

The Trinity as a Weapon

Maybe you thought that, following the Council of Nicaea, the church adopted the doctrine of the Trinity and everyone lived happily ever after. Not so. Like so many things in life, it gets complicated. And in institutional Christianity, it gets brutal.

The concept of the Trinity, of course, is the only logical Christian view of the nature of God that allows for the full deity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was intended not only to be sound doctrine, but also a wonderful divine mystery and a topic of contemplation. Instead, when organized religion and politics got involved, it became an unnecessarily divisive element in Christianity, and a weapon of political power.

When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be a politically acceptable faith in AD 313, he understood that religious disputes often led to societal unrest. He therefore took a direct and heavy hand in church councils, sometimes appointing himself as the final judge in ecclesiastical matters. Accordingly, the outcome of the Council of Nicaea (325) was not merely doctrinal—it had the force of Imperial Law.

In 333, Constantine issued an edict against the Arians, the nontrinitarian followers of Arius, demanding the destruction of Arius' writings and making it a capital crime even to possess them.

In addition, if any writing composed by Arius should be found, it should be handed over to the flames, so that not only will the wickedness of his teaching be obliterated, but nothing will be left even to remind anyone of him. And I hereby make a public order, that if someone should be discovered to have hidden a writing composed by Arius, and not to have immediately brought it forward and destroyed it by fire, his penalty shall be death. As soon as he is discovered in this offence, he shall be submitted for capital punishment....

Ironically, while Constantine may have been nominally Christian, he did not exclusively support Christianity. Like most politicians today, his religious policies and profession were driven by political expediency. To curry the favor of pagans, he freely employed pagan symbols, observances and ceremonies in his reign. Although he apparently exiled Christians who refused to accept the Nicene Creed, he became more lenient later in his reign, allowing some exiles to return. Shortly before his death he was baptized by a bishop who had been an ardent supporter of Arius.

Constantine's son Constantius II was an Arian Christian. After his father's death, he reversed many of his father's policies, promoting Arianism and exiling the Trinitarian theologian Athanasius. He also exiled the Trinitarian Pope and installed his own. For the next half-century, Arianism thrived in the Imperial Court and among top church officials.

But with the 400s, after much political struggle and debate, Trinitarianism came back into fashion and prevailed in the Roman Empire.

Not so elsewhere in Western Europe, where Roman power had collapsed. Many Germanic tribes were Arian. While some of these tribes were tolerant of Nicene Christians, others used military force to persecute them. Battles between these tribes and Rome were as much religious as they were political. By the 8th century, however, Nicene Christians had successfully crushed Arianism through a long series of political and military conquests. It remained dormant until the 16th century Protestant Reformation allowed it to resurface.

Michael Servetus, a brilliant Spanish physician, mathematician, geographer and theologian, was among several nontrinitarian Christian leaders in Europe. Servetus had corresponded at length with reformer John Calvin, but the two men failed to arrive at theological agreement. Servetus, having been arrested on charges of heresy in Vienna, escaped from prison and made the mistake of stopping in Geneva to hear Calvin preach.

He was arrested, tried and condemned to death for preaching against Trinitarianism and infant baptism. His accusers also implied that he had homosexual tendencies, was a friend of Jews and Turks and had studied the Koran and other “profane books.” Calvin wanted Servetus decapitated, but the Geneva Council insisted that he be burned alive. His last words, as he writhed in pain, were “Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me.”

Such a violent history is a large part of the reason many thinking people today want nothing to do with Christianity. Yet this sad chronicle of atrocities flies in the face of Jesus’ words “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

While we as modern, civilized Christians like to believe that these barbarities are in the distant past, we still think nothing of harboring animosity or even hatred toward those who hold aberrant doctrines—including present day Arians, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other cultic groups—dehumanizing them and consigning them to the fires of hell.

We would do well to follow Jesus’ command: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:43-45).

If we should love our enemies, how much more our friends who may simply have a different doctrinal perspective?

—Monte Wolverton