A REVIEW ARTICLE

ARIAN OBEDIENCE:
SCOUTING FOR THEOLOGIANS

Eric Osborn

I. A recent work¹ is based on the thesis that Arianism is most intelligible when seen as a scheme of salvation. Soteriology dominates the Arian texts. At the centre is ‘a redeemer obedient to his creator’s will whose life of virtue modelled perfect creaturehood and hence the path of salvation for all Christians’. Oddly, the inquiry moves from christology to salvation to cosmology, then discusses the life of Antony, and finally contrasts the two possibilities which this account of the controversy proposes. The Arian position is set out:

God foreknew Christ to be good and therefore gave him the glory which was to be his later, as a man of virtue. Without surprises, ‘Jesus advanced internally in virtue so that at the resurrection God could grant him a promotion’. (23) The Son is seen as standing ‘on a trajectory of accomplishment from his first precosmic generation through his earthly ministry’. (23) The basic model is that of ‘an obedient servant who kept the commandments’. (25) Father and Son are one through an agreement or harmony rather than an identity, and the grace which saves is the ‘bestowal of divine favour and approval upon obedient, that is, virtuous creatures’. This means the opportunity to become a son of God, (28) so that Jesus was a representative son of God but by no means the only possible son of God. The sonship of others differs in degree but not in kind for all may work up from Tenderfoot to First Class, if they obey without question not merely their parents and scoutmasters, but God as well. The important thing is to see obedient ethical progress as the motif of the Arian position. Cosmology must take a second place.

Christ, said Arius, was called into existence by the will of God. He was finite in knowledge and capable of moral change. However, he was a steady one and chose the good and reached God’s favour. His only privilege was that God foreknew his faithfulness and made him a son by adoption in advance of his achievement. (43) Apart from this very considerable windfall, he lived, like us all, in a transactional universe, where one never gets something for nothing or nothing for something. The scheme of salvation is dominated by the obedient one who progresses to full and enduring sonship. (45). Adoption, which is the essence of salvation, is common to all

who obey. The son is one of many brothers. 'The Arian soteriology required the saviour, that he might be imitable, to be related to the Father on the same terms as other finite beings.' (63) The dynamic of command and obedience governs all in their relationship to God. We are told, more than once, that the Arians did not work against the divinity of the Christian saviour nor take his central place from him, but that the ideas of election and adoption gave him a place of honour above all others. Yet while his honour exceeded that of others, anything he did was accessible to all men. The limitations of Christ are the limitations of all men, namely: willing, choosing, striving and suffering; so also his benefits and glories are open to all. The obedience of the Logos is stressed and the category of will is made central. The problem of two kinds of Logos is discussed. The mediator between God and man is the man Christ Jesus who is the middle of God's creation and a perfect creature. (117).

Paul of Samosata held a similar concern for the ethical progress and promotion of Christ to full sonship. But the basis of Arianism is to be found, we are told, most clearly in the letter to the Hebrews. Here the Christ whom God appoints for virtuous service has been exalted with honour and glory. He is the son who learns obedience, who obeys and endures death on the cross. He does not glorify himself; like a good high-priest, he becomes like his brothers sharing the temptations of the flesh in sympathy with the weakness and ignorance of men. His pious obedience is without sin, and he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified come from one source. (166).

By contrast Athanasius is said to see the Incarnation as an act of grace which 'has been made irreversibly available to the cosmos and to human persons. . . . In short the universe and the life in grace have become stabilised in the very structure of things.' (181). Athanasius objected to the Arian teaching because of the concept of a free divine will and a free creaturely response. This, it is claimed, made Christian existence uncertain and reversible. The Arians wanted a more flexible universe. 'And Antony, mouthpiece for Athanasius, can trot out the famous unchangeability text from Romans 8.35 and say ‘nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ’.' (138). (His critic here propounds a nonsense pietist interpretation of Romans 8 which is, contrary to his view, about an inferno of warring powers.) Arius chose between a stabilised order of redeemed creation and a grace which empowers people for moral advance in a 'transactional universe'. (193). The same choice rejected 'being' and 'essence' on the one hand in favour of 'will' and 'willing' on the other.

II. There are two immediate difficulties. The first is that the simple inconsistencies in the Arian position have not been noted. On page 82, Arius is quoted 'the son has subsisted by will and pleasure before times and ages'
and 'there was when the son was not and he was begotten later who previously did not exist'. There is no way in any language by which one who subsists from before time and ages can have not existed. The second worry is the use of scripture. The epistle to the Hebrews is seen as offering proof-texts which can be used by either side. At no point is it suggested that the shooting of proof-texts from one side to the other has little point in a final assessment of the controversy. There is no awareness that a critical view of scripture is more appropriate than a biblicist approach. Instead the biblicist view (one verse — one vote — one veto) is regarded as entirely proper.

III. What are the positive features of this account of Arius? First we may say that it tries to identify the problem which concerned Arius. The battle of formulae is no better than the battle of proof-texts. The best way to understand an author is to clarify the problem or problems which he was trying to solve. This problem was, we are told, about the salvation of men and not about God and the world. Whether the answer given is right or wrong, the method is beyond reproach.2

Secondly, this account explains the political appeal of Arianism. The justification of the godly is much better for the empire than the justification of the ungodly. If the Church shows a tendency towards altering 'Trespassers Prosecuted' to 'Trespasses Forgiven' there is a clear threat to law and order. Julian the Apostate saw the ethical danger of a God of grace and claimed that the Christian gospel made it harder for people to be good.3

Thirdly the idea of a 'transactional universe' flatters the wealthy and powerful of every age. In opposition to the gospel of justice for the unjust 'the principle of success and competition, which is highly praised before the under-developed at world conferences today, serves the egoism of the privileged who are defending their status quo'.4

Fourthly, the priority of soteriology over christology, first evident at Corinth,5 offers further explanation of the Arian advance as it turns the eye

2. There is, however, a strange blindness to the problem of what happens to the universe when the Logos is incarnate. See Athanasius, De Inc. 17.1 and Early Arianism, p.174.
5. E. Kasemann, Jesus Means Freedom, (London, 1969), pp.59-84. Pietism is a difficult phenomenon to define. It is best to use 'pious' or 'piety' to describe personal religion, and 'pietistic' and 'pietism' to describe its corruption, as found in Pharisees and attacked by Jesus, or as found in Galatia and Corinth and attacked by Paul. The historical movement, which has included both sound piety and unsound piety (i.e. pietism), is best distinguished by the capital letter, as Pietism. In its Christian forms, pietism allows soteriology to take precedence over christology so that a human experience defines its divine origin, the cross is eclipsed by the resurrection, and the Church becomes a religious club rather than a company of redeemed sinners.
of faith to the Christian’s navel. There is no other vision which can compete with umbilical contemplation, as witness the tales of most religious movements and the prevalence of the first person pronoun in prayers addressed to God. This is what theologians have called ‘pietism’ in the generic and bad sense, as distinct from the historical movements, often good and sometimes bad, which have been designated as ‘Pietism’. It stays with the question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’.

Fifthly the sober statement of the Arian cause fits well with the woodenness behind much Arian thought and utterance. The argument that if God is the ultimate cause of salvation and Jesus is the immediate cause there is no need for the immediate cause to be divine, begs the question as much as a recent claim that the literal accuracy of scripture can be established by turning to the words of Jesus in the fourth gospel: He claims that the scripture cannot be broken. The woodenness is less attractive in Arius’ insistence on the exalted sonship of Jesus and his denial of the homoousia. Here one longs for the wit of the nineteenth century Scottish divine who, when accused of denying the divinity of Jesus, insisted vigorously that he had never denied the divinity of any man.

Sixthly it is easier to understand the length and ferocity of the controversy if it was in some way connected with morals. I have long argued that the moral objections to heretics were not merely attempts to discredit them: Christians could get away with the most extraordinary ideas if there did not appear to be any moral consequences. If the Arians thought that grace slackened the pace and their opponents thought that obedience was far too tedious, then the stage was fixed for a good hard fight.

IV. Against the views of Gregg and Groh, stands first, the overwhelming evidence that the argument was about God. I incline to the view that there is only one problem in Christian theology: that there is only one God and that he is known only by those who believe that Jesus is God. Arius appears to be concerned with this problem and the splendid work of Lorenz® confirms this view.

Secondly the place of cosmology cannot be denied. In any case the ethics depend on a metaphysic or a cosmology since we are told that there is a ‘transactional universe.’ This claim is disturbing to the majority who consider they have little chance of survival unless they get more than they deserve, either through divine grace or a little bit of luck. But the claim is spectacularly inappropriate with regard to Arius himself. The recent work does not convey anything of ‘la véritable tragédie intellectuelle du prêtre

alexandrin’” who must have believed that the transactional universe went wrong in his own case. His enemies have believed that his end was exactly right for a ‘gut (i.e. intestinal) theologian’.

Thirdly, both these points are underlined by Arius’ interest in a hierarchy or chain of being. Platonism could either stay with its monism and logic or it could follow the path of the picture book. ‘Bilderbuch Platonismus’ or the ‘Platonic underworld’ finished up with little more than an ordered series of being in an ordered world. Arius seems to fit this common declension very well indeed.

Fourthly there is a widespread belief that the thought of early Christianity was consistently soteriological and that Arius followed the general trend. This is not true of Athanasius who has been shown to think from the beginning about God and to move from theology to anthropology. Ritschl’s work on this point has not been considered and it should be made clear that in his pietism Arius was following other priorities than those of Athanasius. When we come to theology the Arian God is more shocking to the twentieth century than to earlier patriarchal days. The God who demands of his son obedience and death, would seem to be in need of a good analyst, unless it be the case that the essence of Father and Son are the same.

Finally, does the account of Christian ethics which is here placed over against a theology of grace carry any force at all? There will always be hesitation about a gospel of grace because it offers unearned divine aid to those who have not and who may not do anything about it. Obedience is the central Arian virtue. It is in this that the Arian Christ is strong.

All of which has cultural appeal especially in the decadent West, where (heaven knows) morality is not treated with enough respect; but can the Christian account of the good life afford to be reduced to an ethic of obedience and to be divorced from the amazing grace which is the beginning of the gospel? Certainly within Paul there is no ethical imperative apart from an indicative of grace. Basil reformed monasticism with lots of rules and a theme of infinite grace. No one could deny that the Boy Scout movement has contributed a great deal towards the good life in a transactional universe: ‘Be prepared’. The claim that Arius also was primarily concerned to do his duty to God and the emperor, to help other people at all times and to obey the Scout Law, is to be welcomed with respect and with interest. The evidence presented in its favour is strong and one can see the Chief

7. C. Kannengiesser, ‘Théologie patristique, Crise arienne’ RSR 70, 4, 1982, p.605. Ibid., p.603, where the authors of Early Arianism are said to make of Arius ‘l’inspirateur d’une sorte de “revival” pétiste au sein de la chrétienté alexandrine, lassée par l’intellectualisme desséchant du magistère et de la catéchèse de son évêque.’
Scout of our salvation whistling his way through cross and resurrection. There is inconsistency in the Arian view when the key figure is made Chief Scout, before he has even passed his Tenderfoot, or earned any standing in his transactional universe. This is something for nothing, even if God knows it is going to be all right. Nevertheless this account of Arianism has some basis in the texts, might explain its appeal to the imperial establishment and to perennial pietism, and is therefore worth noticing as we pass the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Boy Scout movement.