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Saints and Heretics

Key players in a high-stakes game of politics and theology.

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Constantine (c. 273-337)

Imperial peacemaker

Like the king in chess, Constantine occupied a prominent position at the Council of Nicaea, but he did not actually do very much. Generations of critics have accused him of manipulating the proceedings, jamming words into the creed, and generally trumping theology with politics, but in fact he mainly sat and listened.

An ambitious politician and effective propagandist, Constantine had come to power in the usual swirl of conflict and intrigue. He waged war on barbarians and other Roman factions. He formed and broke alliances, as with Augustus Licinius, who married Constantine's sister, fought alongside him, allegedly turned traitor, and was murdered at Constantine's request. What made him different was his belief that the Christian God had given him a mandate to unify the administratively divided empire under the sign of the cross.

Rome's first Christian emperor did not forswear ungodly behavior at his 312 "conversion" on the Milvian Bridge. The murders of Licinius, Constantine's wife Fausta, and his son Crispus, for example, occurred long afterward. He did, however, immediately begin to institute pro-Christian policies in territories he controlled. These policies, including return of property and status lost in persecutions, government funding for church construction, and restrictions on pagan worship, broadened and strengthened as Constantine solidified his power.

With the empire stabilized under his leadership, Constantine wanted the church to be stabilized, too. Unfortunately, the church had emerged from persecution beset by heresies and schisms. Constantine saw no problem with the idea of disagreeing politely about different theological views. He urged church leaders to settle their differences for the sake of the empire and of the gospel, which lost some of its attraction when pagans saw Christians bickering. Only when these appeals failed, as they did with Arius and Alexander, did the emperor order a council.

At the Council of Nicaea itself, Constantine repeated his pleas for peace and harmony. He supported the use of the contentious term *homoousios* to describe the Father and the Son but, contrary to some accounts, did not ram it down anyone's throat. He lacked the passion or the theological acumen for such a battle. His primary

concern was for the church to establish a formula of faith to which all major players could and would subscribe.

Alexander of Alexandria (-328)

The Gatekeeper

Alexander could hardly have become bishop of Alexandria at a worse time. Harsh persecutions had taken many lives in Egypt between 303 and 311. Persecution also had caused a schism between Bishop Peter of Alexandria, who urged gentle treatment for those who fled or bribed officials to escape punishment, and Melitius of nearby Lycopolis, who took a stricter line. A surprising late round of violence resulted in Peter's death on November 26, 311, and complicated the search for a successor. When Alexander finally stepped in, in the summer of 313, the terror had subsided but the Melitian schism raged on.

Just five years later, Alexander began to receive complaints about the teachings of one of his own priests, Arius. Melitius led the grumblers. Alexander attempted to handle the matter in-house, calling Arius before a meeting of local clergy and insisting that he change his message. When Arius refused, Alexander assembled about 100 bishops from Egypt and Libya to denounce the renegade. The council banished Arius, but he did not give up. He enlisted the support of Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and many other eastern bishops. Alexander clearly could not keep a lid on the conflict, so Constantine eventually stepped in.

In spite of his gentle and quiet manner, Alexander was unflinching in his theological convictions. He resolutely rejected all attempts, even those spearheaded by Constantine, to reinstate Arius. Upon Alexanders death, on April 17, 328, Melitians resisted Athanasiuss election and ultimately elected their own bishop.

Arius (250-336)

Crowd-pleasing heretic

A 1925 history of the Council of Nicaea describes Arius as "a man of tall stature, of austere countenance and ascetic life. He had charming manners and went about from house to house, with his sleeveless tunic and scanty cloak, popular especially among women." Though little can be documented regarding Arius's wardrobe, he certainly was popular—and unpopular.

Originally from Libya, Arius began his church career as a priest in Alexandria, a city with an abundance of pulpits and ideas. His preaching attracted crowds to the church of Baucalis. His theology attracted widespread interest from friends and foes alike.

Like many heretics, Arius began by trying not to be one. On one side, he disagreed with Valentinus, who asserted that the Son was merely an emanation from the Father. On the other, he sought to distance himself from Mani, founder of the Manichees, who declared the Son to be part of the Father. In fact, Arius did not find any previous attempts to explain the relationship of the Son and the Father entirely satisfactory. Origen, the third-century "father of speculative theology," came closest in his estimation to determining the truth about God as Trinity.

Arius lost out at Nicaea, but he quickly bounced back. In 327, he and two of his supporters petitioned Constantine for re-acceptance into the church. Constantine summoned Arius to court and requested a statement of his beliefs. In direct questioning and on paper he gave a very brief and bland statement of faith that made no mention of the terms used at Nicaea. Arius's answers pleased Constantine but failed to convince Alexander, Athanasius, and many other opponents.

Both sides continued to press their cases in various venues until 336, when, with Constantines support, Arius planned to forcibly enter Hagia Eirene, the most prominent church in the new capital of the empire, and participate in a Sunday service. To the great relief of Constantinoples bishop—and the great consternation of the Arians—Arius died en route to the church. He never got his moment of triumph

We should recognize that records from the fourth century are scant and that stories sometimes conflict. According to Rowan Williams in his book Arius: Heresy & Tradition *(Eerdmans, 2001), we can thank Athanasius for the description of Arius's attempt to enter Hagia Eirene. Rufinus, writing toward the end of the fourth century, later improved on the story by having Arius die en route to the church.*

Ossius (or Hosius) of Cordoba (c. 256-357/358)

Court referee

Ossius had two claims to fame prior to the Council of Nicaea. Briefly imprisoned in Spain during the Diocletian persecution, he had earned the title "confessor." (Persecution survivors, especially those bearing physical scars, had immediate credibility in church circles.) More importantly, he enjoyed an exceptionally close relationship with Constantine, having resided at court since 312. Ossius probably helped Constantine interpret his vision at the Milvian bridge in Christian terms.

So, when Constantine needed someone to take a letter to Alexander and Arius, beseeching them to end their quarrel, he naturally picked Ossius. Ossius tried to smooth things over, but the combatants would not relent. On his way back to court, he stopped by Antioch, where the church had descended into chaos following the 324 death of its bishop, Philogonius. Ossius participated in a council there that selected Eustathius as Philogonius's successor. The council also adopted an Alexandrian creed that three bishops present—Theodotus of Laodicea, Narcissus of Neronias, and Eusebius of Caesarea—refused to endorse. Ossius interrogated the recusants, and the council excommunicated them, contingent on the decision of a forthcoming council at Ancyra (relocated at the last minute to Nicaea).

Constantine tapped Ossius again to preside over the ecumenical council. As no contemporaneous record of the council's proceedings survives, it is difficult to gauge the scope of Ossius's participation. He did promulgate the creed, sign it, and have notaries send it around for the other bishops' signatures. Not long after the council, the Arians regrouped in the eastern part of the empire and moved toward Constantinople. Ossius left, or lost, his court position and returned to Spain.

Ossius does not seem to have married himself to the Nicene Creed. In 341 he signed the creed of Sardica once

it became apparent that Nicaea was not providing ecclesial unity. Ossius also signed, under some coercion, other statements of faith including one that ruled out all "substance" language found in the Nicene Creed.

Eusebius of Nicomedia (-c. 341)

The Gambler

Eusebius seemed to have a knack for picking the losing side of every battle. He supported Constantine's rival Licinius before the latter was defeated in 324. He was an early supporter of the Arian cause and held his ground throughout the Council of Nicaea. Under pressure, he eventually accepted the council's creed but not the anathema that went with it. He thought this move would shield him from further fallout. Three months after the council, however, he was exiled for his support of Arius. A few years later he returned to Nicomedia and responded to his exile by ratcheting up his pamphlet war with champions of *homoousios* and reaching out to schismatics.

Despite all of these potentially fatal missteps, Eusebius survived. He retained his bishopric in a major city of western Asia Minor even after Licinius' defeat. In 327 he joined Arius's petition for reinstatement, which Constantine was only too happy to grant. Eusebius then pressed his advantage, casting those who refused to accept Arians back into the fold as the true obstacles to unity and asking Constantine to deal with them. In 332, he persuaded four witnesses to accuse Athanasius of extortion, destroying sacred property, treason, and other offenses. Constantine acquitted Athanasius and lashed out at the Arians, but the bishop knew he could never rest easy as long as Eusebius had the emperor's ear.

By exercising consummate political skills, Eusebius remained Constantine's confidant to the end. He had the honor of baptizing the first Christian emperor and was afterward installed as bishop of Constantine's new city, Constantinople.

Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339)

Historian Who Saw it All

Christians enjoyed relative security in Caesarea of Palestine during Eusebius's youth. Then came the Diocletian persecution. Then the conversion of Constantine and Christianity's rise to favor. Then in-fighting in the church. Then councils and more councils. No wonder Eusebius, though offered the prominent see of Antioch, elected to finish out his career as bishop of quiet little Caesarea.

Though Eusebius witnessed atrocities during persecution, he apparently escaped personal suffering. He was not so fortunate in later doctrinal disputes. Like Arius, Eusebius admired the theology of Origen. This sympathy led him to reject strongly anti-Arian statements, such as the declaration of the council at Antioch in 325, and briefly got him condemned.

He was given another chance to prove his orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea. He arrived with a prepared statement of beliefs, which his enemies accepted and Constantine heartily commended. Though impressed by the emperor's vote of confidence, Eusebius's opponents kept trying to edge him out, even interpreting the

creed in a way they thought he (and other like-minded bishops) would not be able to endorse. Eventually, however, Eusebius signed on.

Back in Caesarea, Eusebius devoted much of his time to writing. He is best known for his *Ecclesiastical History*.

Marcellus of Ancyra (-374)

Extreme critic

Of the bishops who opposed Arius, Marcellus was one of the most fanatical. Unfortunately, his aversion to one strand of heresy pushed him into another.

Marcellus did not need to get so embroiled in the Arian controversy. That problem erupted far from his see of Ancyra, in Galatia, where he enjoyed a long and stable tenure. He did not have to fight to prove his own orthodoxy at Nicaea or for many years afterward. If he had just stayed home, he probably would have served out his days in peace.

His passion to see Arianism crushed, however, led him to attend the Councils of Jerusalem and Tyre in 335. At these councils, called to mop up Nicaea's unfinished business, Marcellus perceived the balance of imperial favor swinging toward the Arians, who were having success painting Athanasius and his friends as hate-mongers. Marcellus responded by dashing off a tract to Constantine that mixed maudlin praise for the emperor with intemperate criticism of Arius's primary supporters.

In the course of this attack, Marcellus spelled out his own beliefs in greater detail than he had previously. It turned out that Marcellus's views echoed those of Sabellius and Paul of Samosata, who had described the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as different modes of the same being. On the basis of this tract, Marcellus was declared a heretic and deposed in 336.

Marcellus had made another tactical error along the way by antagonizing the prolific writer Eusebius of Caesarea. When Marcellus tried to reclaim his see in 337, Eusebius weighed in with a damning work, *Against Marcellus*, and later *The Ecclesiastical Theology*. As Marcellus wandered around in exile, he found his way to Rome, where the bishop of Rome and a small council exonerated him of heresy. This decision had no impact on Eastern affairs, however, and Marcellus was never reinstated. In his lifetime, and in posterity, Marcellus's enemies retained the upper hand.

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Athanasius

Pugnacious Defender of Orthodoxy

A modern biographer of Athanasius of Alexandria speaks of "the predominantly polemical nature of most of his dogmatic works" and "the lack of serenity in his argumentation." Understandably so! In all of Christian

history, it is safe to say, few churchmen have been so entirely embroiled in doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes as Athanasius. In comparison with him, one ventures that even so controversial a figure as Martin Luther lived out a relatively quiet and uneventful life.

Born into a Christian family in Alexandria in 295, Athanasius was an infant during the persecution of Diocletian and barely more than a boy when the Edict of Milan legalized the church in 313. He was ordained a deacon five years later at age 23. The most indubitable claim we can make for Athanasius is that his entire life was absorbed in the service of the church.

The event that most marked the destiny of this ardent churchman was, of course, the Council of Nicaea in 325. Although there is perhaps no other name more closely identified with Nicaea than Athanasius, this close identification had more to do with the aftermath of the council than with the event itself. Three facts conspired to make this so.

First, the fathers at Nicaea had formalized in the church a ranking patriarchal structure, according to which the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch would exercise general oversight of the other churches in their respective regions. Thus, when Athanasius was made Bishop of Alexandria in 328, just three years after Nicaea, he suddenly found himself in one of the most influential and prestigious positions in the whole church.

Second, Nicaea had also determined that the church at Alexandria, because of the superior records and resources of astronomy available in that city, would be charged with establishing the proper date of Easter each year, and so informing the rest of the church by an annual notice. This arrangement afforded Athanasius an official opportunity to send an annual letter to all of the other major ecclesiastical centers, and until his death in 373 he used these "Paschal Letters" as opportunities to teach and admonish Christians far beyond the borders of Alexandria. Because many successors of Athanasius followed his example in this respect, the bishopric of Alexandria became one of the most influential teaching authorities in the whole church, second only to Rome.

Third, because Nicaea had implicitly granted the Roman emperors an authority over the affairs of the church that they had never had before, the next several decades (even centuries!) would see many instances of direct imperial interference with the church's teaching ministry itself, including the office of bishop. As various emperors exercised this interference, Athanasius was forced into exile from Alexandria no fewer than five times.

Athanasius spent these extended periods of banishment chiefly doing two things. First, he traveled extensively to far-off places, where he conferred with churchmen regarding the Arian heresy and other ecclesiastical matters, including imperial interference. These consultations greatly extended the reputation of Athanasius as a universal Christian teacher. Second, these periods of exile afforded him ample time to write the lengthy theological treatises that caused him to be ranked, even today, among the greatest exponents of Christian

doctrine.

—Patrick Henry Reardon