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Trevor A. Hart

R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*: a Review Essay

The late Professor Hanson's book, subtitled The Arian Controversy 318–381 AD *(Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988. 931 pp. £35) is a major work worthy of the extended discussion which is offered here by Dr. Hart, who is lecturer in Systematic Theology in the University of Aberdeen.*

There can be few periods in the church's history containing more doctrinally determinative debate and decision than the sixty or so years bounded by the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Nor can there be many that have generated so much apparently urgent historical consideration in the modern period, as the contemporary western church, in an attempt to trace its doctrinal roots and thereby to clarify the nature of its distinctive identity as the Christian community, has looked again at the dogmatic heritage which has been bestowed to it by its fourth century forbears. This process has by no means produced a uniform set of results. Some have concluded that the docrines of 'trinity' and 'hypostatic union' in which the labours of this turbulent era are crystallized are nothing more than a theological trojan horse through which the philosophy of Hellenism successfully infiltrated and eventually dominated the church's missionary strategies. As such they represent an alien metaphysical straightjacket from which our attempts to 'remake' theology today must be liberated; and they certainly must not be mistaken for an irreducible element in Christian self-understanding. Others have argued in precisely the opposite direction, suggesting that the decisions taken at Nicaea and Constantinople, if not the particular conceptuality in which they are set forth, must be seen as in some sense regulative and authoritative guidelines for any contemporary ventures in christology or the doctrine of God. Significantly, it has been in the works of Protestant theologians (Barth, Moltmann, Jungel, Gunton, Jenson and others) that this

reaffirmation of the church's ancient tradition has been most noticeable.

The importance of such issues for contemporary theological discussion makes the task of laying bare the historical and doctrinal development of this particular part of our past (and thereby also of our doctrinal 'present') an increasingly important one. While contributions have not been wanting, nothing comparable in either scale or erudition exists in the English language to Professor Hanson's latest and last published work, treating in considerable detail, as it does, the origins, development and eventual resolution of the so-called 'Arian controversy' which dominated the fourth century theological agenda. The distillation of some twenty years' careful research, this book attempts 'to represent the state of scholarly opinion on its subject up to the summer of 1987' (vii). This in part explains its magnitude, since the last century has witnessed considerable strides forward in historical, philosophical and textual aspects of Arian studies, many of which Hanson seeks to catalogue and to take into account in his own presentation. Yet the book is far from being simply a gigantic literature survey of a complex scholarly field. If it also serves that purpose usefully, then it does so in the course of a very clear attempt to fuse together some of the more significant among recent scholarly discoveries and insights so as to provide a new critical framework within which to place and make sense of both the broad outlines and some of the particulars of fourth century trinitarian, christological and soteriological discussion.

The clue to that which provides Hanson with his basic thesis is to be found in the tension between title and subtitle of his book. The latter has a somewhat ironic edge to it, since, as the opening sentences of the Introduction make quite clear, the author's overarching purpose is to demonstrate that as a description of that 'movement of thought in the fourth century which culminated in the Nicene–Constantinpolitan Creed' (xviii) the term 'Arian controversy,' popular as it may have been in scholarly treatments to date, is 'a serious misnomer' (xvii).

In the first place, Hanson argues, Arius was hardly the great heresiarch into which popular tradition has turned him. Despite the adoption of his name as a convenient theological label by those opposed to the views for which he stood, he was not in any real sense the founder of a radical new school of thought. He does not, for example, seem to have had any direct significant or lasting influence upon those other thinkers generally referred to as 'Arian' or 'semi-Arian'. If some of these (Asterius, Eusebius of

Nicomedia and others) clearly agreed with him, then the explanation is to be sought rather in the fact that both he and they were drawing upon a common theological heritage stretching back far beyond the particular circumstance of his public dispute with Alexander. This incident certainly served usefully to bring matters to a head; yet Arius was not in and of himself a major theological figure. He was simply the indiscreet spark which accidentally ignited the fusebox to a display of doctrinal pyrotechnics, for the magnificence and longevity of which he could claim little personal credit. The fuses and charges had long since been laid by other far more impressive theological minds. There can be little doubt that some such reevaluation of the role and significance of Arius is requisite. Insofar as he is revealed to us in the few extant portions of his writings he appears not as one who perceives himself to be a great innovator, or who rests confidently upon his own clearly thought out and articulated challenge to an established orthodoxy. Rather, his comments appear to be those of one who, having taken his stand on a party line (pushing it further, no doubt, than any had dared push it before, a factor which should not be overlooked in attempts to assess his significance), cannot now understand the vehemence and passion with which he is condemned, and who seeks refuge and support not from 'followers' or 'supporters', but simply from those whom he knows to share essentially the same views, since they stand in the same theological tradition as himself. It is as a conservative adherent to a received doctrinal inheritance that we should picture him, therefore, and not as the radical begetter of the fourth century's christological ills.

All this refers us indirectly to the main point Hanson wishes to make throughout the book, namely, that what took place in the fourth century was not, as many accounts have suggested, a straightforward conflict between an ancient and established orthodoxy on the one hand and an emergent christological heresy on the other. The view which Arius himself represented had long since co-existed alongside others within the church, and the question which needed to be answered was precisely *what is* orthodoxy where these matters are concerned? Thus the word 'controversy' is misleading, insofar as it suggests clearly defined groups and boundaries, whereas, Hanson insists, clear definition is just what was lacking, and was, in fact, what gradually came to be established as the century wore on. Thus he replaces the language of controversy or debate with that of the metaphor of a search: 'this is not the story of a *defence* of orthodoxy, but of a *search* for orthodoxy, a search conducted by the method of trial

and error' (xix–xx). The metaphor is helpful in drawing our attention to the complexity and contrariness of the development of christological and trinitarian understanding within the church in the first three centuries. Much was accepted in the earlier period that would have been proscribed as heterodox from 381AD onwards. In this sense it is clearly true to say that Arius's dispute with his bishop prompted a *search* for orthodoxy rather than a simple restatement of something which 'all Christians everywhere had always believed'.

Yet the inherent weakness of this metaphor, as Hanson employs it, is the way in which it is suggestive of a seeking after and discovery of something hitherto unknown or unrecognized. The 'search' for the foot that fitted the glass slipper and the 'search' for Atlantis are two very different types of search. The one is a seeking among known alternatives for that one which alone is acceptable: the other is an open-ended quest for something essentially unknown, a venturing into uncharted waters. The *homoousion* of Nicaea, however much we must admit that it says something new and goes beyond earlier dogmatic statements in its clarity and precision, nonetheless was certainly not a discovery in this later sense. If it was indeed the product of a search, therefore, it was precisely a search among various existent triadic and christological models for the one which could best serve the church as an appropriate interpretative and systematic rendering of the apostolic narrative. And thus the language of a 'defence' is not altogether inappropriate. Precisely what was believed to be at stake in the debate at Nicaea was the *continuity* of biblical message and dogmatic framework. What was sought was a way of expressing unequivocally and with a new depth of understanding the meaning and implications of this same biblical narrative. As Hanson himself rightly observes, 'The theologians of the church were slowly driven to a realization that the deepest questions which face Christianity cannot be answered in purely biblical language, because the questions are about the *meaning* of the biblical language itself' (xxi). Both Arius and those who opposed him sought to base their respective conflicting arguments on scriptural grounds (often on the same passages of scripture!), and in this sense the dispute between them can be seen, among other things, to be precisely an *exegetical* one. What faced the Nicene Council, therefore, was a fundamental choice between two exclusive sets of meanings ascribable to biblical passages and ideas, and thus between two very different renderings of the inherent logic of the gospel message.

In the event, the majority at Nicaea decided that the integrity of

this message, its *true* meaning, was to be preserved only by securing the unequivocal confession of the ontological identity between Jesus and the Father, whatever the conceptual and terminological fallout of that might prove to be. Inasmuch as this was achieved via a term chosen primarily for its negative value (*homoousios* had been rejected by Arius as Sabellian), there was an inevitable newness about the theological result; but it was a newness firmly rooted in continuity with and affirmation of one strand of the ancient interpretative tradition over against others, and not to be misconstrued, therefore, as a discovery, or as an essentially novel doctrinal departure. That it also broke considerable new ground in the process of reiterating, clarifying and rehoning this tradition is hardly surprising; but the discontinuity ought not to be stressed at the expense of a considerable degree of continuity. The metaphor of a search, therefore, must be handled and developed with care.

In treating the substance of Arianism, Hanson rightly suggests that it arises from an attempt to resolve a problem inherent in the very fabric of the primitive kerygma; namely, the unashamed juxtaposition of 'monotheism, and the worship of Jesus as divine' (xx), and not, therefore from essentially pagan concerns or ways of thinking. Yet his citation of the Bible as Arius's 'chief source' (98) is somewhat misleading. To be sure, Arius is a 'biblical' theologian inasmuch as he seeks exegetical support for his views at every stage. What is equally clear, however, is that the fundamental conceptual framework within which he sets the scriptural narrative is not one provided by or hinted at in the biblical material itself, but rather one borrowed from contemporary philosophical and religious movements. The sense in which the results of his endeavours could be described as 'biblical' theology remains, therefore, a cause for serious concern.

Thus, even if we grant Hanson's enthusiastic endorsement of such claims from silence as those of Gregg and Groh (*Early Arianism*, 1981) according to which the heart of early Arian theology lay in a (thoroughly biblical) soteriological concern to affirm that in Jesus the divine is directly involved in the full range of human experiences, including and culminating in suffering and death, it remains true that the 'source' of Arianism *per se* (i.e. that which forced Arius to posit a reductionist christology by denying Jesus' ontological identity with God) is not this biblical emphasis as such, but *attempts to make sense of it within a dualistic metaphysical framework* according to which 'God' simply does not and cannot engage directly with the phenomenal world, let alone become human and die. As Frances Young has

noted, there is a sense in which Arius is guilty throughout not so much of the subordination of the Son as of the radical exaltation of the Father (*From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 64), projecting him into such utter transcendence, in fact, as to remove him effectively from the content of the gospel message. Likewise, his refusal to think or speak of any duality or generation or begetting in God, leading him to refer to the Son as originating in the Father's 'will' (hence a creature), rather than his 'being,' indicates not so much a pure concern for biblical monotheism as a tacit endorsement of the dichotomy reflected in the contemporary philosophical manuals between the unbegotten 'One' and all else that exists.

One of the main reasons for Hanson's consistently sympathetic and optimistic estimate of Arianism as a 'biblically' orientated theology would seem to be his own conviction that it allows a more satisfactory rendering of the gospel message to be given, especially in relation to the scandal of the suffering and death of the incarnate one on the cross, than that of the Nicene opponents of Arius. 'At the heart of the Arian gospel,' he writes, 'was a God who suffered. Their elaborate theology of the relation of the Son to the Father . . . was devised in order to find a way of envisaging a Christian doctrine of God which would make it possible to be faithful to the Biblical witness to a God who suffers. This was to be achieved by conceiving of a lesser God, a reduced divinity who would be ontologically capable as the High God was not, of enduring human experiences including suffering and death' (121). To be sure, this was achieved only at the cost of a doctrine teaching, in effect, the existence of two unequal gods; the High God who remains inscrutable and impassible in his heaven, and 'a lesser God who, so to speak, did his dirty work for him'! (122) But in terms of a basic faithfulness to the pattern of the biblical narrative, Hanson argues, this is infinitely preferable to the way in which the pro-Nicenes 'unanimously shied away from and endeavoured to explain away the scandal of the cross' (122). Even if we must recognize weaknesses in the Arian presentation, therefore, we must nonetheless be prepared to acknowledge its strengths and advantages over against the Nicene alternative.

Two points briefly made must suffice in response to this suggestion. Firstly, whilst it might be maintained that the anti-docetic soteriological motive of Arian christology (if such there actually was) is laudable and 'biblical' enough, it must nonetheless be recognized that the net result of Arianism is precisely an undermining of the real *scandalon* of the cross and not its skilful preservation. For what Arianism does is to capitulate in the face of an Hellenic doctrine of divine impassibility and absolute

transcendence, predicating suffering and death not of the God whom the Bible tells us became flesh for our sakes, but rather of a demi-god, a creature sent by God in order to undergo such pain for our sakes. Thus, far from succeeding in the purpose which Hanson imputes to it, Arian christology cuts the nerve of the gospel message, leaving us with a God who cannot and does not suffer out of love for us, who cannot and does not reveal himself to us, and in whom, consequently, we can invest neither love nor faith. As Hanson himself admits (112), it is precisely the *homoousion* doctrine of the Nicenes which leads logically to the suggestion that the High God himself has, in Jesus Christ, become directly involved in our experience of pain and death in order to redeem it.

Secondly, Hanson's claim that the Nicene theologians (notwithstanding the logical implications of confessing Jesus as *homoousios* with the Father) consistently explained away the reality of Christ's human passibility, thus denying the gospel of a suffering God, is far too insecurely based on the somewhat precarious foundations provided by the old Baurian Logos-sarx/Logos-anthropos schematization of patristic christologies. The suggestion is that the Nicenes consistently attributed the sufferings of Christ only to the body (sarx) which the Logos assumed in the incarnation, and not, therefore, to the divine person of the Logos who indwelt the flesh. They thereby maintained the impassibility of God at the expense of Christ's full humanity, whereas Arius maintained it at the expense of his full divinity.

Thus, for example, Hanson (following Baur, Stülcken, Richard, Grillmeier and others) interprets Athanasius as virtually ignoring the presence of a human soul or mind in the incarnate Christ, discovering in his writings a christology in which the fully divine Logos indwells a physical body, as a modern astronaut might be said to indwell a spacesuit, putting it on in order to do a certain job (448). Whilst the charge (if not the simile) is unoriginal, Hanson makes it with considerable relish and some entertaining turns of phrase. Yet his confident tone is at this point surprisingly unsupported by the sort of careful scholarly attention to detail one might reasonably expect in dealing with what is a highly complex exegetical and interpretative issue in Athanasian studies. It is surely unforgiveable in a book of this size and learning, for example, that no mention whatever is made of a whole host of books, articles and papers presenting an alternative interpretation of Athanasius.

A careful study of Athanasius's use of christological terms in his mature writings, especially of the nouns *anthropos, sarx* and

soma in relation to the crucial verbs *ginomai*, *endidusko* and *lambano*, might seem in fact to point to an approximation in his thinking to the later careful differentiation between 'person' and 'nature' in christology. This distinction was forged precisely in order both to affirm the impassibility of divine 'nature' *and* to insist upon the direct personal involvement of God in suffering by virtue of the Son's assumption of a (complete) human nature through which he actually became human. Thus, too, Athanasius seems to distinguish with great care between that which the divine Logos experiences 'as God' on the one hand and that which can be predicated of him 'as man' on the other. 'As man', Athanasius affirms, Christ prays to the Father in heaven, exercises the sort of faith in God which is proper to his human condition, and endures fear and anguish of soul in the Garden of Gethsemane. 'If we see him speaking and acting humanly, we may not be ignorant that, by bearing our flesh, *he became man*, and hence he so acts and speaks' (*Contra Arionos* III. 35, my italics.) By virtue of the real and personal 'becoming' of God in the economy of his inhomination, therefore, we may legitimately ascribe the full range of human experiences to him. It is certainly true that Athanasius ascribes this full range of experiences to the 'flesh' which the Logos assumed, and not to the 'Logos' himself. Yet ever since the writings of Voisin at the turn of the century, there have been scholars who have argued that Athanasius's use of 'flesh' in such contexts is holistic (all flesh is grass; the Word became flesh etc.) incorporating the psychical and spiritual aspects of creaturely nature, rather than the partial 'flesh' which Greek metaphysics sets over against 'spirit'. Hence his insistence that the Logos *qua Logos* cannot undergo such experiences need not detract from his bold statements elsewhere that, because this same Logos has taken 'flesh' and in so doing *become a man*, humanly speaking (ἀνθρωπίνως) precisely what we must say is that the Logos *does* experience them, for this 'flesh' belongs to him, and he exists in it humanly.

We should never forget that Athanasius's underlying theological concern is the outright rejection of Arianism through the affirmation that 'the Logos' is identical with (of the same substance as) God himself. Precisely what Arius had insisted was that 'the Logos' himself (according to his nature as Logos) must be passible, and therefore cannot be fully divine. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Athanasius avoids any suggestion that the Logos *as such* belongs to the passible (creaturely) realm, and is ever vigilant in his attempts to differentiate that which is proper to his humanity (τὰ ἀνθρώπινα) from that which is proper to his

divinity (ἡ θεότης), that is to say, that existence proper to his *nature* as divine Logos.

Quite apart from the actual nature of the textual evidence, however, the specific angle from which Hanson so clearly approaches and evaluates it (leading him, for example, readily to doubt either the integrity or logical consistency of the ascription of human fear, ignorance and suffering to the Logos *in his human existence* [i.e. in the flesh] in *Contra Arianos*) betrays the familiar influence of a reading of Nicene christology in the light of the later Alexandrian insistence that the humanity which the Logos assumed was *anhypostatic*. This term, coined by Cyril in his dispute with Nestorius, was intended simply to convey his belief that the humanity of Jesus (the 'flesh' in Athanasian terms) was not possessed of its own 'hypostasis', that is to say, it had *no distinct, independent subsistence apart from the hypostatic union* with the divine Son. The rendering of this term *via* the Latin *impersonalitas* has resulted, however, in its unfortunate interpretation as somehow suggesting that the humanity of Christ was not possessed of its own distinct human 'personality' or psychological constituent, a view rightly rejected as docetic and sub-Christian by the fathers at Constantinople. But this is not what the adjective *anhypostatos* meant to those who employed it as a bulwark against dualistic christologies, and the characterization of the whole Alexandrian christological tradition as tacitly monophysite which has resulted from such misunderstanding needs to be radically reassessed.

The truth of the matter would seem to be that the exegetical issues relating to Athanasian incarnational christology remain unclear. The evidence of Athanasius's own words in the period prior to the Council of Alexandria in 362AD is ambiguous, and lends itself equally well to two very different interpretations. What is lamentable in a study of this size and erudition is not that its author should come down so clearly on the side of what must be admitted to be the majority in the debate, but rather that (like too many other recent accounts) he apparently refuses to recognize any further room for debate on the matter, resting content with the rehearsal of the 'assured results' of scholarship from an earlier generation. One cannot, of course, always discuss everything as fully as one might wish to do, and one must sometimes simply stand on the shoulders of others. But when one is going to categorize the Athanasian treatment of the incarnation (which lies, after all, at the very heart of fourth century christology) as 'a "Spacesuit Christology,"' (448) and to build so much of what follows in one's argument upon this interpretation, it would seem

to be desirable at least that one should acknowledge that considerable body of scholarship which has felt (and still feels) compelled to part company with such an interpretation. When the assured results of one generation of scholars become the unquestioned prejudices of the next it is all the more important that alternative cases are taken and treated seriously.

The nature of a review article is such that one often focuses upon that with which one takes issue or disagrees. The impression which this book makes overall, however, is highly favourable. Hanson makes his case with a thoroughness and clarity that readers familiar with his numerous earlier works will recognize and welcome, and there can be little doubt that his painstaking work will provide the next generation of scholars with an invaluable resource.