

## Subordination, Substance, and the Trinity in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana*

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### 1. Introduction

While Milton's *Paradise Lost* has brought him a long-standing fame as a "champion of Christianity's great central tradition," his theological treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, has puzzled the reader and the critic for its unorthodox, even heretical, tenets. An exemplary Christian writer voiced in his prose some key Arian doctrines which were severely condemned as heretical by his contemporary authorities. How can we make sense of this seemingly incompatible evidence? In order to better understand this contradictory nature in the prose work and some poetic representations of theological stance, this paper will look into Milton's views on the Trinity and Arianism in *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana*. One of the ways to explain it away is to situate Milton's writing within the specific political and ecclesiastical circumstances, with a special focus on his position within seventeenth-century intellectual and theological controversies. I will emphasize that our knowledge of what happened to Milton and his contemporaries does help us understand this seeming incompatibility.

In what follows I will briefly summarize the history and some crucial doctrines of Arianism and, then, I will look into Milton's set doctrine as reflected in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Paradise Lost*. Then I will describe what had happened to the believers of Arianism and discuss the possibility that these persecutions might have affected Milton's writings.

## 2. A survey of Arianism: Definition and History

One of the most controversial issues on Milton studies is whether his works—both prose and poetic—represent his Arian position or Trinitarian belief. Trinitarianism holds that God, according to a traditional point of view, is one in essence, but exists in three distinct Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are equal in all respects, each is God, and each is eternally divine. Yet they are not three Gods, but one God. But Arius (d. A.D. 336), a fourth-century Bishop, strongly opposed this equal position of the three Persons and asserted that the Son is subordinated to the Father, and the Son is neither coessential, coequal, nor coeternal with the Father. Arius insisted that God begot (created) the Son, of Whom it must be said that “there was once when He was not.” Arius also argues that the Son was produced not of the Father's divine nature, but out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The logical conclusion from Arius's belief was as follows: the two Persons are utterly alien and dissimilar in substance or in essence. In a move to counter these Arian tenets, the Council of Nicaea in 325 authoritatively affirmed that the three Persons in the Trinity are of one substance. This Nicene Creed was set up to suppress the Arian dogmas which were deemed to be heretical. Arius maintained a total distinction of substance between the Father and the Son, and argued for the subordination of the latter to the former. His views were antithetical to those who held that there were absolutely no distinction of substance between the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Arianism is, in brief, an extreme case of the Judaic-Christianity that subordinates the Son to the Father because none can be equal to the Father, and the Son is no exception. Arianism substitutes a Trinity that is truly of three persons, but with only one of those Persons fully divine. Only the Father, according to Arius, is divine.

Arius thus distinguishes the Son from the Father as a subordinate entity, created in time and differing in substance from the Father. It is an uncompromising monotheism, best summed up in Arius' conception of God as "alone ingenerate, alone ever-lasting, alone unbegun, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign." Arius further goes on to affirm that God is utterly incommunicable, and absolutely isolated from His entire creation. Arians believe that God is unbegotten, simple, and eternal. The Father cannot share or communicate his essence, for to do so would impugn his simplicity and show him divisible and subject to change.

From here begins the controversy: The Son did not derive from the Father's essence, but only from the Father's will, and like other creatures, he [the Son] was generated out of nothing, not from the paternal substance. From this it is not incorrect to argue that the Son is only a creature like the rest of the creation. Nor is the Son coeternal with the Father. Notable for its uncompromising tenet that emphasized unbegottenness as the Deity's characteristic, Arians placed an emphasis on the Son's inferiority to the Father. Orthodox church fathers rigorously and successfully campaigned to have all of Arius' writings destroyed. As a result of this, Arius' ideas are available to us only through statements made by his opponents. Eventually defeated by Athanasius and anathematized by the Nicea Decree, Arius has been declared to be a heretic.

### 3. Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*

Let's look into Milton's thoughts on the Trinity. Milton claimed that based on the Word written in the Scripture he drew some doctrines like Arianism. Milton scholars like Maurice Kelley, David Masson, and Gordon Campbell observed that Milton held Trinitarian

views as a young man. Tracing Milton's changes in religious beliefs, Kelley in "Introduction" to *De Doctrina Christiana* says that "indications of his early orthodoxy" appear in the early poem, "On the Morning of Christ Nativity" (1629) where he makes reference to "Trinal Unity." In *Of Reformation* (1641) Milton writes on "one Tri-personall GODHEAD" and His *Animadversions* (1641) addresses the Son as "ever-begotten light" (68). But after these two tracts his statement regarding the Godhead are non-committal and ambiguous until *De Doctrina Christiana*, which contains some anti-Trinitarian beliefs. *De Doctrina Christiana* is Milton's codification of his personal religious beliefs and it provides some structural underpinnings for *Paradise Lost*. In *The Life of John Milton* David Masson sternly passes judgement on the nature of Milton's Christ as "expressly and emphatically those of high Arianism" (6. 823). Gordon Campbell also indicates in "Popular Tradition of God" that Milton as a young man believed in the orthodox Trinitarianism but later he ceased to believe it (507).

In his religious treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton makes in detail a strong case for his Arian view. The first reason that Milton sides with anti-Trinitarianism is the Son's begottenness. That means that the Son cannot transcend time: while the Father is timelessness, the Son is not. Therefore, the Son is different from the Father. Milton says that God begot the Son

not from any natural necessity but out of his own free will. So God begot the Son as a result of his own decree. It took place within the bounds of time, for the decree itself must have preceded its execution (the insertion of the word *today* makes this quite clear). (209)

Milton connects here the Son's begottenness with the timeness, which he bases for the difference between the Father and the Son. He goes on to say that

Two distinct things cannot be of the same essence. God is one being, not two. One being has one essence, and also one subsistence—by which it meant simply a substantial essence. If you were to ascribe two subsistences or two persons to one essence, it would be a contradiction in terms. You would be saying that the essence was at once one and not one. (212)

The passage above stresses the oneness of God. Milton's logic is as follows: if two substances are attributed to God, God is not One, but one. Therefore, God is one, and the Son is another. It is based on reason, not on any human authorities of his era.

Milton continues to emphasize the significance of the number one:

Since he is called 'one'; since human reason and the conventions of language and God's people, the Jews, have always interpreted the term only one person" to mean one in number. (213)

Here Milton is arguing for the Arian dogma that does not approve of the Son as equal to the Father. God is only one as manifested in the Arian doctrine. Milton's Christology depicted in *De Doctrina Christiana* serves as evidence of his Arian stance. Milton puts an emphasis on the Son's subordination. In his theological system, the Son is subordinated to the Father, generated at the beginning of creation from the divine substance, but neither coessential, coequal, nor coeternal with the Father. If the Son were of the same whole essence as the Father, they would be one person and God could not beget a co-equal Deity, because unity and infinity are two of his essential attributes. By denying the same essentiality between the two Persons, Milton makes a clear distinction between them: since the father and the Son differ in essence, they cannot be equal: they are not only not coessential, but not coequal.

When arguing against the Trinitarian view, Milton quotes the Gospel of John x:30: *I and the Father are one*. But Milton refutes the Trinitarian explanation of it, and argues that "the Father and the Son

are not certainly one in essence, for the son had himself asserted the contrary in the preceding version, *my Father, who gave me them, is greater than all*, (indeed, he also says, *xiv.28: he is greater than I*), and in the following verses he expressly denies that by saying *I and the Father are one* he was setting himself up as God. This is said of two persons, distinct in essence and, moreover, not equal to each other (219). Milton writes *De Doctrina Christiana* that "the Son is saying that the Father dwells in him [the Son], though this does not mean that their essence is one, only that their communion is extremely close" (220). Milton continues: "The Son and the Father are one in the same way as we are one with him; that is not in essence, but in love, in communion, in agreement, in charity, in spirit, and finally in glory" (220). When Milton argues against Trinitarian doctrine that equates the Father's essence with that of the Son, Milton says that in *De Doctrina Christiana* "it is quite impossible for any entity to share its essence with anything else whatsoever, for it is by virtue of its essence that it is what it is, and is distinguished numerically from anything else" (225). Milton's anti-Trinitarian belief of the Son's subordination is firmly grounded on the Scriptural evidence. By citing from Mark xiii. 32, Milton says that even "the Son teaches that the attributes of divinity belongs to the Father alone, and that even he himself is excluded from them" (227). These citations evidence that Milton never thought his Arian doctrines to be heretical. They came from the scriptural passages.

The second reason for the Arian tenet is that humans are not able to know the Father, and neither is the Son. Because the Father is not understood even by the Son, the Son cannot be said to be the same as the Father. Like the Arians say, Milton's God [the Father] exists alone: *De Doctrina Christiana* contains an Arian dogma that the Father is utterly beyond human knowledge: to know God, as He really is, far transcends the power of man's thoughts, much more of his perception.

Echoes of scriptures occur in all of Milton's prose and poetry. Thus, Milton must have thought himself to follow the Scripture in promoting the case for Arianism. Milton would have never consider himself as heretic in arguing against Trinitarian opinions. The significance of *De Doctrina Christiana* is that Milton never published it during his lifetime. It is a posthumous work, so it would never pose a real threat to his political and religious authorities. While it is a set of straightforward religious system, which was not intended to publicize his personal thoughts, his *Paradise Lost* is written to be published. In seventeenth century England Ariars were severely persecuted as heretics and many of them ended their lives as martyrs. Our knowledge of the situations in which Arian heretics were put is valuable to understand Milton's poetic representations of Trinitarianism in *Paradise Lost*.

#### 4. *Paradise Lost*

While *De Doctrina Christiana* is an outspoken treatise of the Arian beliefs, some passages in *Paradise Lost* show a different set doctrine: the trinitarian dogmas. In the long epic poem Milton has the Father say that the Son is

... Thron'd in highest bliss  
 Equal to God, and equally enjoying  
 God-like fruition. (3.305-307).

In the passage above the emphatic word is "equal": the Father declares the Son's equal attributes to Himself. This focus on their equality conflicts with Milton's Arian tenets strongly voiced in the systematic theology. Also Book 10 describes the Son as occupying the seat of "high collateral glorie" (10. 86). Here "collateral" means "equal" to the Father.

Why are the descriptions of the Son so incompatible with that in the *De Doctrina*? First in the invocation the Muse, Milton says that he aims for a "fit audience" (7. 31). His intention to the publication of the poetry is unquestionable. And there are many factors to be considered for a book to be published, such as the religious and political climate of seventeenth-century England, which viewed Arianism as heretical. The severe persecutions inflicted on the Arians might have affected every seventeenth century writer, including Milton. Milton did not need to confess his anti-Trinitarian beliefs in the publications. His epic presents the Son as "begotten," the Father says to the angels that

This day I have begot whom I declare  
My onely Son, and on this holy Hill  
Him have anointed, . . . (5.603-605)

Here the term, "begot," is explained as referring to the Son's exaltation. That means the Father's acknowledgement of his Son's same status with that of his.

One of the distinctive tenets between Arianism and Trinitarianism is the Arian explanation of the Son's nature. Arius maintained that the Son is, like all rational creatures, mutable and indeed peccable. Milton vehemently denies that the Son may be regarded as in any way liable to change. Nowhere in Milton's long epic does the Son show any possibility of being mutable or changeable. The Son is described as being consistent in every aspect: in love for the human race and in obedience to his Father.

In Milton's characterization of the Son, the Son fully reflects the Father in all things:

Beyond compare the Son of God was seen  
Most glorious, in him all his Father shon  
Substantially express'd, and in his face  
Divine compassion visibly appeerd (3.139-142)

The passage above delineates the same nature of the two Persons: the Father and the Son. With the incomparable images and compassion, the Son is the very image of the Father. Milton goes on to say that the Father and the Son share the same divinity:

... the Son of God  
In whom the fulness dwells of love divine. (3.224-225)

This passage hints at Milton's belief that the Son bears the likeness of the divine love. The Son is described as not so different from his Father. Arians would argue against some essential similarities between the Father and the Son. But in Milton's epic affinities between the Father and the Son do frequently occur:

Effulgence of my Glorie, Son below'd,  
Son in whose face invisible is beheld  
Visibly, what by Deitie I am,  
And in whose hand what by Decree I doe,  
Second Omnipotence, ... (6.680-684)

This passage seems to be an oxymoron; nevertheless, it expresses the oneness of God, or sharing, in the case of omnipotence, between the Son and the Father. In Book 6 the Father

... said, and on his Son with Rayes direct  
Shon full, he all his Father full exprest  
Ineffably into his face receiv'd, (6.720-722)

Here again Milton imparts the divine qualities to the Son, in doing so, he blurs the Arian distinction between the Father and the Son.

... Mean while the Son  
On his great Expedition now appeer'd  
Girt with Omnipotence, with Radiance crown'd  
Of Majestie Divine, Sapience and Love  
Immense, and all his Father in him shon. (7.192-196)

Here the Son is dressed in allegorical or symbolic clothing which represents the omnipotence imparted by the Father; that is, He is given the crown of light by the Father because the Son is the "Fountain of Light" (3.375).

There are some noticeable affinities between the Father and the Son. Obviously the Son shares some divine qualities with his Father, like compassion and wisdom. No clear distinction can be seen in the preceding description of the Son. The following passage bears the Son's likeness to the Father. Milton continuously maintains that the Son is very like the Father in several aspects:

So spake the Father, and unfolding bright  
Toward the right hand his Glorie, on the Son  
Blaz'd forth unclouded Deitie; he full  
Resplendent all his Father manifest  
Express'd, and thus divinely answer'd milde. (10.63-68)

The Father generously confers His glory on His Son in the image of light so that the Son's effulgence will be no less resplendent than His Father's. This passage corroborates the Trinitarian dogma that the Son is, thus, not an inferior Person to the Father. Many times the Son is depicted as having the same quality and divinity.

Arius maintained that the Father is both invisible and ineffable to the Son. Milton took great pains to assert the extremely close communion between the two Persons: the Father and the Son. So this passage may be used as evidence that disproves of the accusation that Milton is an Arian poet. The Father directly talks to his Son and the son understand his Father's intentions and the love the Father has for the newly created human race. The Son volunteers the sacrifice because he fully fathoms his Father's magnanimity in the creation and love of the mankind. Different from the Arian teachings that the Father is not to be understood by anybody, He [the Father] is fully understood by the Son. There has

been incomparable communion between the Father and his Son. The Father has never shied away from communication with his Son and with the angels in *Paradise Lost*. The Father is a communicative Father, contrary to the Arian explanation of Him as the non-conversing one.

For all these orthodox Trinitarian expressions, the epic sometimes implicitly represents some key Arian tenets, though. Maurice Kelley, for example, argues that the Son in *Paradise Lost* is described as being bound by time. This serves as evidence of Milton's Arianism because the Arian doctrine that "there was time when the Son was not" substantiates the Son's being subject to time. Therefore, the time-bound Son is not, and cannot be, the same as the Father. Thus, Milton's Arianism in the poetry cannot be said to be totally effaced, but is implicit.

John Dennis's comment on *Paradise Lost* is valuable in understanding Milton's religious thought on the God's creation. Dennis supposes that the term, "created" means something passive, something done by someone else. Passivity is not a divine attribute; therefore, the Son should not be equated with the Father. Thus, the reader cannot entirely rule out Milton's Arianism in the poetry.

But some Milton scholars also find some Trinitarian expressions in *Paradise Lost*. For example, J. H. Adamson focuses on the light imagery associated with three symbols, the sun, the radiance, the fountain and its stream. This hints at Milton's Trinitarianism, not Arian belief because these metaphors appear in the Greek and Athanasian writings, but rejected by Arius as invalid. The sun metaphor is important because the generation of the Son is associated with the sun. The holy light in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* serves as the major metaphor that Arius rejected.

Although acknowledging the existence of some Arian passages in *Paradise Lost*, William Hurter asserts that they merely reflect the ante-Nicene traditions that maintain the Son's subordination to the

Father. Hunter differentiates Arianism from a subordinationist view. That means Milton was never an Arian poet.

Gorden Campbell's biographical study finds that Milton believed in the orthodox Trinitarianism in his young age, but discarded it later. Also the absence of the Third Person in *Paradise Lost* makes Campbell convinced of Milton's Arian stance.

How can we understand this discrepancy between the Arian treatise and the Trinitarian representation of the poetry? To answer this question, some knowledge of the religious history of seventeenth-century England will be of help. In the Renaissance multiple, diverse, and even conflicting ideas concerning biblical interpretation existed and each was competing for gaining the ground, claiming the scriptural basis. And as Rumrich indicates, "most included the trinity" (86). That means the most controversial issue was whether the anti-trinitarian movement was thoroughly heretical or not. In 1689 the Toleration Act was taken effect. During that time, people began to tolerate diverse ideas, different ideologies, but for the case of anti-Trinitarianism. Its extreme insistence on the sole Godhead resulted in the denial of the Son's divine attributes. That may be the reason that Arianism greatly provoked the civil and church authorities. Rumrich's study finds that "in England, at least eight anti-Trinitarian heretics were burned at the stake from 1548 to 1612" (86). The seventeenth century witnessed some Arian dissidents publicly burned to death, and Milton was indubitably well aware of that tragic incident. The two English Arian martyrs to perish at the stake were Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman who died in 1611. According to Rumrich, "at Glasgow they hanged Thomas Aikenhead, aged eighteen, for denying the trinity" (79). There is no denying that confession of Arian beliefs resulted in such severe persecutions as execution or other kind of death sentences. This gloomy historical event may give us the clue to the better understanding of the apparently dual nature of Milton's religious

views. His long epic was published in 1667, revised and reprinted in 1674, and well received by the audience. He did not publicize his antitrinitarian claims in that poetry because, though he never regarded himself as heretical, he was well aware of the consequences of those who confessed Arian beliefs. They were incarcerated and most of them ended their lives as martyrs. Also, as a defeated republican, Milton had been under the governmental scrutiny. Contrary to the published poetry, his manuscript of *De Doctrina Christiana* was still not ready for the press at the end of his life. And he could express his systematic religious thoughts straightforwardly in this unpublished treatise. But in *Paradise Lost*, which Milton clearly intended to publish, Milton did not have to portray in detail something that was regarded as heretical by the ecclesiastical and political authorities. That does not mean that Milton was a coward. On the contrary he regarded himself as a man with piety. But as a defeated republican and controversial writer, he might have wanted to avoid other troubles concerning religious beliefs.

## 5. Conclusion

Claiming that his religious belief is firmly based on the book, the Holy Scripture, Milton always cites from the Bible when he makes a religious argument. His religious treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, persistently maintains some crucial Arian doctrines, like the Son's subordination to the Father, and the Son's inferiority to the Father. Milton thus seems to disprove of the Trinitarian doctrine of the coequality of the Father and the Son, by offering the reader a plenty of passages from the Bible as anti-Trinitarian evidence. Pointing out some scriptural passages as proof of anti-Trinitarian dogma, Milton makes a case for the Arian doctrine in *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Milton's theology often borders on beliefs deemed to be heretical by the established English church of Milton's era. In this theological book Milton apparently assigns much more importance to the Father and less to the Son. His *De Doctrina Christiana* has thus triggered theological controversy among the reader and the critic as well. The treatise has helped us to consider Milton to be an Arian, anti-Trinitarian, and subordinationist. Milton was allegedly a heretic, an Arian with deepest conviction. *De Doctrina Christiana* is an important religious system to understand the epic poem.

Although *De Doctrina Christiana* contains some radical and heretical dogmas, Milton softens the harder edges of his unorthodox tenets in *Paradise Lost*. Even though readers have found some Arian heresies in *Paradise Lost* and that founding angered some readers and critics, the overall theology in *Paradise Lost* is not of an extreme Arianism; rather, the reader can detect a lot of Trinitarian evidence.

Some passages in *Paradise Lost* dramatize the coequality between the Father and the Son, with having the same divinity and same dignity. The Son is often portrayed as sharing the same divine magnanimity. The Son also fathoms his Father's intention and love for the human race. Milton's God is known to His Son, and the Father refers to the Son as having the same quality and substance as Himself. In his long epic Milton seems to blur the Arian distinction between the Father and the Son by conferring the same and equal substance. One notable thing is that Milton clearly intended to publish this poetry. It was written to be read by his contemporaries during his lifetime. Considering the persecutions inflicted on the Arian heretics, we may well think that Milton did not have to confess his Arian belief in the poem. Milton was free to exploit the conventional trinitarian descriptions in his long poem and still did not detail his religious thoughts in the poetry.

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[Keywords: Arianism, Trinity, The Son, substance, subordination, persecution, heresy, *Paradise Lost*, *De Doctrina Christiana*]

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Abstract

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Whether Milton's works represent his Arian beliefs or Trinitarian orthodoxy has been hotly debated. Arianism denies the coessentiality, coequality, and consubstantiality of the Father and the Son and subordinates the Son to the Father. While Milton's theological treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* clearly reflects some key Arian dogmas which repudiate the Trinity, his poetic representations of the Father and the Son in *Paradise Lost* seems to support Trinitarian doctrines. Our knowledge of the political religious situations of seventeenth-century England will help us understand this seemingly incompatible evidence. One noticeable fact is that while his prose work was a posthumous treatise never published during his lifetime, his poetic work was intended to address his contemporaries during his lifetime. In the seventeenth century Arianism was considered to be heretical by the clerical and political authorities. And Milton was well aware that lots of Arian believers were severely persecuted for having heretical thoughts. Even though Milton claims that he firmly bases his systematic theology on Holy Scripture, and in his *Doctrina*

he cites many passages from the Bible to support his Arian arguments, his public confession of having his unorthodox beliefs in his published poetry might have caused him a lot of trouble. And some Miltonists find several implicit Arianism in *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, even though *Paradise Lost* contains the key Trinitarian dogmas, the social and ecclesiastical circumstances in which lots of Arians were persecuted could have affected the poetic representations of Milton's religious issues. The defeated and frustrated republican might have wanted to avoid other troubles caused by his unorthodox writings.

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