

Donatist Controversy

- Donatists were Christians of pro-Consular Northern Africa around Numidia/ Mauritania
- They were members of a movement who rejected the regularly elected Bishop of Carthage and elected one to their liking who was more rigorous in his views, his name was Donatus
- The Donatists rejected their opponents Bishop partly on the grounds that one of the Bishops that consecrated and installed their opponent had delivered copies of the scriptures to the authorities during a time of persecution
- The issues at stake included how to handle the lapsed, as well as more generally those who were more rigorous
- For the Donatists, what gave a Bishop authority was his personal holiness
 - Their emphasis was the holiness of the church
- For their opponents, the office bestowed this authority (a more traditional Roman principle)
 - These were less rigorous in maintaining the holiness of the church, preferring to leave judgement to Christ
- The split also occurred along geographical lines
- Many of those who became Donatists had been Christians prior to Constantine, and had suffered greatly.
- In time the Donatists became increasingly radical and militant, often seeking martyrdom in battle against the “corrupt” church

Donatism persisted until the region was conquered by Muslims in the 7th century

Donatists Become Violent

- In time, some Donatists became violent, believing that dying in a struggle against corrupters of the faith was akin to Martyrdom.
- These were known as Circumcellions
- It came to the point where it was no longer safe to travel without an armed escort.

- Every attempt was made to stamp out this movement through logic, by force, these attempts ultimately failed.
- Donatists/Circumcellions persisted until the area was conquered by Islam .
- The serious questions that arose during this time were dealt with later by Augustine and others.

Arianism

- The basis of Arianism is the notion that the “Logos” or the “Word” was not co-eternal with the father.
- Arius taught that the Word was not God, but the first of all creatures (it pre-existed the incarnation)
- Before anything else was made, the “Word” was made
- Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria taught against this.
- Arius claimed that Alexander’s view rejected monotheism
- Alexander claimed that Arius’ view rejected the deity of Christ, whom the church worshiped as God

Arian View of Salvation

- Alexander taught that Christ achieved our salvation
- Arius countered that Jesus opened a way for salvation by his obedience to God. Such obedience would be meaningless if Jesus were God.
- Alexander condemned Arius’ teachings and attempted to remove him from his post
- Arius rejected Alexanders’ actions and called on his supporters to assist him.
- This led to theological and physical conflict in the streets between these rival groups
- Constantine sent his church advisor to try to mediate the dispute – didn’t work.
- Constantine calls for a church council to decide the issue

Council of Nicaea

- Took place in AD 325
- The first Ecumenical (Universal) Council
- Around 300 Bishops from around the Empire
- These were the most well known, famous of the church leaders
- Many had only recently been released from prison, and showed signs of torture inflicted by the Roman authorities
- Now, they were being united for the first time under “one roof” by those same authorities to deliberate critical theological issues
- These deliberated and came to an agreement on the readmission of the lapsed, aligned on standard procedures for election and ordination of Presbyters and Bishops, as well as the Arian controversy

The Great Deliberation

- Bishops gathered to discuss
- Arius was not a Bishop, so he could not meet or speak, but was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia
- Eusebius and co. expected an easy discussion, as the issue seemed clear to them
- The opposing view was represented by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria who believed the Arian view was a major threat to the core of Christianity. One deacon of his party was Athanasius of Alexandria
- For those from the West, this discussion seemed to be a debate among those members from the East.
- For the Westerners, the issue had been settled by Tertullian: Three persons and one substance”
- A third, very small group maintained that the Father and the Son were one, and so the father suffered the Passion (Patripassianism).

The Debate Continues

- Initially, reactions were somewhat muted
- This changed once the Arian contingency had an opportunity to fully explain its views
- The result was outrage. Eusebius' speech was torn out of his hands, torn up and trampled under foot to the shouts of "blasphemy"!
- The goal of the group was now to determine how to forcefully and categorically reject the Arian heresy

The resulting Credal Statement

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the Catholic church anathematizes.²⁶

Consequences of The Council

- The “Arian” group refused to sign the creed
- These were declared heretical, and deposed
- Additionally, Constantine banished these Bishops from their cities
- This resulted in a serious and unfortunate precedent: the intervention of secular authorities in doctrinal matters
- In time, the Arian group continued to lobby Constantine
- Constantine later relented, and ordered the Bishop of Constantinople to restore Arius to the communion
- While debating what to do about this, Arius died
- Alexander died in AD 328, and was succeeded by Athanasius, who became the champion of Nicene Orthodoxy
- In a strange turn of events, Athanasius was later exiled by Constantine at the behest of the Arian group
- Constantin’s sons inherited power, and were in conflict with one another
- Eventually, Constantias became sole emperor. He favored Arianism and championed its cause, forcing the Nicene church leaders to sign the Arian Confession of Faith
- He in turn was followed by Julian the Apostate, who tried to revive Paganism