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William Whiston: No Longer an Arian

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This article contends that William Whiston (1667–1752) has been misidentified as an Arian for more than three hundred years. Though Whiston was labelled an Arian by his theological opponents, and early in his career naively accepted the Arian label for his own Christological beliefs, he consistently demarcated his own beliefs from those of Arius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Furthermore, Whiston agreed with the Council of Nicaea's decision to rule Arius' understanding of the relationship of the Son to the Father out of bounds. Thus, William Whiston should no longer be called an Arian.

In his chapter 'Why the third fell out: Trinitarian dissent', Thomas C. Pfizenmaier identifies William Whiston as an Arian:

The classical definition of Arianism involved two *loci*. Speaking of the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, Arius had held, 'that there was a time when he was not' (ὁτι ήν ποτε ουκ ήν) and that, while part of the *spiritual* creation, the Son was nevertheless a creature (κτίσμα) and made out of nothing (ἑξ ὁυκ ὁντων), and thus not part of the Deity. According to these criteria, there can be no doubt that Whiston was an Arian.

William Whiston truly believed that Arianism represented the teaching of the early church, and that Athanasius had corrupted that teaching at the Council of Nicaea. Whiston was an avowed and public Arian.[1]

NPNF = *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; SC = Sources Chrétiennes

I am grateful to Karl Shuve and Adrian Weimer for their critique of an early draft of this article, and to this JOURNAL's anonymous reviewer for suggestions that further enhanced my work.

[1] Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, 'Why the third fell out: Trinitarian dissent', in Robert D. Cornwall and William Gibson (eds), *Religion, politics, and dissent, 1660–1832: essays in honour of James E. Bradley*, Aldershot–Vermont 2010, 17–33 at pp. 18, 21. In 1710 Whiston was expelled from his position as Isaac Newton's hand-picked successor in the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge for his heretical beliefs. For narratives

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Most scholars would not raise an eyebrow over Pfizenmaier's assessment of William Whiston's Arianism.[2] For example, Eamon Duffy states that 'To Whiston, rather than to Samuel Clarke, belongs the dubious credit of having revived the Arian heresy in England.'[3] Richard Westfall writes about Whiston and Clarke that 'Before long, both became notorious as the two leading Arians in England, or at least the two leading known Arians.' Furthermore, Whiston's 'Arianism appears virtually identical to Newton's'.[4] Steven Snobelen's assessment is more nuanced than that of Pfizenmaier, Duffy or Westfall. None the less, he concludes that 'The generally Arian Christology that Whiston arrived at, which saw the Father as the only true God and held that the Son was subordinate to the Father, is essentially the same as that held by Newton.'[5]

The purpose of this article, however, is indeed to 'raise an eyebrow' in relation to Whiston's so-called Arianism. It will be demonstrated that Whiston consistently and repeatedly distanced himself from Arius of Alexandria and that he referred to his own Christological beliefs with the term 'Eusebian' rather than 'Arian'. After more than three hundred years, therefore, William Whiston should no longer be called an Arian.

What is an Arian?

There has been a significant methodological shift among patristic scholars, which was prefigured by Whiston himself, in relation to the definition of 'Arianism'. The days when Athanasius' accounts of fourth-century

of what came to be called 'Whiston's affair' see Eamon Duffy, '"Whiston's affair": the trials of a Primitive Christian, 1709–1714', this JOURNAL xxvii (1976), 129–50; Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal heresy: Arianism through the centuries*, Oxford 1996, repr. 2004, 93–110; Stephen David Snobelen, 'William Whiston, Isaac Newton and the crisis of publicity', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* xxxv (2004), 573–603 at pp. 578–86; and Paul R. Gilliam III, 'William Whiston: was he or wasn't he?', *Baptist History and Heritage* xlvii (2012), 19–33 at pp. 20–4.

[2] It is worth mentioning here that in his article Pfizenmaier's goal is to separate the Christology of Newton and Clarke from that of Whiston. Pfizenmaier argues that Newton and Clarke were not Arians; Whiston, however, was one. Thus, according to Pfizenmaier, Whiston became estranged from Newton and Clarke because Newton and Clarke 'had become convinced that Whiston had become an Arian and therefore a heretic, while they had not': 'Why the third fell out', 30. This article will demonstrate that Whiston was not an Arian either. In light of this, it seems that Stephen Snobelen's suggestion that the reason for the break between Newton and Whiston was due to a 'crisis of publicity' is the most cogent suggestion in print.

[3] Duffy, '"Whiston's affair"', 129.

[4] Richard S. Westfall, *Never at rest: a biography of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge 1980, repr. 1990, 649, 650.

[5] Snobelen, 'William Whiston, Isaac Newton', 581.

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Christological debates were taken at face value are in the past. Rather than naive trust, it is now commonplace to find Athanasius' character on trial. In his *The early episcopal career of Athanasius of Alexandria*, Duane Arnold demonstrates this fundamental shift. He compares scholarly views of Athanasius among scholars of the modern era with those of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century scholars, such as J. A. Moehler, John Henry Newman, John Mason Neale and Henry Melvill Gwatkin, held a positive (sometimes even glowing) view of Athanasius. Scholars of the more modern era such as Otto Seeck, Eduard Schwartz and Hans-George Opitz held a negative (sometimes even despairing) view of Athanasius' character.[6] The wake left by earlier scholars over Athanasius' character continues to be felt today. Arnold himself concludes that 'it must be admitted that the more vituperative critics of Athanasius have failed to provide clear and convincing evidence for a revisionist portrait of the bishop of Alexandria'.[7] In contrast, Timothy Barnes concludes that although Athanasius 'cuts an impressive historical figure … he could not have cut such an impressive figure had he not been conspicuously lacking in the Christian virtues of meekness and humility'.[8]

While Barnes's statements represent an extreme position, more recent Athanasian scholarship falls more in line with him than with Arnold. For example, Rowan Williams concludes that Arianism 'as a coherent system, founded by a single great figure and sustained by his disciples, is a fantasy – more exactly, a fantasy based on the polemic of Nicene writers, above all Athanasius'.[9] David Gwynn credits Athanasius with sincerity in relation to his beliefs about his theological opponents. However, Athanasius' presentation of his enemies 'is a rhetorical device … and the polarization that he constructs cannot be assumed to represent the actual teachings of the men upon whom it is imposed'.[10]

Even so, Arnold's treatment of scholarly views of Athanasius is helpful. He is misguided, however, when he states that the charge of forgery was first made against Athanasius by Otto Seeck in 1896.[11] In 1711, almost

[6] Duane Wade-Hampton Arnold, *The early episcopal career of Athanasius of Alexandria*, Notre Dame–London 1991, 9–23.

[7] Ibid. 99.

[8] Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: theology and politics in the Constantinian empire*, Cambridge–London 1993, 1. In an earlier work Barnes wrote that 'Athanasius possessed a power independent of the emperor which he built up and perpetuated by violence … Like a modern gangster, he evoked widespread mistrust, proclaimed total innocence – and usually succeeded in evading conviction of specific charges': *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge–London 1981, 230.

[9] Rowan Williams, *Arius: heresy & tradition*, rev. edn, Grand Rapids–Cambridge 2002, 82.

[10] David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: the polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the construction of the 'Arian Controversy'*, Oxford 2007, 245.

[11] Arnold, *The early episcopal career of Athanasius of Alexandria*, 11.

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two centuries before Seeck, Whiston put forth seventeen 'Suspicions concerning Athanasius', in the first volume of his *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*. In suspicion seventeen Whiston says that

> *Athanasius* relates so many Stories that are almost incredible; and produces so many pretended Letters and Monuments which are wholly unsupported by any other Original Testimonies; and sometimes but ill agree with Chronology, that there is the greatest Reason in the World to suspect many of them to be direct *Forgeries*.[12]

A year later, in 1712, Whiston removed the word 'suspicion' in his *Athanasius convicted of forgery*.[13] Indeed, Whiston's own writings concerning the fourth century prefigured the now commonplace understanding that Athanasius' writings should be read with a cautious eye.

Although subsequent scholarship has proved Whiston erroneous on significant issues such as the authenticity of the Ignatian long recension as well as the *Apostolic constitutions*, in other areas of fourth-century scholarship he was well ahead of this time.[14] In addition to Whiston's concern to read Athanasius critically, modern scholarship also concurs with Whiston's call for more precise terminology in relation to non-Nicene Christologies. Both Whiston and modern scholars agree that all non-Nicene Christologies should not be lumped together into one group called 'Arian'. Setting aside

[12] William Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, London 1711–12, i, historical preface at p. cxxvii.

[13] Idem, *Athanasius convicted of forgery in a letter to Mr. Thirlby of Jesus-College Cambridge*, London 1712.

[14] Whiston contended for the opposite of the modern scholarly consensus. He was convinced that the Ignatian long recension was authentic and that what modern scholars refer to as the Ignatian middle recension was an abbreviation composed '*most probably about the Middle of the Fourth Century of the Church*': *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i.1. Scholarship since the monumental works of Theodor Zahn and J. B. Lightfoot has proved Whiston wrong concerning the authenticity of the Ignatian long recension: Theodor Zahn, *Ignatius von Antiochien*, Gotha 1873; J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp*, 2nd edn, London–New York 1889. However, two important observations must be made. Firstly, that the only textual evidence of the Ignatian middle recension available to Whiston was the Greek Medicean manuscript and a Latin translation. If Whiston had possessed the amount of evidence that is now in existence, he may have come to more satisfactory conclusions. Secondly that, none the less, Whiston was absolutely correct that there are later fourth-century concerns reflected in the Medicean manuscript of the Ignatian middle recension: Paul R. Gilliam III, 'Ignatius of Antioch and the Arian Controversy', unpubl. PhD diss. Edinburgh 2011, 14–55. In relation to the *Apostolic constitutions*, Whiston erroneously concluded that Jesus descended from heaven after his initial ascension to deliver these constitutions to the eleven Apostles gathered in the upper room where Passover was celebrated: *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, iii. 10–11. Modern scholarship places the *Apostolic constitutions* in the fourth century along with the Ignatian long recension, and suggests that the two documents were forged by the same hand. See, for example, Marcel Metzger, *Les Constitutions apostoliques*, SC cccxx, cccxxix, cccxxxvi, Paris 1985.

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for the moment the need for more precision, Sara Parvis, for example, is illustrative in relation to modern scholarship and the origin of the term 'Arian'. With a similar understanding to those of Williams and Gwynn, in her *Marcellus of Ancyra and the lost years of the Arian Controversy, 325–345*, she writes that

> After Marcellus and Athanasius spent their year together in Rome, however, a new animal emerges in the writings of both: the full-blown Arian heresy, modelled on the constructs of the old heresiologies, with its diabolical initiative, its roots in previous heresies or philosophies, and its single male heresiarch with his malignant followers, who propagate theological perversions with great vigour, persecute the orthodox, and, most important of all, have been clearly condemned by the Church.[15]

In the words of R. P. C. Hanson, 'It might be said that at the Council of Serdica in 343 one half of the Church accused the other of being "Arian", while in its turn that half accused the other of being "Sabellian". But these were wild unsubstantiated pieces of propaganda.'[16] If Hanson is correct that the term 'Arian' was 'wild unsubstantiated … propaganda' in its original historical context, then it is likely that the term was used in the same manner within the historical contexts of the Trinitarian debates of Whiston's day.[17]

Thus, if Whiston as well as modern scholars are correct that Athanasius was wrong to label all non-Nicenes with the pejorative term 'Arian', and that more precision is needed when discussing non-Nicene Christologies, what then is an 'Arian'?[18] I would suggest, in a similar manner to

[15] Sara Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra and the lost years of the Arian Controversy, 325–345*, Oxford 2006, 181.

[16] R. P. C. Hanson, *The search for the Christian doctrine of God: the Arian Controversy, 318–381* (1988), Grand Rapids, MI 2005, p. xvii. In a recent article, Matthew R. Crawford summarises that scholarly consensus well: 'As scholarship on the fourth-century "Arian" conflict continues to grow, one feature of the period that is becoming increasingly clear is the diversity that existed on both sides. The terms "Arian" and "Nicene" have long since been shown to be insufficient descriptors for the varied figures who made up the opposing sides of this conflict': 'On the diversity and influence of the Eusebian alliance: the case of Theodore of Heraclea', this JOURNAL lxiv (2013), 227–57 at p. 227.

[17] For the wider historical context of the Trinitarian controversies of Whiston's day see Roger D. Lund (ed.), *The margins of orthodoxy: heterodox writing and cultural response, 1660–1750* (1995), Cambridge 2006; Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable hatred: tolerance and intolerance in England, 1500–1700*, Manchester–New York 2006; and Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery unveiled: the crisis of the Trinity in early modern England*, Oxford–New York 2012.

[18] As is well known among patristic scholars, later in his career Athanasius differentiated between those who disagreed with the Nicene Council as a whole and those who disagreed only with the term *homoousios*. Those such as Basil of Ancyra, who preferred the term *homoiousios*, were not be treated as enemies and called 'Ariomaniacs'. Rather,

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Pfizenmaier,[19] that the term Arian should be restricted to those persons and groups, past and present, who fundamentally agree with what Arius himself taught: that there was a time when the Son was not, and that the Son is not *homoousios* with the Father.[20] Whiston explicitly rejected the first Arian teaching. In relation to the second, he was able to accept *homoousios*, even if with reservation, *via* the interpretation of *homoousios* put forth by Eusebius of Caesarea.[21] In this strict sense, Whiston should no longer be called an Arian, as his own writings demonstrate.[22]

William Whiston and Arius of Alexandria

Upon his death in 1692, Robert Boyle endowed a lectureship with the purpose of defending Christianity against its critics.[23] In 1707 William Whiston delivered the Boyle lectures under the title *The accomplishment of Scripture prophecies*.[24] Shortly afterwards he was asked 'by a Friend or two' to propose a method for the study of divinity in order to bring about unity among Christians and 'the Restoration of the Primitive Faith and Practice'.[25] Since Whiston now had a little time on his hands, he obliged. It could be said then that it was his desire to assist his friends that led to his troubles, as he was being asked to put in print what previously he had only expressed in conversation. Whiston describes his method of

Athanasius says, 'we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers, who mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word': *De synodis* 41 (trans. *NPNF* ii.4).

[19] Pfizenmaier draws his own definition from William G. Rusch (ed.), *The Trinitarian controversy*, Philadelphia 1980, 17.

[20] In his *Thalia*, preserved in Athanasius' *Orations against the Arians* 1.5–6 and *On the councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 15, Arius says that 'We worship him as eternal because of him who was born in the order of time (*en chronois*). The one without beginning established the Son as the beginning of all creatures … For he [the Son] is not equal to God, nor yet is he of the same substance (*homoousios*)' (trans. from Williams, *Arius*, 102). In a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, preserved in Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical history* 1.4 as well as in Epiphanius' *Refutation of all heresies* 69.6, Arius says that before the Son 'was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, He was not' (trans. of Theodoret's version, *NPNF* ii.3).

[21] Even Athanasius gave credence to Eusebius' interpretation of *homoousios: De decretis* 3; *Ad Afros* 6. For an ancient explicit defence of Eusebius of Caesarea as Nicene and not Arian see Socrates, *Ecclesiastical history* 2.21.

[22] Whiston's understanding of the Son as a creature, and thus the ἐξ ὐκ ὀντων, will be examined at 763–4 below.

[23] For the developing attitudes toward the Bible and Christianity that inspired Boyle to endow his lectureship see Christopher Hill, 'Freethinking and libertinism: the legacy of the English Revolution', in Lund, *The margins of orthodoxy*, 54–70 at pp. 54–63.

[24] For a discussion of the background to Whiston's Boyle lectures see James E. Force, *William Whiston: honest Newtonian*, Cambridge 1985, 65–77.

[25] Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i, historical preface at p. ii.

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research for this project. Like others before him, such as Paul Best (1590–1657) and John Biddle (1616–62), Whiston suspected that the doctrine of the Trinity upheld by the established Church was not in accord with that of the Christian writers of the first two centuries.[26] However, he needed to examine his supposition closely 'that so afterwards I might either go on with Assurance, if I should find my former Opinion fully confirm'd; or else might meddle no farther'.[27] Therefore, Whiston 'ran over, on purpose, the New Testament, as now own'd for Canonical among us, twice' and 'the known Catholick Books and Fragments, till near the conclusion of the second Century'.[28] Herein lies the heart of Whiston's method for achieving unity and restoring primitive Christianity: the primacy of primary texts over 'Modern Writers, and the darling Notions of any Church or Party whatsoever'.[29] Whiston concluded that the 'Testimonies for *Arianism* were vastly superior in *Number, Plainness,* and *Antiquity*, to those which are commonly suppos'd to be for the *Athanasian* Doctrine'.[30]

Here is the early mistake, made by Whiston, which has contributed to him being mistakenly defined as an Arian. Later, as he was waiting for the ruling against his heretical beliefs by the Convocation of Canterbury, he wrote to the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison.[31] In this letter, dated 5 April 1711, copies of which were sent to the archbishop of York, John Sharp, as well as to the Prolocutor of the lower house and others not specified, Whiston acknowledges that

> As to the Imputation of *Arianism*, which I confess I have not been sufficiently careful to avoid, I do declare it never was my Intention to assert the *Arian Heresy*, strictly so called; or to revive the *Heresy of Arius*, and of his peculiar Followers, as it was condemn'd at the Council of Nice. I guarded against this expressly in my *Historical Preface*, p.2. by a particular Declaration, that by that *Arianism* which I speak of, I ever mean the Doctrine of that Part of the Church which was call'd

[26] For a lively discussion of Paul Best and John Biddle see Lim, *Mystery unveiled*, 16–68. Lim argues that while the defenders of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine appealed to mystery, opponents of Trinitarian orthodoxy argued that 'ante-Nicene writers were anti-Nicene' (p. 54). Lim clarifies that by Whiston's day concerns about the Trinity were in the air that he breathed. In other words, it was not novel in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century to question the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity of three co-equal eternal beings.

[27] Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i, historical preface at p. iii.

[28] Ibid. p. iv. [29] Ibid. [30] Ibid. p. vi.

[31] For Whiston's prolonged case before Convocation see again Duffy, '"Whiston's affair"'. On George I's accession in 1714, he pardoned all those accused of heresy under Queen Anne. In Duffy's words, 'The trials of William Whiston had ended' (p. 149).

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Arian in the Fourth Century; and not the doctrine of *Arius* himself only, with a few of his particular Followers.[32]

On the one hand, it is clear that Whiston was ahead of his day. Sounding much like today's patristic scholars, he distinguished between those called Arians and Arius of Alexandria himself. On the other hand, Whiston acknowledged that he had not been quick enough to distance himself from the term 'Arianism', therefore giving the impression that he considered Arius' doctrine most closely to represent that of Jesus and his Apostles.

None the less, close attention to the place in the *Historical preface* to which Whiston is referring shows that Whiston did indeed distinguish between Arius' teachings and those teachings that were called Arian by Nicene proponents:

> In short, I therein plainly own'd that the Original Doctrine in that important Matter was very different from the common Opinion, and was most certainly nearer that of the *Arians*, than of the *Athanasians*, and present Orthodoxy: Tho' I had not then examin'd the Matter so exactly as to know whether the Doctrine of that Part of the Church, which was called *Arian* in the Fourth Century, (for those I always mean by *the Arians*; not *Arius* himself only, with a few of his particular Followers) was *entirely* the same as to this Point, with that deliver'd and believ'd in the first times of the Gospel, or not.[33]

Here, as Whiston reflected on the early stages that led to his discovery that primitive Christianity was fundamentally different from the orthodox Anglicanism of his day, he admitted the need for further study. However, even at this early stage, Whiston stated that by 'Arians' he did not mean Arius himself; rather, he meant that part of the Church that was called Arian in the fourth century.

Although Whiston naively accepted the term 'Arian' for his Christological beliefs, support for Arius of Alexandria's beliefs are to be found nowhere in Whiston's extant writings. Rather, the opposite: William Whiston consistently and regularly condemned the teachings of Arius and agreed with the Council of Nicaea's decision to rule Arius' Christological beliefs out of bounds.

In a footnote attached to his letter to Thomas Tenison, where Whiston states that 'I do declare it never was my Intention to assert the *Arian Heresy*, strictly so called; or to revive the *Heresy of Arius*, and of his peculiar Followers, as it was condemn'd at the Council of Nice', there is a clear dismissal of Arius' understanding of the relationship of the Son to the Father.

[32] See Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i, second appendix to the historical preface at pp. 12–13. For the important footnote attached to this quotation see at pp. 762–4 below.

[33] Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i. historical preface at p. ii.

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Here Whiston refers to '*those particular Novel Doctrines, and the like particular Novel Expressions, of* Arius *himself*' and '*those rash and Novel Assertions and Expressions of* Arius, *which caus'd the Disturbances in the Church at the time, and were condemn'd by the Council of* Nice'.[34] Whiston's treatment of the Council of Nicaea will be dealt with later; for now, it is imperative to note the teachings from Arius with which Whiston takes issue: firstly that 'there was when he [the Son] was not' (ἦν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν); secondly, that 'before he [the Son] was begotten he was not' (πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν); and thirdly that the Son was created 'out of nothing' (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ἦν).[35]

In other words, Whiston disagreed with almost everything of Christological significance that emerges from Arius' extant writings. He had the same problems with Arius' teaching as he had with the Nicene shibboleth, *homoousios*. None of these statements – 'there was when he was not', 'before he was begotten he was not', 'out of nothing', nor *homoousios* – appear in the Scriptures or the earliest Christian writings. Whiston reminds us that he confines himself 'to the much Ancienter and more Authentick Doctrines and *Language* of the Scripture and the most Primitive Writers'.[36]

In this same footnote Whiston deals with the issue of the word 'created' (κτίσις) as it relates to the Son. At the time when he was writing, in 1711, Whiston had not yet come to the conclusion that 'Tis true, in the *Athanasian* Copy of the Anathema's of the Council of *Nice* we are told that this Council condemn'd those that said Christ was *Created*: But … the assertion of that Clause has been fully demonstrated to be no better than a Forgery of *Athanasius*, and it is evident this Council never did condemn that Expression.'[37] At this point he simply states that '… that Council's *Anathema* against the use of the Word (κτίσις), *created*, concerning our Saviour, … seems to have been brought in under the Pretence that the *Arians* us'd it the very same sense of the Son, and of all the Inferior Creatures.'[38] Here Whiston says that the condemnation of the term 'created' in relation to the Son was in order to condemn Arius' opinion that the Son was a creature like all other creatures.[39]

[34] Ibid. i, second appendix to the historical preface, 12.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid. 13 (italics mine).

[37] Idem, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated from the *Athanasian* heresy', in *Three essays*, London 1713, 11.

[38] Idem, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i, second appendix to the historical preface, 13.

[39] Whiston did allow that Arius denied saying that the Son was a creature like all other creatures. However, he appeared to think that Arius' original teaching was that the Son was a creature like all the other creatures. In his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, dated around 320, Arius referred to the Son as the perfect creature of God. Here, however, he says that the Son is not as the other creatures. It is worth noting that this letter was from Arius as well as numerous other supporters of Arius.

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There are two noteworthy observations to be made at this point in relation to Pfizenmaier's definition of Arianism. First, it is true that Whiston believed the Son to be created by God because that proposition 'was most certainly the Ancient and Original Language of the Scripture, and of the first Christians'.[40] However this does not mean, for Whiston, that the Son was created from nothing. Furthermore, for Whiston, the creation of the Son is elevated far above the rest of creation. Indeed, Whiston eventually concluded that the Council of Nicaea in fact issued no anathema against the Son's created status. In other words, the condemnation of the word 'created' was not a part of the condemnation of Arius. Once again, at this point, modern scholars concur with Whiston's conclusion that there was no anathema against the Son as created in the Nicene Creed of 325. J. N. D. Kelly writes that 'The ban on describing the Son as "created (κτιστόν)", though printed by many editors, is probably not authentic, being absent (*inter alia*) from the version of the creed read out at the second session of Chalcedon.'[41]

William Whiston and the Council of Nicaea

Since William Whiston consistently and explicitly differentiated his own Christological views from those of Arius of Alexandria, why then has he been labelled an Arian for the past three hundred years or so, not only by his theological opponents past and present, but also by professionally trained historians? One answer to this question is to be found in his own acknowledged early, and naïve, acceptance of the term 'Arian' for his belief system. However, there is another possible answer: the minimal interaction with Whiston's 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated from the *Athanasian* heresy', which is to be found in Whiston's *Three essays* of 1713. In fact, this essay reveals that Pfizenmaier is simply wrong when he says that 'William Whiston truly believed that Arianism represented the teaching of the early church, and that Athanasius had corrupted that teaching at the Council of Nicaea.' It was not that the council itself had erred. Rather, Whiston argued, that Athanasius had corrupted its teaching after the event. This distinction is important. Whiston had no major qualms with Nicaea. Rather, it was the 'Athanasian' interpretation of Nicaea that caused Whiston great anxiety.

Arius and his coreligionists may have decided it best to alter Arius' original teaching on the Son as a creature as all the other creatures.

[40] Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, i, second appendix to the historical preface, 13.

[41] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian creeds*, 3rd edn, New York 2006, 242. For Kelly's Greek text of the Nicene Creed see pp. 215–16.

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In the fourth volume of his *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, Whiston offers evidence from Christian writings ranging from 'the *Books of the New Testament* … 'till about A. D. 190' for twenty-three articles of faith that he believes characterised earliest Christian belief.[42] In 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', Whiston lists all twenty-three articles again. He then discusses the beliefs of three groups in relation to these articles of primitive Christian faith. His goal is to demonstrate the Nicene council's affirmation of his articles of faith, along with Arius and his followers' heterodoxy, as well as the erroneous interpretation of the conclusions of Nicaea by Athanasius' and his followers.

Before examining Whiston's understanding of Nicaea, and these groups, some basic observations are in order. Whiston takes very seriously Eusebius of Caesarea's letter to his diocese, written in order to explain why he eventually signed up to the Nicene Creed. He says that '*Eusebius's* own original Letter from the Council of *Nice*, preserv'd both in *Athanasius, Socrates,* and *Theodrit*, and inserted in the following collection, is much the most full and authentick Account now extant of the Debates in that Council'.[43] Whiston refers back to this letter time and time again.

Whiston's own conclusions about the Christological debates of the fourth century are in many instances in line with modern patristic scholarship. However, it is important to note that Whiston's acceptance of Eusebius of Caesarea's interpretation of Nicaea as well as Eusebius' interpretation of *homoousios*, is not one of those instances. Rather, Frances Young's view is commonplace: 'Eusebius eventually signed the new creed, with its *homoousion*, presumably in deference to the emperor's wishes and for the sake of peace in the Church; but in his letter to his church, his embarrassment is evident.'[44] Whiston, however, saw no embarrassment in Eusebius' letter.

Whiston identifies three representative doctrines involved in the Nicene debates: the Athanasian, the Arian and the Eusebian.[45] The Athanasian doctrine consist of 'those novel Doctrines and Language which

[42] Whiston, *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, iv. 2.

[43] Idem, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', 4–5.

[44] Frances M. Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: a guide to the literature and its background*, 2nd edn, Grand Rapids 2010, 20.

[45] Whiston acknowledges that the Arians, Athanasians and Eusebians all agree on some of his articles of faith. However, even when he says that they all agree, he usually finds some problem with regard to Athanasius and his later followers. For example, Whiston writes about articles 9–14 that 'These six Articles were intirely agreed to by all, *Eusebians, Athanasians*, and *Arians*.' Whiston then notes that all the ancients agreed to the subordination of the Son to the Father, a common theme found in articles 9–14, 'till after the Council of *Nice'*. However, he criticises Athanasius and his later followers for restricting the subordination of the Son to the Father to the Son's human nature: Whiston, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', 17–18. Elsewhere (p. 10), he calls the practice of limiting the Son's subordination to his

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Athanasius and his Followers introduc'd and maintain'd after the Council of *Nice*, in the latter half of the fourth Century; but this, as they were a long time afterward improv'd and explain'd in the *Athanasian Creed*'.[46] It is no surprise to find Whiston defining Arian doctrines as 'only those novel Doctrines and Language which *Arius* himself, and his peculiar Followers, introduc'd; and which indeed were disapprov'd of both by the *Eusebians* and *Athanasians*'.[47] Whiston equates the Eusebian doctrine with '*Christian Doctrines*' because the '*Eusebian* Creeds preserv'd by *Athanasius*' consist of 'those noble Remains of old Christianity'.[48] Whiston does not refer to these 'true Doctrines' as Eusebian because he approves 'of any Names of particular Sects, or of all the Conduct of *Eusebius of Nicomedia*' from whom the name was taken.[49] Rather, Whiston uses this term for authentic Christianity because Eusebian 'was the Name originally bestow'd upon them' and the name Eusebian is much more appropriate than 'Arian; which they by no means either desir'd or deserv'd; but which was only made use of by their Enemies as a Name of Scandal and Reproach for them'.[50]

Even though Whiston employed the term 'Eusebian' from a general rather than a more specific position, it is significant that Whiston saw a clear divide between the Christological understanding of Eusebius of Nicomedia and that of Eusebius of Caesarea. Whiston identifies Eusebius of Nicomedia as the individual from whom a group was first called 'Eusebian' in the fourth century. However, he also states that he was not pleased with some of Eusebius of Nicomedia's behaviour. Thus, in light of Whiston's affinity for Eusebius of Caesarea, it comes as little surprise to hear Whiston call Eusebius of Nicomedia the 'head of the gross Arians' and Eusebius of Caesarea the 'head of the genuine Eusebians'. [51]

Whiston was able to accept the key Nicene term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος), *via* Eusebius of Caesarea's letter, even though he did not think the term was ideal given its absence from Scripture. Eusebius says that after Constantine proposed the addition of *homoousios* to the creed that was

incarnation a 'later *Athanasian* evasion' because 'it never appear'd till the later Days of *Athanasius*'.

[46] Ibid. 3. [47] Ibid. 4. [48] Ibid. 3.

[49] Ibid. 4.

[50] Ibid. In 341 Bishop Julius of Rome sent a letter to the bishops of the east in order to explain why Athanasius and Marcellus were declared innocent of all charges against them. In this letter Julius referred to the 'Eusebians' and the 'Athanasians'. He also identified those around Eusebius of Nicomedia as 'Arians'. The letter is preserved in Athanasius' *Defence against the Arians* 21–35. For discussion see Joseph T. Lienhard, 'The "Arian" Controversy: some categories reconsidered', *Theological Studies* xlviii (1987), 415–37 at pp. 417–18.

[51] William Whiston, *A collection of original texts of Scripture and testimonies of antiquity that relate to Christian discipline*, London 1739, 41. I am grateful to Maurice Wiles for leading me to these statements: *Archetypal heresy*, 102.

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emerging from the Council of Nicaea, there was considerable discussion as to its meaning. Eusebius says then that *homoousios* means 'that the Son of God bears no resemblance to the originated creatures, but that to His Father alone Who Begat Him'.[52] Whiston regurgitates Eusebius' interpretation in his discussion of article VIII: '*Jesus Christ the Word, and Son of God, is a divine Being or Person far Inferior to his Father, in Nature, Attributes and Perfections.*'[53] He says that the purpose of *homoousios* – an 'ambiguous Word' – was to communicate that 'he who was not *made out of Nothing*, as were ordinary Creatures, but was some way deriv'd from God himself, from the Essence or Substance of the Father, might better be said to be of the *Same*, or of a *like Essence* or *Substance* with him, than of the *Same* or of a *like Essence* or *Substance* with those Creatures'.[54]

Furthermore, this time in agreement with Athanasius, Whiston believed that *homoousios* was included in the Nicene Creed in order to exclude Arius.[55] When contrasting the Athanasian doctrine with that of article III: '*Jesus Christ is in a peculiar Sense the Son, the only, the only begotten, and the most beloved Son of God, i.e. a Divine Person, in an extraordinary and singular Manner deriv'd from, and peculiarly near and dear to the Supreme God the Father*',[56] Whiston says that the Council of Nicaea did 'venture to say, that the Son was *deriv'd from the Essence*, or *Substance of God*, in their Creed; but this was done, not in order to establish a strict philosophick Notion, but in opposition to *Arius* and his Followers, who said he was created or made, as the subordinate Creatures were, *out of nothing*'.[57] Whiston goes on to say that both the Athanasians and the Eusebians disagreed with such '*Arian* Rashness'.[58] However, the Eusebians took the higher ground because they resisted 'uncertain, unscriptural and metaphysical Notions'.[59] Even here Whiston displays openness to *homoousios*. He continues 'tho' they did not properly deny the possibility of the same; as not pretending to enter into such Depths of the Divine Power, by determining *how*, or *after what Manner* the Son of God was deriv'd from the Father; but

[52] All translations of Eusebius' letter to his diocese are taken from *NPNF* ii.4.

[53] Whiston, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', 14.

[54] Ibid. 15.

[55] In *Defence of the Nicene definition*, 20, Athanasius states that at the Council of Nicaea an attempt was made to use scriptural terms to define the relationship of the Son to the Father. However, Athanasius' opponents 'were caught whispering to each other and winking with their eyes' in order to communicate that they too could accept the scriptural terms even as they meant something entirely different. Athanasius therefore says that *homoousios* was needed to bring about more precision (trans. *NPNF* ii. 4).

[56] Whiston, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', 6.

[57] Ibid. 7.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

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owning his *Generation* to be really *unsearchable* by Mankind'.[60] Here Whiston is once again condemning Arians for saying that the Son was made of out nothing as the other creatures were.

Even so, Whiston was not at all bashful about calling the Son a 'created' being. His article VI states that '*Jesus Christ is the λόγος θεοῦ προαιώνιος, the first begotten of all Creatures, the beginning of the Creation, of God, i.e. a Divine Being or Person created or begotten by the Father before all Ages, or before all subordinate Creatures, visible and invisible.*'[61] In contrast with Primitive Christian belief, Whiston defines the Athanasian doctrine as '*The Majesty Co-eternal: – The Son Uncreate: – The Son Eternal: – The Son is neither Made, nor Created, but Begotten: – The whole three Persons are Co-eternal together.*'[62] After contrasting these two doctrines Whiston states that 'In this Article the *Athanasians* seem to me to have greatly mistaken the ancient Faith, and the Meaning of the Council of *Nice*.'[63]

What then, according to Whiston, was the understanding of the Son's created status at the Council of Nicaea? In this work Whiston had concluded that the Nicene anathema against calling the Son created 'has been fully demonstrated to be no better than a Forgery of *Athanasius*'.[64] This, therefore, constitutes the evidence that the council did not condemn calling the Son 'created'. However, Whiston acknowledges that the Nicene Creed refers to the Son as '*begotten, not made*'.[65] Whiston also acknowledges the anathemas in the Nicene Creed against those who say that '*there was a Duration when the Son was not*', '*he was not before he was begotten*' and that '*he was made out of Nothing*'.[66] None the less, the Athanasian interpretation of these statements that make the Son 'Uncreated, or a distinct Person or Being, properly *Co-eternal* with the Father, and this by a true *eternal Generation*' is simply wrong.[67] For Whiston, the Son has to be created

[60] Ibid. Earlier, in his *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, Whiston displayed his belief in the possibility that the Son was of the same substance as the Father. He says (iv.77–8) that he does not deny that 'there *may be* some other extraordinary and singular Circumstances in the original of the Son of God, whereby he *may* be distinguish'd from all other Beings; as perchance that the Son was produc'd *out of the Substance of his Father*, while all the Inferior Creatures were created *out of nothing*'. However, he is hesitant because he knows 'no sufficient Authority for any such like Opinions before Philosophy came into the Church'. Therefore, 'I look upon them all as Philosophical Notions of some Christians, but not as parts of the Christian Faith, nor proper to be inserted into this plain Account of the original Articles thereof'. Once again, Paul Lim's work demonstrates that Whiston's opinions were not novel. Lim summarises Thomas Hobbes's (1588–1679) critique of Nicene theology with three statements. The third is that 'While Nicaea did right by affirming the deity of Christ, it also committed an egregious error by officially endorsing a philosophy-laden theology': *Mystery unveiled*, 228.

[61] Whiston, 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated', 10.

[62] Ibid. [63] Ibid. [64] Ibid. 11.

[65] Ibid. 10. [66] Ibid. [67] Ibid. 11.

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in some sense. If the Son is not created, then the Son is eternal. It is impossible to have two eternal figures.

Whiston therefore relies on Constantine's interpretation of the anathema 'he was not before he was begotten', as preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea's letter to his diocese. Constantine said, according to Eusebius, that the Son 'was in being even according to His divine generation which is before all ages, since even before He was generated in energy, He was in virtue with the Father ingenerately'. Because the Son had the potential to be in the Father, as Word or Wisdom, before the Father generated the Son, Whiston concludes that at the Council of Nicaea 'it was not safe to say absolutely that he once had no Existence or Being at all'.[68] However, by way of implication, Whiston suggests that the council 'had no traditionary Doctrine of any Being properly *Co-eternal* with the Father, yet had they no traditionary Doctrine neither that said Christ was *made out of Nothing*, or had no sort of Existence at all before he was begotten'.[69]

Whiston offers eleven arguments against the Athanasian interpretation of Nicaea which maintains that the Son was not created and that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. One of these is that the anathema against the word 'created' is a 'Forgery of *Athanasius'*. Taking examples from the remaining ten arguments, in argument I, Whiston contends that neither the Scriptures nor church tradition leading up to Nicaea held to the 'very strange' doctrine 'of more than one *eternal Being*'.[70] In argument II, Whiston believes that to say that the Son is a '*deriv'd* or *begotten Being*' is 'directly contrary' to the Son's eternity.[71] In argument VII, Whiston cites Arius' letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia in which Arius says that all the eastern bishops except three 'own'd the Father's Existence *prior* to that of the Son, and this just before the Council of *Nice*'.[72] Whiston's point is that many of these same bishops were at the Council of Nicaea. In argument VIII, Whiston observes that in their letter to Bishop Alexander, the presbyters and deacons of Alexandria state that they received from Alexander himself their teaching that the Father preceded the Son. Bishop Alexander, of course, 'was a principal Bishop of the Council of *Nice*'.[73]

Whiston's stance is clear. He believed the Son to be a creature but not as one of the creatures. He also believed that this was the teaching of the Council of Nicaea itself. The council 'best approv'd of those Terms which did most certainly distinguish the origin of the Son from the origin of the inferior Creatures'.[74] Therefore, the council 'liked the words *Begat, Begotten* and *Generation*',[75] and was 'suspicious of the words

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid. 12.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid. 13.
[75] Ibid.

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Create, Created and *Creature*'.[76] And the council 'most of all disapproved of the word *Made*' because it was 'most directly capable of that Heretical or *Arian* Interpretation, *Made out of Nothing*, as were the other Creatures, which they abhorr'd and condemn'd, tho' without the belief of the Co-eternity'.[77]

Whiston, thus cannot be called an Arian on the grounds that he believed that the Son was a created being, because Whiston believed that the bishops at the Council of Nicaea believed the same. Therefore, Whiston concludes, 'It has been almost all along believ'd by the Church of late; that the Council of *Nice* were on the *Athanasian* Side, whereas it was plainly on the *Eusebian*.'[78] In other words, Whiston believed that it was Eusebianism that prevailed at Nicaea. It was only subsequent to Nicaea that the Athanasian interpretation won the day.

No longer an Arian

How then should Whiston's religious beliefs be labelled, if indeed he has been mistakenly called an Arian for more than three hundred years? They should be defined as he defined them. Whiston embraced the Eusebian doctrine in his 'The Council of *Nice* vindicated' written in 1713. In his *Memoirs*, written towards the end of his life, he still identified himself as an Eusebian. Thus:

> Some time in the summer this year, 1710, or rather the foregoing year, 1709, it must have been, when my best friends began to be greatly affrighted at what they heard I was going about, both as to the *Eusebian Doctrine*, which then was universally called the *Arian Heresy*, which I had embrac'd.[79]
>
> Nor so far as I can judge, ought any serious *Eusebian*, or primitive Christian, such as I owe myself to be, especially if he be also a Clergyman himself, as I am, to receive communion from such an *Athanasian*, who thus frequently and solemnly, though most unjustly, pronounces him *accursed*, and in a *state of damnation*.[80]

[76] Ibid. [77] Ibid. [78] Ibid. 28.

[79] William Whiston, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Mr. William Whiston containing memoirs of several of his friends also*, 2nd edn corrected, London 1753, 131.

[80] Ibid. 384. Here Whiston comes to the conclusion that it is not appropriate for a clergyman who reads the Athanasian Creed to give communion to known Eusebians such as himself since the Athanasian Creed states that unless one adheres to that creed, one cannot be saved. To such a clergyman, therefore, Whiston stands already condemned. Prior to reaching this conclusion, Whiston would absent himself during the part of the Anglican service when the Athanasian Creed was read, but would then return for communion. Now, however, his view and practice has changed. In fact, on Trinity Sunday 1747, when the Athanasian Creed was read, Whiston left the church and did not return. He went 'to the Baptist Meeting at *Morcot*, two miles off': Whiston, *Memoirs*, 386. For Whiston's relationship with the Baptists see Gilliam, 'William Whiston: was he or wasn't he?'

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As this article has demonstrated, William Whiston saw a reflection of his own Christological beliefs in those of Eusebius of Caesarea who found a way to embrace the Nicene Creed[81]; Whiston never saw his own Christological beliefs reflected in those of Arius of Alexandria or even Eusebius of Nicomedia. Whiston should no longer be called an 'Arian' because he never was one.

[81] There is, of course, a longstanding debate concerning Eusebius of Caesarea's Christology. Frances Young's conclusion is sound: 'In the old days of controversy, it is hardly surprising that some condemned Eusebius, others tried to defend the "father of Church history" from the charge of heresy. Clearly Eusebius' position was neither on one side nor the other and, like Constantine himself, in some bewilderment, he acted primarily in the interests of Church unity. He wanted to steer a middle course': *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, 20. For a discussion of scholarly opinion concerning Eusebius' understanding of the relationship of the Son to the Father see Gilliam, 'Ignatius of Antioch and the Arian Controversy', 149–51.

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