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# Arius as a Figure in Church History

Kendall Davis



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Church history, much like any other kind of history, is an exercise in meaning-making and identity creation. As Anglican theologian, Rowan Williams, writes regarding Church history, “We begin with a sense of identity that is in some way fragile or questionable, and we embark on the enterprise of history to make it clearer and more secure. In the process, of

course, definitions may change a good deal, but the aim is to emerge with some fuller sense of who we are.”<sup>1</sup> This is quite obviously true when we tell stories about the heroes of the faith: Irenaeus, Martin Luther, C. F. W. Walther, and so on, but it is no less true when we tell stories about the villains of the faith, that is, heretics. The church’s identity and doctrine have been shaped in no small part due to her reaction to heretics. This is why heretics make up a significant part of the way Christians retell their own history, whether at an academic or popular level. Therefore, anyone who participates in retelling the story of the church does well to pay attention even to how they tell the story of heretics to ensure that the telling of these stories serves the church.

No figure is reckoned to be *the* quintessential and paradigmatic arch-heretic quite like Arius of Alexandria. Athanasius himself expresses it this way: “But this one heresy, called the Arian...has now emerged as forerunner of the Antichrist.”<sup>2</sup> Later historians and theologians, such as John Henry Newman writing in the early nineteenth century, have followed Athanasius’ lead and have portrayed “Arianism” as the pinnacle and recapitulation of all the heresies that have come before it.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we see that the story of Arius possesses a symbolic value in church historiography. Arius is not just one heretic among many. He stands for something more significant. He represents the pinnacle of the heretical enterprise itself.

However, the church no longer finds herself in open conflict with those who espouse the theology of Arius, Jehovah’s Witnesses notwithstanding (more on them below). The church does not need to understand Arianism so that it can do what Athanasius did. She is in a different situation. Instead, church historians seek to understand the Arian error because the church rightly wants to guard herself against this heresy and its attendant errors cropping up again. This is why church historians often unwittingly find themselves “projecting on to...[Arianism] whatever theological or ecclesiological tenets currently represent the opposition to a Christian mainstream in which the scholar and interpreter claims to stand.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, theologians of all stripes often find that these ancient heretics have an uncanny similarity to their own opponents. Now, regardless of whether these theologians are correct in their assessments, it certainly makes for a compelling argument

against their opponents. After all, who wants to side with a modern-day Arius? This is another way in which Arius (and other heretics) possess symbolic value for church historians.

This is part of the reason why one finds such a proliferation of different approaches to Arius among church historians. An accurate portrait of Arius as a figure and theologian is notoriously difficult to reconstruct, not merely because the sources are scant and not always trustworthy, but also because, for church historians, this question is not merely an arcane historical question about a long-dead Egyptian presbyter. This question also has symbolic value for the church today as she seeks to remain faithful.

Therefore, this essay does not seek to give another reconstruction of the historical figure of Arius and his theology, although certain points will be made in this regard. Rather, this essay is interested in discussing Arius as a figure in church historiography. To do this, I will discuss in-depth how Arius has been treated in recent historiography and will offer suggestions for how Arius might be approached in a genuinely ecclesial or church-centered historiography as a case study. This essay will seek to show that church historiography is rightly interested in the symbolic significance of Arius and other heretics as theological figures and that, because of this, the church of the present day is best served when she pursues a portrait of Arius and other heretics that is simultaneously *accurate* and *sympathetic*. To be accurate means to present a portrait that is in line with what can be known on the basis of the evidence available; it is to present a reasonable construction based on the available data. To be sympathetic does not mean to make heretics appear likeable or attractive. Rather, it means to treat such figures fairly, to recognize that almost nobody wants to be a heretic. Even heretics believe they are preserving the truth and are typically motivated by that pursuit even if they end up in heresy.

### **Church Historiography**

But what exactly does this essay mean by “church historiography”? Let this definition suffice, “church historiography” refers not merely to history written by those who are Christians nor to history about the church, but to history written in and for the church, that is, history written within the interpretive community of the church and in the service of the church. It does not attempt to be purely neutral or objective. It is an intentionally and unapologetically ideological historiography or, better yet, a theological historiography. This is in many ways at odds with modern western historiography, which prizes neutrality and objectivity. However, church historiography is unbothered by this because the church cannot be neutral when it comes to the telling of her own story.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, church historiography is not the only way to approach the history of the church. For example, biblical scholar Bart Ehrman exemplifies a rather different approach.



*Arius of Alexandria. 1493. Public domain.*

## Davis: Arius as a Figure in Church History

Ehrman presents a picture of early Christianity that consists of a diverse group of perspectives and traditions which are only later consolidated into what we call orthodoxy: “Virtually all forms of modern Christianity...go back to *one* form of Christianity that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the second and third centuries. This one form of Christianity decided what was the ‘correct’ Christian perspective... and... what forms of Christianity would be marginalized, set aside, destroyed.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, some would also tell the story of the Arian controversy in these terms, that it is not a story of the truth of the faith triumphing over heresy, but about power factions and politics. Orthodoxy is written by the victors, they would say.

One certainly could dispute the accuracy of Ehrman’s approach, but the primary problem for church historiography is not the potential inaccuracy of Ehrman’s narrative, but that it proceeds from assumptions that are at odds with the assumptions of church historiography. Now, this is not to say that the assumptions of church historiography are merely arbitrary or are just as good as any other historiographical perspective. This approach to historiography does not consign us to relativism. There are arguments to be had and maybe even minds to be changed. Some people really are right, and others really are wrong. However, we cannot have these arguments from outside of our perspectives, and we should not attempt to do so. Church historiography understands this and proceeds accordingly.

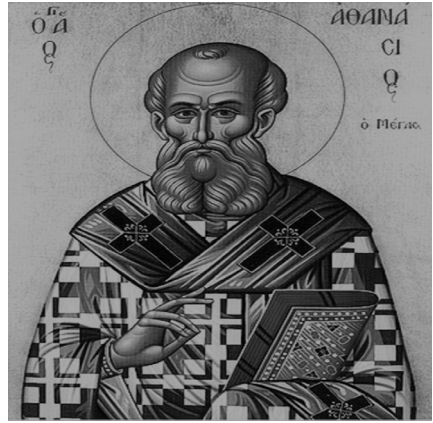
A church historiographer studies the heretics not merely as marginalized theology or as the history of ideas, but as instances of opposition to the truth of the faith with present relevance to the church today who seeks to guard and protect this truth. Church historiographers will seek to be accurate in their assessment even of heretics because they serve the “God of truth” (Isa 65:16). The truth of God has no part in falsehood. To mingle the truth of God with falsehood merely because it is convenient or helps paint the portrait one would like is to forget that the Lord of the church is himself truth (John 14:6) and that the Devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). Church historiographers will seek to be sympathetic in their assessment even of heretics for two reasons: 1) Since unsympathetic portraits tend to present oversimplified portraits driven by the historian’s own agenda, they are quite likely to be inaccurate. Sympathy is helpful in the pursuit of accuracy since it encourages nuance and complexity. Sympathy is not a guarantee of accuracy. There certainly are a number of sympathetic portraits of Arius that are also inaccurate. 2) Sympathetic portraits are more conducive to the critical reflection necessary for the church to avoid the errors of heretics in the future. This will be explored further below.

### ***Methodological Problems in the Study of Arius***

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to give a brief account of the methodological problems inherent in any reconstruction of Arius. These issues are what make it difficult for church historians to give an *accurate* picture of Arius.

Our only certain and complete texts from Arius himself are three short letters written to Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Constantine.<sup>7</sup> We possess potential fragments from Arius’ work, the *Thalia*, in two quotations from Athanasius’ *Orations Against the Arians*. However, it is difficult to determine whether Athanasius is

quoting Arius exactly, paraphrasing Arius, or something else. In any case, the fragments are removed from their original context, which makes it hard to judge how these statements fit into the larger framework of Arius' theology. As Williams points out, "We can never be sure that the theological *priorities* ascribed to Arius by his opponents were his own, even if his *statements* are transmitted correctly."<sup>8</sup> It may well be that Athanasius is picking the most objectionable parts of the *Thalia*, not necessarily the most *representative*. Of course, this does not mean that Athanasius is being reckless or irresponsible. Historian Charles Kannengiesser is right to point out that we should not judge Athanasius for merely adhering to the standard practices of his own time and polemical context.<sup>9</sup> In ancient rhetoric and polemics, exact quotations and polite decorum were not expected the way modern people are accustomed to.



Icon of Athanasius of Alexandria. Public domain.

These difficulties with primary sources lead to further methodological issues. For example, there is little agreement about how trustworthy Athanasius and others are in their treatment of Arius. Williams is quite critical of the reliability of some of the Athanasian quotations<sup>10</sup> while Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh tend to receive Athanasius' statements far less critically in their study of Arius.<sup>11</sup> The result is twofold: not only can historians not agree on what constitutes the core historical data, but they also cannot agree on how to interpret the data. The data requires a great deal of judgement calls and critical evaluations. And while this is indeed true for any historical figure, it is especially true for Arius because, as Kannengiesser writes, "*We reach the essential Arius through Athanasius, and in no other way.*"<sup>12</sup> Our best source for Arius' own thought is a hostile source. Until a copy of Arius' *Thalia* and some of Arius' sermons are discovered in a long-forgotten corner of the Egyptian desert, Athanasius remains our best source for Arius' theology.

Finally, a further difficulty is the complex relationships between various theologians in the Arian controversy. For our purposes, the primary issue is that "Arianism" is in large part a rhetorical invention of Athanasius.<sup>13</sup> The "Arians" were, in reality, a rather diverse group of Anti-Nicenes. It was unlikely many of these figures were influenced by Arius or even agreed with him on much. Of course, this inevitably complicates the matter for church historians, who must distinguish between Arius as the figure who began a theological conflict in Alexandria and the later Arianism which Athanasius and others fought against.

### Portraits of Arius

But how have actual historians overcome these difficulties and reconstructed Arius and his theology? To be sure, there may be as many reconstructions of Arius as there are historians doing the reconstructing. Therefore, this section will give a selective survey of patterns among important attempts to understand Arius as a theological figure in the history of the church.

## Davis: Arius as a Figure in Church History

Many scholars spend a great deal of attention determining Arius' influences and where he fits within the theological divisions of his day. There is a particular focus on whether Arius was more influenced by the more allegorically-minded Alexandrian school or the more literally-minded Antiochene school. How Arius could have been influenced by Alexandria is quite clear considering this is where he served as a presbyter. The potential connection with Antioch is not quite so obvious. In Arius' letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, he calls Eusebius a "fellow-Lucianite," referring to Lucian of Antioch.<sup>14</sup> Many have concluded from this that Arius studied in Antioch under Lucian, but it is far from certain that this is what Arius means.<sup>15</sup> Even still, Newman is adamant that Arius is more influenced by Antioch than Alexandria.<sup>16</sup>

While such a question may sound like another in a long line of arcane fights among patristics scholars, Williams' analysis of Newman's reconstruction shows that even a dispute like this is still relevant for how Arius functions as a symbolic figure in church historiography:

In the appendix to the fourth edition [of Newman's work], Newman made still more of the Antiochene devotion to the "literal and critical interpretation of Scripture," the invariable connection between "heterodoxy and biblical criticism," and the implicit denial of any real doctrine of inspiration of those rejecting allegory. The Alexandrian church is held up, in contrast, as the very exemplar of traditional and revealed religion.... In true Alexandrian (or at least Origenian) style, Newman regards certain exegetical options as moral and spiritual in character and effect. Antioch's exegetical preference is no mere alternative within the spectrum of possible techniques: it is a spiritual deficiency.... *The Arians of the Fourth Century* is, in large part, a tract in defence of what the early Oxford Movement thought of as spiritual religion and spiritual authority.<sup>17</sup>

If Williams is right, then Newman is keen to connect Arius with Antioch because he sees parallels between Antioch and his own theological enemies and between Alexandria and his own Oxford Movement. The implicit move being that, while his enemies are of the spirit of Arius, he is of the spirit of Athanasius and Nicaea, making the correct choice between the two sides quite obvious. Newman's polemic about the past then becomes a polemic about his present. All this is possible because of how highly symbolic Arius is.

Another common feature of the historiography is to emphasize Arius as a cold and exacting logician. Arius' downfall becomes his own philosophical presuppositions. He cared more about his philosophy than his theology, so say several historians.<sup>18</sup> Davis speaks of Arius' "rigorous use of syllogistic reasoning."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Kelly speaks of Arius' "ruthless dialectic" as well as the Arians' "dry rationalism" and "their methodical, literalistic interpretation of Scripture."<sup>20</sup> While there may be some truth in these characterizations, one also detects that they may share some influence from the polemic of Athanasius and others. As Young points out, "Being led astray by philosophy was an all-too present motif in Christian polemic."<sup>21</sup> Thus Athanasius' characterization of Arius as overly philosophical may reflect the rhetorical environment more than a distinctive feature of the theology of Arius. Historians who rely too heavily on this polemical trope may fail to take into account the evidence that we have and instead offer a simpler and more easily digestible portrait of Arius. This is one reason why church historiography does well to pursue a sympathetic portrait of Arius. Unsympathetic portraits are typically oversimplifications. People are usually complex,





Mosaic from Arian baptism in Ravenna, Italy. © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro. CC BY-SA 4.0.

even heretics. Unsympathetic portraits will be both inaccurate and misleading. Their reliance on oversimplification will fail to reveal the true issue.

Yet another strain in the historiography has sought to do just that: present a sympathetic portrait of Arius. It is rare to find Arius championed as a hero, but many historians seem keen to reverse the

demonization that has been done to Arius over the centuries. Some are subtle, such as Young who states, “Arius was not in himself the ‘archetypal heretic,’ nor even much of an enquirer; rather, he was a reactionary, a rather literal-minded conservative who appealed to scripture and tradition on the basis of his faith.”<sup>22</sup> Wiles is equally measured in his final assessment of Arius, “All this is not to say that after all Arius was right, nor is it to accuse Athanasius of illogicality or unspirituality.... It is to suggest that the difference between the two sides is not as absolute or as clear-cut as has traditionally been assumed. Arius was seriously inhibited by the rigidity of the philosophical framework within which he was operating.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the two most significant studies of Arius that seek to take the sympathetic track are Gregg and Groh’s *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* and Williams’ *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. Gregg and Groh argue that Arius is not the cold and hyper-rationalistic philosopher-turned-theologian of much traditional historiography. Rather, they argue that Arius’ core concern was not philosophy, but soteriology: “Early Arianism is most intelligible when viewed as a scheme of salvation. Soteriological concerns dominate the texts and inform every major aspect of the controversy. At the center of the Arian soteriology was a redeemer; obedient to his Creator’s will, whose life of virtue modeled perfect creaturehood and hence the path of salvation for all Christians.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, Christ as the perfect creature provides a model of growth for human creatures to follow.

In contrast, Williams argues that Gregg and Groh have gone too far in attributing an “exemplarist doctrine of salvation” to Arius. Rather, Williams argues that Arius would likely affirm that the Son is unchanging, but he possesses this immutability by the grace and will of the Father and *not* by nature. Thus, the Son is *in theory* changeable even if he is not so in fact. Thus, for Arius, “it may well be that he was as uneasy with the rhetoric of exaltation and apotheosis as were his critics.”<sup>25</sup> Athanasius, however, presses Arius precisely on these points about the changeability of the Son, not because Arius was actually teaching a form of Adoptionism, which he was accused of, but because Athanasius believes “that Arius’ solution...leads him inexorably toward the position he most wants to avoid—in this instance, the Christological doctrines associated with Paul of Samosata,”<sup>26</sup> that is, Adoptionism. Even if one did not agree with Williams on these points, one should see that his study of Arius represents one of the most careful and comprehensive accounts of Arius and his theology in recent decades. He is intentional about not making Arius out to be a hero or a martyr at the

## Davis: Arius as a Figure in Church History

hands of power-hungry bishops<sup>27</sup> and is just as willing to criticize Arius as he is to defend him against the oversimplifications of modern scholarship. The portrait that emerges is of a complex and sympathetic figure, both theologically and philosophically:

Isolation<sup>28</sup> is a word that recurs in discussing Arius, both in his career and in his thinking; and we constantly find a paradoxical mixture of the reactionary and the radical in this. In Alexandria he represented not only a conservative theology, but also a conservative understanding of his presbyteral role *vis-à-vis* the bishop.... In philosophy, he is ahead of his time: he recognizes the mythological and materialist elements in a loosely Middle Platonist account of God's relation to the world and the world's participation in God, and presses the logic of God's transcendence and ineffability to a consistent conclusion.... In many ways—and here is a still stranger paradox—his apophaticism foreshadows the concerns of *Nicene* theology later in the fourth century, the insights of the Cappadocians, or even Augustine. If he had his problems with the Lucianists, he would have found the “neo-Arians” of later decades still less sympathetic.<sup>28</sup>

This is an Arius that is clearly a product of his particular time and context and whose theological thinking is robust even though it is heretical. He is not merely the quintessential arch-heretic and chief enemy of the church. He is not reduced to an abstraction of a particular idea about the Trinity or Christology. However, this does not mean that Arius has no further relevance for the church's telling of her own story. Williams explores modern parallels for the Arian controversy in the German Church Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) where German churches struggled to respond to the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>29</sup> The general contours of Williams' historiographical approach identified here should be the model for church historiography of Arius and other heretics, namely with respect to his concern to produce an *accurate* and *sympathetic* portrait that nevertheless serves a larger symbolic function for the church's reflection on her teaching and life.

### **Church Historiography and Arius**

Church historiography will care about Arius' theology not merely as an instance of fourth century religious thought or as an instance of social and political dynamics in the late Roman Empire, although it is certainly both of these. Rather, church historiography cares about Arius' theology precisely as a heresy. The church has regarded and continues to regard Arius and his teachings as heretical and has an interest in avoiding them. Thus, for church historiography, one of the purposes of the study of Arius is to help the church understand Arius' errors so that she can avoid them. When she does this, she will inevitably and rightly make generalizations from the particular situation of the fourth century in order to identify significant similarities with the present.

However, at this point, some would object that generalizing heresies from their particulars is both unproductive and irresponsible. They would argue that looking for modern-day Arians is not only a waste of time but also destructive. This objection should be taken seriously. After all, while Jehovah's Witnesses certainly have much in common with Arius, namely their denial of the divinity of Jesus,<sup>30</sup> one imagines that they would be befuddled by his Middle Platonism and Origenistic exegesis. Perhaps it is inaccurate to regard Jehovah's Witnesses as modern-day Arians. After all, Arius and Jehovah's Witnesses do not quite believe the same things. Or maybe the differences between Jehovah's Witnesses and Arius are not substantial enough to prevent church historiographers from rightly using the



label. In any case, it is a fair question.

Pete Enns is a progressive biblical scholar and one who finds such generalizations to be “utterly ridiculous and irresponsible.”<sup>31</sup> Enns is routinely accused of being a Marcionite for his position on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In his own words, Enns believes that “the New Testament does not share the tribal, insider-outsider, rhetoric of a *significant portion* of the Old Testament.” However, Enns believes that to be a Marcionite “means adhering to the teachings of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century heretic Marcion, who saw in the Bible two different Gods: the wrathful God of the Old Testament and the happy gracious God of the New.”<sup>32</sup> Enns does not adhere to the precise teaching of Marcion on this point. Therefore, in his estimation, calling him a Marcionite is simply incorrect.

Regardless of whether or not we think Enns fits the label of “Marcionite,” his frustration is understandable. In his own experience, “the name-calling is simply a way of shutting down discussion, no different from similar debate moves like, ‘That sounds like something Hitler would say,’ or ‘That sounds just like the snake in the Garden of Eden’.... It is a sub-Christian, point-scoring, debate tactic that does nothing but perpetuates tribal thinking, animosity, and misunderstanding.”<sup>33</sup> Enns is right to reject superficial name-calling as a debate tactic. When such strategies are used to end conversations, they are unhelpful. Thus, to be clear, when I advocate for church historiography to treat Arius and other heretics symbolically, I am not advocating for the kind of rhetorical tactics Enns derides here. In fact, I would hope that a sympathetic and nuanced reading of heretics would result in an equally nuanced and sympathetic reading of modern theologians (even if they are modern heretics!).

I do believe that Enns is too quick to reject the possibility of someone rightly being called a heretic in the vein of Marcion. The church is right to seek parallels between ancient heretics and modern teachers. Enns’ claim that one has to believe exactly the same things as a heretic to be guilty of his error sets a rather high bar for any would-be false teacher. After all, the intervening centuries mean that our situation is theologically, philosophically, and socially quite different from Marcion’s. Thus, it will be functionally impossible for anyone to take an *identical* position as him. Unsurprisingly, Enns admits that he has never actually met anyone whom he believes actually qualifies as a Marcionite.<sup>34</sup> However, Enns has made a historiographical error. He is not allowing for the legitimacy of historical generalizations. If historian John Lewis Gaddis is right that “without generalization historians would have nothing whatever to say,”<sup>35</sup> then Enns’ objection artificially prevents what is a standard historical move. Inevitably, to do history is to generalize. To be sure, any generalizations are “limited, not universal, generalizations.”<sup>36</sup> They do not apply to any and all situations. However, these generalizations will have applicability outside of their immediate context. As Gaddis writes, “My generalization about Stalin might thus provide some basis for making comparisons to other dictatorships, or to democracies, or to still other forms of government.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, church historiography is right to treat Arius and “Arianism” as generalizable or as this essay has discussed, symbolic, that is, it is possible and justifiable to identify figures, teachings, and so on in our contemporary context as somehow “Arian.” To say that a modern person is an “Arian” is not necessarily to say that they believe all the same things as Arius.

## Davis: Arius as a Figure in Church History

After all, even most “Arians” in the ancient world did not believe the exact same things as Arius. It is to say that where it counts, modern figures are making a fundamentally similar error as Arius. We should be careful not to make such generalizations hastily or to use them to shut down conversations and ignore points of genuine difference. However, the practice is not totally objectionable. The church does well to avoid the errors of previous eras, even if such errors do not look *exactly* the same. For example, I think that Enns is in error regardless of whether or not his error qualifies as Marcionism. I think the church does well to avoid his error just as she avoided Marcionism. Perhaps, if we would like to be more precise, we might say that Enns is making a *similar* error to Marcion or that groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses are making *similar* errors to Arius. In any case, this is what responsible church historians mean when they describe a modern person as a Marcionite or an Arian.

However, treating Arius as a symbolic figure does not mean that we are free to craft our portrait of him however we like. In fact, any attempt at responsible generalization is reliant upon a portrait that is true to life. After all, if portraits are not true to life, it is typically because they have been fashioned more by whims and proclivities than reality. This is why church historiography ought to be concerned with *accuracy*. Arius is a real historical figure. He was a real person not unlike any of the rest of us. The controversy he started was in response to his actual ideas, whatever they were. Thus, for church historiography, we serve the interests of the church best when we are as historically accurate as we can be given the limitations. The church is not served well when our portrait of Arius is molded and shaped to fit our opponents irrespective of what Arius actually thought and taught. That is to put the cart before the horse. After all, one’s opponents can both be wrong and also not be Arians.

Accordingly, it is in the interests of church historiography to provide a *sympathetic* portrait of Arius and other heretics. To be sympathetic does not mean providing an attractive portrait. We have no interest in inspiring future generations of Arians. Rather, it means recognizing that no one, not even Arius, became a heretic on purpose. Arius thought he was defending the truth from error. We can recognize this while still affirming that Arius was indeed a heretic. Furthermore, demonizing Arius can have the unintended effect of making his error seem not only wrong; but also inconceivable. It can seem that only an exceptionally foolish or wicked person could fall for such an error. Most people do not consider themselves exceptionally foolish or wicked. Thus, most people do not believe that they should be concerned about falling into such an error. Now, a sympathetic portrait of Arius will not shy away from pointing out foolishness and wickedness in Arius. The point is not to turn Arius into a misunderstood martyr. We have no interest in rehabilitating Arius. Arius is a heretic. There is no getting around that fact for church historiography. Rather, a sympathetic portrait seeks to make clear the fact we are not necessarily immune to the errors of Arius. We too must be on our guard from falling into the same kind of errors. One observes this same strategy used in many of the best spiritual writers.<sup>38</sup> Sin is not typically obviously evil to us. Rather, sin so often looks to be good. This is one of the factors that makes sin so destructive and impossible to avoid. Accordingly, heresy and error are also pernicious. Heretics generally do not think that they are heretics. They will identify more with Athanasius than Arius. Arius himself thought he was defending the truth of scripture from the errors of Alexander and Athanasius. While Athanasius could point to Arius’ condemnation at Nicaea, Arius could

point to Athanasius' condemnation at other councils. Things are not so simple when one is in the middle of them. Therefore, a sympathetic portrait is more helpful than a demonizing portrait, since it encourages the tough critical reflection that is required for the church to avoid these errors. We avoid false teaching through critical self-examination, guided by the Holy Spirit. Responsible church historiography can help us do this.

Now, at this point, some may object that Athanasius certainly did not give a sympathetic portrait of Arius. Athanasius portrays Arius in the worst possible light, as a blasphemer of the holy truth of God. Surely, they might say, church historiography should follow the lead of such a foundational figure as Athanasius. However, church historiography is not necessarily committed to the historical judgments of the fathers or their tactics. Just because Athanasius portrays Arius rather unsympathetically does not mean that we must do likewise. We must recognize that Athanasius was in a different rhetorical situation. He needed to convince a church who found Arius' teaching rather appealing that it was actually a horrible error. He was writing at a time when Arius was not widely considered to be a heretic. This is not true of our situation. If anything, in our situation, people are more likely to demonize Arius than canonize him. Of course, if we found ourselves in the opposite situation, it may then be useful to dust off some of Athanasius' rhetoric. Church historiography is done in the service of the church; therefore, it must be sensitive and responsive to the situation that the church finds herself in. To be clear, this essay has not advocated for sympathetic portraits of figures like Arius because the Church has some kind of universal obligation to be nice to heretics. There is none. The argument has been that sympathetic portraits serve the church of the present-day well.

This essay has left many questions unanswered. What exactly is the most accurate way to understand Arius based on the historical data available to us? How do we best generalize the error of Arius, and where do we find parallels in our own day? These are important questions to answer, especially since Arius remains a persistent character in the telling of the doctrinal history of the church, even at the popular level. The inclusion of Arius in such settings acknowledges that an understanding of him is still important for Christians today. This essay has sought to address why this might be so and how church historians ought to present Arius and other heretics to the church today. We must remember that church history is not just a recounting of names and dates in the church's past. Church history is an activity of meaning-making and identity creation. Heretics and other false teachers serve key roles in this process which can easily be made less effective through inaccuracy and demonization. Instead, the church is best served when the stories she tells about heretics and other false teachers are both accurate and sympathetic. If this is true of Arius, then it is also likely true of other heretics and false teachers throughout the ages.

## Endnotes

- 1 Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 23.
- 2 Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius, The Early Church Fathers*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 89.
- 3 John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 109–110.
- 4 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 2.
- 5 For a more theoretical and philosophical engagement with these ideas see Seth Heringer, *Uniting History and Theology: A Theological Critique of Historical Method*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2018).
- 6 Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.
- 7 An English translation of these letters can be found in William G. Rusch ed. and trans. *The Trinitarian Controversy. Sources of Early Christian Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).
- 8 Williams, *Arius*, 95.
- 9 Charles Kannengiesser, “Arius and the Arians,” in *Arius and Athanasius: Two Alexandrian Theologians*, (Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), 460.
- 10 Williams, *Arius*, 99.
- 11 Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
- 12 Kannengiesser, “Arius and the Arians,” 460.
- 13 Williams, *Arius*, 247.
- 14 See Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 30.
- 15 See Williams, *Arius*, 30–31 for a discussion on this.
- 16 Newman, *Arians of the Fourth Century*, 16.
- 17 Williams, *Arius*, 4–5.
- 18 See Frances M. Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*. 2 nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 44–45.
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- 20 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. 2 nd ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 229–30.
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- 22 Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, 48.
- 23 Maurice Wiles, “In Defence of Arius,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 13, no. 2 (1962): 347.
- 24 Gregg and Groh, *Early Arianism*, x.
- 25 Williams, *Arius*, 113.
- 26 Williams, *Arius*, 115.
- 27 See Williams, *Arius*, 2.
- 28 Williams, *Arius*, 233.
- 29 Williams, *Arius*, 237.
- 30 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, “Is Jesus Almighty God?” Jehovah’s Witnesses. <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/is-jesus-almighty/>
- 31 Pete Enns, “Can We Cool it with the Whole Marcionite Accusation Thing? Thanks,” Pete Enns, <https://peteens.com/obviously-not-marcionite-sheesh/>
- 32 Enns, “Can We Cool it?”
- 33 Enns, “Can We Cool it?”
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- 35 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2002), 62.
- 36 Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 63.
- 37 Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 63–64.
- 38 For example, C. S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*, rev. ed., (London: Harper One, 2009); and *The Screwtape Letters*, reprint ed., (London: Harper One, 2009).