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**The Marketplace of Ideas Quenched: Examination of Christological conflicts, and their  
outcomes, in the Early Christian Church**

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### **Abstract**

The first four centuries of church history were largely dominated by a diverse mix of philosophical arguments, theological debates, and seemingly intractable conflicts over the nature of Christ and his person. The paper presented here will endeavor to examine these through multiple lenses of understanding, historical, political, geographical, and theological. Perhaps the most defining conflicts of this period of upheaval were the gnostic controversy of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, followed by the Arian controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D (Pagels, 1974, & Haas, 1993). The theological kerfuffle's over Christ and his humanity considered against his deity were every bit as sociopolitical and geographical as they were theological. In a word, they were historical, and they must be broadly contextualized through a historical framework. The most salient focus of the research to be presented is an objective and honest consideration of the sundry conflicts and disputes, without taking sides as to any of their respective rightness or veracity, to understand the period with markedly superior clarity than has been done before.

Moreover, the nature of these conflicts is often marked by a regrettable theological “victor’s bias”, wherein history is written by the conquerors in any respective conflict. In this case, the Nicene Orthodox faithful gradually subdued the gnostic, Modalist, and later Arian elements, which was the catalyst for Orthodox Christianity to establish its hegemony over the now vanquished theological competition. The analysis offered here will endeavor to show, not who was right and who was wrong, but rather, how these conflicts materialized and metastasized over the relevant geographic localities and provinces in which the faith of Christ Jesus grew. The reader will soon be both delighted and bereaved to learn that the early church period was, in

many respects, a flourishing and thriving marketplace of ideas, but many of these theories (and their exponents) have now been lost, obscured under the weight of sanctioned religious history.

*Keywords:* Christology, Ebionite, Arian, Trinitarian, Marketplace.

## **The Marketplace of Ideas Quenched: Examination of Christological conflicts, and their outcomes, in the early Christian Church**

### **Part One: The Ebionites, and the suppression of their ideas and religious practice**

The story begins, as it almost invariably should, at the beginning. The earliest followers of Christ saw themselves as fundamentally Jewish, following a humane Jewish Messiah who had been sent by God to expound to them the way of the rabbinical law more fully, without the distortions and obfuscations of the religious establishment. Regrettably, there has often been a dearth of scholarship on this group, and some scholars have regarded them dismissively. The Ebionite moniker means “poor ones” in Hebrew, and this was not only a form of linguistic nomenclature, but expressive of their background and lifestyle. The Ebionites were known, and sometimes disdained, for their rejection of St. Paul, their rejection of the notion of the divinity of Jesus, their strict insistence on the careful and thoughtful observance of Jewish law, and their adoptionist theory of Christ that they posited in its place. Chiefly, that Christ was a mere man who was adopted by God as a son because of his perfect obedience. While the Ebionites would later come to be regarded by the proto-Orthodox as heretics in the second century, their Christological construct is undoubtedly what the earliest (Jewish) Christians believed.

The Ebionites had their own undoubtedly riveting versions of many of the biblical stories of Christ and his journeys in the gospels. Moreover, they were all at least vegetarian, and some were vegan, and argued that both Christ and John, the Baptist were as well. They believed in modesty and shunned the opulence and debauchery associated with excess wealth. To quote the scholar H.J. Schoeps, “The Ebionites saw in Jesus the Saddiq, who in a unique degree perfectly fulfilled the law. In their view, however, he fulfilled it as a human being, not as Son of God, but as Son of Man, who was consecrated to be Messiah and equipped by God with power, not through true pre-existence or at the moment of birth, but only on the day of his baptism through the act, announced in the words of Psalm 27, of adoption through baptism, i.e. through the Holy Spirit present in the baptismal water. Among the Ebionites this adoptionist Christology was combined with the apocalyptic expectation of the Son of Man which prevailed in the primitive community, the expectation that Rabbi Jeshu ha-Nozri, transfigured into the angelic form of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, would soon return at the hour of salvation for the last judgement upon the living and the dead” (Schoeps, 1953, pg. 2).

The Ebionite Christology was characterized by a strict notion of ontological separateness between man and God. God is completely distinct from his creation, and thus, God is not a man, and no man can possibly be God. This has certain parallels to the later development of Islam as a religious system that attempted to correct what it perceived to be philosophical corruptions and deficiencies in Orthodox Christianity which had deviated from the earlier revelation (Schoeps, 1953).

The Ebionites at their core believed in eschewing the trappings of material wealth, followed a simple lifestyle, advocated vegetarianism and condemned animal sacrifice, arguing that the Messiah came to abolish these barbaric and backward practices, and not merely from Jews

themselves, but amongst every cultural, religious, and ethnic group. Moreover, the Ebionites also argued for the necessity of water baptism for salvation, which was a belief later “borrowed” by the Orthodox as they developed their theology.

Why did the Orthodox Christians reject the Ebionite Christology and emphasis on spiritual purity in a modest life, instead opting for elaborate ritual and pomp and circumstance and proclaiming Jesus to be God, the Son, the second member of the Holy Trinity, while retaining their emphasis on baptism as a salvific practice that absolved one of sin? I want to introduce this quandary to you now, dear readers, but an answer will not be provided until the conclusion. It is the author’s belief that the later introduction of the Trinity was a response to the need to reconcile opposite poles of theological and ontological sensibility, to retain a certain sense of ontological Monotheism. In truth, the Jewish roots of the religion were duly obliged to be honored in a certain sense, while also interjecting a philosophical paradigm largely borrowed from the Persians, Romans, and Greeks to explain and rationalize the unique and extraordinary experiences that followers had with, and of, Jesus. While Christ was known through his humanity, it was the second ontological dimension of his deity which enabled Christianity to set itself apart from other Jewish sects, and likely, to greatly prolong its shelf life, as it were, and to not be doomed to oblivion and historical marginalization as were many of the other Jewish sects in their wake which posited an impassable barrier between the human and the divine. Orthodox, institutional Christianity, in sharp contradistinction, married the two neatly into one.

However, the geographical and sociopolitical elements must be considered as well. The Ebionites were, as alluded to in the paper before, a group of poor Jewish faithful who lacked any real political or institutional power to either compete with, or later be assimilated into, imperial power politics. Where concentrations of capital were found, so too was found the ability for a

religious sect to ingratiate itself to a pre-existent power structure, such as the Roman Empire. Several of the notable proto-Orthodox church fathers were philosophers who had received exemplary schooling and whose educational strata accorded them a certain level of status and prestige, such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian. It may truly be said that the seeds which were sown, ultimately flowering into Orthodox Christianity, were strewn about by philosophers and those with a certain political finesse in cajoling the imperial power structure. History was truly made by philosophy in the exceptional case of Orthodox Christianity. Philosophy was not simply made by History. The prevailing ideas, embedded within those of considerable social respectability, which was arguably its own novel form of social capital, married with the material wealth needed for a faith system to be disseminated, were ultimately found triumphant on the side of the “Orthodox”. Orthodox Christianity also offered a form of class conciliation between the upper and lower strata of ancient life, unlike the simpler faith of the Ebionites, which condemned the rich and extolled a modest lifestyle as a great moral virtue. It was necessary for the Orthodox to dishonestly portray the Ebionites as a marginal, heretical, or eccentric sect in comparison.

“It was reported by Irenaeus (another early church father) that the Ebionites faced toward Jerusalem as an act of reverence during their prayers and worship each day. They did not accept the Virgin Birth, or the idea that Jesus might have pre-existed. They did acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, but not for because of his having a divine nature or because of the virgin birth, but because of his having been adopted by God to be his Son. Ebionites were said to have maintained that their views were authorized by the original disciples, especially Peter and Jesus’s own brother, James, head of the Jerusalem Church after the resurrection” (Cook, Jr., 2013, pg. 4).

Thus, we can see that the Ebionites cast themselves as the true inheritors of the Apostolic legacy, decrying the followers of Paul (who would later form the basis for Orthodoxy after much inter-religious conflict) as apostates who had gone astray into philosophical speculation regarding the nature of Christ and his deity. Cook Jr., also reports as essential Ebionite beliefs the following:

“There is only one God.

Jesus is the true prophet.

A simple lifestyle is desired by God.

Jesus condemned animal sacrifice and teaches vegetarianism.

Alcohol should be avoided.

God has one law for everyone.

The law has been distorted by false texts.

Warfare is condemned.

Christ has already appeared many times.

Baptism was important for salvation.

Paul was an apostate from the law” (Cook Jr., 2013, pg. 4).

Cook Jr. enumerates these as indispensable Ebionite beliefs, some of which were embraced, albeit with much rebranding, by later Orthodoxy, and others which were discarded entirely. As the proto-orthodox grew in rank and sophistication and following the collapse of dissenting theologies holding any sort of institutional viability following the Arian controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup>

century, this obscuring became particularly pronounced. The Ebionites and other groups who were seen as heretical and marginal were largely forgotten and sidestepped in church history, except for the Orthodox to utter a few dismissed, and biased, words against them, condemning them to what they considered to be a rightful obscurity.

However, the Ebionites are only one such pertinent example. The next part of the paper will focus on the treatment and beliefs of the Gnostics, which were many, particularly in the first two centuries of Christendom. While their beliefs were largely condemned or suppressed, the Nag Hammadi discoveries in Egypt during the 1950's greatly renewed interest in what these groups had believed, much to the chagrin of the Orthodox. It is the writer's hope that this next section will serve to illuminate the discussion more clearly on how the esoteric was ultimately eclipsed in Christendom by the exoteric- the emphasis on inner, private, mystical experiences with God was superseded by a heavy emphasis on external structure, hierarchy, conformity, and sanctioned religious teaching.

## **Part Two: The Gnostics, who were they, and why do they matter?**

The subsequent dimension of the examination rests upon the Gnostics, who were as multifarious in their ideas and as sundry in their scope as they were impossible to generalize with a single, broad theological stroke. The first thing to know about the Gnostics is that contrary to the Ebionites and their dismissal of Paul, Gnostics often venerated Paul, in some instances dubbing him the only genuine apostle of Christ. The Gnostics delved profoundly into the hidden and repressed side of the human psyche, giving it potent expression with religious symbolism and metaphor.

Gnostic sects included, but were certainly not limited to, the Valentinians, the Sethians, the followers of Marcion of Sinope, the followers of Cerinthus, the Sethians, the Ophites, and myriad other sects of considerable scholarly weight and importance, whose esoteric beliefs, reject of institutional hierarchies, their perceived lawlessness or antinomian proclivities, and their emphasis on hidden knowledge as the sole viable path to salvation, made them anathema in the eyes of their critics, and the *Auri sacra fames* (Latin, sacred hunger) for institutional power and hegemony rendered the diverse Gnostic sects as foes and rivals to be suppressed.

It is also notable that many of the Gnostic sects were essentially born out of Jewish soil, and while some sects became increasingly detached from the semitic roots, others embraced them heartily. The Ophites are one such especially pertinent example of a Jewish Gnostic sect that was often lambasted by the proto-Orthodox church fathers, to wit, Irenaeus and Origen. Rasimus, 2005, compiled the following, “Several church fathers describe the teaching of the Ophites. In addition, the pagan philosopher Celsus wrote on the so-called Ophite diagram and its users. His testimony, however, only survives embedded in Irenaeus's *Contra Celsum* 6:24-28 together with Origen’s own account”, and in elucidating (undoubtedly with his own measure of polemical bias) the beliefs of this seemingly inscrutable sect, one notices also the following, “This is, in fact, the most complete description of the Ophite teaching. Let me therefore summarize its contents at length here. The first principle is called the First Man. From him came forth his thought (ennoia), apparently identified as the Son of Man, the Second Man. Below these was the First Woman, the Holy Spirit, and below her the elements, including water and darkness. Both the first and second man united with the First Woman who begot the Third Male, Christ. These four form the heavenly *ekklesia* (Greek phrase, meaning church, congregation, or tabernacle). However, due to an overflow of light, the First Woman also gave birth to Sophia, who fell down to the waters

below. Having struggled, she managed to ascend and free herself from the body she had assumed. The remains of her body fathered the demiurge Ialdabaoth, who, endowed with her power, produced six offspring: Iao, Sabaoth, Adonaeus, Eloeus, Oreus, and Astaphaeus. Together with their father they formed the “hebdomad”, i.e. the seven planets. The offspring then started a war against their father for the supreme power. Ialdabaoth, for his part, produced a serpent-formed offspring, apparently to help him. This serpent, who is the devil, was called Nous, Michael, and Samuel. It was not only the source of the spirit, soul, and all mundane things, but also of oblivion, wickedness, emulation, envy, and death”, and finally, the scholar goes on to add, “Ialdabaoth then claimed to be the only God, with words reminiscent of YHWH’s monotheistic claim (i.e. in the Old Testament)” (Rasimus, 2005, pg. 237-38).

Thus, the Ophites, like many Gnostic sects, emphasized a demiurge mythology, wherein an ignorant and, in some cases, malevolent being was posited as the creator of the physical world and the material realm. Concurrently, Gnostics posited the existence of a higher God, a God of enlightened spiritual mankind, who had no part in making the physical world and desires to free human beings from the constraints of matter and the material which were imposed by the Demiurge. This is an indispensable component of Gnostic mythologies, rather than order and symmetry in the universe, as with the Orthodox, they instead posit disarray and cosmic confusion, and gaining spiritual knowledge as a worthy initiate is the only way to escape.

### **An Inclusive History of Theological and Sectarian Developments in the Early Christian Church**

One of the most notable sects to emerge within the deluge of diversity that characterized much of the early church period were the Valentinians, who have been the subject of much scholarly fascination and speculation. Kent ascertains the basis of the Valentinian Gnosis (hidden, or secret, knowledge which must be grasped by a spiritual initiate through direct personal experience) with the following, “The Valentinians began their speculation with the assumption that an omnipresent and perfect God could not be directly connected with an obviously imperfect world. Therefore, this creation must have come into being through a power (or powers) either antithetical to the Godhead and/or far less perfect than he. Despite this, some people still had within them the certainty of the knowledge of God while still having a physical existence in the material world. The solution to this enigma was that there had fallen from the heights of the Perfect God (that is, the *Pleroma*) some of his wisdom, and that this fall was what led to the creation of the world. Contained within the inmost core of the person was a seed of this wisdom, a seed which could grow to receive a full knowledge of the bliss of God’s love. However, for reasons probably involving accommodation to basic Christian doctrine, this seed was not thought to be in all people, and many could not know God’s love but could at least reap some benefits by studying about his greatness. Those remaining persons who could not even benefit by such studies were doomed to perish with the destruction of *hyle* (matter) at the end of the world” (Kent, 1980, pg. 3).

Kent also asserted that the Valentinians were advancing ideas which had pre-Christian origins and roots, albeit presented within a Christianized theological package. Kent noted certain striking similarities, as well as disparities, between the Valentinian Gnostics and the Buddhist tradition of Sāṃkhya. The writer would like to argue that this is intimately relevant, as upon closer examination, all of the divergent theological trends and tendencies within the “big tent” of Christendom did not emerge in a vacuum, or in isolation. Rather, they borrowed heavily from earlier mythologies and conceptual paradigms about deity and its relationship to humanity which came before. Another salient example of this tendency within Christianity would be its conspicuous borrowing, albeit with modifications, from Mithraism or the “Cult of Mithras”, everything from the observance of December 25 as a “holy day”, to the observance of bread and wine in the form of communion, to the idea of a God-man, redeemer, and Messiah (Wagener, 1960, pg. 79-80).

While all the divergent theological streams within Christendom borrowed heavily from pre-Christian mythological and theological sources, it was the Gnostics who perhaps most effectively married the emphasis of Eastern religiosity on intimate personal experience with the divine and the unique nature and status of Jesus as redeemer. The Gnostics advanced an esoteric and internal paradigm for human communion with the divine. To a Gnostic, knowledge of God necessarily implied knowledge of the illusory nature of the material world, the goal of which it is for one to transcend, by acquiring not blind faith in church hierarchical dictates, but by experiential knowledge through direct communication with the divine. Thus, Gnostics were representative of a socially constructed, yet psychologically individuated, emphasis on the esoteric, and the personal, and the experiential. A certain equality of sorts was introduced.

Although there were different classes, or gradations, of humans (as well as of believers), all could potentially rise through the ranks of spiritual progress and evolution and achieve gnosis.

As a consequence of this, Gnostics were quite egalitarian, rejecting artificial social hierarchies, embracing gender equality with surprising enthusiasm, and allowing women to lead and conduct prayers, study, and liturgy. Gnostics were often criticized by the proto-Orthodox for this, for indulging in what they perceived to be a subversion of God's eternal and immutable social order, which the budding yet nascent orthodoxy endeavored to protect (see Pagels, 1974).

The appreciable lack of any hierarchical power structure, as well as an emphasis on individual experience, essentially cast Gnostic Christians into a role wherein they were hopelessly overpowered by the disciplined, regimented, and hierarchically obsessed Orthodox Christian Church that was, slowly but surely, taking root and taking shape. This is one of the most salient reasons as to why Gnostics were defeated and suppressed. Their beliefs and praxis allowed them to be suppressed, because they refused to wield institutional power in the way their opponents embraced. History is a seemingly perpetual succession of institutional and power struggles, and those who are able to most effectively, or most efficaciously, wield power skillfully and shrewdly on their own behalf, are the ones who prevail. The point of history is not merely to be a passive participant, but rather an active creator. However, no historical conflicts or consummations are born from nothing, or created in isolation or in a vacuum. One notices a complex constellation of historical, geographical, institutional, political, hierarchical, theological, and ontological dynamics which amalgamated together into one to produce a certain and decisive outcome in the course of early church history.

Gnostic Christians, much like the Ebionites before them, are little understood and often obscured under the weight of sanctioned history. It has long been extremely fashionable amongst the apologists of the Trinitarian and Orthodox faithful to dismiss these groups as heretics on the margins at best, or as nefarious enemies of what they consider the true and holy Apostolic Faith, at worst. However, the serious scholar must continually dispense with such notions, and shun vitriol in favor of dialogue and understanding (see Macchia, 2010, pg. 12-21). Since, as Macchia et al. have duly noted, we live in an increasingly diverse and religiously pluralistic landscape, it is then incumbent upon us to fight against the pernicious nature of Ad Hominem attacks and reductionist history. The Gnostics matter precisely because they were the victims of such treatment, and because to ignore or sidestep them is to ignore or sidestep our understanding of early church history more generally.

### **Part Three: The Modalists and The Arians, and the Arian Controversy that gave way to the triumph of Orthodoxy**

At this stage in the paper, one would be remiss if they did not take the time to discuss the Modalist Christology and Arian Christology. The reader will notice that the author has refrained from referring to any of these belief systems as “heresies”, because that is not the position, and nor is it the aim in writing this paper. Having come from a Modalist background myself, one might deign to accuse me of scholarly bias, but they would be mistaken. The writer is merely endeavoring to provide the reader with a substantive analysis, historical, geographical, and theological, of the most pertinent and prolonged conflicts, the bloodiest and seemingly most intractable battles, as it were, which ultimately gave rise to the triumph of Orthodoxy. Orthodox,

Trinitarian Christianity (again, used here merely as a scholarly designation, not as an objective judgement in its favor) triumphed not merely because of what it posited, but because of the competing systems of thought which it negated and opposed. Such is the dialectic of triumph for the Nicene faithful. The paper will say some briefer words about the Modalist Christology, and then it will proceed to develop sufficiently ample time to discuss the Arian controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, and how one Libyan philosopher and presbyter's ideas about Jesus and his subordination to the Father were the impetus for the triumph of the institutional Goliath that Christianity subsequently became.

What is the Modalist Christology? The Modalists today were the closest to those we would call Oneness, or the believers in Oneness Pentecostalism. Oneness Pentecostalism emerged as a novel and distinctive sect in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, following an abrupt re-discovery of the primitive baptismal formula of the early church, "in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins", as well as a doctrinal realignment on the Godhead, rejecting the Trinity Doctrine in place of a doctrine which came to be known as the Oneness of God. Oneness believers came to believe that Jesus himself was the Father of the Old Testament, who had been manifested in human flesh, in corporeal form, as the Son of God, and then later came back himself to indwell the hearts of his people as the Holy Spirit in the New Testament Church. Thus, Modalists denied any essential separation between Father and Son, except with respect to natures, the Father being the divine nature of Christ, the Son being his self-revelation in flesh. Christ and God were taken to be one in the most authentic, and primitive, sense. Jesus, according to his spiritual essence, was the Father, but according to his physical nature, became the Son at his incarnation. Modalist believers often cite texts such as Colossians 2:9, John 14:9, and Isaiah 9:6 to bolster their theological claim.

In short, Modalism was the valiant attempt of earlier Christians to reconcile their beliefs about the unique nature of Jesus with the strict monotheistic insistence upon one God (see Bernard, 2019). Moreover, the Modalists also exalted Jesus as the sole and supreme deity, and this insistence on the complete deity of Jesus Christ has often put them at loggerheads with the religious establishment (see Macchia, 2010). While Trinitarian Christians also accept the notion of Christ being God, he is viewed as being merely one member of the Godhead, whereas in Modalist Christology, all the “fullness of the Godhead”, as per Colossians 2:9, is believed to be in Christ, and in Christ, alone.

Dr. Bernard confidently asserts in his paper that Modalism “was the predominant Christian view of God for over a century” (Bernard, 2019, pg. 70). Being that this was the case, as per Bernard’s cited research, it seems to the author that this further reinforces the thesis on early Christianity as a fragmented and unwieldy “big tent” of disparate ideas and beliefs, later forcibly welded into conformity and institutionalization. How else could one explain what was once the majority Christological view being so vitriolically castigated as heresy, and its believers condemned? However, the catalyst for this religious standardization was not the Modalist controversy, but rather, it was the Arian one, which I shall endeavor to discuss next.

The Arians have long been regarded by the Orthodox as one of the most notorious sects of heretics and schismatics in church history. However, the Arians saw themselves fundamentally as defenders of the faith, contending for the “true Orthodoxy” which was being displaced and superseded by Trinitarian theological speculation. The Arians take their name from Dr. Arius of Alexandria, a Libyan philosopher, writer, and Alexandrian presbyter, who attracted sizable columns of followers through his persuasive oratory and his intellectual brilliance.

Arius, in a nutshell, taught that Christ was subordinate to the Father and that he was a created being, the first entity ever created by the Father, and through whom the Father then subsequently made all else that was made. While Arius did regard Jesus as deity and as worthy of worship (many of the anti-Arians have denied this, but the historical record is fairly clear from the few primary sources available), he did not regard him as the Almighty, and asserted that he was the “firstborn of all the creation of God”. Arius’s views on the nature of the Holy Spirit remain unclear. What is clear is that those who codified and systematized the mainstream Trinitarian Christology viewed him as a deadly foe.

On the geographical and historical roots of Arianism, Haas argues the following, “Intellectual history, however, seldom takes place in a vacuum. Alexandria in the early fourth century was probably the second largest city in the Roman Empire and served as the commercial entrepot for the entire eastern Mediterranean. Tightly organized communities of Jews, Pagans, and Christians jostled one another in their ongoing competition for socio-cultural hegemony within this cosmopolitan urban milieu. Arius’s teaching first gained its first popularity within this richly-textured, socially complex urban environment. Consequently, our understanding of both this outspoken Alexandrian presbyter and his message may be sharpened further by looking closely at the social composition of his first adherents within the city.

Early on, both sides in this local theological dispute appealed to authorities outside Alexandria, thereby embroiling emperors and bishops in over a half-century of empire-wide conflict. The Alexandrian patriarch, Alexander (312-328), enlisted the support of various bishops throughout Palestine and Syria. For his part, Arius gained the backing of several high-placed churchmen, including Eusebius of Nicomedia” (Haas, 1993, pg. 1-2).

Thus, the conflict over theological supremacy and hegemony was as much imperial and geopolitical as it was theological. Alexandria was a vital port city, and those who controlled the religious tendency of Alexandria, would shape much of the empire strategically as a result. Moreover, it was a series of blundering militaristic and imperial machinations on the parts of those Arians who gained power, which ultimately set the stage for their Trinitarian adversary to prevail.

Haas goes on to cite one such salient example of Arian imperial failures here, with the following, “Thus, in March of 339, when the Arian appointee, Gregory the Cappadocian, made his violent *adventus* into the city accompanied by Philagrius, a veteran Praefectus Aegypti, the Arian mob which attacked the church of Quirinus included herdsman and shepherds. Athanasius even tells us that they were armed with clubs- in this case probably shepherd’s staves. Two decades later we find a similar topographical connection between Arianism and Alexandria’s extra-mural regions. Before his appointment to the throne of St. Mark, the Arian bishop George of Cappadocia had spent a portion of his career as a treasury contractor in Constantinople, (modern day Istanbul), and had acquired thereby a measure of business acumen and a reputation for ruthlessness. It is instructive to note that during his ill-fated tenure in Alexandria, George sought monopolies on papyrus manufacture as well as a special tax on the extraction of nitre-economic activities concentrated in Alexandria’s suburbs. This reliance on the city’s peripheral regions is confirmed by George’s control over the city’s *collegium* of grave-diggers and coffin-bearers, who seemed content with giving George a portion of their profits in exchange for the bishop’s patronage” (Haas, 1993, pg. 3-4). The Arian bishops, upon gaining religious, and therefore political, power, were often heavy-handed, corrupt, and ruthless, which gave ample fodder to their Trinitarian rivals and adversaries to portray the Arian sect as an existential threat

to the Christian Church. The most seething and indefatigable opponent of Arius and his theology was Athanasius, who diligently worked to court monks, and to persuade the faithful of what he considered to be the “pernicious nature” of the “Arian heresy”. Athanasius was incredibly heavy-handed and authoritarian himself, as Naas references near the end of his document, informing the reader that “Athanasius's allegedly brutal methods for enforcing ecclesiastical discipline and doctrinal conformity became much more comprehensible. Despite Epiphanius's enthusiasm for Athanasius, he tells us that Athanasius “kept trying accusations, threats, and admonitions, and no one paid attention” (Haas, 1993, pg. 6).

Both Trinitarian and Arian believers invoked ruthless imperial machinations, of both force and diplomacy, in an effort to see their will done. The Arians seemed to be a formidable foe for the Trinitarians, a veritable juggernaut fully capable of imposing its theological will on the empire, especially after many of the wealthy political and religious elite of the *bouleutai* class begin contending for their theological cause. Why, then, did Arianism ultimately lose? To resolve this quandary, readers, we must turn to the period of 357-361.

The Arians of Alexandria had deliberately, and politically, posited themselves as a viable alternative to the rule of Athanasius, who was often viewed by his opponents, and even in some cases by his own supporters, of being excessively violent, authoritarian, and unyielding. The Arian Gregory of Cappadocia entered Alexandria in 339 and enjoyed sizeable military and political backing in the empire. However, when the Arian hegemony insisted on a sycophantic replacement for Gregory in the year 349, and increasingly lamenting Gregory's rule as it was marked by episodes of arson, violence, and unrest directed against the opponents of the Arian doctrine, the Arian hegemony settled instead on George of Cappadocia. This, however, proved to be a devastating blunder on the parts of the Arian religious, ecclesiastical, and political elite.

George's tenure was characterized by wanton brutality, discrimination, and gratuitous violence directed against pagans, Jews, and the Christians who opposed Arian theology and the dominance of the Arian political and military regime. Ultimately, in December of 361, George was murdered by a vicious, violent, and vengeful mob, and thus ended the seeming triumph and emerging hegemony of the Arian theological (and political) cause. The Arians would never again recover the position of hegemony now lost at the hands of both the machinations of their enemies, as well as their own general imperial incompetency. The Arians had lost not only the battle, but also the war. Again, given the theological "victor's bias" that we mark as prevalent throughout the history of Christianity as a living institution, the Arians were subsequently demonized and condemned, almost universally, by the hegemony of the Orthodox that formed in their wake.

Thus, the writer has endeavored to carefully and analytically examine the Ebionites and the suppression of their ideas and practices, the diversity and plurality of the Gnostics, the teachings of the Modalists, and the defeat of the Arians, in an integrative way that will enable one to better ascertain the most salient conflicts of the early Christian period, 1-4 centuries A.D. In the following section, the writer will conclude with some remarks about deficiencies in existing research, the needed expansion of the literature, and broader implications for religious plurality and mutual understanding in our modern era.

## **Conclusion**

The depth of diversity that characterized the early Christian Church is incontrovertible. From the Unitarian sensibilities of the Ebionites, to the esoteric individualism and spiritual wayfaring of the sundry Gnostic sects, to the exaltation of Jesus and his deity propounded by the Modalists,

to the subordinationism advanced by the Arians, the early Christian era was multifarious and replete with struggle and disputation. The diversity and pluralism of the first four centuries A.D. is mirrored by the modern era of globalization and religious individuality, in which diverse sects have arisen and attracted exponents, from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to Jehovah's Witnesses, to Oneness Pentecostalism, to the charismatic movement within Trinitarian Pentecostalism. Similar to the protracted struggles of the nascent Christian Church, those who account themselves on the side of Orthodoxy have often misunderstood and demonized their opponents as dangerous apostates from the faith.

Moreover, some potentially illuminating questions remain unanswered. These include, why did the Trinitarian faithful reject the preponderance of the Ebionite theology, while embracing their doctrine on the necessity of water baptism for salvation? My own tentative answer to this question, as promised earlier in the paper, is that it was necessary to retain something of the Judaic roots of the nascent Christianity, as baptism was seen as mirroring circumcision, which was essential for devout Jews in the Old Testament, while also offering enough substantive distinction to merit the classification of the "new Christianity" as a distinct sect in its own right. The Ebionites were fundamentally Jewish at their core, whereas the proto-Orthodox sought to separate themselves markedly from earlier expressions of Judaism, both theologically and culturally (see Schoeps, 1953, pg. 219-24). Another potentially instructive question that might potentially be worth exploring in subsequent literature is to what extent Islam "borrowed" from Ebionite practices and customs while also deviating in its own right as a novel theological paradigm.

Another pertinent question remains, what was the true nature of the similarities between Valentinian Gnostics and the proto-Orthodox? Moreover, if these similarities were as extensive

as some scholars of the Gnostic period claim, why then were the Valentinians so vehemently opposed and castigated with the charge of heresy? Finally, how exactly was the “Modalist majority” alluded to by Bernard et. al. in 2019 on this subject so irretrievably lost?

Finally, the notion of history being “written by the victors” remains as captivating, and regrettably often accurate, as ever. The first four centuries of church history, including but not limited to the Ebionite, Gnostic, Modalist, Arian, and Nestorian theological, geographical, political, and polemical disputes, were a veritable hotbed of spirited, bloody, and uncharitable debate between brothers who came to view themselves as irreconcilable enemies instead. If indeed the Nicene Trinitarians had lost and the Arians prevailed, what would the historical trajectory have looked like, in sharp contrast to what it became? Will the remarkable diversity and breadth and depth of divergent insights and experience that so fluently marked the early church period ever be recaptured again, and indeed, can it be? Regrettably, there is no easily available answer to any of these questions here. However, one can take comfort in having given these diverse groups and believers in Christ their just consideration, situated within a substantive and scholarly context, aimed expressly at giving voice to those who were tragically marginalized, suppressed, and branded as enemies of the Christ they strived to follow as they knew how. The marketplace of ideas in early Christendom was quenched, but many of the fragments that remain of the brilliance, originality, conflict, and upheaval of this era have thankfully not been lost.

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