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What is an *iota* to God? The Balkan Bishops, the Bible, and the Fourth-Century Christological Debates

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The Council of Nicaea, held in 325, was supposed to end the debate on how Christians defined and discussed God. Unfortunately, the Council only served to further split the Church. Throughout the fourth century, Christianity was divided against itself as different groups within the church advocated different definitions of orthodox faith, often at variance with Nicaea, and designated by the blanket term 'Arian.' Among these was the Homoian creed favored by the Emperor Constantius II (337-61).¹ Throughout the fourth century, these different definitions led to a number of ecclesiastical councils called by the Roman emperors in order to end the debate. These councils varied in size from small local councils to great ecumenical councils and, importantly, many of these councils took place in the Balkan provinces, and many of the bishops involved in these councils were from these Balkan sees.

This paper will begin by examining the terms that surround the Christological debates. It will then examine some of the major bishops who held the 'Homoian' explanation of Christology, showing that this was the explanation favored by virtually all of the Arian bishops in the Balkans. The following shows that bishops on all sides utilized Scripture to bolster their arguments, and that the Nicene bishops began to supplement the Bible with ecclesiastical history and apostolic authority as the crisis worsened. Next the Christological councils with Balkan involvement will be examined, ending with the Nicene victories over the Homoians at the Councils of Aquileia and Constantinople in 381. This paper concludes with a discussion of the distinctive Balkan character of the fourth-century Christological debates and posit explanations for why this character came about.

¹ Humphries 1999: 116.

The fourth century Christological debates were filled with, among other things, half-truths, misrepresentations, and blatant lies. For this reason, a number of the terms that have come down to us today, and are ever-present in the scholarship of this period, are problematic. I will not create new terms for these concepts in this paper, but I will offer alternate definitions for some of these terms. The first term is 'Arian,' which will refer to any of the multitude of theological understandings in the fourth century that hold Christ to be some sort of creature, or created being, but does not necessarily imply support for the teachings of Arius. This problem can be seen clearly when one investigates the debate between the Homoiousian Arians and the Homoian Arians. The 'Homoiousian' Arians preferred the term *homoiousios* (of like essence) to the term *homoousios* (of same essence) as a description of Christ's relationship with the Father. The 'Homoians,' on the other hand, attempted to avoid the term *ousia* (substance) entirely, hoping that this could serve to unite the various Christian groups who were debating how important an *iota* actually was to a Christian's understanding of God. Despite these differences, both groups were considered to be 'Arians' by non-Arian Christians. This matter is not helped by the fact that most of the sources that have survived from this period are from non-Arian Christians, and many of them could not tell the difference between one group of Arians and another group of Arians. Philastrius of Brescia, for example, wrote a book describing the different heresies and his definition of Arianism was based on the Homoian strain.² The final term is 'Nicene,' which deserves special mention. This term does not refer to those who held to the Nicene Creed, as two of the major players in the 'Nicene' camp, Marcellus of Ancyra and Photinus of Sirmium, would be considered heretics by Nicene and Arian Christians who came after them. The 'Nicene' bishops also rarely used the Nicene Creed until the late 350s, and it did not become widely viewed as an orthodox creed until after the Council of Ariminum in 359. And even this creed was superseded among 'Nicene' Christians by the creed formulated by the 381 Council of Constantinople which,

² Philastrius of Brescia 1890: 66.1-2.

although nearly identical to the creed promulgated by the Council of Nicaea, was more nuanced.³ For this reason, I will use the definition of Nicene given by Athanasius of Alexandria in his *De Decretis*: 'He who does not hold the doctrines of Arius,' bearing in mind that Athanasius composed his definition for reasons antithetical to this paper.⁴

Of the Arian Balkan bishops, virtually all of them were Homoians. The Emperor Constantius II favored the Homoian, Arian understanding of Christ, and made sure that all councils held during his reign included representatives agreeable to this creed, and the Balkans provided many of his most important supporters.⁵ Valens of Mursa and Ursacius of Singidunum were two Homoian bishops who took leadership roles at the Council of Serdica and they continued to lead the Homoian bishops until their deaths sometime after 370.⁶ Germinius of Sirmium replaced Photinus of Sirmium after the latter was exiled. He then became an important accomplice of Ursacius and Valens until Germinius renounced Homoianism (but not Arianism) in 366.⁷ It is probable that Germinius helped to compose the 'Dated Creed' of 359.⁸ Before his defection, Germinius, together with Valens and Ursacius, led the 357 Council of Sirmium and produced a creed that was labeled the 'Blasphemy of Sirmium' by the Nicenes.⁹ Ulfila, a Gothic bishop from the trans-Danubian region, was rescued from a Gothic persecution by Constantius who allowed him to settle along with a number of Christian Goths near Nicopolis in Moesia Inferior and guaranteed their protection.¹⁰ As bishop, Ulfila attended the Council of Constantinople in 360 and brought the Homoian creed composed by this council back to his congregation.¹¹ Ulfila's importance is enhanced by him being the only Homoian bishop of the Goths during his lifetime,

³ Williams 1995: 7.

⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Decretis*, 20; translation in Gwynn 2007: 169.

⁵ Humphries 1999: 116.

⁶ Barnes 1993: 72.

⁷ McLynn 1994: 95.

⁸ Hanson, 1988: 363.

⁹ Hanson 1988: 345.

¹⁰ Hanson 1988: 589.

¹¹ Barnes 1993: 148.

as was his successor, Selenas. Further, Ulfila translated the Bible into the language of the Goths and helped to compose that language's alphabet.¹² Palladius of Ratiaria was another leader of the Homoian bishops, taking the mantle of Valens and Ursacius. He is most notable for his long reign as bishop, his failure to defeat Ambrose of Milan at the Council of Aquileia in 381, and his polemical response to that Council, sadly only surviving in fragments.¹³ These Balkan bishops were the chief Homoian combatants during the fourth century Christological crisis.

Scripture was held in great esteem by both sides, and both sides used Scripture in their arguments. There are, however, differences in the importance they placed on Scripture. The Homoian Arians had an understanding of the place of Scripture that rivals today's radically *sola scriptura* Protestants. Homoian bishops litter Scripture throughout their writings and creeds, and their main argument with Nicenes and other Arians is their use of concepts and terms that are outside of Scripture. The Homoian Council of Sirmium held in 358 condemned the term *homoousios* as unscriptural.¹⁴ The 360 Council of Constantinople went further, declaring *ousia* (substance) to be extra-biblical.¹⁵ Further, the Arians commonly complained about metaphorical readings of Scripture.¹⁶ Like today's Christian sects, Arians had a number of 'proof-texts.' *Psalms* 45:7 was used by the Arians to show that the Father was the God of Christ.¹⁷ *Proverbs* 8:22 showed that Christ was created.¹⁸ *Psalms* 110:3 echoed this argument.¹⁹ In the New Testament, the Synoptic Gospels, *John* 14:28, and *John* 17:3 were popular texts used by the Arians, particularly by Palladius.²⁰ Nicene bishops comment on the Homoians' reliance upon Scripture with an air of disbelief. Hanson, in his *Search*

¹² Thompson 1966: 111.

¹³ Hanson 1988: 595.

¹⁴ Barnes 1993: 142.

¹⁵ Thompson 1966: xix.

¹⁶ Hanson 1988: 830.

¹⁷ Hanson 1988: 833.

¹⁸ Hanson 1988: 832.

¹⁹ Hanson 1988: 834.

²⁰ Hanson 1988: 836.

for the Christian Doctrine of God, gives a long list of Nicene bishops who complained about the Arian obsession with Scriptural proof, including Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory Nazianzus.²¹ Hilary of Poitiers complains about the 'fraudulent' and 'poisonous' use of Scripture by the Arians.²² Of course, the Arian stress on the importance of Scripture did have drawbacks. If they misquoted Scripture in a debate with a Nicene bishop or at a Council, the bishop's credibility was destroyed. For example, Palladius' misquotation of *John* 14:28 at the Council of Aquileia destroyed his own credibility and legitimised the authority of the Council and Ambrose of Milan which he was fighting against.²³

Nicene bishops used Scripture in their writings, just as the Arians did. The Nicenes primarily used *John* in their anti-Arian arguments due to its theological and philosophical bent.²⁴ Hanson states that 'the pro-Nicenes are at their worst, their most grotesque' when they attempt to prove that terms from contemporary pagan philosophy 'were really to be found in Scripture.'²⁵ Due to these problems, Nicene bishops supplemented Scripture with the history of the 'orthodox,' Nicene church and apostolic traditions. Liberius, bishop of Rome, in a letter to Constantius, argues that he has 'added nothing...safeguarding the faith which had taken its course through... bishops... the majority of whom were martyrs.'²⁶ Hilary of Poitiers and other Nicene bishops in the second half of the fourth century frequently appealed to the special authority of the Council of Nicaea.²⁷ The 'deceit of the "Arians," who conceal their false teachings behind a cloak of Scripture' are contrasted to the "'true faith" established at the Council of Nicaea.'²⁸ Hilary and other Nicene bishops use Constantine's presence at the

²¹ Hanson 1988: 827.

²² Hilary of Poitiers 1916: 1.8.4. Note: For all works of Hilary cited in this paper, I am using the organisation of the documents structured by Lionel Wickham in *Hilary of Poitiers: Conflicts of Conscience and Law in the Fourth-century Church* (Liverpool University Press, 1998).

²³ *Gesta Concili Aquileiense* 1982: 36. Palladius states '*Qui me misit maior est me*' instead of '*quia Pater maior me est*.'

²⁴ Hanson, 1988: 834.

²⁵ Hanson 1988: 846.

²⁶ Hilary of Poitiers 1916: 2.3.3.

²⁷ See Hilary of Poitiers 1916: 1.8.7, as one of many examples.

²⁸ Gwynn 2007: 175.

Council of Nicaea to attempt to sway later Emperors to their preferred creed.²⁹ Nicene bishops frequently referred to the rite of Baptism as proof of the Trinitarian nature of God.³⁰

The Christological crisis led to a number of councils that were supposed to build on the Council of Nicaea and finally end the debates. Which of these councils had Balkan involvement? Unfortunately, the lists of bishops at the important councils in this period are partial, as the opposing groups would split and issue their own documents, some of which have not survived.³¹ For example, the Arian and Nicene bishops never met together at Serdica in 343: the Arian bishops used news of Constantius' victory over the Persians to politely excuse themselves from the Council. We do know, however, that 90 Nicene bishops and 80 Arian bishops attended this Council.³² Of this number, very few are known.

Still, we do have many of the names of the Balkan bishops who attended the councils. Before they left Serdica, the Arian bishops explicitly excommunicated a number of the Nicene party, including Protogenes of Serdica and Gaudentius (Cyriacus) of Naissus.³³ We also know that the Nicene bishops at Serdica included many from the Balkans: Euterios of Gannos, the aforementioned Protogenes of Serdica and Gaudentius of Naissus, Lucius of Cainopolis, Vitalis of Aquae, Paregorius of Scupi, Macedonius of Ulpiani, Calvus of Castramartis, Euterius of Pannonia, Marcus of Siscia, and Valens of Iscus.³⁴ At Sirmium in 351, the Arian bishops condemned Gaudentius and Protogenes and other Balkan bishops, including Dionisius of Elis, Bassus of Salona, Photinus of Sirmium, and Aetius of Thessalonica.³⁵ Another Council of Sirmium met in 358 and condemned the term *homoousios*.³⁶ The Council of Constantinople in 360, of which Ulfila was

²⁹ See Hilary of Poitiers 1916: 2.3.1, as one of many examples.

³⁰ Hanson 1988: 828.

³¹ Humphries 1999: 46.

³² Hanson 1988: 293.

³³ Barnes 1993: 73.

³⁴ Hilary of Poitiers 1916: 1.4.5.

³⁵ Hanson 1988: 298.

³⁶ Barnes 1993: 142.

a member, declared *ousia* to be unscriptural.³⁷ Twenty years later, Theodosius invited Balkan bishops to the 381 Council of Constantinople, of which no records survived, however, we are aware that the Nicenes enjoyed an emphatic victory at this Council.³⁸ Unfortunately for Palladius of Ratiaria, we know that he wound up at another council in 381: Ambrose of Milan's Council of Aquileia. In fact, six Balkan bishops took part in this Council: four Nicene (Constantius of Siscia, Germinius' successor Anemius, Maximus of Emona, and Felix of Zadar) and two Arian (the aforementioned Palladius and Secundianus of Singidunum).³⁹ As mentioned above, Palladius misquoted Scripture and therefore lost any chance to legitimately contest his condemnation by the bishops of the Council.⁴⁰

Finally, this paper must ask if there was, consequently, a Balkan character to the debates. The answer is a resounding 'yes.' Although the origins of the Christological crisis were in Alexandria and spread from there to Antioch, the crisis came to its head in the Balkans.⁴¹ The leaders of the Homoians were almost exclusively Balkan bishops, and it is the Homoian creed that becomes the theology of most of the barbarians that supplanted the Western Roman Empire in later centuries.⁴² Why, then, did these bishops become the leaders and why were so many councils held in the Balkans? First, the Balkans were on an important route between the Western and Eastern portions of the Roman Empire, connecting Italy with Asia.⁴³ According to Hanson, Constans and Constantius decided that the Council of 343 should take place at Serdica because it stood 'between the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire.'⁴⁴ Second, the Balkans were located on the Roman frontier. This meant that important Roman officials, including Emperors, were forced to travel to the Balkans to defend the

³⁷ Thompson 1966: xix.

³⁸ Hanson 1998: 809.

³⁹ *Gesta Concili Aquileiensis* 1982: 2, 55, 59, 61-2.

⁴⁰ *Gesta Concili Aquileiensis* 1982: 36, 52-64.

⁴¹ See Philastrius of Brescia's *Diversarum hereseon liber*, a late fourth-century work expanded upon by later editors, which describes a decidedly Balkan 'Arianism.'

⁴² Thompson 1966: 119.

⁴³ Humphries 1999: 40.

⁴⁴ Hanson 1988: 293.

Empire from invasions. Constans was regularly in Pannonia throughout his brief reign.⁴⁵ One of Constantius' chief residences from 351-359 was Sirmium.⁴⁶ During the 340s, there was a large-scale attack by the Danubian Goths on Thrace and Illyricum.⁴⁷ This was followed by a Gothic persecution of Christians in 347-8, and it was this persecution that forced Ulfila to flee to Constantius.⁴⁸ Gallus was proclaimed Caesar at Sirmium in 351 and was defeated and stripped of his title at Poetovio in 354.⁴⁹ The Alamanni invaded across the Danube in 354 and 355.⁵⁰ In 357, the Suebi invaded Raetia, the Quadi invaded Pannonia, and the Sarmatae invaded Moesia and Pannonia.⁵¹ Ambrose of Milan first met the Emperor Gratian in Sirmium in 378-9.⁵² This meant that Emperors would be in the area when councils were called and could influence who attended and who won. We know, for example, that the 351 Council of Sirmium was held while Constantius was staying in the city.⁵³ Third, when exiled, many bishops were either confined to an area in the Balkans or traveled through them. Athanasius stayed in Naissus during one of his exiles.⁵⁴ Liberius of Rome was exiled to Thrace.⁵⁵ These and many other bishops, especially those allowed their freedom of movement, like Hilary of Poitiers and Athanasius, were able to connect with Balkan bishops and spread their ideas throughout the region.

During the fourth century, a crisis broke out throughout the Roman world. Its major flashpoints throughout the century were in the Balkans. Some Balkan bishops became the leaders of the Arians, a group that stressed how important an *iota* actually was to God. Other Balkan bishops disagreed and became part of the Nicene cause. These two groups spent the fourth century debating each

⁴⁵ Barnes 1993: 224.

⁴⁶ Barnes 1993: 219.

⁴⁷ Thompson 1956: 380.

⁴⁸ Thompson 1956: 381.

⁴⁹ Barnes 1993: 226.

⁵⁰ Seager 1999: 582.

⁵¹ Seager 1999: 582.

⁵² McLynn 1994: 90.

⁵³ Hanson 1988: 325.

⁵⁴ Barnes 1993: 67.

⁵⁵ Barnes 1993: 138.

other over subtle points of Christology and Scripture. Although there were bishops from other regions taking part in these debates, the Christological crisis of the fourth century had a distinct Balkan character. Many of the leaders of the Homoians, for example, were from the Balkans and many Christological councils took place in the Balkans. The fourth century Christological crisis became a Balkan crisis.

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