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The symbol and the banquet: A prolegomena to a future metaphysics of Nicaea

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Author:
Khegan M. Delport[1,2]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

[2]Institüt für Evangelische Theologie, Fakultät Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften, Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

Corresponding author:
Khegan Delport,
khegan.delport@gmail.com

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Contemporary research on 'the Arian Crisis' has undermined earlier polemical readings of Arius as simply a heresiarch, or a comic-book villain, within the debate leading up to and beyond Nicaea. Historical scholarship demonstrates a more sophisticated picture of Arius as an Alexandrian theologian who imbibed the metaphysical and logical traditions of his time, growing out of a broadly conservative and Platonic ferment. The available evidence suggests a figure attuned to the problems of metaphysical terminology when applied to the divine nature, especially as regards the relation of God to created being, demonstrating an 'orthodox' theology of divine transcendence. And yet, in the wake of Arius, pro-Nicene theologians adopted the controversial terminology of the *homoousia* to make sense of the incarnation, that is, of the genuine communication of the divine nature in and through the Son. It implied the adoption of a novel metaphysics to articulate the radical nature of this divine communication. This article argues that thinking through the metaphysical implications of Nicaea today means a continuation of this gesture: a non-identical repetition and radicalisation of Nicene orthodoxy. It suggests that an ongoing, fallibilist explication of theology through metaphysical concepts is, in some sense, legitimised through the incarnation, insofar as God is truly communicated into created forms while always being transcendent to them. The article argues that new continuities within Christian orthodoxy can be made and reimagined through ruptures within the tradition, and that this appears to be in line with the eschatological and apophatic trajectory of orthodoxy itself.

Contribution: The article attempts to expound the element of metaphysical innovation found within the Nicene tradition, and thereby to outline what this may mean for a Christian theology of tradition.

Keywords: metaphysics; Arius; Athanasius; the Council of Nicaea; incarnation.

Overture

For Robert Vosloo, my Doktorvater[1]

> [*W*]hat you thought you came for
> Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
> From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
> If at all. Either you had no purpose
> Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
> And is altered in fulfilment.[2]

The last several decades have seen a greater clarification of the stakes of the so-called 'Arian' crisis. Since the critical editing of the primary documents by Hans-Georg Opitz and others in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the historical narrative of what led to the crisis has been laid out with much more nuance than in previous efforts.[3] Earlier recountings tended, by and large, to accept the terms of the debate as they were offered by the Nicene factions, and especially the heresiological metanarrative of Athanasius. If I am permitted to exaggerate slightly, the story of the debate goes something like this: once upon a time, in Alexandria, the established 'orthodoxy' of the church came under the onslaught of a 'heresy' called *Arianism*. In this debate, the heroic

1.The publication of this article – with the others collected in this special edition of *In Luce Verbi* on the Council of Nicaea – will coincide with the sixtieth birthday year of my *Doktorvater,* Robert Vosloo, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. Anyone familiar with Robert's work may detect some elected affinities in my approach to tradition and his own (Vosloo 2010, 2023). This is hardly incidental and expresses his explicit and osmotic influence on my historical and theological approach.

2.T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' I in Eliot (1963).

3.For a history of modern scholarship on 'The Arian Controversy', see Williams (2001:1–25).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years: Reflections on doctrine, confession, and ecumenism' under the expert guidance of guest editors Nico Vorster, Sarel van der Walt and Nadia Marais.

champions of said orthodoxy were Alexander, the bishop, and Athanasius, a church deacon. Pitted against them were the blasphemous proclamations of one called Arius, a presbyter from Libya, as well as others who were sympathetic with his cause, such as the two Eusebii from Nicomedia and Caesarea. Within this narrative, Arius is the recalcitrant heresiarch who denied the divinity of Christ, contrary to the established orthodoxy of the church. He then initiated a schismatic movement of Arian thinkers who created all manner of problems for the church in the post-Constantinian era. However, chiefly through the efforts of the Nicene Council of 325 CE, and later its ratification and expansion in Constantinople in 381, orthodoxy finally won out against a faction of heretical interlopers. Arius, the intellectual leader of this movement, was sanctioned and excommunicated, and would eventually suffer a rather ignominious death before his readmittance into sacramental communion – an auspicious sign of divine judgement if there ever was one.[4]

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek recounting of the narrative of the 'Arian' crisis is nowadays widely recognised as a tendentious and distorting narrative.[5] 'Arianism' is a phantom concept: we are now aware of the conflicting theologies of the anti-Nicene networks, and Arius's marginal and even absent presence in their argumentation (Hanson 1988:123–128; Wiles 1993).[6] His reception among the anti-Nicenes could even approach dismissive or critical registers as seen, for example, in the evaluation of Arius by the 'neo-Arian' historian Philostorgius.[7] Moreover, this image retrojects back into the pre-Nicene period a picture of 'orthodoxy' that is certainly anachronistic, especially as regards the divine status of Christ. For one thing, it is pretty much a staple of historical scholarship on the question that the ontological subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, in some fashion or another, was commonplace among many of the Apologists and pre-Nicene church fathers (Latinovic 2017). Arius was therefore hardly an outlier in his opinions on this matter – even though he pressed these traditions into novel directions (cf. Löhr 2007). By and large, the opinion now is that Arius, rather than being an unreformable heretic, was a conservative theologian within a broadly Alexandrian tradition, with a concern for doing justice to the variety of scriptural depictions of the divine Son (Williams 2001). Because of this, the tendency of 'revisionist' scholarship on Arius has been to demonstrate his placement within the theological traditions of his time, rather than seeing him as a kind of theological surd within a basically 'orthodox' environment.[8] Many of his opinions, to the extent that they can be inferred from the surviving texts (which are limited), find coherency within a landscape of Middle Platonist theology, such as we find in Numenius, and exemplified in Philo, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria.[9] Even though he can be placed within a broad network of 'Eusebian' theologians, Arius nonetheless also had a common cause with many Nicene theologians, such as a rejection of a Sabellian collapse of the ὑποστάσεις, a Valentinian metaphysics of emanation, or any 'low Christology' in the style of Paul of Samosata. The key question for Arius centred on the grammar of divine nature and its transcendence, that is, on the distinction between creator and creature, and the whole question of how to parse this metaphysical dependence.

In this article, I cannot go into the details of the whole debate surrounding the 'Arian' crisis, which would be foolhardy. Here, rather, I will briefly summarise some of the conclusions regarding the renewed image we have of Arius, chiefly as found in the handful of surviving texts (such as the *Thalia*). Thereafter, I will discuss the Athanasian critique of Arius and his positive argument for the ὁμοούσια in his *De decretis*. I will argue that the invocation of the ὁμοούσια (despite its extra-biblical and controversial origins) was for Athanasius an articulation of the emerging 'sense' of the scriptural testimony on Jesus, and that for him it was one way to maintain the coherence of a Christian account of God's self-communication and creaturely deification. In the conclusion, which can only be a gesture, I suggest that an influx of philosophical or metaphysical innovation into the continuing reception of Nicaea is an element of the Nicaean legacy, forming a part of its hermeneutical horizon. Sometimes, I would suggest, a rupture within tradition can remake the *continuity* of a tradition.

The theological conservatism of Arius

Arius exhibits a broadly 'classical' theology, insofar as his concept of deity is something shared with the majority of early Christian thinkers.[10] He explicitly places himself among the 'holy and orthodox', those wise teachers who had received the Holy Spirit and suffered persecution (*Thalia* I.1–5).[11] For Arius, God is one, true, good, wise, unbegotten, eternal, without beginning, unchanging, unmoving, as well as the

4.Sozomen reports that some of Arius's associates believed he had been poisoned; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.29.5. For the legends surrounding the death of Arius, see Muehlberger (2015).

5.As Ayres summarises: '[T]he direction of recent work has been to focus on Arius as a catalyst for a controversy within which his particular theology rapidly becomes marginal' (2004:12n3). Also see Lienhard (1987).

6.On this point, a good example of some of this later reception can be found in the scholia contained in Gryson (1980, 1982). For instance, see the reported interaction between Ambrose and Palladius in the Acts of the Council of Aquileia, where Palladius distances himself from Arius; cf. *Scolies ariennes sur la concile d'Aquilée* 31 in Gryson (1980:352). Or the fragmentary statement by one Arian' Christian explicitly rejecting the adjective 'Arian'; cf. *Scripta Arriana Latina*, Frag. 6 in Gryson (1982:237–238). Moreover, there is the statement made by several 'Arian' bishops, recorded in Athanasius's *De synodis* 22, which explicitly records that the bishops in question denied being followers of Arius because this would imply a reversal of the ecclesial order of bishops and presbyters.

7.*Historia ecclesiastica* 2.3.1: 'While he [Philostorgius] idolizes Arius for his battle with God that he wages against the Son, he says that he [Arius] gets tangled in nonsense when he repeatedly presents God as unknowable (ἄγνωστον), incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτον), and inconceivable (ἀνεννόητον).' This of course touches on one of the key differences between Arius himself and the 'Neo-Arians', especially regarding the knowability of the divine nature. For the editions of Philostorgius, see Amidon (ed. 2007) and Bleckmann and Stein (eds. 2015).

8.This is a tendency generally within the revisionist scholarship, but one may see it already within Manlio Simonetti's classic text on the 'Arian' controversy, which he saw as a controversy internal to the 'Origenist' tradition; cf. Simonetti (1975:3–22).

9.On Arius's Platonism, see Barnard (1972), Stead (1964) and Williams (1983, 2001:181–232). Also see Stead's (1997) critical comments on Williams's thesis regarding the possible Neoplatonist influence on Arius.

10.For an overview of Arius and 'Arianism', see Brennecke (2007), Löhr (2012), Lyman (2021), Stead (1994), and Williams (2006).

11.Translation by Stuart Hall from C. Stead's reconstruction (1978) in Stevenson and Frend (eds. 1987:330–332). I have also consulted in the text of the *Thalia* in Fernández (2024:90–95). The in-text citations are in reference to the numbering of Stead. For the difficulties of reconstructing the *Thalia*, see Williams (1985).

God of the Law, the Prophets, and the New Covenant (*Urkunde* 6.1).[12] God is the source of all things, the grounding actuality on which everything else depends (*Urkunde* 6.4). There is no sense in which God depends upon anything outside of God, and it is for this reason that Arius rejects the co-eternity and consubstantiality of the Son, since this undermines divine aseity and simplicity by making God dependent on or equal to something *external* to God. This seems to be the case for the following reason: an initial point of the 'Arian' crisis seems to have been the whole question of Origen's doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, which was bound up with his related assertions on the eternity of the first creation (in its immaterial or idealised form). There was a tradition, found in Philo and possibly Clement also, of the Logos being generated as a secondary divine principle that initiated the creative process, and Origen connected these with his account of creation. Additionally, Origen's adoption of a logical correlativity of trinitarian terms, so that the Father is only the Father in relation to the Son, further strengthened the supposition that Origen bound too strictly together the divine nature to creation.[13] Arius reports in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia that what was objectionable was Alexander's teaching regarding the co-eternity and eternal generation of the Son, that is, that there was no time when the Father preceded the Son (*Urkunde* 1.2). Much like Methodius of Olympus (cf. Williams 2001:167–171), Arius strongly rejected any 'Origenist' account of necessary generation and wanted to maintain an *infinite qualitative distinction*[14] between God and creation, between the unbegotten and the begotten, between the Monad and the Dyad. There was no 'necessity' of creation; rather, created and dependent being is a product of God's will and grace.[15] Therefore, he strictly adheres to the *creatio ex nihilo*, and he holds, more or less, a traditional theology of divine transcendence. To maintain this ontological distinction, creation cannot involve a partitioning of the divine essence, which would undermine divine simplicity, nor involve a materialist division of οὐσία in a gnostic fashion. This would imply that God was corporeal, mutable and composite (*Urkunde* 6.5), or possessed a material substrate (*Urkunde* 1.3). In short, Christ could not form a 'part' of the divine essence. Furthermore, he rejected a reduction of trinitarian persons into a single identity in the manner of Sabellius[16]– hence Arius's strong opposition to the ὁμοούσια. Or, in a matter that goes to the heart of his philosophical monotheism, the doctrine of the co-eternity of the Son meant for him a metaphysical picture of two 'ingenerated' divine principles – a Manichaean conceit which most theologians, including Arius, would not countenance (*Urkunde* 6.3).

In distinction from two ingenerate principles, Arius believed that the Father had generated the Son freely and before time from non-being (*Urkunde* 1.3). He was willing to affirm that the Son was divine (*Urkunde* 1.3), and that through the Son, as the Wisdom of God, the Father had created all things (*Urkunde* 6.1). He indeed believed in a trinity of glories, and a baptism into the trinitarian name of God (*Urkunde* 30.4),[17] but that the Father as divine source exceeds the others through an infinity of glory (*Thalia* II.16–18). The Son is thus foreign [ἀνόμοιος] to the nature of the Father (*Thalia* II.19), since Arius radicalised the distinction between the οὐσίαι of the Father and the Son as a properly real distinction between the ingenerate and the generate.[18] Even though the Son is generated from the Father before the ages, the Son has a beginning in the Father, and therefore, there is a real distinction between the unbegotten and the begotten. For Arius, the Father alone is ἀγέν(ν)ητος, that is, existing without a prior cause. In his metrical poem, the *Thalia* ('The Banquet', or 'Festivity'), Arius invokes the image of the Monad who generates the Dyad (*Thalia* II.20). There is no necessary outflow of the divine nature, in contrast to a Valentinian or Neoplatonic picture, but rather a generation through the will of the Father (*Thalia* II.23–24). The divine nature is intrinsically ineffable, incomparable in glory (*Thalia* II.1), so that even the Son, as a created divinity, is unable to know the divine essence (*Thalia* II.33–34), or even know his own essence as one dependent on the will of the Father (*Thalia* II.37). Divinity is not something proper to his nature as the Son. Therefore, the Son cannot know his own essence, nor can he be considered equal or consubstantial with the Father (*Thalia* II.8–9). The Son is unable to comprehend his source in the Father since it is formally and grammatically impossible for the finite to encompass the infinite (*Thalia* II.39–42). The Father is intrinsically invisible to the Son and to creatures, but the Son is granted through the will of the Father a power of vision to see God, through a kind of spiritual perception, thereby granting the Son a beatified vision and knowledge.[19] Consequently, the Son mediates to creatures an access to the unutterable divine nature, through a communication of a spiritual vision analogous to the Son's own. Here, one might say, the Father is *inexpressibly known as the unknown* source of all things (*Thalia* II.11–14.) (cf. Löhr 2006). Christ as the begotten is the one who reveals the unbegotten, the one who reveals the eternal within time (*Thalia* II.2–5). He reveals the divine nature through an innumerable plurality of names and aspects (ἐπίνοιαι), as the wisdom, glory, image, and light of the divine nature. Christ is the one who, in a hymnic adoration of the Father, mediates, eternally and temporally, the Supreme deity in a way accommodated to creaturehood (*Thalia* II.25–32). To quote Hart (2017):

12.For editions of Arius's letters, see Opitz (ed. 1934a) and Radde-Gallwitz et al. (eds. 2017:109–113).

13.On this, see Williams (2001:117–157).

14.The Kierkegaardian turn of phrase 'infinite qualitative difference', or ideas approximating it, can be found in several of Kierkegaard's texts, such as *Journal* NB: 87.27–28. For the edition, see Kierkegaard (2011:73). The phrase was of course taken up famously by Karl Barth in his *Römerbrief* commentary.

15.The emphasis on 'the unity of will' between the Father and the Son among the anti-Nicene factions, in distinction from Nicene emphasis on 'the unity of being', has been advocated by Anatolios (2011:41–98) as one of the distinguishing nodes of emphasis between them.

16.This element of the controversy is evidenced in Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.5 in Stevenson and Frend (eds. 1987:321). For the Greek text, see Hansen (1995).

17.For the text, see Opitz (ed. 1934b). For a German translation, see Brennecke et al. (eds. 2007:121).

18.This point would be important for later 'Neo-Arian' or 'Eunomian' theologians. Cf. Aëtius, *Syntagmation* Frag. 5: 'If the Deity is ingenerated ([ἀγέννητός] in essence, what was generated was not generated by sundering of essence [οὐκ ουσίας διαστάσει]) but he posited it by his power. For no reverent reasoning permits the same essence to be both generated and ingenerated'. For text and translation, see Wickham (1968).

19.The echoes of Origen here are palpable; cf. *On First Principles* 1.1.8 and *Contra Celsum* 7.33.

> The God [*ho theos*] of Arius is a God revealed only as the hidden, of who the Logos [*theos ho logos*] bears tidings, and to whom he offers up the liturgy of rational creation; but, as the ambassador of the Father, his is the role only of a celestial high priest, the Angel of Mighty Counsel, the coryphaeus of the heavenly powers. (p. 144)[20]

Following contemporary scholarship, Arius's theology can be situated quite coherently within the gallimaufry of Alexandrian options. It aims to articulate a *real distinction* between creator and creature, and to avoid any compromise of divine simplicity and transcendence. By the standards of his day, Arius was pretty orthodox and conservative,[21] even as he tried to press more radically some of the implications of divine transcendence. Moreover, he resisted an *ontological* participation insofar as this implied a materialist rendering of the divine nature, or any kind of *necessary* outpouring of uncreated Being into created Being. The Father or Monad can create deified beings, but this is through an act of divine will, not through an ontological communion or mixture of ὑποστάσεις or οὐσίαι. The divine nature, in this sense, is not communicable or predicable of any other. The Father, the One God, is infinitely foreign to any created being, a divine οὐσία so radically different, incomprehensible, and unutterable, even the divine Son cannot comprehend it. If these are accurate summaries, then Arius is clearly an apophatic theologian of the most stringent sort; but while his emphasis is certainly radical and creative in its conclusions, it nonetheless lies within the field of theological options in the Alexandria of the third and fourth centuries.[22]

The Nicene revolution of metaphysics: On Athanasius's *De decretis*

In turning to Athanasius,[23] I will focus on the text of *De decretis Nicaenae synodi* [On the Council of Nicaea],[24] written probably in the early 350s (Barnes 1993:198–199). Here, Athanasius defends the *homoousia* and some of the related terms of the council. The language of *homoousia* was indeed controversial: in early Christian literature, it was often associated with the theological debacles of Gnosticism (Stead 1977:190–222). Tertullian's own language of *substantia* had strong materialist overtones, so that a trinitarian participation in the same substance implied a corporeal substrate (Hanson 1988: 183–184; Simonetti 1975:10). Early Church figures like Origen seem to have avoided it (though this is a topic of continued debate),[25] and Nicene figures, including Alexander of Alexandria, appear not to have used it initially (Hanson 1988:198). According to the early historical narratives, it was included in the Creed because Constantine indeed pressed for its acceptance (*Urkunde* 22.7), though this account is historically contested.[26] There were real theological challenges here: the *homoousia* could be taken in Sabellian directions, implying a single substrate to the differing manifestations of trinitarian persons. That such a risk existed is demonstrated by the example of the vehemently anti-Arian bishop, Marcellus of Ancyra, who articulated a trinitarian picture hardly different from Sabellius. Or as was often the case in the critical reception of the *homoousia*, it could be taken as implying two co-eternal principles; and for some critics, this would undermine the basic tenets of monotheism. Moreover, after Nicaea and the death of Constantine, there was significant ecclesial-political tumult between bishops in which the fortunes of the Eusebian factions were reversed, and the outcomes of Nicaea sidelined. Pro-Nicene figures such as Athanasius experienced a series of exiles and setbacks, which only made the reception of the *homoousia* even more contested.[27] It is within this polemical context regarding the reception of the *homoousia* that *De decretis* finds some contextual illumination.

It may, of course, be said again that Athanasius is not a judicious accountant of the 'Arian' crisis,[28] a historical construct which he pretty much invented. Nonetheless, he did (arguably) have some perceptive critiques of Arius's theology. Part of Athanasius's strategy, here and elsewhere, is to demonstrate the inconsistency of the opponents of Nicaea, visible in their theological diversity and their backtracking from an earlier acceptance of the Nicene Creed (cf. *De decretis* 5.6–7).[29] Athanasius focuses on the question of whether the Son is *unlike* or *foreign* to the essence of the Father [ὁ λόγος καί ξένος και ἀνόμοιος κατ᾽ οὐσίαν τοῦ πατρός ἐστιν; *De decretis* 6.1].[30] The key here is the question of whether the Son is externally related to the divine nature, as presupposed by

20.On the possible liturgical and angelical background to the *Thalia*, see Lorenz (1979:163–174) and Williams (1997).

21.On this question of Arius's conservatism, see Latinovic (2017).

22.A legitimate question might be raised here: if Arius expressed a 'conservative' theology, plausibly situated within a tradition of Alexandrian theology and metaphysics, then what was the source of the conflict? Indeed, part of the conflict was theological, and Arius expressed his position with a particular stringency, to a degree that made even some of his sympathisers worried. For instance, Eusebius of Caesarea was clearly uncomfortable with Arius's language of the Son being created 'out of nothing' (*Urkunde* 22.15; *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.15), something that Arius seems to have toned down in some of his later pronouncements (since it is not found in the *Thalia* or in his later letter to Constantine; cf. *Urkunde* 30). However, there is a continuing debate among historians as to what was the spark that set off 'the Arian Crisis'. Since the Athanasian meta-narrative of the crisis is no longer accepted at face value, scholars propose several factors that led to the crisis. The Melitian Schism, as well as tensions between charismatic teachers and bishops in the wake of this schism, have been proposed as factors (Williams 2001:32–47), but the debate continues on this front (cf. Lyman 2021). Whatever the nature of these tensions was, the summary of Fernández (2024:XXV–XXVI) expresses something of a loose consensus: 'Arius did not divide the Christian world but rather exacerbated an existing division in the Alexandrian theological tradition inside and outside Egypt'.

23.For a theological summary of Athanasius's approach, see Anatolios (2011:99–156).

24.Text in Opitz (1935a, 1935b). Translation in Anatolios (2004:142–171).

25.Origen is sometimes cited as giving an early positive appropriation of the term, as preserved in the *Apology* for Origen written by Pamphilus and translated by Rufinus, but the likelihood that this single occurrence within a quotation goes back to Origen himself, is controversial since Origen was resistant to any language of the Son being generated out of the *ousia* of the Father (cf. Hanson 1988:185; Williams 2001:131–148). However, see Edwards (1998) for a contrasting view.

26.For this edition, see ed. Opitz 1934b. Cf. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.8. For Constantine's involvement in the council, see Barnes (2014:120–126), Drake (2021), and Van Dam (2021). Other sources suggest that the inclusion of the *homoousios* was pressed by Alexander, or collectively by Alexander and Hosius of Cordova, Philostorgius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 1.7), and Ambrose of Milan (*On the Faith* 3.15.15). For more, see Edwards (2021:145–149).

27.For more on the contested reception of the *homoousia* and the Nicene Creed, see Parvis (2021).

28.Besides the clear vitriol and demonisation of his opponents, his polemical strategy can be broadly seen as an attempt to trace all the outgrowths of 'Arian' or 'Eusebian' theology to their founding source in the heresy of Arius.

29.Cf. his overall strategy in the *De Synodis.* The in-text citation will be shortened to the standard *De decretis.*

30.Here we might pick up a reference to the kind of statement one finds in *Thalia* II.19.

the language of *homoiousios* or *heteroousios*, or whether the divine Son is proper [ἴδιος] to the essence of the Father (*De decretis* 23). For Athanasius, like Arius, God does not exist like other things: God is self-existing and comprehends all things, existing *inside* things according to his power and goodness, and *outside* created things (ἔξωθεν) according to his divine nature (*De decretis* 13). Thus, it is a question of whether the relation between the Father and the Son, to use contemporary jargon, is an *external* or *internal* relation, that is, whether it is contingent or essential.[31] Athanasius spends some time trying to determine what the nature of Christ's sonship is for 'the Arians' and 'the Eusebians': is it attained through moral achievement, as when Moses speaks of the 'sons' of God as the ones who keep the law, or is it rather analogous to natural offspring? If the former, Christ clearly is not qualitatively different from other righteous human beings.[32] If the latter, this would go against the Arian argument that the Son is intrinsically foreign or alien to the nature of the Father, and therefore ἀνόμοιος (*De decretis* 10). If his opponents want to avoid this conclusion, then Athanasius presents another option: one argument for the relative superiority of the Son is that it is only the Son whom the Father creates *directly* while everything else is created *through* the Son, as a kind of divine assistant since God does not create the world directly. This is because it could not withstand the deity, and moreover, it would lower the divine *ousia* to an unacceptable degree.[33] This will not do for Athanasius, since the scriptural witness clearly says that God is the creator of all things; moreover, it does not divide up creative activities between the Father and the Son, but rather that the Father creates all things through the Son (*De decretis* 7). The Word is presupposed *for* the act of creation and not a product *of* creation. However, there is also a philosophical reason for why this is incoherent for Athanasius: echoing something like Plato's[34] and Aristotle's Third Man Argument,[35] whereby a *separation* of transcendent forms from their particular instances leads to an infinite regress of formal mediation. Athanasius argues that if the Son is a creature, even a divine one, then presumably the same problem arises for the creation of the Son, which would then imply an infinite regress of mediators (*De decretis* 8.1–2). Elsewhere, like in *Contra Arianos* (II.21–22; 67–69),[36] Athanasius argues for something analogous regarding redemption: since the Supreme deity cannot be joined with creatures, and the Arian Christ is a creature *per definition*,[37] Christ cannot deify creatures, for Christ cannot give what he does not have, namely an integral, deified union with the Father. Moreover, even though God could grant salvation through the divine will or fiat, like the Son's own created divinity, this would not involve a real union since deification remains external to creatures. In this schema of mediation, God and humanity could never be reconciled or brought into saving contact, since God would always be held in reserve, as an inscrutable divine being and will, in the hinterland of his created emissary (see Williams 2001:239–242).

By contrast, for Athanasius, like Origen, the generation of the Son is *internal* to the definition of the Father. He would not be the Father without the Son. God does not generate the Son like humans procreate, which involves a portioning of themselves into their offspring. For him, the generation of the Son involves no such partitioning of the divine nature, nor a participation in it, but an eternal communication of divine simplicity, without any materialist division (*De synodis* 48, 51).[38] The Son is not external to the divine nature, or created through divine will, but exists eternally from the nature of the Father (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός; *De decretis* 13; cf. *Contra Arianos* III.65).[39] There is thus a fundamental distinction for Athanasius between being generated [γεννάσθαι] and coming-into-being [γενέσθαι] (cf. Stead 1964:22). Of course, Athanasius also says – *qua* his adoption of human nature– that the Eternal Word *is* considered creaturely. Indeed, through the incarnation, the Divine Son adopts the *covering* of the human body and thereby divinises it, rendering it immortal (*De decretis* 14). But this is properly spoken of his human nature and not his divine one. And indeed, as he says, created Being also exists, in some way, *from* the divine nature, in the sense that it does not spring from pure contingency and chance but exists through a creation from non-being (*De decretis* 19). However, unlike the Son it is not a proper or internal relation but an external one.

Therefore, since the divine nature is immutable, the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and so does not become the Father of the Son through a creative act (*De decretis* 11–12). He is not made from nothing but is the Father's proper offspring (cf. *De decretis* 19; 29). Thus, the names given to Christ, like Radiance, Wisdom, Image, and Word, signify the eternally and properly derived nature of the Son from the Father (*De decretis* 16–17). The symbols or *paradeigma* articulate this

31.The language of *external* and *internal* relations is contemporary philosophical jargon and is used to clarify whether any specific relation may be considered as contingent or necessary element of a propositional content or description. If I say that a P (predication or property) is internally related to S (subject of predication), this is to say that S is necessarily related to P, so that the definition or self-identity (X) of S is bound to P. This means that S=X if and only if it has a relation with P. Contrariwise, if such a P relation is lacking, then S≠X. In our example, the concepts of the father and the son can be grasped as an internal relation since if one of the relational terms is lacking their definitional content changes, while the concept of creation (at least in orthodox renderings) is not considered constitutive to the divine nature but contingent, and therefore can be understood as an *external* relation, that is as not being a necessary element of its identity. On the whole problematic of 'relations' more generally, see MacBride (2016).

32.Athanasius's argument here might be somewhat misdirected, at least as far as Arius's own teaching is concerned, since there is little indication in the available material that Christ for him was morally exalted because of his virtuous attainment, whether proleptically or not, since this would probably bring Arius himself close to the exaltation Christology of Paul of Samosata, something that Arius himself denied since he did not believe in the mutability of the Son's divine status.

33.Cf. Asterius, *Syntagmation*, Frag. 27–29, in Vinzent (1993:96–97). Cf. Frag. 27: 'Since the rest of the creatures could not bear the action of the direct hand of the Unbegotten, only the Son was produced by God alone, while the other things have been produced through the Son as a collaborator and assistant' (in Fernández 2024:89). On the relationship between the *Syntagmation* and the *Thalia*, see DelCogliano (2018).

34.*Parmenides* 132a–b.

35.*Metaphysics* M 1086a33–b12.

36.For the text, Kannengiesser et al. (2019). Translation in Anatolios (2004:89–141).

37.We should add here though that Arius in the extant texts nowhere refers to the Son as κτίσμα or ποίημα (Stead 1964:28). The context of the Son being created *ex nihilo* and not being eternally generated from the Father, implies that the Son inhabits a liminal space within Arius's cosmology: neither a creature as other creatures, nor divine as the Father is divine.

38.For text, see Opitz (1935c, 1935d). For translation, see Radde-Gallwitz et al. (eds. 2017:150–215).

39.Athanasius states that the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός was first used by Theognostus of Alexandria (*De Decretis* 25).

proper relationality; light, wisdom, or image are not foreign to the divine essence but indeed proper [*idion*] to it (*De decretis* 23–24).[40] It is partly for this reason that Athanasius resists the Arian preference for the concept of *the unoriginated*, not just because this language is extra-biblical but because it separates the ingenerate and the generate, whereas the concepts of paternity and filiation maintain an 'integral' connection between these terms (*De decretis* 30–31). For Athanasius, despite its innovative and extra-biblical origins, the concept of *homoousios* was appropriated at Nicaea to gather together the sense [διάνοιαν] of the Scriptures and here especially regarding the proper and integral relationality of the Father to the Son (*De decretis* 20–21).[41] Despite its controversial status, it articulates things better than other options, for example the *homoiousia*[42] because it expresses the Son being 'internal' to the divine nature itself, and not merely 'externally' related such as those who achieve a likeness to God through virtue (*De decretis* 20), or have attained it from divine grace (*De decretis* 22). Rather, the Son is eternally derived from the being of the Father and not through a contingent, external relation produced through the divine will. It is precisely this intrinsic correlation of paternity and generation that believers receive through the Spirit, and into which they are *enfolded*,[43] by the One who deifies creatures and leads them into that filiation where they address God as *Abba* (*De decretis* 31). Anatolios (2011) writes concerning Athanasius:

> As perfect Image, the Son is immediately united to the Father and transparently reflects knowledge of the Father; anything short of this immediate and transparent relation would deconstruct our immediate connection with the Father through the Son from the divine side. Through his incarnation, the Son repairs our human participation in his imaging of the Father from within the human constitution; anything short of a full incarnation would leave humans disconnected from both Father and Son. (p. 107)

It is worth unpacking some implications of this, since there is something genuinely novel happening here in terms of the history of thought. One might even call it *a Nicene revolution of metaphysics*.[44] The theology of Arius, as we have seen, is situated broadly in a Middle or Neoplatonist schema. Here, the transcendent God, or the One, stands at the intellectual apex of hypostatic entities, in which the One remains beyond intellection or any contact with lower beings. For Arius, the Father is the ineffable and the unoriginated, being fundamentally unlike [ἀνόμοιος] any created essence – even the Son. Much like the Plotinian One that is incognisable – since any act of knowing introduces a duality of reflection into the One – Arius similarly proposes a God who is beyond all thinkability, only dimly perceived through a spiritual vision, granted to creatures by grace. By contrast, Nicene theology proposes a 'new kind of metaphysics' (Hart 2017:163) in which one could say that the *ontic* and the *ontological* are truly distinguished.[45] Instead of an asymptotic horizon or withdrawal reaching to the unknowable Monad, Athanasius sees the Son's proper relationality to the Father as one proceeding from the essence of the Father [ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός]. It implies a *transcendence* of both a Middle or Neoplatonist chain of being and any subordinationist Christology. While still maintaining a radical difference between the created and the uncreated, it indeed involves a reformulation of the whole relation of transcendence and immanence through a kind of 'transcendent immediacy' (Hart 2017:148). God the Father is no longer an apophatic surd beyond all intellection, but rather the One who is essentially *generative* and *communicative*, so that the Son, as the true Image and Radiance of the Father, is proper [ἴδιος] to the divine essence. Unlike the innumerable ἐπίνοιαι of *Thalia*, which in their enumeration gesture towards the Son's alienation and distance from the Monad, here the conceptual unfolding of Christ's significance is a revealing of the divine nature, insofar as Christ is the Word, Image, and Radiance *of* the Father. Through the incarnation of the Son, the communicative nature of the divine essence is expressed radically.[46] In the condescension to the finite, the divine essence is truly revealed. Here, no *part* of God is reserved within revelation, which would imply a corporeal picture or composition; rather, revelation is a self-revealing and self-communication of the divine essence to creatures in Christ through a participation in the Holy Spirit – something that Athanasius discusses in his *Letters to Serapion.* For if there is only a chain of mediators without a real communion or contact with God, and thus no divine presence within sinful flesh, there can be no θέωσις or immortality granted to creatures.

Tradition and rupture: The futural and retroactive dimensions of orthodoxy

In his well-known book on Arius, Rowan Williams notes that studying the 'Arian' crisis as a historical phenomenon implies becoming *coeval* with the original figures of the debate. Here, he is alluding to Johannes Fabian's concept of 'normative time' and 'coevality' – and especially the typically western imposition of a normative time upon anthropological

40.It is precisely the *idios* quality of the Son's relation to the Father that is denied by Asterius; cf. *Syntagmation,* Frag. 64.

41.On this aspect of Athanasius's thought, see Anatolios (2011:127–128).

42.Basil of Ancyra himself used the phrase ὅμοιος κατ' οὐσίαν (cf. Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.14).

43.I take this language of *enfolding* from Anatolios (2004:143).

44.By talking of a 'Nicene' revolution of metaphysics, I should probably say that the specific way Athanasius appropriates Nicaea was *not* the only one on offer. Since the Creed was a compromise document, non-Homoousian theologians could also interpret the text to underwrite a subordinationist Christology, while still distancing themselves from Arius (e.g. Eusebius of Caesarea). However, it is the Athanasian interpretation, in the end, which would be the most decisive on church teaching.

45.Adopting elements of the early Heidegger regarding the *ontological difference* between Being and beings, with *the ontic* referring to particular entities as they exist in the world, while *the ontological* articulates more generic structures of existence, that order and delimit the way any being may *be* in the world.

46.Anatolios (2011) states:
> Ultimately, Athanasius's theology of the trinitarian naming of the divine strictly implies the priority of the cataphatic over the apophatic in the Christian vision of God. And he does not merely assert that positive statements about God are truer than negative statements. Over against negative statements that deny creaturely attributes to God, he prioritizes not merely a set of positive statements likening God to creatures but the immeasurably more awesome possibility that we can name God from within God's very being and self-naming. It is not we who name God thus. Rather, God is named from within God's self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we are enfolded into this intra-divine self-naming through the incarnation of the Word. (p. 132)

subjects of study (Fabian 1983). Here, the imposition of a 'normative time' often involves a refusal to experience the 'relativisation' of one's own time, to allow different temporalities to intersect in the present. To study the development of Christian orthodoxy as *history*, involves seeing 'orthodoxy' as something of the *future* within the dialectic of Early Christianity. Orthodoxy was in many ways, an attempt to deepen 'the Christian concerns of the teachers it set out to condemn', so that engaging in 'a bristly undialectical rhetoric today of 'conserving' and 'defending' a clear deposit of faith, may come less easily to us' (Williams 2001:24). Both 'Arians' and 'Catholics' were attempting to develop an account of normative faith, and the boundaries between what came to be called 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' are often very thin indeed. The *futural* dimension of orthodoxy, however, should be pressed somewhat further: if orthodoxy is going to be a living tradition today, it cannot be a repristination of a mythologised past, a kind of false memory or confabulation, inattentive to the contingency of its formation. To quote Williams (2001:24–25) once more: 'There is no absolute *locus standi* above the struggle; there is, ideally, a continuing conversation that must be exploratory and innovative even when it is also polemical. Orthodoxy continues to be *made*'.

The innovative element of Christian orthodoxy is evident, as we have seen, in the reception of the ὁμοούσιος and ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός. The history of its adoption is not a linear narrative of the church triumphant holding out against its heretical opponents. That is certainly an untenable reading of the matter. However, that such language could be accepted after qualification indicates not only the contingency of their adoption, but also something characteristic about Christian doctrines or *symbola* more generally. Theological definitions exhibit a pliancy, which say enough to establish coherence, while allowing an 'openness' at their edges (Tanner 2025). On this point, the problem of the *homoousia* is indeed a problem of *theological* language. It illustrates what happens when there is a transference of ontic terms from their ordinary use into a theological register, an analogical transferral from one domain to another.[47] However, because we are dealing with a reality capable of infinite symbolisation, the scope of this transference, its *intentional horizon*,[48] is something inexhaustible. It betokens, in the words of Hart (2020):

> [*T*]he nimbus of the unseen that shines all around the seen, a boundless excess of meaning that lies beyond the scope of every formulation of the faith, an open distance that at once frustrates and continuously urges devotion and reflection toward a final rest. (pp. 105–106)

If, as Nicaea implies, God's infinite self-communication has occurred through Christ in the Spirit, then the Holy Trinity is indeed truly given and revealed to us. God can be named, spoken to and communed with because the Son is ὁμοούσια and ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρός. God is infinitely sayable and nameable. Unlike an Arian conceptual proliferation that underscores the distance of the Father from everything else, post-Nicene theology teaches an infinite self-revelation and condescension: the Word became flesh. This also means that the infinite communication of the Trinity relativises any creedal or symbolic definition; it makes them *eschatologically* directed, open to that final horizon of intentionality intimated by the living source of tradition (Hart 2022).

The Nicene revolution of ancient metaphysics gestures to an aspect of traditions: they are often formed by what Michel de Certeau called 'a rupture of continuity', a certain break with the past. In a Christian context, Certeau (2000:235) linked this rupture to the act of discipleship, the *turning around* of the early Christ-followers which, for him, exemplified 'the gesture of Jesus'. I would want to read this phrase both in the subjective and objective sense of the genitive. In our case, it implies a rupture which, on the one hand, interrupts a linear and magisterial narrative of doctrinal development. On the other hand, I would say that it is precisely this rupture that remakes and reimagines our continuity with the past. The rupture of continuity implies an *invention* of the past, both in the sense of a *making* and *finding* – here playing on the double meaning of *inventio*. To quote Hart (2020:108; cf. also 2022), while it is indeed true that 'every dogma draws upon the practices and language of the past, it also constitutes at once a synthesis and an innovation and may even so radically alter the meaning of past beliefs and claims that something entirely new is introduced into the tradition (albeit under the aspect of a *venerable* truth)'. If this is so, then I would suggest that one *horizon* of Nicaea – to invoke the spirit of Gadamer (2004) – might be an ever-renewed *inventio* of metaphysics. Because of the incarnation, we can say that God is both within and beyond ontology, communicated truly into the constraints of creaturely forms while simultaneously being the transcendent source of those forms. Even if we follow Thomistic accounts, which emphasise that God himself is not the subject of metaphysics,[49] one can still say that the incarnation legitimates both a transcendence of metaphysics by theology, and a continuing and fallible elaboration of theology by metaphysical concepts. I understand the spectre of ontotheology[50] haunts any invocation of this sort. However, if what I have been suggesting about the metaphysical revolution of Nicaea is broadly accurate, then it gestures to a *theological* transformation of ancient ontology. If God as Trinity is essentially communicative and generative, then God *is* simply an infinite movement of giving and receptivity

47.Didymus the Blind references this in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (*De spiritu sancto*) only preserved in a Latin translation of Jerome):
Now every human term can indicate nothing other than corporeal things, and the Trinity […] is beyond all material substances. For these reasons, no word can be applied to him in the proper sense and thereby signify his substance. Rather, when we speak about incorporeals in general and especially about the Trinity, everything we say is said καταχρηστικῶς, that is, in an improper sense. (p. 167)
Translation from DelCogliano Radde-Gallwitz and Ayres (eds. 2011). For the Latin translation of Jerome, see Doutreleau (ed. 1992).

48.I use 'intentional horizon' or 'intentionality' in a phenomenological sense insofar as I am referring to the way our consciousness or knowledge is always *directed to* or *about* something. However, it has an extra valence here, drawing especially from *nouvelle théologie* regarding the natural desire for the supernatural, that the ultimate horizon of intention is the divine. In the specific context I am using it here, it draws heavily from Hart's application of transcendental intentionality to the question of doctrinal development (Hart 2022).

49.For an exposition of this aspect of Thomas, see Marion (2012:199–236).

50.*Ontotheology* is a term coined by Immanuel Kant, but most famously associated with Martin Heidegger. It generally refers to that form of philosophical inquiry that seeks to ground entities in the highest being, or to understand God in light of such entities. For Heidegger (1969:42–74), the problem with 'ontotheology' is that it tends to conflate the being and beings, rather than thinking their *difference*. For his most famous treatment, see Heidegger's 'The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics'). For a summary, see Pattison (2021).

in which nothing of God is held in reserve. There is no God, so to speak, 'behind' Christ as if Christ did not really communicate the essence of the Father. To see Christ is indeed to see the Father. However, it should be stressed, this does not negate the apophatic. The logic of transcendence and immanence is grounded in the internal life of the Trinity. God is God through God in an eternal outpouring of generation, reception, and love, and it is this trinitarian relation that grounds the self-diffusion of divine life in creation, incarnation and redemption.[51] In this light, one could say that the *homoousia,* in its Nicene acceptation, reinvents ancient metaphysics, reframing the categories of logic, essence, being, substance, relation, and causality. If the relation between God and creation is not framed in a competitive or dualistic manner but rather as a 'transcendent immediacy', a reimagining of transcendence and immanence, then the outcome of this means that our metaphysical categories will continue to be ruptured and remade theologically. To echo the sentiment of Kierkegaard: to repeat Nicaea today is to repeat it *differently*.[52]

The form of this non-identical repetition continues to be negotiated and contested in every context and epoch. The Christian faith has no *locus standi* outside of history: it is a continuing tradition and extended argument within time – an *enacted narrative*, to use the language of MacIntyre (2007:211). It establishes its coherence within a historical trajectory, a recollection that gathers a sense of continuity through a tracing of its history, as a series of moves and gestures within a longer narrative. The way any specific continuity or discontinuity is judged legitimate is largely dependent on whether any such gesture makes *sense* of the larger developing narrative – as Athanasius argued vis-à-vis the *homoousia.* But this development need not be a linear one, nor does it suppose that all the elements remain unchanged throughout this development. Much like the myth of the Ship of Theseus, its historical identity is found not in the originality or authenticity of any one of its elements. Rather, it is found in a lived story, within the extended argument that is the tradition. It maintains its identity in a continuing reception of the Christ-event, as that climax of God's historical dealings with Israel, orientated to the horizon of God's apocalyptic disclosure (Hart 2022). Various attempts to establish an unchanging kernel or essence of Christianity, as well as pleas for reducing the tradition to its lowest common denominator, all fail as attempts to narrate this continuity. There is little consensus among Christians as to what constitutes the criteria for discerning the substantial or the merely accidental, or what would count as 'authentic' Christianities from which we could extract an 'essence' or 'lowest common denominator' (Brümmer 2006:375–390). Moreover, a shift or change in one area of Christian faith may lead to a reimagining of the identity of Christianity overall. If there is something like Christian 'orthodoxy', it is a norm-guiding process gathered through a retrospective accounting of the sense of Christian tradition. This, in turn, is founded on a basic rupture: the coming of the kingdom of God. Fidelity to Nicaea today then cannot be a mere repetition of formulae or the canons – important as these may be for the historical identity of Christianity (cf. Vosloo 2023). It must also involve a continuing witness within ecclesial life to the unfathomable generosity of God's self-presentation in Christ and the Spirit. If the divine life, in an infinite and unrestricted way, has entered the flesh of the human, then the meaning of Jesus is not an event closed off to a particular epoch, but is generative of an infinite symbolisation throughout the aeons. It is a 'lagging epiphany', to adopt a suggestive phrase of DeHart (2021:18), in which the enfleshed Logos is continually manifested through human signs and their reception, through its continual 'handing-over' in tradition and liturgical celebration (cf. Riches 2016:63–70).

51.Cf. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 2.82.

52.Alluding to Kierkegaard's (1983:171) account in *Repetition*, when he says of his failed attempt to repeat the experience of the Königstadter Theater: 'there simply is no repetition and had verified it by having it repeated in every possible way' (cf. Pickstock 2013).

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