

When Jesus Became God
by Richard E. Rubenstein

A Review by Barbara Buzzard

“Was Jesus Christ God on earth, or was he something else? Three hundred years after the crucifixion, Christians still had not made up their minds about this.” This was what the Arian controversy was all about.

I am not a history buff so parts of this book were very challenging for me, but the matter posed by the title of the book is viewed as an unspeakable heresy and therefore an invitation to investigate.

I could not do better than the church father Gregory of Nyssa in describing the atmosphere which surrounded the Arian controversy: “If in this city you ask a shopkeeper for change, he will argue with you about whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you inquire about the quality of bread, the baker will answer, ‘The Father is greater, the Son is less.’ And if you ask the bath attendant to draw your bath, he will tell you that the Son was created *ex nihilo* [out of nothing].”

What an incredible atmosphere where ordinary shopkeepers and workers were competent enough to discuss theological issues and confident enough to decide for themselves! What a departure from our present day experience where even questioning these very issues is often enough to have one dismissed from church. Also notable is that Arianism (the position that the Son was brought into existence, that he is separate from and lesser than God; that Jesus was the holiest person who ever lived, but not the Eternal God) was as popular as the view that “Jesus is God.”

The Arian dispute was regarding the relationship of Jesus to the Father. Today, Arianism is considered heretical - but that is because the other side won! (Remember who writes the history!) Arians argued that Jesus was a perfect representative of God, that just as a painting or statue “represents” its subject — it is not the

subject itself. Being in the exact image of God did not mean that Jesus himself was God. Rubenstein tells us that what was at stake between the two camps was a “worldview derived originally from Judaism — a passionate monotheism fundamentally at odds with the premises of pagan thought.” Rubenstein goes on to say “disputes as serious as the Arian controversy virtually compelled ordinary churchgoers to choose between rival theologies.”

Rubenstein paints a very vivid picture of the day with all of the tension and friction that existed. Add to that, fear of social collapse and the examples surrounding them what happened to societies that lapsed into immorality. Into this chaos, the emperor Diocletian stepped with his plan to rid the Roman world of Christianity. Though it failed, the hundred years of conflict brought on by the Great Persecution and its campaign of terror was the background to the Arian controversy. “These clashes between Christians were traumatic, raising questions that would haunt the Church for generations to come. Did Jesus’ life provide a realistic model for human behavior, or was it an ideal reachable only by a handful of saints and martyrs?” Would that we as Christians were still “allowed” to ask this question, for it is an excellent question. After all, we are told to imitate Jesus; he is to be our elder brother in the faith. How does his example help us if he possessed Godhood as an advantage?

Enter Christianity as the established religion of the imperial family rather than the ragged little persecuted sect it had been. Problem: a priest named Arius publicly criticized his bishop’s theology. Arius was expelled but was supported by others and it became a raging controversy with the potential of spreading throughout the Mediterranean world. “Anathemas and decrees of excommunication were flying.” His ideas were explosive. Believers were “faced with the problem that had confronted all Christians since St. Paul — how to be a monotheist believing in only one God, yet still worship Jesus Christ.” Athanasius appears on the scene as Arius’ chief opponent. Athanasius argued that Jesus *had* to be both fully human and fully divine, that the death of

a *mere* human being could not redeem our sins. These were tremendously powerful arguments and are with us today, written in stone, as it were. Unfortunately, they are philosophical arguments, not scriptural ones. (Did not the sacrifice of a dove cover Israel's sins? Could not the sacrifice of a perfect man cover the whole of humanity? Yes, if God so decrees it.) It was decided that a conference would be called to end the bitter wrangling. So began the Council of Nicea (named after a lake).

And this, please note, is the answer to the now disallowed question, When did Jesus become God? He became God officially at Nicea. The rest of this review will be an attempt to show how such a thing came to be. Nicea was proposed (dictated) by the emperor to resolve the arguments among the bishops as that sort of wrangling was unhealthy for the state of the nation. Rubenstein states that Constantine "agreed with Hosius (his chief advisor) that the dispute should be ended on terms favorable to Alexander and the anti-Arians." So *the outcome was predetermined*; the only question — how to get there! Rubenstein says this in the nicest possible way, yet it is a jaw dropper to be sure, for this is what is now considered "the faith." Rubenstein goes on to explain why Constantine offered his personal hospitality to 250 bishops. He had just had his brother-in-law and nine-year-old nephew murdered as they were a threat to his power. (The choice between "losing heaven and losing power" was so difficult that Constantine put it off until his deathbed and was then baptized.) Hosting this conference would provide a way for the people to forget what had happened. "Having just assumed the throne, Constantine was by no means finished either with power or with committing the sins necessary to retain it. But presiding over the grandest council in Christian history might make up in the community's eyes (and who knows, perhaps even in God's!) for a certain number of moral lapses." And this, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the leading actors in leaving to us that so-called Christian heritage. Rubenstein reveals that Constantine detested Judaism; rather he desired a

“New Rome” and felt that Christianity could be used for uniting his people.

“The bishops and their retinues began arriving in early May. Constantine welcomed them warmly and housed them...either in the palace or in one of the numerous outbuildings rimming the lake. A good many of them bore the scars of past persecutions: eye patches covering lost eyes, limps produced by severed hamstrings or Achilles tendons, backs deformed by hard labor in Phoenician mines...Some bishops apparently believed they had already entered the Kingdom of Heaven or at least a well-furnished anteroom.” Not only had they been invited to an emperor’s home but he was going to pay their travel and living expenses for several months. Many thought they were living a miracle!

Rubenstein has managed to unearth the nuts and bolts of this conference and describe the goings on as if they were a suspense novel. I am reminded of the board game Clue in which you must determine who was the murderer in what room with what weapon. Surrounding the Nicene council you have crime, cover-up, motive, dangerous ambition and power-mongering. You have fear, intimidation, intrigue, back stabbing, conniving, bludgeoning, and terrorizing. Did I mention violence?

The bishops got right to work sorting out the Arian controversy. The word “*homoousios* had been kicking around Eastern theological circles for some time, but most churchmen did not like it, since it was a Greek philosophical term not found anywhere in Scripture.” Stay with me here as I attempt to explain why this is important. It forms the linchpin of orthodoxy. This word was used in a letter read out at the council. Some “observers testify that the document was torn into pieces in the presence of all the bishops as an expression of their disapproval...One passage in the letter mentions *homoousios* scoffingly, in order to show how ludicrous it was to equate the Son with the Father: Imagine! Some fools maintain that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, and the omnipotent, unknowable Creator are made out of the same essential stuff...No idea could be more absurd!”

“This rhetoric (or something like it) gave Alexander and Athanasius *the weapon they were looking for. Homoousios* — the ‘absurdity’ — would become a test of faith and *a method of smoking out* those unable to accept Jesus’ identity with God” (emphasis added). Chaos ensued. The crackdown was to issue an anathema (a formal curse or condemnation and excommunication) to any and all disbelievers. From such appalling stuff is orthodoxy born.

“A look into the future, then, shows us Nicea as a watershed. While it looks forward to the ultimate resolution of the Arian controversy from the Catholic point of view — the identification of Jesus Christ as God — it also represents the last point at which Christians with strongly opposed theological views acted civilly towards each other. When the controversy began, Arius and his opponents were inclined to treat each other as fellow Christians with mistaken ideas. Constantine hoped that his Great and Holy Council would bring the opposing sides together on the basis of a mutual recognition and correction of erroneous ideas. When these hopes were shattered and the conflict continued to spread, the adversaries were drawn to attack each other not as colleagues in error but as unrepentant sinners: corrupt, malicious, even satanic individuals.”

I think that it is important to see who the Arians were up against. Their chief opponent was Athanasius. Rubenstein quotes Barnes to give us a picture of this man: “In Alexandria itself, he maintained the popular support which he enjoyed from the outset and buttressed his position by organizing an ecclesiastical mafia. In later years, if he so desired, he could instigate a riot or prevent the orderly administration of the city. Athanasius possessed a power independent of the emperor which he built up and perpetuated by violence. That was both the strength and the weakness of his position. Like a modern gangster, he evoked widespread mistrust, proclaimed total innocence — and usually succeeded in evading conviction on specific charges.” Rubenstein goes so far as to say that: “For a similar combination of theoretical acumen, dogged

adherence to principle, and political ruthlessness, one would have to await the advent of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Vladimir Lenin.” Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria and “was reported to be maintaining power by intimidating and terrorizing his opponents.” It was said that he engaged in financial extortion and that he sent violent gangs to beat Arians. Frankly, a pretty filthy foundation for one’s faith!

My thanks and gratitude to Richard Rubenstein for his exposure of the roots of Trinitarian dogma, which has not only survived but remains the governing force of orthodoxy and which will continue to pronounce an anathema upon you if you question any or all of it. As for the very dear ones who are a part of this system but do not agree with those anathemas, my greatest service to you would be to discourage your confidence and faith in a “church” that could show itself so violent and hateful. When dissenters are bludgeoned into submission, this should be a great revelation as to the identity of the “thugs.” (“By their fruit you will recognize them...” Mat. 7:16.)

The Council of Nicea, with all of its ramming through of dogma, still left many in confusion. “What was needed to clear up this confusion was something that the Nicene Creed alone could not supply: a doctrine explaining how God could be one and yet consist of two or three separate entities. *And the development of this doctrine...could not take place without new language.* It was necessary to create a new theological vocabulary capable of going beyond the bare statement that the Father and Son were of the same essence (*homoousios*). That term expressed the oneness of God, but how to express His multiplicity as well? The answer was to clarify or *redefine* key words.”

Gregory of Nyssa: “Do not be amazed if we declare that the same thing is united and distinct, and conceive, as in a riddle, of a new and paradoxical unity in distinction and distinction in unity.” He said, according to Rubenstein, “If this seems paradoxical, so be it.” Say what?!

Note well: “There were other objections as well. The doctrine was too novel, too paradoxical, too mystifying, too clever by

half...but, to many skeptics, the new theology's most troubling feature was that, in redefining the relationship of the Father to the Son, *it altered the Christian understanding of God*" (emphasis added).

"Doctrinally, this is the point at which Christianity breaks decisively with its parent faith and with other forms of monotheism that, insofar as they use family metaphors, consider God a Father and persons created in His image sons and daughters" (emphasis added).

I would like to ask what kind of childish game was being played at the Council of Nicea with adults acting as terrorists and thugs. How is it that 1700 years later we are still cowering under their very faulty leadership and the unscriptural "rules" they made up as the trinity was "invented"? I beg you not to be content with such shoddy workmanship. When we are being invited to accept a paradox, we are being asked to accept square circles or, as Webster's says, something absurd.

In *When Jesus Became God*, Richard Rubenstein writes well on a very volatile subject. His calm and rather unbiased perspective sheds light on the dark days in which was born what is now regarded as Christian orthodoxy regarding Jesus Christ. Rubenstein helps his readers better understand how a multi-person view of God would eventually triumph over the earlier monolithic view of the One God of the Bible.

Respectfully submitted,
Barbara Buzzard