

Fully understanding the arian controversy religion essay



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The church has battled throughout its history with various Heresies and controversies, which in essence have partly defined the path that the church has taken. A perfect example is Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria and his bold stand against Arianism. Without which today's orthodox faith may have drifted into paganism and found itself more of a philosophy than a life saving religion. The message of salvation was on the line.

The Arians believed that Jesus was not God, but instead a created being, where Athanasius knew that for salvation to be realised, Jesus must be both fully God and fully human, of the same substance as God, and always being, not created. The importance of this stance could not be overstated as it would affect all aspects of Christian belief and society.

Athanasius' stand cost him dearly spending many years in exile on 5 different occasions, but his determination to stand for what he believed was absolute truth eventually triumphed. His stand maintained the church as an instrument of salvation, separate from the control of secular power. It is through the example of Athanasius' life and costly fight for truth that we learn the importance of identifying today's critical issues and standing firm in this present difficult age.

Introduction

To fully understand the Arian Controversy and the depth of involvement for Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria[1], one only has to follow his life story, as the history of the Arian Controversy is entwined throughout it.[2]The life of Athanasius is so dominated by the combat of this heresy, that the rise and

fall of the Arian Controversy was a reflection of the life and security of this theological giant.

In this essay the Author shall attempt to examine the relationship between Athanasius and his passionate fight against the Arian heresy. In so doing one must firstly understand the Controversy, secondly have knowledge of the Key players, and what they so passionately believed and fought for, and finally to consider how learnings from these past battles can be applied today.

Section1: The Arian Controversy

The Arian Controversy was birthed through a man named Arius (250[3]-336AD)[4]born in Libya.[5]A very popular and prestigious presbyter of the Baucalis Church,[6]in the city of Alexandria.[7]Arius' intention was to protect the status of a unique God, the only being to have always been and neither has another ever existed with the same standing nor made of the same matter.[8]However the controversy finds an earlier conception through Origen,[9]probably the greatest Christian theologian of the early church.[10]

Origen's understanding of the Trinity was three distinct beings firmly united into one, God the Creator of all, the eternal Son Christ and the Holy Spirit. However it was his comments regarding the subordination of both Christ[11]and the Holy Spirit to the Father, which influenced some of those who followed him to accept subordinationism[12]and finally Arianism. This belief along with a number of other popular heresies and schisms built a foundation and lead into to what is now known as the Arian controversy.

Around the year 318AD[13]Arius began to spread his views on the relationship between God and Christ,[14]one being the uncreated Father without a beginning, who bore a Son with a beginning.[15]The Word (Logos) became flesh as the man Jesus Christ (John 1: 14), but Arius argued, He was not made of the same nature nor substance as God the Father, “ neither eternal nor omnipotent, and therefore was a lesser being”.[16]In Arius’ appeal to the highly influential Eusebius, the bishop at Nicomedia[17]he wrote “ The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning”.[18]Arius postulated that Jesus Christ was a created Being, the first and the greatest ever created,[19]but still only a form of creation, not the Creator.[20]This is further seen in a common phrase that would eventually become the Arian motto,

“ There was, when He was not”

At this time (early in the fourth century) in church history, the theory’s and ideas surrounding the divinity of Christ were still “ up in the air” so to speak, and the church had no set way to ‘ officialise’ doctrine or determine what was an acceptable belief.[21]So it was, when Alexander the bishop of Alexandria clashed over several issues with Arius, the most important being whether the ‘ Word of God’, was co-eternal with God.[22]

In 320AD Alexander took decisive action, clearly declaring his belief in the Son’s, being ‘ consubstantial and coeternal with the Father’,[23]following which he brought together a council of local bishops, condemning the views of Arius[24]and deposing him in 321AD.[25]Arius, appealed both to the local populace and some prominent bishops[26]from the eastern side of the

empire,[27]who in turn supported him. Arius' return to Alexandria, [28]resulted in demonstrations and riots in the streets,[29]further threatening a division of the ' entire eastern church',[30]causing Constantine; the first fully attested Christian Emperor,[31]to intervene.

In 325AD[32], Constantine called the first Ecumenical (Universal or worldwide) Council in Nicea[33]to settle the matter of the Arian Debate. [34]This historic meeting not only had the Emperor Constantine present but it is also claimed in ancient chronicles that 318 bishops[35]were also in attendance.[36]The Arian party was led by Eusebius of Nicomedia[37]and the opposition was headed by Alexander bishop of Alexandria notably supported by a young deacon named Athanasius[38]his eventual successor and champion of Nicene orthodoxy.[39]

The Arian debate was distilled to the addition or subtraction of one iota. Was Christ ' Homousios' (i. e. of the same essence as God) or the Arian stand ' Homoiousios' (i. e. of similar essence with God)?[40]In what has been described as a ' decision of immeasurable importance in the history of the church',[41]Arianism was rejected,[42]in the clearest way possible,[43]and after debate, the condemnation of Arius pronounced by the bishop Alexandria was upheld,[44]resulting in Arius being ' anathematized and banished with two companions to Illyria'.[45]Furthermore for clarity of belief, and complete rejection of Arianism, it was decided that a common creed needed to be developed and unanimously agreed upon.[46]Eusebius of Caesarea presented his own creed,[47]which was adopted with some changes strengthening the rejection of the Arianism heresies.[48]This creed

known as the ‘ Creed of Nicaea’[49]became the basis of the ‘ Nicene Creed’ still used in today’s churches.[50]

This should have ended the Arian controversy but it soon reappeared with the emperor ordering the church to reverse Arius’ condemnation, and readmit him. This introduced a new church issue, the interference of the state (emperor) in church affairs. Instead of persecution, the church had to deal with instruction from a secular authority. We also start to see the true grit of Athanasius, and his willingness to stand for truth despite the negative consequences to his own life.

Section 2: Athanasius, “ The Black Dwarf” Champion of Nicene Orthodoxy.

Athanasius (296 – 373 AD),[51]seemed to be a man surrounded by controversy. In his time as archbishop of Alexandria,[52]he was exiled no less than five times. His controversial standing centred around his use of Episcopal authority,[53]as well as the famous alleged assassination of a fellow bishop of a rival group[54]which was dramatically found to be false. [55]It was Athanasius’ lot, that his fortunes would ride the waves of rejection and popularity of the cause (The Arian controversy) he so diligently fought against throughout his life. His stance against the heresy that plagued his defence of Christianity fashioned his life. He is credited in history[56]as one who “ stood alone for the truth, against the forces of heresy”, [57]and is to have stated his famous defiance, “ Athanasius Against the World”.[58]

Athanasius who was noted as being so dark and short of stature, was known to his enemies as “ The Black Dwarf”, [59]the man seen above all others as

being opposed to Arianism and to be feared the most.[60]He was also known as the champion of Nicene orthodoxy, seen as one of the ' great fathers of the fourth century',[61]and is also credited as one of the most renown theologians of the early church,[62]amongst other greats such as Clement and Origen.[63]

Three key issues of concern for Athanasius were within the ' religious, social, and political' realms. His gravest concern was the Arian core argument regarding the full deity of Jesus Christ and the theology of the Trinity.

Athanasius' stance on the trinity, was deeply rooted upon his beliefs on creation and salvation, effectively focusing debate on a biblical and theological basis steering it away from philosophical speculation.[64]In the Arian debate, Athanasius could clearly see that Christianity was at the brink of becoming a form of paganism.[65]If Jesus was not declared ' Homousios', then Christianity would have worshiped two Gods, and Jesus would not have been a worthy sacrifice for our sins.[66]Athanasius saw Salvation was on the line,[67]Jesus needed to be both fully human to atone for the sin of man, and fully divine, as none other could have the power to save humanity. This dual nature of Christ was paramount, as without it the Salvation of humanity would be impossible.[68]

The second major issue was in the realm of politics. At this time Christianity had just emerged from a period of major persecution by the secular powers[69]to a time in which it was the dominant religion. However, Christianity had in reality moved from secular persecution to secular control by the Emperor[70]of the day.[71]The Arian controversy was a great

example of a shift in foci with Athanasius now finding himself opposing the <https://assignbuster.com/fully-understanding-the-arian-controversy-religion-essay/>

Emperor over religious issues. This resulted in five periods of exile and reinstatement,[72]based on either a change in emperor or the cliché closet to the emperor at the time.[73]Subsequently the church found its role degraded away from its real role of pointing mankind to salvation in Christ, rather becoming a tool of the emperor used to achieve his own ends. Consequently, church issues and doctrines were not being decided by the religious elite debating each issue, instead key decisions (e. g. Arian controversy) were made by secular rulers under petition.[74]Furthermore, church decisions were subject to being over ruled by the state to suit the whims of the emperor.[75]Throughout this period Athanasius established and fought for the principle of church separation from the state, retaining the church's focus and mission on the good news of Christ.

The third issue faced by Athanasius was in the social sphere This arose through the emperor Constantine's legitimate concerns with the volatility of the Arian dispute, its magnitude and potential to tear apart the entire eastern church.[76]Constantine recognised the importance and role of a united church holding together the fabric of a decaying Roman society. This was his hope and means of ensuring Rome's survival, but a divided and embittered church would seal the fate of weary empire.[77]So it was that Constantine called together the first worldwide assembly of Christian bishops to deal with these issues amongst other things.[78]His stance regarding the social impact of a divided church was clear as he addressed the bishops before the council stating " Division in the church was worse than war".[79]

Athanasius refused to condone violence to achieve his goals. This was shown during a confrontation with rival bishop Gregory which escalated into <https://assignbuster.com/fully-understanding-the-arian-controversy-religion-essay/>

violence. Athanasius' response was to remove himself from the city in order to avoid further bloodshed.[80] Athanasius' pastoral heart recognised the danger Arianism would bring to society, and that those who opposed Arianism would once again face persecution,[81] (only this time it would come from within). Athanasius also realised that Christianity's endpoint under Arianism was paganism leading to the demise of both social and moral standards as the Christian faith decayed to the depth of other pagan religions.[82]

Section 3: Applying these lessons in today's society

The issues which arose in Athanasius' day are seen again today, challenging Christians across all nations to varying degrees. The three main areas of conflict faced by Athanasius and Christians today, are as follows.

The first issue Christians face today is that of religious heresy. The many denominations now found under the Protestant banner demonstrates the splintering of the church into multiple denominations, further giving rise to cults barely related to the original Christian message.[83] Even the Arian controversy itself has re-surfaced in a modified form with the emergence of the Jehovah Witnesses.[84] One learns from Athanasius that even with insurmountable odds, someone must stand in the gap for truth, despite the cost it may have on your very being. Athanasius showed that one must persist until the end, to not only ensure truth is victorious, but that unity of the body of Christ is achieved. Looking at Athanasius' stand, it is observed that he never gave up on the church body, despite overwhelming odds opposing him. Athanasius worked within the existing church structure, resisting the temptation to start his own religious theological group. This <https://assignbuster.com/fully-understanding-the-arian-controversy-religion-essay/>

resulted in the survival of the ancient church, giving Christians of this present day a functional theological base to build upon.

Today's second issue encompasses the relationship between church and state. This battle is being played out across the world. Christians in many western countries have formed specifically Christian political parties, [85]based upon the Christian stance and influencing government policy where possible.[86]Globally we see countries like Communist China and the old Russia where the government took an active role in trying to discredit and eliminate religion[87]through persecution and unjust laws. Unable to defeat the church of Christ some adopted a policy of offering religious "freedom" with harsh restrictions under the tight control of the government. [88]We learn through Athanasius trials, the dangers of mixing politics and religion, with the corruption and misuse of the church which can come from such a union. Today we face the seeds of secular intervention in Christian belief and activity with Australia's recent discrimination and vilification laws having the potential to silence the church.

The final lesson deals with the society or community in which Christians live. Constantine saw that the unity of the Christians could hold the fabric of the Roman Empire together, and Christians may exert a similar influence today. The gradual decay of present society towards a collapse in its social moral character is evident with the increasing occurrence of problematic behaviours (in societal terms) such as abortion, child and spousal abuse, and euthanasia (in some western countries). From a Christian stance, moral indicators such as divorce, suicide and problem pregnancies are also increasing in frequency. Some indicators show a decreasing difference
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between secular society and the Christian community as Christian beliefs are influenced and eroded. The past reveals that to avert social disaster, Christians need to be unified, offering stable standards and clear beliefs tempered with peace, hope and love to the communities and nations in which they live: Offering Christ as the real alternative to modern paganism. Athanasius demonstrates that the church must get back to its roots and be a vessel of good news, offering Salvation to mankind.

Conclusion

The church would do well to look back on the life of Athanasius and learn from the lessons that this great man of God teaches. Although the works of Athanasius hold an important place in the history of Christianity, it is more the Life and stance of Athanasius which speaks volumes to Christians throughout the ages. It was Athanasius' tireless and fearless stand against the Arianism which earned him the title " Champion of Nicene orthodoxy". Against seemingly insurmountable odds, Athanasius opposed heretical change, battling both the hierarchy of church and state.

The tenacity and vision of one man, refusing to recant his theological stance on Christ's deity and the role of the church, established and impacted the church's direction to this day. In most Western countries the protestant church is independent of the state's influence[89]with a primary focus stayed true around the message of Christ bringing salvation through his deity and subsequent efficacy of his substitutionary sacrifice.