

# Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief overview of the scholarship on the questions of Arius' theological belonging. The main thesis of the article is that Arius himself was not an innovator but rather a conservative (traditionalist) and that as such, in contrast to Alexander and Athanasius (who are identified as innovators), he belonged to the older Alexandrian theological tradition. This interpretation might offer a potential solution for some so far unresolved questions, such as the question of the rapid spread of Arianism.

*Ingemuit totus orbis, et Arianum se esse miratus est*<sup>1</sup> – ‘the whole world groaned and was amazed to find itself Arian’. These are the words that Jerome used to describe the situation at the Council of Rimini, which took place in 360 A.D., approximately forty two years after the so-called ‘Arian controversy’<sup>2</sup> had begun and twenty five years after the council of Nicaea began to establish *homoousios* as a fixed norm of Orthodox Christology. In terms of the time normally required for the spread of such a large and global movement like Arianism, these are both remarkably short periods. The main question that will be addressed in this article is how it was possible for this ‘heresy’ to extend itself through the entire known world so quickly and so widely.<sup>3</sup>

What makes this question even more intriguing is that, if we are to believe modern church historians, ‘Arianism’, in the sense of a homogeneous movement, never actually existed.<sup>4</sup> This assertion is based mainly on the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus, *Altercatio Luciferiani et Orthodoxi* 19 (CChr.SL 79b, 48).

<sup>2</sup> Hanson finds the notion of ‘Arian Controversy’ to be a ‘serious misnomer’. See Richard P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh, 1997), xvii, xviii.

<sup>3</sup> In order to grasp how inexplicable this rapid and wide-ranging spread truly was, we need to be reminded that we are dealing with the fourth century, a time in which there was obviously no global media sources, no social networking websites and finally, no spam emails.

<sup>4</sup> See for example a very interesting lecture on this topic by Hanns Christof Brennecke with the title ‘“Arianismus” Inszenierungen eines Konstrukts’, Erlanger Universitätsreden 83/3 (Erlangen, 2014).

there was so very little homogeneity between the different groups labelled as 'Arian' and that practically none of the individuals involved with them wanted to be labelled as follower of Arius. Naturally, such reluctance was also connected with the fact that at that time the label was mainly employed with rather negative connotations, primarily as an abusive tag which the Nicenes applied to most of their adversaries<sup>5</sup> and as a curse-word used for all who rejected their Christological teachings. Alexander provides a good example when, in his *Epistola Encyclica*, he describes Arius as πρόδρομος τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου<sup>6</sup> – a forerunner of the Antichrist.<sup>7</sup> As for the 'Arians' as a collective group, Alexander describes them as πονηρευομένων σύνοδος<sup>8</sup> – a gang of evildoers. His pupil Athanasius continued to employ similar vocabulary<sup>9</sup> and in some cases actually went a step further by using some even more extreme (and admittedly more original) epithets such as Ἀρειομανίται<sup>10</sup> – the Ario-maniacs. Also other Nicene theologians followed this pattern and accused Arians of being beguiled by the subtlety of the devil,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that they are more impious than demons,<sup>12</sup> and are blasphemers against Christ.<sup>13</sup> In such writings, Arius is portrayed as presumably the first heretic in history to be compared to none less than Judas Iscariot.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, none of these colourful titles assist us in resolving the question of who Arius really was. They actually make this whole question much more intriguing, because if someone was so vehemently hated, he must surely have been quite a remarkable personality and hence deserves greater and continued attention. Because of this, let us explore what we know about Arius and his belonging.

### The question of belonging

Although Arianism was without doubt a fiction, Arius himself did indeed exist, which is unfortunately one of the few things that we can say about him

<sup>5</sup> R.P.C. Hanson, *Search* (1997), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Alexandrinus, *Epistula encyclica* 3 (Opitz 3.1.1, 7).

<sup>7</sup> This seems a rather extreme wording for a fellow Christian whose only fault lay in his support for a different type of Christology.

<sup>8</sup> Alex. Al., *Epistula ad Alexandrum Thessalonicensem* 36 (Opitz 3.1.1, 25).

<sup>9</sup> The evidence does suggest that Athanasius was one of the most pugnacious theologians in the entire history of the church which is probably one of the main reasons why he nonetheless managed to achieve so much in circumstances that were so often against him.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius Alexandrinus, *De synodis Armini in Italia et Seleucia in Isauria* 13, 2 (Opitz 2.1, 240), 41, 1 (Opitz 2.1, 266), 54, 1 (Opitz 2.1, 277).

<sup>11</sup> See Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1, 9, 21 (GCS 1. n.F., 32).

<sup>12</sup> Alex. Al., *Epistula ad Alexandrum Thessalonicensem* 43 (Opitz 3.1.1, 26).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See Archer Taylor, 'The Judas Curse', *American Journal of Philology* 42 (1921), 234-52, 244.