

John Campbell

Division within Unity: Contrasting Views of Empire and Church in the Writings of Eusebius of
Caesarea and Athanasius of Alexandria



In 325 CE, the Council of Nicaea, which was later proclaimed the first ecumenical council of Orthodox Christianity,¹ produced the Nicene Creed. This doctrinal statement declared that Jesus the Son was consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father. This promulgation from a unified (though not unanimous) synod of bishops, gathered under the oversight of the emperor Constantine,² appears to denote the emergence of a singular, monolithic imperial Christianity. This moment of outward unity, however, did not signify that the imperial church was united in

¹ Throughout the following article, when I use the term orthodox to describe Christianity, I am denoting those Christians who accepted the Nicene Creed and its proclamation that Jesus shared the same divine substance as God the Father who had begotten him, i.e. generated him. I am not merely noting the modern Eastern Orthodox Church. Rather, I am distinguishing those Christians who declared themselves orthodox in contrast to other groups, such as the Arians, who did not accept the Creed because of their conviction that Christ was *homoiousios*, similar but not identical in substance, i.e. being, with the Father.

² Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284-430*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68-72. According to Cameron, Constantine's role within this first ecumenical gathering was ambiguous. While the emperor desired a definite resolution to the question of the Son's nature and personally favored the victorious position, he wished for the council's resolution to be the product of the assembled bishops and not the result of imperial fiat.

all matters of the faith, especially in respect to the person of Christ.³ Within Orthodox Christianity, there remained a notable division over the risen Christ's workings in the present age and his use of political institutions, such as the Roman empire. From the inception of the religion, Christianity had to address the tension over its claims of a risen Lord who ruled over the entire cosmos and the temporal reality of living under an empire that persecuted the faith's adherents.

In his epistles, the apostle Paul addressed this dissonance by looking forward to the apocalyptic in-breaking of the Messiah's return (*hē parousia*) when Christ would bring all powers and authorities under his visible rule.⁴ In the interim, Paul encouraged the early Christian communities to accept the temporary order of the world and the rule of the empire over it for stability on the earth. Following Paul's death, the theologian and Pauline exegete Irenaeus (130-202 CE) drew upon the apostle's writings to encourage Christians to continue to conduct their lives in preparation for Jesus' reappearance and to recognize Jesus as the cosmological Lord who would soon bring his kingdom to rule temporally upon the earth.

The conversion of Constantine in 312 CE and his subsequent military victories caused Christians to reconsider their former understanding of the manner in which Jesus was exercising his lordship over the world. Before the unforeseen event of a Roman emperor's conversion to the faith that his predecessors had persecuted as a subversive cult, Orthodox Christians, in

³ Ibid. Although Constantine appears to have thought that the declaration of Nicaea would settle the debate over Christ's nature, dissidence continued, and even the emperor's own son and successor Constantius II was sympathetic to Arius' belief that Jesus was similar but not the same in substance with the Father.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume V*, trans and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), 868. According to Kittel, *hē parousia* for Paul was a future event in which the believer would be united with Christ at his return to the earth. For Paul, the only way to have achieved such a union with Christ, *sun Christo einai*, in the present was through experiencing martyrdom.

accordance with the epistles of Paul, believed that God had established the world's political leaders primarily to bring order, rather than chaos, upon the earth. Constantine's favoring of the religion inspired the Christian writer Eusebius (263-339 CE) to declare that Jesus was *presently* and *chiefly* exercising his lordship over the earth by using Constantine and the Roman empire to usher in his return (*hē parousia*) and to initiate the millennial age of his earthly kingdom.

Eusebius' conviction was not, however, accepted universally within the Orthodox church. Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373 CE), the most prominent early defender of Nicaea, rejected the theological proposition that the Roman empire was the divinely-inspired instrument that would establish Jesus' kingdom upon the earth. In contrast, he maintained, similarly to Irenaeus, that the Pauline language of Jesus's lordship was primarily cosmological and soteriological in nature and that it revealed the eternal being (*ousia*) of the Son and his transference of the attribute of immortality to humanity in the incarnation. For Athanasius, when the writers of the New Testament spoke of Jesus becoming Lord over the world in his incarnation,⁵ they did not *primarily* mean that he was *presently* directing the actions of world's political institutions.⁶ Rather, they were declaring that by becoming human, Jesus, who had throughout eternity shared with the Father a divine lordship over the entire cosmos, had become the head and representative, i.e. king, of all humanity so that in himself all people might be saved and become like God.⁷

⁵ For this recondite but crucial part of Athanasius' thought, see Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, trans. A. Robertson in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ed. Archibald Robertson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 354, 55.

⁶ Certainly, Athanasius would confess that Jesus along with the Father providentially rules over the affairs of humanity, but an analysis of Athanasius' thoughts about this matter would quickly turn to an examination of his beliefs about the interaction between a person's free-will and the Divine's sovereignty.

⁷ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 354, 55.

This division between two prominent theologians within the institutional Orthodox church reveals that early imperial Christianity was not a monolithic entity in which all its members favored the promotion of the Roman state. Rather, it was a complex union whose leading minds continued to wrestle with the theological categories of Jesus' lordship of the world and the proper relationship that should exist between the Roman empire and the church. Within this realm of theological disputes, the writings of Paul stood as the common foundation upon which Orthodox theologians had to build their arguments. By examining the writings of Eusebius and Athanasius and their diverse interpretations of Paul, we may gain insight into early Nicene Christianity's relationship with the Roman state and its understanding of Jesus' lordship over the political institutions of the world. We may thereby recognize the diversity of thought that existed within Orthodox Christianity during this period of transformation.

Before I analyze the thoughts of Eusebius and Athanasius, I should note the distinction between Jesus' temporal authority over the earth and his cosmological lordship that existed in early Christianity. By Jesus' temporal lordship, I am describing the belief of early Christian authors that Christ had direct control over the world's political institutions and their leaders and that he was using them, in cooperation with the church, to establish his kingdom upon the earth in the present age. When I employ the concept of Christ's cosmological lordship, I am referring to the conviction of these writers that Christ possessed an eternal divine union with the Father that Christ, according to the plan of the Father, wished to share with humanity through a participation in himself that transcended any temporal boundaries.⁸ By recognizing these two

⁸ When I speak of this union between humanity and the Divine, I am noting the early Christian belief, found especially in Irenaeus and Athanasius, that Christ was sharing through his incarnation the attribute of immortality with humanity—not the Divine essence in and of itself. For the development of this theology, which reached its apogee during the Byzantine period, including the eventual language of the distinction between God's energies, by which he interacts with humanity, and his unknowable essence,

distinctions within the thought of the early church, we may better appreciate Eusebius' and Athanasius' diverse approaches to understanding the role of the Roman state in God's ordering of and plan for the world.

Among early Christian authors, Eusebius is notable for his prioritization of Christ's temporal lordship. Eusebius viewed Jesus' lordship and subjugation of the world as an active process in which the temporal political authorities, i.e. the empire, brought the nations into conformity with the headship of Jesus.⁹ In contrast to previous theologians, such as Irenaeus, Eusebius did not view this subjugation as a future, apocalyptic event for which the Son was waiting; rather, in his interpretation of Paul, Eusebius viewed the subjugation of the world and its powers, which Paul describes in passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, as a contemporaneous and ongoing event that had to be fulfilled before Jesus' return (*hē parousia*).¹⁰ In this process, both the church and the empire were the instruments of Christ. Following Constantine's adoption of Christianity and his sole leadership of the empire, the central political force in the world—from Eusebius' perspective—had emerged as a primary instrument by which Christ would reveal his lordship to all the peoples of the earth.

Within his *De Laudibus Constantini* (*On the Praises of Constantine*), Eusebius presents his argument for the active rulership of Jesus over the world and the continuous subjugation of

consult the writings of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas. See also Torstein T. Tollefsen, "Christocentric Cosmology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, eds. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 307-321, as well as Jean-Claude Larchet, "The Mode of Deification," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, eds. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 341-377.

⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Laudibus Constantini*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1: Eusebius Pamphilus: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, trans. Ernest Cushing Richardson, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1890), 1148-1154.

¹⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Contra Marcellum*, 2.4.1. Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Eusebius, the Doctrine of Apokatastasis, and Its Relation to Christology," in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, eds., Aaron Johnson and Jeremy Schott (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013), 312, 313.

those powers and civil forces that are hostile to him.¹¹ According to Eusebius, the resurrection of Jesus proved his authority over all the nations of the world. For Eusebius, the event of the resurrection created a contemporaneous reality in which those governments and peoples that were opposed to God had already been defeated, and the vocation of the church was to announce the truth of this altered world. However, this vocation of proclamation was not limited to a declaration of subjugation; rather, Eusebius envisioned the mission of the church as one of reconciliation in which the previously divided nations were unified with each other under the single authority of God in Christ. Thus, Eusebius recognized Jesus' return (*hē parousia*) as a consummating event that the church and the empire, under the authority of Christ's representatives, the episcopacy and the emperor Constantine, would initiate upon the earth.¹²

Eusebius' unique perspective of the Roman empire's vocation in God's ordering of the world permitted him to speak of the Divine having a twofold plan to restore the world to himself. According to Eusebius, the incarnation of Christ and the subjugation of the world to the rule of Rome under Augustus were two unified parts of a divine mission to return the world to God. While the resurrection of Jesus had destroyed the forces of evil and the harm that they had perpetrated on the world through polytheism, the unified force of the Roman empire had secured the promise of universal peace temporally for the world by conquering those nations that had

¹¹ Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini*, 1148-54.

¹² Michael J. Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea's Commentary on Isaiah: Christian Exegesis in the Age of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 180, 181, 195. Eusebius' metanarrative for the world envisioned the dual bodies of the church and the empire as united in a single purpose, and while the bishops served as the representative of the Messiah in the church, the emperor acted in the unique role as the head of the laity, allowing him a type of equality with the ecclesiastical leaders in the affairs of the church.

embraced polytheism.¹³ Thus, it would bring all nations into a state of harmony through its rule and its facilitation of the proclamation of the gospel. Indeed, Eusebius envisioned the swift unification of the entire world under the authority of a Christian Roman empire because of his belief that Jesus was actively ruling and subjugating the world as its temporal Lord through the power of the Rome.¹⁴ Moreover, for Eusebius, the continued expansion and success of the Roman empire was definite proof that Jesus was the living, present king of the world who was unifying all people to God through the power of the empire and the doctrine of the church.¹⁵

Thus, Eusebius had no need in his theology for a sudden apocalyptic, in-breaking of the kingdom to initiate Jesus' rule of the earth as did Irenaeus; rather, during his life, this subjugation of the world seemed to him to be unfolding naturally.¹⁶ For this reason, Eusebius conflated the Pauline mission of the church to proclaim the consequences of the resurrection and to unify humanity within itself with the success and Christianization of the Roman empire. Nevertheless, even with his belief in a twofold divine mission for the church and the empire,¹⁷ it is clear the Eusebius still prioritized the church's role in reconciling individuals both to each other and to God and viewed the empire as a force to protect the mission of the church from the harmful influences of polytheism and the divisions he believed it encouraged.

¹³ Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini*, 1148, 1149. Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea's Commentary on Isaiah*, 190, 191. For Eusebius as well as Athanasius, polytheism was the root of the divisions and enmity that divided people groups and that led to conflict and war.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini*, 1151-54.

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, in *Ancient Christian Texts*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 10, 11. See also, Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini*, 1148, 1149.

¹⁶ Aaron P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 213, 14. Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini*, 1149. Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea's Commentary on Isaiah*, 191.

¹⁷ For a summary of Eusebius' theology of the empire and the church as part of a unified divine plan, see also, R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 147.

In contrast to Eusebius' envisioned triumph of God's plan for the world through the unified instruments of church and empire, the ecclesiastical career of Athanasius of Alexandria revealed the political friction that would develop between the Orthodox church and the empire, which adopted the religion as its official faith under the reign of Theodosius I (347-395 CE). Thus, the optimism of Eusebius for the impending return of Christ (*hē parousia*), based on the advent of a Christian emperor, serves as a unique moment within the relationship of the church and the empire. Moving forward, the political reality of the relationship between the concept of orthodoxy and the theological beliefs of the emperor would become more frictional within the imperial church.

Following the death of Constantine, the church faced the challenge of an emperor, Constantius II (317-361 CE), who did not adhere to the creedal faith that had been set forth at Nicaea and who personally favored a form of Arianism, i.e. the belief that Jesus was similar in substance to the Father but not of the same substance. In response, Athanasius of Alexandria placed himself within this controversy as the defender of Nicaea as the touchstone of orthodoxy. Presenting himself as the preserver of the established, orthodox teaching of the Son's nature, Athanasius had to navigate the political consequences of openly opposing an emperor who adhered to a different doctrine than that which the imperial church had dogmatized.

This schism in the relationship between the emperor and the imperial church revealed to writers like Athanasius the limitations of Eusebius' belief in the unity of the church and the Roman empire in the mission of God to restore humanity to himself. Moreover, the opposition of Athanasius also permits me to examine the counter-position of Eusebius' understanding of Paul and the role of the empire in propagating the Christian faith. While Athanasius' self-perpetuated role as the defender of Nicene Orthodoxy against the Arians may have been a political

calculation of the Alexandrian bishop,¹⁸ a charitable reading of his theological material will allow us to gain a fuller sense of the early church's understanding of the Pauline concept of Jesus' lordship over the world and the relationship between the mission of the church and the divine employment of the empire.

In contrast to Eusebius' use of the Pauline theme of Jesus' kingship as an indication of Christ's temporal lordship over the world, Athanasius maintained that the Davidic language of Jesus becoming king, of which Paul was fond, was soteriological in nature and chiefly addressed the reconciliation and exultation of humanity through the human nature of Jesus. For him, the eternal, cosmological kingship of Jesus was primarily a Christological truth that required a defense against the Arians and those opponents of Nicaea who wished to limit Jesus' lordship to a state of exaltation that occurred only after Christ's resurrection.¹⁹ With Athanasius, this Pauline category of Messianic kingship, which previous theologians had employed as a lens through which to view the altering of the world order after the resurrection, became a defining characteristic of the eternal word (*ho logos*). According to Athanasius, any apostolic discussion of Jesus becoming king was only in reference to his humanity because in eternally sharing the being (*ousia*) of the Father, Jesus had continuously been king with respect to his divinity.²⁰

In his *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei (On the Incarnation of the Word of God)*, Athanasius adopts the metaphor of human kingship in order to emphasize that the revelation of Jesus'

¹⁸ See Timothy David Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1993); Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000, Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 79, 80; David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishops, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, trans. A. Robertson in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ed. Archibald Robertson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 330, 354, 355.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 330, 355.

coeternal kingship with the Father in the incarnation disclosed the true reality of the world to those pagans who had formerly waged war against each other because of the confusion about the nature of existence that the demons had perpetuated.²¹ In agreement with Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius maintained that the proclamation of a cosmological king who, through the incarnation, had become the sovereign representative of all people groups brought harmony to humankind where it previously had not existed.²² While Eusebius stressed the temporal characteristic of this lordship because of his belief that the emperor was a chief instrument in uniting the world under the single kingship of Christ, Athanasius primarily perceived Jesus' lordship as a titular category for understanding the eternal being (*ousia*) of the Son and the consequences for humanity of the eternal becoming human. Upon this foundational understanding, Athanasius interpreted any language about Jesus becoming Lord as a metaphor to communicate the redemption of humanity and the restoration of the divine image of humanity that had been lost in Adam.²³ Thus, for Athanasius, the theological concept of Jesus' eternal lordship was a crucial truth that the church had to confess in order to preserve orthodoxy, especially the doctrine of "same substance" that the bishops under Constantine had crystalized at Nicaea.²⁴

²¹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. A. Robertson in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ed. Archibald Robertson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 65.

²² Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, 65, 66.

²³ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 330, 355. Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 34-36. For the common use of human characteristics, attributes, and offices as metaphors for the Divine in early Christianity, see also the contemporary of Athanasius, Ephrem the Syrian, *Select Poems*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz, in *Eastern Christian Texts Vol. 2*, ed. in chief Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 16- 27.

²⁴ Gwynn, *Athanasius*, 43.

This concern for the preservation of orthodoxy through the proclamation of Jesus' eternal lordship provided Athanasius with the theological impetus to combat the perceived heresy of Constantius II. This particular conflict between the head of the empire and a theologian who proclaimed that the emperor was threatening the orthodoxy that the church had confirmed at Nicaea provides me with an opportunity to examine the evolving relationship of the Christian church and the empire that was hastening its institutionalization. From the inception of his career as bishop of Alexandria on June 8, 328 CE, Athanasius found himself in a conflict over his episcopal authority. His rhetoric claimed that the followers of Arius were engaged in a conspiratorial plot against him to undermine the authority of Nicene orthodoxy.²⁵ However, the political realities of this situation were more complicated than Athanasius made them appear in his writings with his claims of a vast Arian conspiracy against him and, later, other orthodox bishops.²⁶ Nevertheless, the politicization of this conflict should not cause us to view Athanasius' theological concerns as mere political tools.²⁷ For Athanasius, the emperor's adoption of a Christological position opposite that of Nicaea was a threat to the orthodoxy of the church and even had soteriological consequences for humanity.²⁸ In response to this threat, Athanasius declared his belief in the essential separation of the mission of the church and the authority of the empire.²⁹

Following this declaration that the emperor was leading the Arian sect, which Athanasius believed to be threatening to the orthodoxy of the church and consequently the promise of

²⁵ See Gwynn, *Athanasius*, 25-30. Athanasius believed any undermining of the fullness of Jesus' divinity would limit humanity's ability to participate salvifically in the divinity of Christ.

²⁶ Gwynn, *Athanasius*, 46.

²⁷ David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 245, 246.

²⁸ Gwynn, *The Eusebians*, 196-201.

²⁹ Gwynn, *Athanasius*, 47-49.

salvation for Christians, Athanasius argued that the mission of the church and that of the empire were not necessarily in union to achieve God's kingdom upon the earth. When the emperor did not uphold what the church had defined as sound doctrine, it was the role of the bishop to declare that Christians had to follow their only true king, Jesus, and depart from the dangerous course of the emperor's heresy. In his approval of a letter from Ossius,³⁰ the bishop of Cordova, Athanasius went so far as to declare that the church and the empire should become separated and that the bishops and the emperor should rule separately with respect to their appropriate spheres.³¹ Here, the importance of Athanasius' prioritization of Jesus' cosmological lordship becomes clear. When a theologian emphasizes the temporal distinction of Jesus' kingship, as Eusebius of Caesarea did with the triumph of Constantine, it becomes easy to conflate the mission and success of the church with that of the empire and other political institutions at the expense of the church's salvific teachings. As Athanasius noted, while Constantius II was the temporal lord over the citizens of the Roman empire, the bishops and the church had another cosmological ruler over them whose kingdom and authority, though not yet visible on the earth, was of higher importance.³² With the eternal kingship of Jesus at the center of his Christology, Athanasius was able in his later writings to denote the risk that Eusebius' theology of a unified church and the empire held for the Orthodox faith and for its teachings.

This contrast in Eusebius' and Athanasius' understandings of Jesus' lordship over the earth reveals the diversity of thought that existed within early imperial Christianity. Dispelling the popular image of the nascent Nicene church as a monolithic entity in both thought and

³⁰ Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum*, trans. A. Robertson, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ed. Archibald Robertson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 280, 281.

³¹ Augustine, also, in his later thought, as displayed in *De Civitate Dei (The City of God)*, argued for a divine separation in the purposes of the church and the Roman empire.

³² *Ibid.*

motivation, the works of these two Christian authors reveal that there existed within Orthodox Christianity significant divisions over the relationship of the church and the empire and over the extent of Jesus' present lordship over the earth. The clear divisions that existed in the thoughts of these two paramount theologians within early Nicene Christianity confirm that the Orthodox church during the fourth century was a complex community wrestling within itself over how to understand the profound transformation that had occurred in its relationship with the empire and what that alteration could tell them about their Lord's ordering of the present age before his return.

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