probably true: the declaration of Alexander, with the public contradic-



tion, simply the result and recognition of controversies long conducted in private. What followed need not be described. Alexander demanded retraction; Arius refused. Parties were formed; Alexandria cast out the heretic; he went eastward and found friends. Eusebius, of Nicomedia stood forward as his apologist, and Alexander in a circular epistle accused him to the churches. This letter was almost certainly the work not of Alexander, but of Athanasius, the second of the notable men within the council, though he had not yet attained episcopal rank. He was only indeed a deacon and the Patriarch's secretary, but he was destined even more than the emperor to command the storm, and to play for almost fifty years a leading part in the church. He had already proved himself a subtle apologist for the Christian religion and a strenuous critic of heathenism. He was to be a mighty foe of Arius and a victorious champion of orthodoxy, a valiant defender of the liberties of the church and its strong bulwark against the rising tide of imperial tyranny. He lived and contended a much loved and much hated man, the idol and the abhorrence of his own age, and to after years either a saint and a successful exponent of the deepest mysteries of faith, or a dexterous dialectician and furious stickler for the minutest verbal distinctions. He had a soul so noble as to touch even the cold and critical intellect of Gibbon with enthusiasm. The cynical historian, who made merry over "the furious contests which the difference of a single diphthong excited between the Homoousions and the Homoiousions," \*could not refuse his admiration to the "immortal name" of the man whose courage and genius made the Homoousions victorious.

The youth of Athanasius lies in the deepest obscurity, the very year of his birth being unknown. It must have happened at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century. His first work must have appeared dur-

---

\*"Decline and Fall," Chap. xxi.

ing or before 319, and we may well assume that he did not become an author before he was 21. He had recollections, though indistinct as those of a child, of the persecution under Maximian in A. D. 303-5; and so if we make 298 his birth-year, we cannot be far wrong. The only glimpse we have into his boyhood is through a story which shows the boy so like the man that we can hardly tell whether Nature so propheised what was to be or fond fancy imagined what ought to have been. Alexander, the then Patriarch of Alexandria, looking out from a house where he was to dine, once saw a band of boys on the sea-shore playing at a religious service, in which with all the needful and established forms, baptism was administered. Anxious to discover whether it proceeded from reverence or mockery, Alexander called the boys, examined them, found all had been done in proper form and with utmost sobriety of spirit, and was so struck with the boy who had acted the Bishop that he adopted him, and had him educated under his own eye. This boy was Athanasius, and the story represents him as with the qualities he was most to need so built into his nature that they broke out spontaneously in his very play. And he was placed where these qualities were certain to be most completely developed. Alexandria was exactly the city where such a boy could be most thoroughly educated. In no city was life so varied, intellect so active, man so busy, religion at once so strenuously aggressive and so strongly resisted. The people were mobile yet tenacious, nimble and subtle of wit, rich and resourceful in trade, of mixed blood and wide culture. The harbour was crowded with ships that carried the grain and fruits of Egypt to Rome, and bound in intercourse and interests the cities of the Nile and the Tiber. The Jews had an immense colony, a synagogue that was almost a fourth temple, a worship elaborate as the old Judean, and schools where Moses was made to speak in Greek things he had never uttered in Hebrew. Philosophy, too, decayed in Greece had made its home in Alexandria, and

as Neo-Platonism had attempted to become a religion, *wearing rags it had borrowed from Plato and Moses, Christ and Buddha* into a system as beautiful but as unsubstantial as the rainbow, perhaps all the more beautiful that it was stretched over the dark background of expiring paganism. Though its most creative teachers had passed, it was yet full of vigorous life, and with its ecstasies, visions, mortifications of the flesh, its æons and spiritual hierarchies, its allegorical interpretations, which enabled it to find wonderful wisdom in the most offensive parts of the old mythology, its theistic and even sacramentarian doctrines, it had attracted to it and rallied round it all the noblest hearts and best heads of the dying Faith. The antagonism between Neo-Platonism and Christianity was all the intenser because they faced each other not simply as foes, but, in a sense, as rivals. The gymnasium of the one vied with the catechetical school of the other, and the same persons were often found to be students in both. And the catechetical school had its own fame; within it Clement, Origen and Dionysius had taught, bringing intellects broadened by philosophy to the interpretation of the Christian scriptures and the explication of Christian truth. And within and beneath all this intellectual life there beat a passionate religious zeal. Alexandria had had its martyrs, among the sternest of their order, and now had its hermits. Antony had sanctified and glorified ascetism. Fiery Copts, sick of heart, weary of the struggle to reconcile a nascent faith with a decadent civilization, had fled from the city to the hermit's cell, and the wonderful colonies of the Thebaid multiplied and flourished while society decayed. And all these influences acted powerfully on Athanasius. He had in the home of the Patriarch the breeding that made him sensitive to the honour and liberties of the church, conscious of her more than royal dignity, of her mission as too high and holy to be forgotten or forsaken at the smile or frown of an emperor. The far-stretching commerce of the city helped to make him cosmopolitan, prevented him

falling into the narrow ways of a provincial ecclesiastic. The philosophical school made him a skilled disputant, exercised not simply in knowledge and by dialectic, but trained through sympathy with men who had struggled towards the truth in the past to speak to the men who were seeking truth in the present. The catechetical school instructed him in the most generous and creative Christianity of the early church, and inspired him by the example of teachers who had been alike victorious in argument and through martyrdom. And the enthusiasm of the cell, the devotion that could forsake the world to save the soul begot in him the spirit of sacrifice, and made him thrill under the hands of Antony as if he had been touched by the finger of God. And his earliest work showed how these varied forces had affected him. The young was a mature man; he came out of the schools with the enthusiasm of the student tempered by the spirit of the Christian. His first work consisted of two treatises, one a discourse against the Greeks, the other "concerning the Incarnation of the Word." They form together a new apology for Christianity, distinguished throughout by one remarkable feature—it was not so much defensive as constructive; it set the Christian religion as a positive and scientific interpretation of Man and his Universe over against the ancient Heathenism. The first treatise started from a strenuous criticism of the Old Polytheism, argues for the higher rationality of Monotheism, and the need alike to God and Man of the Son and Logos. The second continues the argument so as from the history and state of Man to bring out the necessity and significance of the person, death and resurrection of Christ. In this method and aim there was the wisdom of true genius. The best apology for Christianity is its interpretation, to bring out its inmost meaning and set it before the intellect of Man as the articulate truth of God is the best way to commend it to his acceptance. And this is what the treatise of Athanasius did. The time had passed for apologies. Christianity did not now need

to plead, even in the proud words of Tertullian, to be allowed to live; it had proved its right by living to purpose, and turning the very power that persecuted into the power that befriended. What was now needed was to persuade the reason as it had conquered the heart and conscience of man. And so Athanasius planted over against the eclecticism a new philosophy that combined the sublimest elements of all the older systems, a true religion that was also true science, and answered the coarse and disdainful charges of Celsus, and the embittered criticisms of Porphyry, by placing face to face with theirs a system whose centre was the Christ of Nazareth, whose circumference was the infinite God—completer, better reasoned, and more rational than anything that had ever entered the imagination of Plotinus, or been heard in the Neo-Platonic school.

What might have been the issue had no influence turned Athanasius from his path, we cannot tell; yet, indeed, he was never turned from it. His controversy with Arius was a controversy with the fundamental principles of heathenism. The supreme moment of this controversy was the council of Nicaea. The question that there emerged was more soteriological or Christological than teleological. It concerned much more the status of the Son within the Godhead than either the function of the humanity or the relation of the two natures in the Incarnate Christ. What was involved was the predication of necessary existence rather than conditional existence to the Son. It was felt that a being who depended upon anyone's will, even the will of the Father, had, however high he might be placed in the scale of being, a mere contingent existence. He might, or he might not be. A necessity had, therefore, to be claimed for the being of the Son. And this necessity was expressed in the term *ὁμοούσιος*, to be the same substance as the Father or to be independent of any will, even the Divine. The term said, in effect, the Son is as essential a constituent of deity as even the Father. Hence, round it raged the

fiercest conflict. The one party objected to it, because it was an unscriptural term, incorrect, heretical, since it had been condemned by an earlier council. Athanasius and his friends argued that no other term could adequately condemn the new heresy, which said the Son is a creature and made by the will of the Father out of nothing and so affirm the truth that the Son is as necessarily existent as the Father, is eternal, and has from the beginning been in God and with Him. The emperor, who was at first averse to the introduction of anything non-Scriptural into a creed which was to be enforced by statutory enactment, was converted, and *ὁμωούσιος* was, therefore, accepted and subscribed as the symbol of the orthodox faith.

Now it would have been altogether agreeable to me, had it been possible, to discuss the meaning of the Nicæan Creed. Picturesque historians of the Eastern church have turned wearily away from the fierce and often ignoble conflict over mysteries too high for human speech concerning terms that denoted things so transcendent as to be without significance for man. But there may be truths in the world the eye that looks for the picturesque fails to see. The struggle at Nicaea was as to whether there should be a Christian God, whether the Christian elements in man's conception of Him should be lost or retained and developed. Beneath the apparent issues the real question was concealed. The Arian formulae that tripped so lightly from the tongue were but as the babbling of a child before the last problem of human reason; and however imperfect the technical terms might be, they represented a far profounder, more reasonable and exalted conception of God. The Arian Deity was a naked and indescribable simplicity, but the Athanasian a manifold active unity. Does God live? Does He love? Is He capable of sustaining relations? These questions now come remote enough from this old Nicæan controversy, but they lay at its very heart. If God lives, His nature must be an eternal activity, infinite

in all its processes and movements; if God is love, He must have ever loved, which means that within His own absolutely perfect essence all the conditions of loving, object as well as subject, are necessarily contained. If God is capable of sustaining relations to the universe, it implies that His being is essentially related being; within Himself, as it were, relations exist, and the absolute God is the God who has never been and can never be out of relation. To express it otherwise—the Arian formulae implied a conception of God that made creation and redemption alike impossible to Him, but Athanasius strove after a conception that would make both not only possible, but, in a sense, necessary. And he in a wonderful degree reached it. The Father who had never been without a Son was in the strictest sense an eternal Father. The Son, who was consubstantial with the Father, represented relations within the Divine Nature, which made God the object as well as the subject of love. The “eternal generation” was the symbol of a process immanent in Deity, the sign of the manifold energies that made God necessarily creator. The God of Arius was abstract, an impossible, immobile, impotent name; the God of Athanasius was concrete, a Being who necessarily lived, loved and created. If Arius had prevailed, the church would have fallen back into a bewildered Pantheism, or an arid Deism. The victory of Athanasius was the victory of Christian Theism, the only Theism that possesses a living and personal God.

But now let us see how Athanasius lived for the doctrine he had done so much to formulate and maintain. For court favor ever fickle was never so fickle as in the later Empire. Hardly was the council over when Alexander died, and Athanasius was chosen his successor. And we may well believe Gregory of Nazianzus when he describes him as being all that a bishop ought to be, so living as to set an example more persuasive than any eloquence, stooping to common-place minds, yet able to soar high above the more aspiring, accessible

to all, slow to anger, quick in sympathy, pleasant in conversation, still more pleasant in temper, effective alike in discourse and in action, assiduous in his devotions, helpful to Christians of every class and age, a theologian with the speculative, a comforter of the afflicted, a staff to the aged, a guide of the young, a physician to the sick. But he was not to be allowed to exercise his pastoral qualities in peace. Eusebius, the crafty, he of Nicomedia, got to the ear of Constantine, won him, and an imperial mandate was sent to Athanasius—"Restore Arius, or I will depose you." But he refused; where Christ reigned Cæsar could not be allowed to rule. Where force fails, fraud may succeed. Charges of injustice, oppression, continually were carefully framed so as to be most offensive to the emperor, who at length, in 335 commanded Athanasius to appear before a council at Tyre. He was charged with desecration, sorcery, murder; but he silenced his calumniators in the most conclusive way, by the production of the reputedly murdered man, the Meletian Bishop, Arsenius. But as his condemnation had been determined beforehand, Athanasius "resolved to make a bold and dangerous experiment, whether the throne was inaccessible to the voice of truth."\* He went to Constantinople, presented himself before the emperor, and demanded that either a lawful council should be assembled, or the members of the Tyrian synod summoned to meet him in the imperial presence. For a moment reason and truth prevailed. But Eusebius, the crafty, touching the point where Constantine was sorest and most sensitive, said: "He once threatened to stop the Alexandrian corn-ships bound for Constantinople." Athanasius denied; Eusebius re-affirmed; and the emperor banished, 336, the accused to Trier, then in Gaul.

For two years and a half he lived at Trier, restful, studious, watching as from afar the movements in the Empire and in the church. The news was now and then momentous. In 336, he would hear that Arius had sud-

---

\*Gibbon, "Decline and Fall," C. XXI.



denly and tragically died, just as he was about, in obedience to the imperial mandate, to be received into the church. A year later Constantine himself passed to his account, and in 338 Athanasius was restored to his flock. "The people ran in crowds to see his face; the churches were full of rejoicing; thanksgivings were offered up everywhere; the ministers and clergy thought that day the happiest of their lives." He was magnanimous, and could proudly boast that "he caused no imprisonment, no bloodshed—not a man was banished from Alexandria for his sake." But his enemies were busy and Constantius, the new emperor of the East, became their facile tool. His was the sort of mind the Arian formula convinced—what so perfectly lent itself to dialectical dexterities must be the very truth of God. And he could not brook a bishop who despised his formula and denied his authority in things divine. So the imperial decree invaded the sacred rights of the church. Athanasius was again sent into exile, 340, and Gregory, the Cappadocian, was instituted, as the new bishop or Patriarch. The wanderer sailed for Italy, was kindly received and hospitably entertained by the church at Rome, used his leisure to good purpose, addressed by pen the church of East and West, powerfully influenced the Latin peoples, persuaded at length Constantius into friendship, and was restored to his see October 21, 346. The day of his return was one of "glorious festivity." To the fond imagination of Gregory Nazianzus it seemed as if the Alexandrian people had become another Nile, flowing along the highways, covering every bank and height whence they could see and salute him. So joyful was the time that it became a proverb, and the day of gladness and promise was "like the day when Father Athanasius came home."

For ten years he was allowed to labour in his loved city; but not untroubled. The death of Constans deprived him of his truest friend. Constantius, fickle, prone with that soul of his to Arian formula, inclined to

exercise his brief authority over the church, liked not the inflexible courage, the jealous independence, the devotion to Christ and His kingdom of the great Patriarch. So it was determined to remove him, and the rude soldier, Syrianus, was sent to do it. The scene has been described by Athanasius himself. On Thursday, February 8, 356, he was in the church of St. Thomas, conducting a night-long service. Suddenly the church was surrounded. Athanasius sat down on his throne, commanded the deacon to read the 136th Psalm, and all the people responded—"For His mercy endureth forever." Then the word was given, "every man to his home." But the soldiers broke in with a fierce shout, swords flashed, arrows were discharged, the crowding people were trampled down, many wounded, some killed, while above the din rose voices urging the Patriarch to escape. But he would not go till the people were saved, and amid the last, in the darkness unobserved, he made his way through the soldiery, passed out of the city to wait till "the indignation was overpast." Finding all appeals to Constantius hopeless, he turned towards the desert, and found refuge and a home amid "the pathless solitudes which surrounded upper Egypt, and the monasteries and hermitages of the Thebaid." There he devoted himself to the exposition and defence of the doctrine he best knew and most loved. The day was dark; in a less faithful heart hope had died. The apostasy seemed general, Arianism was victorious at court and truculent in the church. The heart of Hosius failed him, Tiberius disowned his past, and Athanasius was alone. As Hooker so finely says: \**"This was the plain condition of those times: the whole world against Athanasius and Athanasius against it; half a hundred of years spent in doubtful trial which of the two in the end would prevail, the side which had all, or else the part which had no friend but God and death; the one a defender of his innocency, the other a finisher of all his troubles."*

---

\* *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1-530. (Ed. 1825.)

Constantine died, 361; Julian assumed the imperial purple. Paganism flamed up into an ecstacy of joy over the succession of the Apostate. The pagans of Alexandria seized George, the Arian bishop, dragged him out and kicked him to death; and in February, 362, Athanasius returned. But it was only for a little while. He was too courageous to be spared for he was in the revived pagan speech, by pre-eminence, "the foe of the gods." So the old man had to be a wanderer once more, though a voice from out his weeping flock assured him—"It is but a cloud, it will soon pass; be of good heart." He was by imperial orders pursued. He embarked on the Nile; his pursuers followed. The imperial emissaries met a boat coming down the river, and demanded—"What of Athanasius? Where is he?" "Not far off," was the reply, and the boat sailed on carrying Athanasius in it, who was possibly himself the speaker. His home was once more in Thebaid, whence, however, he was soon to return. Julian died in June, 363, and with his death the troubles might be said to end, and a happier day dawn. Usefully and heroically the old man laboured, careful of many things, loving the truth he had lived for, the church that lived by it, the hopes the church bore for the dying Roman State but reviving humanity, and in the spring of 374 he peacefully laid down his burden and entered on his eternal rest. He lived for his own age and, therefore, for all ages; and looking back over the centuries we thank him for his noble struggle, for the splendid victory he achieved for the truth of God and the liberties of the church of Jesus Christ.