

## Book Review

Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1999.

How did Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish carpenter turned rabbi who many believed to be the Messiah of Israel, who died on the cross and was raised from the dead by God, come to be worshiped as God incarnate, the second member of the triune Godhead? For most churchgoers this is a simple article of faith. The "orthodox" Nicene Creed is recited by millions of Christians of various denominational labels in their houses of worship each week. Together, they proclaim that Jesus is "God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father." It is a rare worshiper who questions the truth of this statement. Those who do are told by their priests and pastors that it is a mystery. Many students of the Bible recognize that the doctrine of the Trinity is nowhere explicitly stated in the Scriptures, yet they honor the theologians who they believe carefully and prayerfully formulated the doctrine of the Trinity in the early days of the Christian Church. One might imagine these great saintly theologians working in unison with the Holy Spirit to make explicit that which is implicit in the sacred Scripture. At least, that's what one would hope. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

Richard Rubenstein is a professor of public affairs and conflict resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. He specializes in analyzing social and religious conflict. While on sabbatical in France he rented the house of a French historian. As he was perusing the historian's library he came upon a book describing the Arian controversy of the fourth century. It was in the midst of this controversy that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated and became the official dogma of the Catholic Church. What fascinated Rubenstein, a specialist in conflict resolution, was the nature of this conflict, the passion and violence associated with it, and the way it was intertwined with the politics of the Roman empire. He decided it would make an excellent case study in the nature of religious and socio-political conflict. The fruit of his many years of research into the Arian controversy is the highly readable and concise book *When Jesus Became God*.

Rubenstein gives a detailed narrative of the conflict which began in Alexandria, Egypt as a disagreement between the bishop, Alexander, and a charismatic priest named Arius. Arius publicly called into question the bishop's theological position. The bishop's response was to have Arius removed from his church and excommunicated. When Arius appealed to some of his sympathetic bishop friends in the east, the controversy spread. It's difficult to imagine that a religious quarrel about the nature of Christ could end in violence and bloodshed, until you consider that at the same time, the young emperor was seeking to bring unity to the eastern and western parts of his diminishing empire. Constantine, who was not yet a baptized Christian, was the first emperor not only to be sympathetic to Christianity, but to have the idea of using the Christian faith as a means of uniting his empire. Spurred on by a mystical vision telling him to conquer in the name of Christ, Constantine set out on his scheme of creating a unified empire by promoting a unified Church.

When news of the conflict between Arius and Alexander reached the ears of the emperor, he decided, with the help of his advisors, to take action. In 325 AD Constantine called for a council of bishops to come together and formulate a doctrinal statement upon which all Christians could agree. Rubenstein documents the story of the politicking that followed. The chief spokesman for Bishop Alexander was a fiery young redheaded priest named Athanasius. Athanasius defended the position that the Son, Jesus, was of the same substance ("*homoousios*") as God. He emphasized Jesus' equality with God. This was opposed by Arius, who taught that Jesus was subordinate to God. After months of wrangling and negotiating, Athanasius' position was voted on by the council and chosen as orthodox or accepted doctrine. Arius and those supporters of Arius who refused to sign the Creed of Nicea (the city where they held their council) were excommunicated from the Church. One can imagine Constantine's satisfaction at finally achieving the long-awaited union of Church and empire. He soon discovered that his vision of uniting the Church to achieve his political purposes would not be as easy as he had hoped.

Rubenstein documents the political intrigue that followed the decision at Nicea. The story continued to unfold over the next 60 years as a kind of tennis match between the eastern and western bishops. The eastern portion of the empire continued to be largely Arian, while the western part of the empire maintained its allegiance to the Nicene Creed. That which kept tipping the scales back and forth was not sound biblical exegesis or religious fervor — it was, rather, the struggle for power. Constantine and those emperors who followed him continued to struggle to hold the empire together internally, at the same time staving off external threats from the Persians in the east and the Barbarians in the west. Meanwhile, within the Church there was a struggle for power and control over the bishoprics in the east and west. The Church had undergone a major shift, from being persecuted by the Roman Empire, to being embraced by the Roman Empire. Rubenstein demonstrates that the Church was more united when it was

being opposed by the government than when it was in favor with the government and used for its political purposes. In the Church, everything depended on the position taken by the emperor. If Caesar was an Arian, then Arian bishops were installed and the Church embraced an Arian creed. If Caesar supported Athanasius and the creed of Nicea, then the Arian bishops were excommunicated and the Nicean sympathizers placed in positions of power in the Church.

Rubenstein shows the behind-the-scenes plotting and intrigue. He raises questions surrounding the mysterious death of Arius, who died tragically from diarrhea the evening before the bishop would be required to give him communion. Was Arius poisoned? Or was this God's judgment on a heretic? We hear about Athanasius, on five different occasions excommunicated, who several times managed to evade arrest by fleeing to the desert to be cared for by monks until such time as a sympathetic emperor assumed the throne. We read about a plot by two Arian priests who hired a prostitute to go to the bed of a high-ranking Nicene bishop so that he could be caught in a compromising position and discredited. But the quick-thinking prostitute turned the tables on the priests who became the victims of their own evil scheming. Rubenstein tells us about Julian, who became emperor but secretly espoused paganism and decided to sow seeds of division in the Church in an attempt to destroy the followers of Christ and pave the way to Rome becoming, once again, a pagan empire. And we see how badly Julian misjudged the Church, as the Church was able to lay aside its internal fight in the face of an external enemy. We hear how the Arian position nearly became, once and for all, the orthodox dogma in the Roman Church and empire, only to be thwarted when the Arian emperor was killed by the warring Visigoths.

Rubenstein also demonstrates that Arianism was a product of eastern thinking and world view. Arianism espoused a more optimistic view of people's ability "to make moral progress." To them, Jesus could be the supreme example of what humanity could become. This was in contrast to the more pessimistic western world view, which required nothing less than God Himself to come and save mankind. And where Arianism was more tolerant of diversity in religious dialogue, the Nicean western church was far more intolerant.

What Rubenstein clearly shows is that the doctrine of the Trinity, which is so widely believed by Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant believers today, did not develop in a hermetically sealed theological vacuum. The desire to arrive at the truth about the nature of Jesus Christ was not the primary issue in this whole conflict. The real issue was political power. The various emperors of Rome were guilty of using their power and influence in the Church to achieve their own ends of securing a powerful and unified empire. The bishops of the Church were guilty of allying themselves with various earthly political powers in an attempt to gain control over the Church. The clash was largely one of differing values in the eastern and western halves of the empire. The division which was so clearly

evident during the Nicean-Arian struggle would later lead to the complete fissure of the Church in the 9th century.

One of Rubenstein's most intriguing observations is that, in the western Church, as Jesus ascended to the place of God, his status as the approachable human mediator between man and God was taken by Mary. This is no doubt the reason that she is the object of religious devotion throughout the Roman Catholic Church to this very day.

Another of Rubenstein's observations that I find of huge interest is the way the population involved itself in the religious discussion. In a way, their thinking was purer than that of the theologians who used doctrine as a means of achieving power. Among the common laity, there was intense interest in learning the truth about God and Jesus. Ordinary shopkeepers and bath attendants engaged in serious intellectual debate regarding the nature of Christ. Rubenstein writes: "Converting a pagan population was no mere matter of getting people to make an emotional 'decision for Christ.' It meant bringing them to an understanding of the basic theological and ethical concepts embodied in the Old and New Testaments. It was not just Christ the evangelists and theologians were teaching, but a world view derived originally from Judaism — a passionate monotheism fundamentally at odds with the premises of pagan thought" (12-13).

How different this approach is to our contemporary evangelical approach. One has to wonder what would happen if today's lay people would give as much energy to studying the Scriptures, Christology, and the history of how the dogma of the Trinity came to be accepted as orthodox, as those simple pagan shopkeepers of 1700 years ago did. Would there be another reformation? Not simply a reformation of Church government — but a total reworking of Christian thinking about the person of Christ, leading to a rediscovery of the real Jesus as described in the Bible. What would happen if biblical theology could be divorced from worldly power struggles and hidden agendas? What if we could simply go to the Scriptures and ask, what do they teach about the person of Jesus and his relationship with God? If every Christian in every church were willing to invest a year of their time to biblical study, they would no doubt come to entirely different conclusions about the person of Jesus than those of the "theologians" who were often motivated by a lust for power and fear of persecution and ruled over by a government that co-opted the Church for its own political purposes. If a person was willing to undertake such a search for truth, a reading of *When Jesus Became God* would be a significant first step in the process of demythologizing the doctrine of the Trinity by helping the reader to see its formation — a power struggle and a demonstration of the use and abuse of religion mixed with politics. We have seen what happens when political extremists use religion as a means of achieving their political ends. It frequently ends in bloodshed. We need only to consider the events of September 11, 2001 or the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians to see where such an uneasy marriage takes us. The Arian-Nicean conflict provides a case study in the outcome of such events. One

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has to wonder how much bloodier it would have been had the conflict happened in an age of suicide bombers. But the damage has been done. We now have a divided Church that is alienated from other monotheistic faiths. When the Church embraced the dogma of the Trinity, it cut itself off from any meaningful dialogue with Judaism. Islam, the other great monotheistic faith, grew out of the eastern milieu that never fully embraced the Trinitarian dogma, but was forced to accept it on pain of excommunication, or worse. One has to wonder what would have happened if Arius had won the day. Would Islam ever have flourished? Would the preaching of the prophet of Allah, the one God, have found so many willing adherents in the East, had a more monotheistic version of Christianity won the day? This is a question that Rubenstein never asks directly. He leaves it to the reader to ask and wrestle with that question. How much easier would it be for Christians to engage in fruitful dialogue with both Jews and Muslims were it not for the fact that the Church espoused a dogma which claims to be monotheistic, but in actuality is tri-theistic?

This book should be required reading for all seekers of truth who are not content blindly to accept the dogmas that grew out of a hunger for power. Those who want to continue blindly believing a doctrine that is nowhere to be found in the Bible, don't read this book. Those who don't want to be challenged by learning the uses and abuses of politics and religion when they are mixed, don't read this book. Everyone else — read this book!

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