

Arius in the Mirror:

The Alexandrian Dissent And How It Is Reflected in Modern Unitarian Universalist Practice and Discourse

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1. The Strength of Arianism Through the Ages

Here in these early years of the twenty-first century of the Common Era, I call myself a Unitarian Universalist. For a few hundred years before I was naming myself, my spiritual ancestors called themselves either Unitarians or Universalists. For a hundred or so years before that, they were called Socinians, or the Minor Church, or the Polish Brethren, or even, sometimes, just Christians. At times, my spiritual ancestors were dismissed as Origenists and Erigenists because they shared the universal hopes for the restoration of all souls shared by both Origen and John “the Scot” Erigena. Earlier in history, they were sometimes lambasted by their critics as Pelagians, after the Irish monk Pelagius, with whom they shared a heartfelt defense of innate human dignity.

But throughout the largest part of their religious history, my religious ancestors were called Arians. Their reluctant namesake was an individual who lived in early fourth century North Africa. We know him only by a single and very common Hellenistic name, Arius. About his two presumed other names, according to Roman practice, we simply know nothing.

In the fourth century, the Arian Controversy named after him was a pivotal conflict in the history of the ironically called All-Embracing (katholikos) Church. Although Arius literally lost his place at the Eucharistic table during the eastern leadership conference at Nicaea in 325 C.E., the name Arian lived on for many centuries. The Emperor Constantinus himself, in his splendid new capital in Anatolia called after his own name, is commonly reported to have been baptized late in life by his chaplain, bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, who apparently had been sympathetic toward Arius. And despite the intense emotions generated by the controversy, with anathemas and excommunications hurled in every direction, Arian bishops continued to hold posts for a hundred years after Arius died . Furthermore, the German Visigoths who occupied Spain were Arians until just a few decades before the

Muslims crossed over from North Africa. The Ostrogoths in Northern Italy were Arian, too. Indeed, Arianism dominated parts of Germany itself for centuries. Finally, due to constant legalistic and ecclesiastic harassment, it slowly faded as a large public movement in opposition to more orthodox theology.

For a while after the 8th Century, the name Arian almost seems to have disappeared entirely, except when dug up as an insult to hurl against the theology of selected individual dissenters. But just over a thousand years after Arius died, Arianism surfaced again in the European community. Today, historians often use the phrase “anti-Trinitarian” to refer to *individuals* in Italy or Spain (i.e like Miguel Serveto) who expressed something like the Arian position on the Trinity, without nominally basing their theology clearly on Arius. But the greatest community of *self-named* Arians since the days of fourth-century Egypt and Lybia could be found in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. The Arians there were also called by many other names as I said earlier. And much later, these particular Arians were called Socinians after their favored theologian, the Senese immigrant Fausto Paolo Sozzini (Socinus in Latin). True, he somewhat watered down their original social radicalism as well as slightly altered Arius’ concept of God. For Arius, God was un-changingly unknowable. But for Sozzini, God was clearly growing, limited in knowledge but knowable through the scriptures read “plainly.” Yet, despite these small modifications, the 16th Century Arian period in Poland, according to Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz, was “the Golden Age” of Polish letters. It was a time of great cultural development. Poland, he writes, was a “*paradisus hereticorum*,” a paradise for heretics. And these “heretics” revived Arius’ ancient vision for a new era, and encoded it, first into their lives, and then into their widely disseminated book, the Catechism published at Rakow.

(The History of Polish Literature, Czeslaw Milosz, University of California Press , p. xvi and 29)

The Racovian Catechism would eventually spread the ancient message across Western Europe, but especially to Dutch and English speaking areas of Europe, and thus eventually to the Anglo-Colonies. For example, many of the Arians from Poland and Lithuania, exiled by the Polish Diet in the mid 17th Century, made their way to Amsterdam

and other cities in Nether-land, bearing their theological books with them. In a very short time, Arian thinking in its Socinian form was so prevalent. and considered so deadly a toxin to the Dutch body politic, that Anti-Socinian laws were passed frantically for generations.

Furthermore, the Arianism among the Collegiants, the radical pluralistic group that even attracted the great rational skeptic Spinoza, is well documented. Arianism even frequently tempted the ministers and laity among the Remonstrants. Now Holland too was a *paradisus hereticorum*.

(Cf. *The Dutch Republic, 1477-1806* Jonathan Israel, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995 p. 909-916)

In England, prominent scholars like Sir Isaac Newton and John Milton were articulate Arians. In fact, Newton and the influential John Locke both had extensive shelves of *Sociniana* in their personal libraries, as well as fresh new Arian tomes from German theologians, who wrote under the influence of Polish Arians who had emigrated there.

Those not usually embraced by Unitarian history also embraced Arianism. In 1668 William Penn, the great English Friend, was imprisoned in the Tower of London for denying the eternal divinity of Christ. He did this in a book beautifully and explicitly defending Arius against his most blustery critic, Athanasius, called "The Sandy Foundation Shaken." (The title refers to Luke 6: 46-49, which criticizes those who build their homes on sand instead of rock.)

Several English dissenters among the Presbyterians considered themselves to be either Arians *or* Socinians. The two words were *not* seen as synonyms by some in the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, the dissenting minister Joseph Priestley considered himself to be an Arian at one period of his life, a Socinian at another, and an out-and-out Unitarian in the later part of his life. His Unitarianism, however, was a unique materialist monism which I am convinced would have totally perplexed Arius himself. The plentitude of Arians among the Church of England clerics as well as among dissenters impressed the not-easily-impressed Voltaire enough that, in 1734, he composed a lengthy letter describing their rational influence in England: "On the Socinians, or Arians, or Anti-Trinitarians." But obviously for Voltaire, unlike for Priestley, the three words all referred to the same basic idea.

Some Arians immigrated to the so-called New World. Others discovered their Arianism in the Anglo-colonies. Still others felt its pull in their theological hearts but kept quiet about it. For example, William Penn left the Tower of London eventually and moved to the area of the Anglo-colonies that one day would be named after him, but he never much raised the Arian issue again. However, though William Penn suffered prison for his explicit Arianism in England, other Quaker theologians expressed themselves not so much as Arians, but in the manner of the pre-Arian theologian Sabellius, claiming Father, Son and Spirit to be simply modes or masks of the singular God. Still, Penn's Arianism did not lose itself entirely in the shell-game of Sabellianism. For example, Mary Dyer, a Quaker of Massachusetts, made an even clearer Arian statement just before her execution than the Spanish upstart Miguel Serveto had made at his stake in Geneva. She cried out in 1660, "I came to do the will of my Father, and in obedience to his will, I stand even to this death."

Arianism took explicit hold among many liberal ministers of the Standing Order. For example, John Adams and his wife Abigail attended a church in Braintree where the minister clearly claimed Arianism and preached from that viewpoint. And John Adams himself is often called a Unitarian in our modern Unitarian Universalist literature, but it would be fairer to call him an Arian, like his minister.

All in all, though Arianism was always something of a minority expression in post-Reformation European history, it has attracted some of the most remarkable people and groups in the history of the Christian West. But of the original namesake of the teaching, the presbyter Arius, we know little supportable by reliable historical documentation.

We know plenty, however, about how his reported life has been distorted by those who disagreed with him. He is most often portrayed as a cranky and rank old man who stubbornly refused to believe in the "all-embracing" Christian affirmation of *Trinitas*. This is, of course, the famous philosophical concept of God, understood as one *essence* (ousia) consisting nonetheless of three equal but different *realities or characters* (hupostaseis). Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christian text books, often trying to define things in terms comfortable to this now long-taught doctrine, often insist that Arius taught a sort of vertical but unequal *Trinitas*. They insist he put the great and supreme Father on

top, the semi-divine Son in the middle and the encouraging but barely divine Spirit on the bottom. This kind of distortion is not much different from saying that Jesus of Galilee preached that a mere belief in the saving quality of his death is “the gospel.” The concept that the Arian controversy reduces to a duel between Trinities abuses the complex and rich worldview of Arius of Alexandria.

Invective against Arius is still prevalent in our own day, among Christians of both the East and West. D. G Kousolos, for example, in his book on Constantine the Great

(The Life and Times of Constantine the Great, Rutledge Press, Danbury CT 1997 p. 346-347)

adds biased emotional interpretation to every description of Arius in his book. As Arius speaks, the bishops “listened with horror” to his “blasphemy.” Toe-the-line Roman Catholic and Protestant authors treat Arius with equal contempt, dismissing him as simplistic, or burying Arianism under piles of innuendo. For example, Vivian Green, in his history of Christianity written as recently as 1996, writes “The Arian heresy had been long in festering.”

(Vivian Green, A New History of Christianity, Continuum, 1996)

And Mark Noll, in his history of important turning points in Christian history, dismisses Arianism as a mere “*intuition*” which could not “be supported by a dextrous (sic) use of the Bible.”

Thus he criticizes Arianism for the same reasons that folks like Andrews Norton criticized Waldo Emerson’s “infidelity” fifteen hundred years later.

(Mark Noll, Turning Points, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1997 p. 54-55)

And J.W.C Wand, an Anglican Bishop of London some 50 years ago, says quite sharply, “The effect of Arius’ teaching was to produce a piece of mythology.” These are damning words indeed, for in the 1950’s the word “mythology” did not have the non-judgmental character it does in our own post-Joseph Campbell days. And worse, he swipes at Arius as having a “literalist mind.”

(J.W. C. Wand, The Four Great Heresies, A.R. Mowbray, London, 1955)

Athanasius himself, one of our chief sources of information about Arius and his teaching, began these diatribes over 1600 years ago. He can barely contain his bitter rage at the very existence of this man. Historian John Holland Smith expresses his prejudice in plain words, "Athanasius was no angel of truth and justice." And historian T.G. Elliot describes Athanasius aptly as "a bitter and vehement adversary who *was not scrupulous.*" (*italics mine*)

(*John Holland Smith, Constantine the Great, Scribners, NY, 1971; T. G. Elliot The Christianity of Constantine the Great, University of Scranton Press 1996*)

The much younger Athanasius invented a derogatory legend that the aged Arius died of some explosive internal bleeding in a lavatory in Constantinopolis. Athanasius insists triumphantly that God himself struck the elderly man in the bowels and made them burst open because he had perjured himself before the Emperor Constantinus a few hours earlier.

Such histrionics hardly count for evidence. We actually don't know when and where or how Arius died. But Athanasius' furious fictions are still considered sober history by many modern religious commentators. (*Cf. T.G. Elliot The Christianity of Constantine the Great, as above.*)

The scorn against Arius by certain parties is represented by over-the-top legends too, fictions which nonetheless strike many of the conventionally pious as easily believable. One popular legend, reported as factual in many Eastern Orthodox theological writings and web-sites in particular, involves the Bishop of Myra himself, St. Nikolas (AKA Santa Claus). Supposedly, he grew so enraged at Arius' utterance that he left his seat at the Council of Nicaea, went up, and buffed Arius in the chops, knocking him to the ground.

Of course we know this is a fiction because the official and quite thorough list of all the attendees of the council does not contain Nikolas' name. He was safely at home in Myra the whole time.

There can be little doubt that Arius evoked extreme controversy. But, before I offer you what little is known about Arius, and engage his theology as a modern Unitarian Universalist, I need to set the stage and clarify the context.

2. The Sociological, Philosophical and Theological Setting

Alexandria was the largest city on earth for most of the duration of the Roman Empire. Today it is remembered for its superior and vast library and research complex, the *Museon*, (House of the Muses) from which word we take the English word “museum.” Unfortunately, the complex had been reduced to ruins during the civil conflicts of the 270’s, so it was of no avail to Arius.

Alexandria was also known for one of the “wonders of the world,” it’s famed *pharos*, or lighthouse, which could, by its exceptional mirrors, cast its powerful and saving beam over 130 kilometers off the shore.

Alexandria was blest with a colorful and fabled history. Founded on the Nile Delta by great Alexander himself, the area’s history was rich with characters as well known in those days as in our own. I speak of Rameses (Ra-Mesu) the Great, who held his court in nearby Avaris, Iulius Caesar and Marcus Antonius of Rome, who rivaled in its palaces, and the remarkable, and final *p’ro* (*pharaoh*) of the last dynasty of Egypt, Kleopatra VII.

The city boasted a cosmopolitan culture second to none, including Rome. A Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jewish community flourished there, and during it’s heyday, just after the death of Kleopatra, almost one quarter of the population of Alexandria was Jewish, making it a slightly larger “Jewish City,” population wise, than even Hierosolyma (Jerusalem) in Palestina. One of the books found in the Bible among the Apocrypha, the Book of Wisdom, was written by a member of this influential Jewish community.

Alexandria was built on a narrow isthmus that hemmed in Lake Mareotis from the Great Sea. Its double harbor with its famed smooth waters was without peer in the ancient world. Its tree-lined boulevards and fine Hellenistic buildings, white and gold and red-tiled in the hot Mediterranean sun, lent it grandeur not unlike that of Rome at its best or elegant Ephesos. Via Canopica, its main colonnaded avenue over thirty meters wide, was the beautiful heart of the city’s businesses and commercial life, and literally cut the city in two. Theaters, impressive tombs (including the tomb of Alexander the Great) and victory columns, the *pharos* itself, and large monuments like the towering Caesarion built by Kleopatra gave Alexandria a superb skyline.

It was a city of rival, competitive neighborhoods, a lot like Sienna, Italy, with its independent and testy *contrade*. Class or economic status isolated some of the neighborhoods. Cultural or religious realities divided others. Pagan, Jewish and Christian communities each knew eras of ascendancy, but rarely at the same time. But even within the communities there were competitive elements. For example, Alexandria in the fourth century had at least nine Christian congregations. People remained competitively loyal to the presbyter-preacher they had chosen, based on their style of biblical exegesis i.e. preaching.

(Christopher Haas, Alexandria in Late Antiquity, John Hopkins University Press, 1997)

Class conflicts were reflected in the leadership of the Christian community. The *episcopoi* or bishops tended to think of wealth as a blessing on their rank, and accumulated vast fortunes in gold. This was so much the case throughout the Empire that one of the Pagan senators in Rome once commented that he would convert to Christianity in a trice, if only he could be immediately elected bishop! Often, and shamelessly, episcopal political intrigues resembled the famed fiascoes in the gubernatorial or even imperial courts. Theirs was a tentative upper-class reality, with a fear of losing their fortune governing many of their decisions.

By contrast, many of the presbyters and diakonoi, however, ministering in the congregations spread through the city's neighborhoods and even into the suburbs, favored a more ascetic lifestyle. Some identified with the poor and marginalized in society to the extent of eschewing fine clothes and ample housing. Arius himself seemed to have dressed in the sleeveless white tunic which monks wore in those days. And it was based, interestingly enough, on the style of clothes worn two centuries earlier by the *Therapeutae*, the Jewish "monks" described to us by Philo the Jew. Many of the women in Arius' congregation at Baukolis were "virgins," that is, women living communally outside the economic custom of marriage. They might even be seen as antecedents of the nuns who would begin to take institutional form within a century.

(Cf. Alexandria in Late Antiquity, Christopher Haas, as above)

Alexandria, like many burgeoning cities in the eastern Hellenistic world, was a riotously cosmopolitan city. Indian Buddhists in orange robes were seen in its vast marketplaces as far back as the first century. Persian magi, merchant Athenians, Roman tourists, Palestinian rabbis, Syrian ecstasies, Ethiopian emissaries, and other Africans from further south down the Nile crowded its grain markets and the stalls where the world's strange gifts could be bought and bartered.

Thus it can come as no surprise that Alexandria was a metropolis of mixture and blending, a place where culture held hands with culture, and where nothing stayed "pure" for long. Indeed, this blending of cultures, this easy syncretism in the urban Hellenistic Roman Empire, was especially visible in the public religious life of the people.

Now of course, I say public religious life because I well know that the private day-to-day devotional life of the ordinary Roman throughout the Empire resembled private Confucian ancestor worship more than anything else. The grand smoky rituals down at the temples of Jupiter or Minerva or Caesar for that matter blared on state occasions only. It was the familial *lares* and *penates*, or ancestral figurines, which were the main focus of daily prayer. And for many too, a well-honed faith in the stars and Fate, and yes, the Imperial state itself sufficed as a practical and most helpful religious doctrine.

But, despite the private homeliness of Roman private devotion, there was also, in Early Christian times in particular, a marked tendency to blend some of the public deities, and fuse them in surprising new forms. Roman Gods and imported foreign deities were often blended in a kind of well-meaning and falsely liberal "imperialism of the spirit." This is the kind of thinking which was seen first in the post-Alexander days of Antiochus Epiphanes. "We all really believe in the same God after all, don't we? Why won't you accept an image of Zeus Olympios as the countenance of your G-d YHWH?" There was also a more honestly liberal tendency, almost like some forms of modern Hindu theology, to see *all* the various divine names as being merely masks (*personae*) of a great and nameless Deity that transcended all names. Thus Zeus and Jupiter were two different names for the same Power in the Universe, even though they rose from different cultures. I am convinced that this attitude helped engender the rise of Christian Sabellianism, (the Son

and Holy Spirit are all masks or versions of the Father) which seems to have irritated Arius so.

A good example of a more complex form of this amazing syncretism can be found in the Roman rooms in the Detroit Institute of Arts. There you can see a votive thanksgiving altar from first century Rome. On it you will find an inscription dedicated to Jove, another name for Iupiter. Or is it? The actual inscription is written this way: IOVE SABAZ (IOS.) In ancient Latin pronunciation, Jove was not pronounced with an English *j*, of course, and *v* was more of a *u*, or *w*, and the word would be pronounced Yo-weh. Sabazios was a Tracian grain God whose name was often linked to Iupiter, but then, so was the God of the Judeans, according to more sophisticated Romans, the God whose name was sounded Yahweh. I submit that the ancient Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh Tsebaoth*, the Lord of Hosts, has here been fused to the Tracian grain God and Roman supreme God, creating a new and perhaps more magically potent unity. There is only a poetic, not authentically shared, etymology, of course, between Iove and YHWH. But it is enough. And though some may protest that the pronunciation of the *Tetragrammaton* was unknown to any save the now defunct first-century Sadducean high priest whispering it in the innermost shrine of Herod's resplendent temple, there is no real compelling evidence to support this purist and romantic understanding. The Jewish Encyclopedia alone offers many examples of the use of the "unpronounceable" Divine Name in Hellenistic-Egyptian magic amulets, especially in the form of Yah. The magic word *Yaldabaoth* found in many of these ancient spells clearly combines the Tetragrammaton and the Tsebaoth, suggesting that the sacred pronunciation was indeed well known at the time to religious cognoscenti and magicians.

In Alexandria itself, this same sort of blending occurred quite consciously in the deliberate creation of the god Serapis, the local city God. He was a fusion of the typical Egyptian animal God Apis and a beautiful Hellenistic human form of the Egyptian savior God Osiris. The *Serapeion* of Alexandria was one of the great temples and pilgrimage spots of the ancient world.

Besides sharing the general Hellenistic predilection for blending and fusing images and ideas, Alexandria also supported *unique* schools

of philosophy and theology, Jewish, Pagan and Christian. The clear Mediterranean air of Alexandria rang with the great names of Philo the Jew, Plotinus, Titus Flavius Clemens (Clement), Ammonius Saccas, Origenes Adamantius (Origen,) Dionysius the Great, Arius, Hypatia the Pagan Martyr and many others. The intellectual ferment in the great city was constant, and the schooling offered to its inhabitants was rich.

The Hellenistic world was a Greek world. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the whole eastern Empire, never Latin. Thus, in Alexandria, the Jews read a *Nomos*, not a Torah, Greek replacing Hebrew as the language even of scripture. Philo the Jew elevated the rich Greek philosophical word “logos” (which can mean many things-- reason, matrix, concept, proportion, and grammar as well as word) to a sublime height, even though it is originally a word of Athens, not Jerusalem. Words like “eide” or “hupostasis” out of Platonism served new blended ends for Jews like Philo, but also for Pagans like Plotinus and Christians like Origen in Alexandria.

Philo in particular recognized the blended quality of contemporary religion, and apparently felt no shame or sense of blasphemy by suggesting that Dionysius and Yahweh were something of the same deity seen from the differing Hebrew and Greek perspectives. He even tells us that the Jewish monastic community of the Therapeutae engaged in Dionysiac ritual. And to go full circle, Dionysius himself was considered another name for Sabazios, as in that votive altar I encountered in The Detroit Institute of Arts.

(Hellenistic Religions Luther H. Martin Oxford University Press, 1987 p. 110)

Like Paul of Tarsus, his Hellenistic contemporary, who was born in a city famous for its school of Cynics, Philo unabashedly wove “secular” philosophers into his apologetic writings on Judaism. Unlike Paul, however, he felt that Plato got everything he ever taught by relying on the mind of Moses who had preceded him. He felt that both Pagan and Hebrew were on the same road to truth, but that the Hebrews got there first.

For Philo, The sole God is the ineffable, the inexplicable, a Mystery from whose inscrutable mind arise the *eide*, the original “forms” or “patterns” of all the cosmos. These “forms,” (clearly an idea right out of Plato’s cave) are the concrete expression of the “logos” or “reason” of

God. Collectively, they may also be called the “son of God” or “a second God,” ideas which seem to file away at strict Jewish monotheism. But the Alexandrian Jews actually felt they were saving monotheism by this theology. The Wisdom literature of the Jews, both from Palestina and Alexandria personifies Wisdom as a being, usually feminine, separate from but dependent upon the Ineffable.

(The Harvest of Hellenism, F.E. Peters, Barnes and Noble, 1970)

Although Philo could blend Moses and Plato *theologically*, he was reluctant to blend the more complex and sometimes free-wheeling Greek morality and mores with Hebraic restraint. He preferred to keep the commandments unblended, and actually bent them backward significantly for fear of ethical blurring. For example, Philo is the first person in antiquity that we know of who associated the sin of Sodom with the sexual congress of men with men. This is an attitude that might have surprised Plato himself (whose present name is actually a nickname which refers to his broad “shoulders”) sitting at his Symposium table next to the handsome Alkibiates. Or it would have surprised the Galilean Jew, Jesus of Galilee, who clearly, with modern scholars, saw the sin of Sodom as one of inhospitality (cf. Mark 6; 11)

No, Philo clearly favored a certain asceticism in behavior, thinking that a restraint from the sensual world brought one more into line with the less fleshy and purer realities of the immortal patterns (eide) bundled in the “*logos*” of God.

It was Justin Martyr in the second century who made the first serious attempt for the Christians to find analogies between Pagan philosophy and Christian theology. Although not an Alexandrian, and although we cannot prove by surviving evidence he was influenced by Philo, since, by his day, most Christians in his area were routinely speaking negatively of all things Jewish, Justin preached a message similar to Philo’s. He claimed the complete transcendence of God, but allowing for his immanence in the world of Creation to be *the fruit* of the *logos*, or more specifically, the *logoi spermatikoi*, the “seed-words” planted into the abyss that made the *kosmos* blossom into reality on the first day of creation. For him, the Stoic concept of *logoi spermatikoi* seems to have occupied the same place as the *logos* occupied for Philo...a mediator between the Ineffable and the Mundane.

(Cf. F.E. Peters Harvest of Hellenism, above)

But it took another Alexandrian to take this fusion of philosophy and religion and so express it so as to influence Arius the most. Origenes Adamantius, commonly called Origen, creatively linked Greek philosophy and Biblical data. Learning, we think, his Platonism from the much admired Ammonias Saccas, one of his Pagan teachers, Origen joined the third century Platonists in rejecting the Gnostic theory of the worthlessness of the material world. But his theory of Christ's incarnation put a good twist into the Platonic philosophy that formed him. For Origenes, the human being Jesus slowly allowed the goodness of the Reason (logos) of God to so align him with the Eternal that he became *like* God. He was elevated eventually to the place where his goodness was God's goodness in the world, unalloyed and flowing, two *hypostaseis* or characters, one emanating from the other, yet sharing one joined will. It was this sharing of wills which fused them into a true singularity, or Oneness (Monad.) And toward this Oneness all would eventually return, said Origen, at the end of time, a true restoration of all souls (*apokatastasis*) into the wholeness of the singular Divine. He felt that human beings could slowly become more and more like God, since they have a kind of "blood-kinship to God." "It is possible," he wrote, "for a rational mind, by advancing from a knowledge of small to a knowledge of greater things and from things visible to things invisible, may attain to an increasingly perfect understanding."

(Origen, On First Principles, translated by G. W. Butterworth, Harper and Row, 1936)

3. Arius of Alexandria in his Setting: Vita Homini

Arius was born, we think, in the part of North Africa called Libya, sometime between 250 and 280. We do not know anything about his early life. He claims to have studied with the great teacher and late martyr, Lucian of Antioch. If so, we must surmise he traveled to the school at Antioch. And perhaps it was at this time that he traveled to the parts of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine where he befriended Eusebius of Caesaria and Eusebius of Beirut, (later, of Nicomedia.) We have no idea how he or his family and friends fared during the great persecution of Diocletian. He eventually moved to Alexandria where he was ordained deacon in the days of Bishop Achillas. After a time he was ordained

presbyter, and appointed as the preacher/presbyter of the congregation in the suburb of Boukolia (aka Boukalis)

This was just outside and north of a curve in the eastern wall of the city, very close to the Martyreon, or Witness-Shrine, or Tomb, of St. Mark, the putative founder of the Alexandrian church. It was as far from the episcopal center of the city as you could get. Theonas Church, where the bishop presided, was far to the southwest down the Via Canopica by the Gate of the Moon. The suburb called Boukolia, just outside the Gate of the Sun, was famous in those days for three things: its rough and tumble inhabitants, its cemeteries, and the hermit monks who lived either near the tombs or at the edge of the shepherds' meadows. It had also been the center of the Jewish Quarter in the days of Philo, even though it was outside the walls. The large Hippodrome was there where the working class could find entertainment in races and clowns. The flat Delta land of Boukolia was cut into sections by several canals, which carried cargo from the harbor down into the Nile for further dissemination throughout Egypt.

Tall and thin, with lines etching his face, the elderly but apparently energetic Arius wore the *colobium*, or garb of a monk, a sleeveless white tunic. He was famous for his preaching, and his dazzling exegesis of scripture. His language was full of poetry and peppered with metered but popular songs. He seems to have been genuinely revered by the members of own congregation. His congregation included many women, the "virgins" who supported his rhetorical style, although the figure given in the histories is surely too large...800. His parish also included a group of presbyters and deacons who had also studied with the great Lucian of Antioch, the "Co-Lucianists" as he called them.

Although Lucian's theology remains sketchy to us, we have reason to think he stressed the utter transcendence of God, the human life of Jesus and the practical and demonstrative aspects of Christian living.

(C.F. Peters, as above p. 618-22)

Accused by an anonymous critic of wrongful teaching, Arius' bishop, Alexander, who had succeeded Achillas, called him on the carpet and told him to explain his variation on church teaching. Arius does not seem to have thought that his was a variation at all, but rather, the authentic teaching of the church, received through Lucian and even earlier, from the speculations of Paul of Samosata. Not all of these were

Alexandrian theologians to be sure, but Arius could also appeal to Origenes Adamantius for previous, if slightly different, articulations of his Logos theology. He also seems to have felt his take on things was the most sensible reading of Christian life based on the scriptures themselves, and his quoted extant, but tattered, writings show him to be a lover of the rich texts in both testaments. He could also have quoted the recent but former bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, who spoke of the relationship of God to Christ in this way: “a spring and a river, a root and a plant, a shipbuilder and a sailor of a ship.”

(Cf. Dionysius in the Catholic Encyclopedia, on-line version)

At some time in this period (between 318 and 323) we think Arius gathered many of his best sermons fragments and songs and arranged them in a book which was called *Thalia*, no copy of which has survived. Whether this was a reference to the muse of that name, or a reference to a joyful banquet, perhaps like a Platonic *symposium*, we shall never know. The nuances of the word are clearly rich, however. We are aware that its metrical contents were well known to the working class citizens of Alexandria, who are reported to have sung his popular tunes on the wharves or at the taverns. By means of memorized and memorable songs, set to catchy popular tunes, the Arian doctrine leapt from the Alexandrine port to other places round the globe. One commentator even suggests that the meter of the poems, ionic tetrameter, was the meter of the “lascivious comedies” in the theaters of the day.

(Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Eerdmans, 2001)

Bishop Alexander all the way across town was at first slow to personally condemn Arius, since there was clearly no universal agreement in those days about the nature of God or God’s relationship to Christ. So Alexander convened a local synod to look into the matter, and the synod sided with Alexander. Arius left his church in suburban Alexandria and moved to Caesaria, and eventually all the way up to Nicomedia, the Imperial residence where Bishop Eusebius of Beirut was now chaplain.

Now that the theological quarrel had spread beyond the confines of Alexandria, Constantinus Emperor soon felt uneasy about this debate as potentially divisive, and asked Hosius, the trusted bishop of Cordova in Spain, to decide whether Alexander had acted reasonably. It must be said here that Constantinus, although undeniably baptized late in his

life, was a Christian long before the highly mythologized event at the Milvian Bridge: “In hoc, vinces!” He was not the cynical, cunning, merely practical ruffian he is sometimes portrayed to be, although there can be no doubt of his political self-confidence and strategic theatricality. He had a good mind and was a terrific administrator. He was also fascinated with both theology and religion, so he was deeply and honestly interested in this debate. But he was interested in the unity of his empire all the more. So while it is not clear that he *necessarily* expected that the Cordovan would necessarily rule in Alexander’s favor, he did expect a clear answer that he assumed would be binding on all other Christian teachers. Hosius, unfortunately, came out for Alexander with clarity and force.

This decision, however, did not eradicate the debate, which now raged more than ever through the Empire, the Eastern Empire, that is. I say this because the Bishop of Cordova is one of the very few prelates from the West to have anything to do with this issue at this time.

So Constantinus decided to call a general synod of mostly bishops although it did include two non-episcopal emissaries sent by the Bishop of Rome, and a brash, newly ordained firebrand deacon named Athanasius from Egypt. Only ten bishops from the Western Empire were present. One hundred delegates came from Anatolia, seventy from Syria, Lebanon and Palestina, and twenty from Egypt and Libya...all from the eastern part of the Empire. They were to consult together in the small town of Nicaea near Constantinopolis about this theological issue. Nicaea was a lovely lakeside town, something like one of the resort cities that gleam languidly on Lake Como in Italy. Constantinus provided their travel expenses, put them up in lovely quarters, fed them well and gave them lavish gifts.

He also participated in, and organized, all the proceedings himself. He arrived at the start of the sessions in May, dressed in opulent Oriental brocade finery that shocked the bishops, who were used to governors and even emperors who dressed in more restrained purple or white togas. His theatricality may have been a method of overshadowing their considerable episcopal wealth by his own, in a power play of prestige and rank. It certainly reflected his own self-understanding as God’s chosen defender of the church, as “bishop to the bishops.” He did not retain the Imperial title *Pontifex Maximus* (Great High Priest)

without understanding what it meant. It also cannot be forgotten that, just four years earlier, Constantinus had passed a law allowing deathbed legacies and bequests to be made to the church. This law was so popular that, only forty years later, the Bishop of Rome had to forbid presbyters and bishops from haunting the courtyards of widows and elderly unmarried women in the hopes of a deathbed windfall. Thus, the walls of separation of church and state which were clearly in force during the persecutions and which weakened when Constantinus declared Christianity the religion of the Empire began to crumble to rubble at Nicaea.

(Cf The Faith, Brian Moynahan, Doubleday, 2002 p. 100)

The issue at question at the conference was the relationship of God the Father to Christ. The solution they hammered out was based on the Baptismal Liturgy of the Palestinian churches, into which the clarifying word *homoousios* (“of the same essence”) was tucked, some say at the behest of golden Constantinus himself, which might be true. (This word “homoousios” was particularly vexing to Arius, who seems to have feared that using it would reduce God to a thing, a metaphysical lump of clay so to speak, in the heavens.) To this document was added an appendix of *anathemas*, that is, beliefs worthy of banishment from the church community, a truly terrifying threat in an Empire which regarded Christianity as the state religion. And all of these *anathemas* pointed to Arius.

This *symbolon*, or “togetherness statement” they adopted was not the Nicene Creed recited today in Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many liturgical Protestant churches. It was, however, the seed for that creed, which was completed almost a century later. It was composed in Greek, not Latin, and read like this:

We believe in the One, God the Father, all governing, maker of all things, both seen and unseen. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only one generated from the Father, that is, from the actual essence of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, generated, not made. He is of the same essence (homoousion) as the Father. It was through the Son that all things came to be, both those in the sky and those on earth. For us human beings, and for our salvation, he came down and became flesh, that is, became human; he

suffered, and rose up on the third day, and went up into the sky, and will come to judge the living and the dead. And in the holy Spirit. And as for those who say "there once was a time when he was not"; and "before he was generated, he did not exist"; and that he, like all creatures, was called into existence from nothing or from some alien character or essence, thus affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or improvement, these the all-embracing church descended from the apostles casts out. (anathematizes)

When the conference was over, only two bishops, both Libyan, sided with Arius. And they were to go into exile with him.

But the actual personal and authentic theology of anyone at Nicaea is impossible to retrieve. It certainly is not likely that every prelate save two had already decided that "God and Christ are of the same essence," or even understood fully what that meant. After all, the *homoousios* is not found in the Greek Testament anywhere, and belies the importance of the scriptural volleys used to establish the validity of either position. And there is no evidence that the whole Antiochene school of Christian theology, which had influenced Arius through Lucian of Antioch, had just evaporated in the mere eight years since the controversy had begun. Yes, the late tales of the Nicæan bishops and presbyters stabbing each other in the back and desperately bribing each other have to be dismissed, along with the story of Santa Claus clobbering Arius. Nicaea was a more orderly affair than that, despite the intrigue of secret reporters, which Constantinus had planted among the bishops to find out what they were thinking informally. But I have to surmise that at least some bishops were caught up in the Emperor's theatrical and fiscal demonstration of power and unity more than in their understanding faith in subtle Greek philosophical statements. It wasn't that long ago when the Emperors themselves were "God from God," saviors of the world and often virgin-born, so we cannot discount such pressures, embodied in Constantinus, on the theological thinking in those resort rooms. Some of these bishops may have signed onto the famous *symbolon* created at Nicaea, not thinking that their questions could even *fit* into a splendid room filled with all that brocade and jeweled light. I clearly must question the authentic theological uniformity of the clergy at Nicaea because, after all, Arianism hardly disappeared with the stroke of a few episcopal signatures in Anatolia. It was a significant

organized movement in Asia, Africa and both Southern and Central Europe for almost twice as long as there has been a United States of America on earth.

Nonetheless, Arius was excommunicated and sent into exile to Illyria along the Danube, which may partially account for the Arianism found among the German Goths. Or he may have been sent back home to Lybia. The evidence is sketchy here. But this was not the end of him, although his larger theology did get lost in the jot and tittle of his definition of the relationship of Father to Son.

About his final years, much is in question. We do know that one of his defenders was the Imperial Chaplain, and that Constantinus received a letter from Arius which so upset him that he ordered all of Arius' writings, especially the *Thalia*, confined to the flames like the books of the fiery critic Porphyry. He accused Arius of defaming Christendom as much as the Pagan Porphyry had done. We do not have Arius' letter, only Constantinus' response, but apparently Arius wanted to be given a church of his own back in Alexandria. Whether or not Arius was summoned back from exile and had a conversation with the Emperor is up for question. The idea, spread by a number of authors, that he recanted and was ready to sign onto the *symbolon* is suspicious, coming as it does from the poison pens of those who hated him. He does seem to have sent (or brought?) a proposed new creed to Constantinus, which was, at the very best, a half-hearted compromise with the Nicaean *symbolon*. And the story of his death in a latrine in The New Rome in the year 336 is certainly a story meant to belittle him by association, although the year, perhaps, for all that we know, might be correct.

Over the next several years, his manipulative and terrorizing opponent Athanasius was himself sent into exile a number of times, once as far away as Gaul, partially because he *was* so manipulative and stubbornly self-righteous. Still, the verdict of standard church history is that Athanasius is a canonized saint, whereas Arius himself remains a damned heretic of the first order.

4. The Teaching of Arius and Modern Unitarian Universalism

Arius of Alexandria did more than speculate about the Father and the Son. He taught a whole concept of salvation, of a life that leads to wholeness and health.

For Arius, God was the ineffable. He was the Unbegun, unknown to humans or even to Jesus in any full or complete way, but only intuited. Call him if you will an anti-gnostic, or even an agnostic, for the unknowability of the divine *monad*, or oneness, was complete for him.

But from within the depths of this *Anarche*, this Unbegun, radiated, almost like light from the sun, a pattern, a matrix of forms, a reason, a logic, a word, in short, a *logos*. This *logos* had a beginning, unlike the Unbegun.

This *logos* was the initial pattern of the *kosmos*, the structured idea behind it. The universe did not exist until the will of the Unbegun bent toward the generation of a universe. All of this so far sounds like Philo of Alexandria, whose work must have been still well known in the former Jewish Quarter of Alexandria where Arius lived. The language is so similar, the concepts so identical, that it is hard to imagine that Arius was not familiar with the work of the great Jewish philosopher.

(Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought, ed. Lenn E. Goodman, SUNY Press, 1992 p.249)

Now as for Jesus the Christ, Arius seems to have thought that he was a human being, born of Mary the Virgin. (Virgin motherhood was a concept no classical Roman had much difficulty with, since half of the great figures of history and religion they talked about were said to be virginally conceived, including Caesar Augustus.)

Arius felt that Jesus, the human being, moved to the rhythm of the *logos* created by the Unbegun. He was seized by the *logos* in the way that God's spirit seizes a prophet and bids him or her to utter truth. But with Jesus, the occupation of the *logos* was life-long, since he, as a free human being, always chose to do what the *logos* would do... compassionate things, truthful things, healing things, gracious things. By willing what the *logos* wills, the *logos* being the pattern of the Unbegun for all creation, Jesus the Christ can be fairly called "son of God" or even "a second God," both terms straight from Philo. But he is *not* God per se because God is without beginning and Jesus most certainly had a beginning.

Furthermore, Arius believed that Jesus was capable of error, of limitation and mistake and sin. Thus for Arius, he was someone whose divine human struggle we other, limited, error-burdened human beings could hope to emulate. If he was God, that is perfect and unknowable, his life would be impossible to imitate. And Arius insisted that we too could attain what Christ attained if we lived in his way...we too could be “Christs,” despite our fallibility. By willing what the Unbegun wills, revealed in the compassionate patterns of the *logos*, we become divine via relationship, *not* substance or essence. We rhyme with God, so to speak, but are as different from God as words that rhyme are different from each other, having different meanings. Salvation consists not in loving the death of Jesus, but in thankfully imitating his life and deeds here upon earth. By doing so, we too are sons and daughters of the Unbegun. We too participate in the great outpouring from the unknown Ineffable at the heart of all things, by co-creating a world on the pattern of the benevolent and universal grace that brought this world into being in the first place. Unlike the Protestant Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, who limited the grace of God by making God as arbitrary as an Emperor who may save or damn at will, Arius, I think, would have found joy in the statement of Therese de Lisieux “*Everything is grace.*”

Furthermore, Arius would have said that the Unbegun may be called “a Father” *only* by virtue of metaphor. He is not really anything we mortals can understand as we might a father. For any kind of human understanding would pose a limitation on God. And thus “Father” is, therefore, simply a *provisional* convenience, not a substantial definition of the Unbegun, of which there can be none. The eternal capacity of the Unbegun to remain ultimately unknown *safeguards the mystery of divinity* for Arius. His upset with the Nicæan language stems from his conviction that it was a full frontal assault on the Mystery that is God. It is no wonder he was more taken with the humble and quite beautiful relationship metaphors of bishop Dionysius: “a root and a plant, a spring and a river.” For Arius, the universe becomes a process of growing salvation for all things, radiating out from the root mystery into ethical relationships which help grow the universe like a spreading tree of life.

For Arius, the Trinitarian speculation with its stress on “essence,” or “substance” turned both God and the universe into a collection of mere “things” bumping into each other. For Arius, the faith of Athanasius, in stressing essence, and not relationship, makes the *static* reality (hypostasis) of each of the three become objectively real, perverting the flow of the living and mysterious and unknowable reality without beginning that centers us all.

(Cf Early Arianism—A View of Salvation, Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, Fortress Press, 1881 and Arius: A Theological Conservative Persecuted? Dr. John C. McDowell, Girton College, University of Cambridge, An Undergrad Dissertation written in 1994 <http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/Arius.htm>.)

Arius had a typically Hellenistic mind. He combined and blended and reshaped and fused ideas from Philo, Origen, Lucian, Dionysius and others. He especially looked to those who illuminated his own city’s mighty history. His solid rooting and creative fusion of historic ideas suggests why he seems to have been so surprised by the accusations of heresy offered by his foes. He did not feel like he was breaking new ground, just tilling the earth he had inherited, that it might blossom in peace.

Rooted in brilliant and deeply Christian thinkers as well as in Greek and Jewish philosophies, Arius himself can now serve as a root for moderns like me who claim to be Unitarian Universalist.

His creative depth of thought provides a refreshingly cosmic theology, which can feed some of today’s Unitarian Universalists. I see many points of comparison.

1. Like many modern Unitarian Universalists, Arius refused to hem in the Divine, or the Great Mystery, by too many explicit doctrinal straightjackets. He tries to let the Ineffable stay ineffable. The popularity of such hymns as *Spirit of Life* and *Bring Many Names* in the present hymnbook suggests a similar reluctance to enclose the Unknown in theological images that do not bend. Arius’ Unbegun resists traditional imagery, and so do many post-agnostic Unitarian Universalists. After all, it’s just as difficult to paint a portrait of a *Spirit of Life* as it is to make a mosaic of the unknown Unbegun. Agnostic and even atheist Unitarian Universalist impatience with overly concrete or seemingly

unreflective God language reflects a parallel concern to Arius' insistence that God is not *really and essentially* a Father.

2. The Twenty-first century Unitarian Universalist will often talk about the Universe as if it was, in Philo's term, a "second God." The "universe" language of Rev. Judith Walker Rigg's essay "Cosmic Theology" comes to mind. Biologist Ursula Goodenough's language of the naturally sacred also comes to the fore.

(Judith Walker Riggs "A Cosmic Theology" in What We Believe, UUA 1987 and Ursula Goodenough, The Sacred Depths of Nature, NY Oxford U. Press, 1998)

Modern Unitarian Universalists will speak like Carl Sagan of the arc of starry wonder over us arising from some nameless, original and mysterious dimensionless point, but from which joy, and deep spiritual sensibilities flow. They will use poetic metaphors to talk about the natural universe. Like Bishop Dionysius' river flowing from a hidden spring, the whole universe flows from a hidden atom at the beginning of time, which opened up into us over a period of 13 billion years. "I think the Universe is trying to say something to me..." is a playful metaphorical statement I sometimes hear in our congregations. (This is not to be confused with some forms of New Age thinking which posit that there are dotting patterns in cosmos that diddle in our lives if we but notice...such thinking is far to the edge, away from the Unitarian Universalist center rooted in Arius, Origen, Pelagius etc.) Like the Arian Jesus who listened to the Word, or *logos*, and lived his life accordingly, modern Unitarian Universalist often speak as if the awesome, Hubble-revealed, wildly-patterned cosmos was something immanent to them, a source of their religious life. And for such Unitarian Universalists, as for Carl Sagan, the stars in that universe are no longer the juggernaut of Roman fate, but rather, delightful, free sources of open spiritual wonder and thanksgiving.

3. Arius preached a democratic Christology. Although Athanasius gets credit for his famous, quite magical, and strangely pre-Latter Day Saint proverb "God became a human being so that human beings could become God," it is Arius, his dreaded enemy, who really lifts human dignity to divine possibilities. He does this by asking human beings to live a divine life here and now. He is not concerned with changing their "substance" into something transcendent and glowing, to spiritualize

them by some sort of theological incantation of atonement. Rather, he is concerned with so altering the relationships of human beings to each other and to the world that they grow into a *human* christhood day by day, year by year, like that Dionysiac root growing into a full and blossoming plant.

4. Arius' theology seems to make Origen's famous *apokatastasis* (complete restoration of the world and all souls) a realistic and humanistic possibility. He insists that grace is not some arbitrary separation of the sheep from the goats, or something that arrives drenched in the blood of Christ, but presses us *all* forward as once it did via the *logos* across the unformed abyss before creation. Thus Arius anticipates a universe restored and recreated by human beings aligned with the will of the Unbegun, the mystery behind creation itself.

Our Socinian ancestors understood this aspect of Arianism very well as they established their utopian communities along the Vistula. Their form of Arianism was not the classic early form, true, but a form fit for their time and place. Even their understanding of God as a growing, learning power, while different from Arius' understanding, is trying to answer some of the same questions as Arius was trying to answer by posing his mystic unknowable God. Salvation for the Arians of Poland was also not an arbitrary gift to those who accept the blood-soaked death of an ancient prophet as a sacrifice. But it was a gift human beings can bring to the *kosmos* itself, of which they are part and parcel, by willing the divine compassion and truthfulness represented in the maxims of the Sermon on the Mount into every nook and cranny of reality via their own lives.

Arius, one who seems to have been filled with Philo's Jewish impatience about making an idol of God, might say something like this if he could speak to us now: "Brothers and sisters! Live your life, if you will, without spending your days speculating about what "substance" God is made of, as if God were one great Thing amidst the many. Stop speaking of God as if God were a row of Constantines in the sky startling us with dazzling power and light. Believe instead in a tender Will at the heart of all things radiating the splendid pattern (*logos*) of a universal love for all. Live, in short, as Jesus did, unafraid of your own power, unafraid of facing the broken and calling it to wholeness and always telling the truth poetically and beautifully.

For me, looking into the ancient Arian dissent is like looking in the mirror and recognizing my Twenty First Century Unitarian Universalist self for the first time.

I find, in many ways, after preparing for this paper on our dishonored ancestor, that though Arianism can be treated historically with great interest, it can also be lived out anew in our day and age. It might take on new forms, as it did for the Socinians and for Newton or Mary Dyer. It might be almost unrecognizable with its fresh coat of metaphors and stories. It still, I suppose, will be considered a great heresy by many, dismissed as a poetic and rationalistic mysticism, a utopian ethics without any real, substantial and hard-line and blood-obsessed religion attached. But I am still convinced that this ancient dissent, interpreted afresh for our own days, might be a source of strength to us as we struggle to restore our world. It might help make the disorders of war, hunger, distortion, oppression and destitution far, far more rare than they are in this 2003rd year after the beginning of the so-called Christian Era than they are.

And who, I wonder, would want anything less?