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What was Arius' Philosophy?

The evaluation of the philosophical antecedents of Arius, the fourth-century Alexandrian Christian heretic, presents considerable difficulties.

1.

In spite of much that has been written, in fact we know little of the philosophy current in *Alexandria* in the early-fourth century. There is a lamentable gap in our knowledge after the time of Plotinus (mid-third century) until the advent of Theon, father of the ill-fated Hypatia, who taught in Alexandria during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius (379–95). Theon, we are told, was associated with the Museum[1] which was an 'Institute of Advanced Study' – a community of scholars whose studies were supported by the State. But we have no knowledge of a continuous school of philosophy in Alexandria before Theon's time although Professor H.I. Marrou, in an authoritative study, has argued that there were municipal chairs of philosophy in Alexandria much as in other principal cities of the Empire.[2] These chairs, however, did not form a continuous succession (διαδοχή) as was the case at Athens: 'All we can say, on our present knowledge, is that we find in Alexandria, from the fourth to the sixth centuries, philosophers and teachers of philosophy.'[3] This judgement is also true of the second half of the third century. One such teacher from that period known to us is Anatolius, later bishop of Laodicea in Syria, who taught the Aristotelian tradition there in the late-third century[4]. His pagan fellow citizens had elected him to his post. Unfortunately we know nothing of his influence.

Much has been written about the Platonic and Aristotelian origins of Arius' philosophy which assumes that there were Platonic and

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[1] Θέων, ὁ ἐκ τοῦ Μουσείου: Souda 205; Adler ii. 702.

[2] H. I. Marrou, The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century, ed. A. Momigliano (1963), pp. 131–35.

[3] Ibid., p. 134.

[4] Eus. Hist. vii. 32. 6: ὧν ἕνεκα, καὶ τῆς ἐκ' Ἀλεξανδρείας Ἀριστοτέλους διαδοχῆς τὴν διατριβὴν λόγος ἔχει πρὸς τῶν τῇδε πολιτῶν συστήσασθαι αὐτόν ἀξιωθῆναι. – We have no knowledge of this "school" continuing after Anatolius' day.

Aristotelian *schools* of philosophy in existence in Alexandria in his day. We must rigidly eschew such a presumption. Nevertheless that Arius may have come into contact with *individual* non-Christian philosophers is a possibility – and indeed perhaps a probability – although the general impression that we gain of his teaching is that it was *sui generis* although drawing on and working over older material.

2.

During the period which saw the rise of Arianism the influence of *Platonism*, in its Middle and Later forms, was everywhere predominant. Small groups of sceptics here and there might resist Platonic teaching. Yet if a Christian thinker, starting from within the tradition of the Church, wished to interpret the Christian Faith philosophically he would undoubtedly find an ally in Platonism. It was not the question of a simple choice between Plato, Aristotle and the Stoa but between Platonists who had embraced Aristotelian and Stoic ideas[5] and those who had rejected them. It is worth remembering that Platonism was not a unified philosophical system in the early-fourth century and the Master himself might well have been astonished with what passed muster under his name.

How far are we justified in tracing *specific* Platonic influence on Arius' thought? Arius twice uses the philosophical term μονάς of God in his letter to Alexander, bishop of Alexandria:[6]

a) οὐδ' ὡς Σαβέλλιος τὴν μονάδα διαιρῶν, υἱοπάτορα εἶπεν.

b) ἀλλ' ὡς μονὰς καὶ ἀρχὴ πάντων, οὕτως ὁ θεὸς πρὸ πάντων ἐστί.

G. C. Stead refers to the implications of this[7] which are paralleled in Philo.[8] God could be called 'the Monad' (1) as unique, or (2) as the ultimate origin of things, or (3) as simple and indivisible. In the first passage from Arius (3) is clearly implied; Sabellius had been guilty of dividing what is essentially indivisible. In the second (2) is

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[5] The first Platonist to use the Aristotelian philosophy was Eudorus of Alexandria who wrote a commentary on the Metaphysics and emphasised the Transcendence of the Supreme God or τὸ ἕν. R. E. Witt, Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism (1937), p. 126.

[6] Athan. De synodis 16. Μονάς is the special feminine of μόνος.

[7] G. C. Stead, Journ. Theol. Stud. 15 (1964), p. 18.

[8] Philo, Leg. All. ii. 3.

implied; God is before all things as 'Monad', i.e. as ultimate Origin. From this it would seem that for Arius μονάς is a *theological*, rather than a philosophical, title. Arius is appealing not directly to Plato but to an earlier Alexandrian tradition found in Philo, Athenagoras, Clement and Origen[9]; and it is significant that in arguing that God is μονάς Arius does not exclude His biblical attributes.[10] It is also interesting that Arius uses the term δυάς for the Son. In the Thalia he says: Σύνες, ὅτι ἡ μονὰς ἦν· ἡ δυὰς δὲ οὐκ ἦν, πρὶν ὑπάρξῃ.[11]. This could be taken in the Platonic sense of imperfection – something belonging to the world of sense. However, as Stead points out[12], it seems more probable that Arius uses δυάς as meaning "the number two", a synonym for δεύτερος as used by the second-century Greek apologists for "second in rank".[13] It is of course true that for Arius the Son is a subordinate, created being and, in that sense, inferior to the Monad. Philosophically this corresponds to marked trends in Middle and Later Platonism in which the Absolute becomes the Ultimate Principle, the logos taking second place and the Stoic *anima mundi* being the third and lower principle. Cf. Numenius' doctrine of the highest God and the inferior creator-God (Fragments 20–9) and Albinus' distinction between the Soul, the superior Mind and the highest mind (Epit. 10.2).

However it seems unlikely that Arius began from μονάς as the Absolute of the philosophical schools into which he fitted some Christian elements. Rather he began from the Christian Platonist tradition exemplified by Athenagoras[14], Clement and Origen, in which μονάς is a theological title, and had no difficulty in using this of the biblical God. Thus there is a correspondence with Platonism and a use of Platonic terms but not, I would hold, direct influence. Arius' Platonism was mediated through the Christian tradition. In

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[9] Philo, ibid.; Athen. Leg. 6; Clem. Alex. Paed. i. 71. 1; Orig. De princ. i. 1. 6. Cf. also μονάς in Plato, Phaed. 101c, 105c; Arist. Metaph. 1089ᵇ 35.

[10] Five of the phrases used by Arius of God in the introduction to the letter to Alexander (Athan. De synodis 16) are scriptural and three others are well established in tradition. Stead (n. 7), p. 17.

[11] Athan. De synodis 15.

[12] Stead (n. 7), p. 19.

[13] Cf. Justin, I Apol. 13.

[14] For the Alexandrian origin of Athenagoras see J. H. Crehan, Athenagoras = Anc. Chr. Writ., 23 (1956), pp. 3–8. I believe that Arius was directly acquainted with Athenagoras' Legatio.

this Arius differs little from Athanasius who also draws on the earlier Christian tradition and makes no sharp dichotomy between the Platonic Absolute and the Living God of the Bible. So Athanasius can interpret Exod. 3. 14 LXX, ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν, in a Platonic way.[15] By ὁ ὤν he means that God is Unchangeable in the Platonic sense.[16] It is the merit of recent study to have demonstrated that Athanasius makes use of the Middle Platonic idea of God in which the highest divine Principle is identified with the real and unchangeable Being.[17] In this he was close to Arius. Yet neither *begin* from the Platonic Absolute. They begin from the biblical idea of God and interpret this in Platonic terms. Their differences do not lie primarily in their idea of God considered philosophically.

In other respects Arius is not much indebted to Platonism. This is shown from a comparison of Arius' view of the creation of the cosmos with that of the Platonists. The latter interpreted Plato's Timaeus in various ways. The predominant view was that the cosmos had always existed, the account of the creation being a kind of parable. This view, known as early as Aristotle and Xenocrates, was held by Plotinus and his successors.[18] It is obviously far removed from the view of Arius which stressed the Priority and "Aloneness" of the Father. A second view, held by many Platonists[19], was that the cosmos was created out of formless matter (Timaeus 27d). This was certainly known to the second-century Apologists.[20] Arius, however, appears not to follow this line of thought as, in his view, the Son is οὔτε μέρος θεοῦ οὔτε ἐξ ὑποκειμένου τινός.[21] Rather he held that the cosmos was created *ex nihilo* which was the view of Athanasius. However it is significant that this view is not found in Middle or Later Platonism and is unknown outside the Christian tradition. It would therefore seem that Arius, in this important particular, is not drawing on Platonic interpretations of the Timaeus. Starting from the premiss of the Priority of the Father he believed that he

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[15] Athan. De decr. 22; De synod. 35.

[16] Athan. C. Arian. iii. 63.

[17] E. P. Meijering, Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius. Synthesis or Antithesis? (1968), p. 126.

[18] Calcidius, In Tim. 23–25, 300.

[19] Proclus, In Tim. i. 276, 31ff.

[20] Justin, I Apol. 10; Athenagoras, Leg. 19.

[21] Arius, Letter to Eus. Nic.; H. G. Opitz, Urkunden, 1 (1935), nr. 1, 5.

was reasserting traditional Christian positions. While his scheme runs parallel to philosophical tendencies in Platonism, found e.g. in Atticus and Methodius, and while he uses Platonic terminology in respect of God, direct influence need not be postulated. Arius was drawing on the early *Christian* Platonist tradition and was primarily a *religious* thinker rather than a philosopher *per se*.

There is, however, no doubt that direct Platonist influence is traceable in *later Arian* ideas. R. Arnou has noted the claim of the later Arians to a knowledge of the Divine Essence.[22] Gregory Nazianzus speaks of the unbridled contemplation (θεωρία) of *Eunomius*[23] and Arnou finds here an allusion to the Platonic doctrine of contemplation. Gregory of Nyssa also states that Eunomius held that those who believe in the Lord rise beyond anything sensible or intelligible – even beyond the generation of the logos – since desire for eternal life inspires the soul to attain to the knowledge of the ingenerate God.[24] This passage is full of Neoplatonic echoes.[25] In Eunomius we find a greater dependence on Greek philosophy, particularly logic, than is the case with Arius himself.

3.

The influence of *Aristotle* on Arianism must now be discussed. If Platonism made an immediate appeal to some Christian thinkers Aristotelianism was far less attractive. However a revival of interest in Aristotle seems to have taken place in the fourth century or a little earlier. Porphyry wrote an introduction to Aristotle's Logic and, as already mentioned, Anatolius set up a school of Aristotelian studies in Alexandria in the late-third century.

It has often been suggested that Arianism was primarily an affair of the schools. While it is true that its propaganda breathes the spirit of formal logic – the later Arian leaders were sophists to a man – caution is needed before we ascribe to Arius himself the cult of Pure

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[22] R. Arnou, Platonisme des Pères: Dict. théol. cath. 12 (1935), cols. 2320–21.

[23] Greg. Naz. Orat. 39. 8.

[24] Greg. Nyss. C. Eun. 10; cf. Theodoret, Haer. Fab. Comp. iv. 3.

[25] Noted by H. E. W. Turner, The Pattern of Christian Truth (1954), p. 224.

Form. This is the mistake of H.A. Wolfson who reads back later evidence into the origin of the controversy.[26] R. Arnou likewise has argued that the controversy arose from the use of Aristotelian dialectic on the part of the orthodox with perhaps Dionysius of Alexandria or Novatian in mind.[27] J. de Ghellinck, like G. C. Stead, thinks of actual debates between contending parties of philosophers.[28] These positions are deduced from the fact that Arius, in rejecting the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, refers to the doctrine of relations: οὐδὲ ἅμα τῷ Πατρὶ τὸ εἶναι ἔχει, ὥς τινες λέγουσι τὰ πρός τι.[29] The technical term τὰ πρός τι goes back to Aristotle, Categories 7 b. 15. It is, however, significant that the term does not occur in the extant fragments of Dionysius of Alexandria and it is unlikely that Novatian's writings were known in Alexandria in Arius' day. Arius' exact contemporary Peter the Martyr, who represents a reaction against Origen, knows nothing of a use of dialectic although he does refer to strife between pro and anti-Origenist factions in his day.[30] It may be that Arius is simply pointing out that the doctrine of relations is, in his view, irrelevant to theology.[31] It is true that, according to Sozomen, Arius possessed "no inconsiderable logical acumen" and was "a most expert logician"[32], but he uses these descriptions only with reference to Arius' opposition to Sabellianism and his initial preaching in church of his views about the Son of God. There is no indication that Aristotelian logic is in mind, as the context is religious rather than purely philosophical. Sozomen means little more than that Arius was clever in argument.

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[26] H. A. Wolfson, Religious Philosophy (1961), pp. 126–57.

[27] R. Arnou, Arius et la doctrine des relations trinitaires: Gregorianum 14 (1933), pp. 269–72.

[28] J. de Ghellinck, Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati, 1 (1946), pp. 127–44; Stead (n. 7), pp. 28, 30.

[29] Epiph. Haer. 69. 8. 2; Athan. De synodis 16; Hilary De trin. iv. 12–13.

[30] J. Viteau, Passions des Saints Ecaterine et Pierre d'Alexandrie (1897), p. 75.

[31] Stead (n. 7), pp. 29–30, argues that Arius' argument against the doctrine of relations is found in the Platonist tradition exemplified by Methodius, De autex. 22 (cf. Eus. Dem. iv. 3. 5–6). However it is worth noting that Methodius is concerned with the Father's relationship to the world, not to the Son, and it must remain uncertain whether Arius is indebted to him in this matter.

[32] Soz. Hist. i. 5; i. 15.

Aristotelian logic, however, came to the fore with the *later Arians* and may have been mediated through *Stoic* channels.[33] Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Socrates and Epiphanius[34] all mention Aristotle as the source of this later Arian teaching. Asterius is described as "the many headed sophist"[35] and Eunomius "the artificer of syllogisms".[36] Aristotelian dialectic reached its high-water mark in Aetius and Eunomius and it is to be noted that Aetius was a professional sophist trained in the Aristotelian school before he became an Arian.[37] In the hands of these teachers later Arian theology became a form of technology (τεχνολογία) and the term took on a disreputable connotation in the Church Fathers.[38] τεχνολογία was the use of logic as an end in itself and could be applied to the subject matter without any restraint. It was said that the Anomoeans wished to deduce God from Aristotelian and geometrical syllogisms.[39] Metaphysics became subordinated to logic with disastrous consequences for Christian faith and life – a tendency paralleled in the literature of the second Sophistic movement. In later Arianism religious mystery was replaced by logical paradox and this was the cause of the jibe that Aristotle was "the bishop of the Arians".[40]

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A clear *distinction* must, however, be drawn between *Arius* and his *later* followers. There is no trace in the extant fragments of Arius of Aristotelian logic as a Form controlling content as there certainly is in the writings of the later Arian sophists. Rather we must credit Arius with the religious intention of conserving belief in the Unity of God such as had been taught by Philo.[41] This intention need not have led necessarily to the separation of Monotheism from a spiritual

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[33] Turner (n. 25), p. 228.

[34] Basil C. Eun. i. 5; Greg. Nyss. C. Eun. 1; Socr. Hist. ii. 35; Epiph. Haer. 69. 69.

[35] Athan. De synodis 18.

[36] Soz. Hist. vi. 26.

[37] Socr. Hist. ii. 35; Soz. Hist. iii. 15.

[38] Greg. Nyss. C. Eun. 1, 7, 12.

[39] Epiph. Haer. Anac. 6.

[40] Faustinus, De trin. 2.

[41] Wolfson (n. 26), pp. 144–45; idem, The Philosophy of the Church Fathers, 1 (1964), pp. 585–587.

context as happened with the later Arian sophists. I believe that we must credit Arius with conservative intentions in this matter. However, Aristotelian logic came into its own in later Arianism and gradually gained momentum throughout the fifth and subsequent centuries reaching its climax in Medieval Thomism. Such a development could not have been foreseen in the early-fourth century.

Our short investigation has shown that any attempt to find an *origin* for Arianism in Platonism, Aristotelianism or, for that matter, in Stoicism[42] is fraught with uncertainty. While Arius' hierarchy of Being *corresponds to trends* in later Platonism, and may use Platonic terminology, we cannot demonstrate any decisive influence on him. The dichotomy between Platonism and the biblical tradition should not be exaggerated. Arius worked primarily from within the earlier Christian Platonist tradition and saw no difficulty in using μονάς of the God of the Scriptures. In this he is close to Athanasius. There is no trace in Arius of an incursion of alien philosophy and logic overwhelming the Christian element although evidence for this exists in the works of the later Arian sophists.

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[42] J. de Ghellinck, Patristique et moyen âge, 3 (1948), pp. 282–87, attempted unsuccessfully to trace Stoic influence in Arian dialectic.