Athanasius & the Trinitarian Controversy

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1. CONSTANTINE & THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Texts & Translations


Studies

H.D. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, Ancient Society and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2000). It was Constantine who ended the persecutions and opened the path for the flowering of Christianity in the 4th century. He was a complex character, brutal at times, often misunderstood. This offers an important revisionist reading of Constantine’s underlying political considerations.


Bibliographies for Theology, compiled by William Harmless, S.J.


Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) paperback, $30. NEW.

2. THE “ARIOAN” CONTROVERSY

R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: the Arian Controversy, 318-381 AD* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988; reprint, 2000). The fourth century saw one of the most momentous battles in the history of Christian theology: a debate over Christ's divinity, whether or not he is "true God", and if so, then how Christians can legitimately claim to be monotheists. The one who sparked the debate was Arius of Alexandria (d. 338), whose views were formally condemned by the Council of Nicaea in 325. The debate continued for decades and has often been referred to as the "Arian controversy." As Hanson demonstrates, the debate on the far side of Nicaea was quite different, and those theologians traditionally labelled as "Arians", in fact, had little to do with Arius or his views. This book is a massive 900-page study of Nicaea, Athanasius, & the Cappadocians and is the finest and the most exhaustive treatment of the theology of the Trinitarian controversy.

Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). A very important revisionist interpretation of the development of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ and of the Trinity. Not easy reading, and Ayres presumes you know the basics of that development, but an essential text. This needs to be read against Hanson's work, which Ayres both builds on and challenges on numerous points.

Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2007). The history of this debate is complicated, to say the least, and the work of Hanson, Ayres, and others has significantly rewritten the old textbook accounts. This new work is a very helpful introduction and a straightforward overview of the history, the figures, and the issues. It carefully incorporates new perspectives and can help
newcomers transition to more complex treatments such as those of Hanson, Ayres, and Williams.

Philip R. Amidon, trans. and ed., Philostorgius: Church History, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). Philostorgius was an "Arian" historian. This translation of Philostorgius' late 4th-century account offers an intriguing glimpse into seeing the events from the point of view of those who lost the debate.


3. ATHANASIUS: TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

Texts

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria from 328 to his death in 373, played a central role in the defense of the Council of Nicaea and its assertion of the full divinity of Christ. He was and is a complex and controversial figure and did much to create orthodox Christian doctrine as we now know it. The 19th-century Montfaucon edition of Athanasius' Greek works is reproduced in J. Migne, Patrologia Graeca, vol. 25-28. The 20th-century critical edition of his corpus is Athanasius Werke (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1934-2000):


Some of his works have been preserved in Syriac; for these, see R. W. Thomson, ed., Athanasiana syriaca, 3 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 257-258, 272-273, 324-325 (Louvain: SCO, 1965–1977). Other recent editions include:


**Translations**

The bulk of Athanasius' works were translated in the 19th century by John Henry Newman and others in the Oxford movement. These are available as volume 4 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series (1893; reprint: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); also available at various websites on the internet. These are slowly being replaced by new translations that draw on the updated critical edition:

Khaled Anatolios, ed., *Athanasis*, Early Church Fathers (New York: Routledge, 2005). This opens with a lengthy introduction that includes both an overview of Athanasius' life and world and a study of his theology; this is followed by new translations of some of Athanasius' major works, including his *On the Council of Nicaea (De decretis)* and his *Letters to Serapion*.

Robert C. Gregg, trans., *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Athanasius' *Life of Antony* was one of the earliest Christian best-sellers and did much to popularize monasticism throughout the ancient world. It would also set the standard for all later lives of the saints. This volume also includes his *Letter to Marcellinus*, setting out how Christians should read and pray the Psalms.


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### 4. ATHANASIUS: STUDIES

David Brakke, “Athanasius,” in Philip F. Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 2:1102-1127. It is in large measure due to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria from 328-373, that Nicaea survived. He combined shrewd, determined political action and a penetrating theology to rescue the faith of Nicaea. And he knew well that the stakes were Christian faith itself: that God is one and that Christ is true God. It is important to note that recent studies of Athanasius disagree with one another, sometimes sharply, about overall interpretation of Athanasius’ character and many details of his career. This brief overview introduces readers to the terms of the debate.

Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998). A fine systematic overview of Athanasius as a theologian. Anatolios reads Athanasius in his own terms rather than in terms of Nicene terminology or of later issues (such as the christology of the 5th century).


William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). This has two chapters on Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*.


5. THE CAPPADOCIANS: TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

The three Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea (d.379), Gregory of Nazianzus (d.389), and Gregory of Nyssa (d.395)—are seen, in retrospect, as Athanasius’ successors. They not only continued the defense of the full divinity of Christ against Eunomius and other radical anti-Nicenes; they also defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit and were the architects of the classic Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

**Texts**

For the Greek text of their works, the old standard is that found in J. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 29-32 (for Basil), vol. 35-38 (for Gregory of Nazianzus), and vol. 44-46 (for Gregory of Nyssa). In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, this has been largely superceded by the series *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, begun in 1921 by Werner Jaeger, with 13 volumes to date. The standard edition of Basil’s letters is the 3-volume edition by Yves Courtonne (Paris: 1957). For the Greek text with a facing French translation, see the following volumes from the Sources chrétiennes (Paris: Éditions du Cerf):

- Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium*, ed. B. Sesboué, SC 299 & 305
- Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of the Human Person*, SC 6

**Translations**

Most of the important writings of the Cappadocians have been translated. A 19th-century translation is found in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series (1895; reprint: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992): vol. 5 (Gregory of Nyssa); vol. 7 (Gregory of Nazianzus); and vol. 8
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(Basil of Caesarea). Versions of this can be found on the Internet. As with Athanasius, these older translations are gradually replaced by better and more up-to-date translations. See especially:

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters of Cledonius*, trans. Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002). Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Five Theological Orations* may be the finest lecture series in the history of Christianity—at once, a literary and theological tour de force. Gregory gave these talks soon after his arrival in Constantinople, around 380. They articulate what the Church has come to believe about the Trinity and about the divinity and humanity of Christ. This translation had previously been published in an expensive edition by Brill; so this edition is a real bargain. An earlier translation is found in Edward Hardy, ed. *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); this volume contains not only Gregory’s *Theological Orations* but also Gregory of Nyssa’s *To Ablabius: On Why One Should Not Say There are Three Gods* and his *Catechetical Oration*.

St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand, Popular Patristics series 42 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011). It was this treatise by Basil more than any other which cleared the way for the formal declaration of the divinity of the Holy Spirit by the Council of Constantinople in 381. This excellent new translation replaces older (and less accurate) one by David Anderson published in 1980.

Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Everett Ferguson & Abraham J. Malherbe (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). Gregory was not only one of the architects of trinitarian doctrine but was also a mystic. Here he allegorizes the Exodus story, treating it as the map of the journey of the soul to God.


the Gospel of John, Homily on Not Three Gods, Homily Against the Sabellians, Anomoians, and Pneumatomachians.


6. THE CAPPADOCIANS: STUDIES

There are a number of excellent studies of the Cappadocian Fathers and their theology. A few key ones are listed below. Others are found within larger surveys of the Arian Controversy (see above, especially those by R.P.C. Hanson, Lewis Ayres, and Khaled Anatolios).

Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, Early Church Fathers Series (New York: Routledge, 2006). Daley opens with a lengthy introduction to Gregory's life and works under various headings ("the Humanist", "the Philosopher", "the Theologian", and "the Priest"). He then offers new translations of a variety of Gregory's works, including 8 of the *Orations*, and a selection of the poems and letters.


