

# THE CHURCH AND THE RHETORIC OF EXPULSION

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“Scandal” means, not one of those ordinary obstacles that we avoid easily after we run into it the first time, but a paradoxical obstacle that is almost impossible to avoid: the more this obstacle, or scandal repels us, the more it attracts us. Scandals are responsible for the false infinity of mimetic rivalry...”  
(René Girard)

THE FRENCH-AMERICAN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, René Girard, is famous for discovering the victimage mechanism, a process through which highly mimetic creatures like us resolve those paradoxical and unavoidable conflicts when the acquisitive passions of two or more human agents converge on the same object in rivalry. I want to show on a well-known example from church history that the Church is not immune to becoming so scandalized by its own that the “victimage process,” exemplified by the shrill rhetoric of expulsion, drowns the music of Christ’s love command. Assuming that readers are broadly familiar with Girard’s theory, am turning in my analysis to the intense rivalry between two theological positions during the fourth century C.E., Arianism and Trinitarianism.

First some background. The fierce debate over the question whether Jesus was co-eternal and co-substantial with the Father had inflamed public and theological passions in unprecedented ways. As Arian churches were flourishing in Europe and the Middle East, the Christological debate divided the Roman Empire. To resolve it, Constantine the Great called the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 where Arius (256 – 336), an Alexandrian Presbyter, championed the non-trinitarian position. His claims had been debated for decades that Jesus was neither co-eternal nor co-substantial with the Father but was made “God’ by

the Father's power. At the Council, the conflict escalated into a church-wide rivalry of unparalleled fervor.

Under the leadership of Athanasius (296 – 373), an assistant Bishop from Alexandria, those who rejected Arianism as blasphemous and heretical and claimed that Jesus was indeed co-eternal and co-equal with the Father, emerged as the more persuasive and influential party. Trinitarianism carried the day as the dominant Christology, now enshrined in the Nicene Creed. Arius and his supporters were deposed and exiled; his teaching was declared anathema; his writings were burned and keeping them was punishable by death.

However, the debate did not die with Arius' exile. In its wake, Arius began to soften his Christology and the Emperor became more lenient toward Arians so that Arius was to be readmitted to full communion with the Church ten years later. But that was not to be. As tradition has it, Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople, who was to reinstate him at the Emperor's request, had prayed to God that Arius might die beforehand, and he did. One of Arius' fiercest opponents, Socrates Scholasticus, wrote a rather graphic account of what happened:

Arius was expecting to assemble with the church on the day following [Sunday]: but divine retribution overtook his daring criminalities. For going out of the imperial palace, attended by a crowd of Eusebian partisans like guards, he paraded proudly through the midst of the city, attracting the notice of all the people. As he approached the place called Constantine's Forum .... A terror arising from the remorse of conscience seized Arius, and with the terror of violent relaxation of the bowels: he therefore enquired whether there was a convenient place near, and being directed to the back of Constantine's Forum, he hastened thither. Soon after, faintness came over him, and together with evacuations his bowels protruded, followed by a copious haemorrhage, and the descent of the smaller intestines: moreover, portions of his

spleen and liver were brought off in the effusion of blood, so that he almost immediately died. The scene of this catastrophe still is shown in Constantinople ... behind the shambles in the colonnade: and by persons going by pointing the finger at the place, there is perpetual remembrance preserved of this extraordinary kind of death.<sup>1</sup>

Reading this text through the filter of Girard's theory, we note the typical features of a what Girard calls a "text of persecution." Apart from exposing the mimetic drama that must have taken place when the fourth-century church sought to hammer out the distinctively Christian boundary markers of its institutional identity, the text proves the guilt of the victim by attributing his death to divine retribution. At the Council, Arius was condemned by the church, and now the text depicts the manner of his death (or shall we say 'execution'?). The surrounding circumstances (presumably brought about by God's sovereign intervention) are described in detestable detail showing how Arius had expired in a most ignoble place imaginable, a public toilette that became afterwards a handy anti-Arian exhibit, a tourist attraction of sorts. Without Girard's theory, a twenty-first century reader of the text would be left wondering how a document that resorts to a rhetoric of expulsion in order to extol the orthodoxy of the Church could reflect the gospel Jesus.

In a recent study of this fourth century case, Oxford Professor of Theology, Johannes Zachhuber raises a similar question. He calls communication of this type the "rhetoric of evil," considering its presence in Christianity "deeply problematic," evincing that the Church *as an institution* and the gospel of Jesus are fundamentally at odds with each other.<sup>2</sup> He writes:

The Church is fallible not only in its day-to-day operations, but depends for its very institutional functioning crucially on means and mechanisms that are in principle and fundamentally opposed to the message of the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Zachhuber based his study on a different document of equally drastic content, the letter Athanasius wrote to his Bishop Serapion. It leaves us in no doubt that Christianity when it formed its institutional identity during the turmoil of the Nicene crisis, resorted more than once to the “rhetoric of expulsion.” Athanasius’ letter also describes the death of Arius and like the letter of Socrates shows up “the rhetoric of evil within the Christian Church.”<sup>4</sup> While scholars are sceptical about the historical accuracy of the circumstances surrounding Arius’ death, there is no doubt about its “careful rhetorical construction.”<sup>5</sup> Written twenty-two years after Arius’ death at the behest of Bishop Serapion, the letter refers to the delicate issue of Arius’ standing with the Church at the time of his death. Without wanting to appear too pleased about the circumstances, Athanasius seemed to have been quite keen, nevertheless, to publicize them:

For I conceive that when the wonderful circumstances connected with his death become known, even those who before questioned it will no longer venture to doubt that the Arian heresy is hateful in the sight of God.<sup>6</sup>

Athanasius presents even the prayer which the Bishop of Constantinople had offered twenty years earlier asking for divine intervention to secure Arius’ timely removal:

If Arius is brought to communion tomorrow, let me, Thy servant depart, and destroy not the pious with the impious; but if Thou wilt spare Thy Church (and I know that Thou wilt spare), look upon the words of Eusebius and his fellows, and give not thine inheritance to destruction and reproach, and take off Arius, lest he enter into the Church, the heresy also may seem to enter with him, and henceforth impiety be accounted for piety.<sup>7</sup>

Since Arius dies before his reinstatement, Athanasius lauds the “wonderful and extraordinary circumstance” that took place.<sup>8</sup> As Zachhuber puts it, “Not only does he [Arius] die timely,

he dies under the most dishonourable circumstances possible ... to which he had withdrawn 'urged by the necessities of nature'.”<sup>9</sup>

Before offering a closing comment, let me summarize some of the key features both texts have in common with “texts of persecution”:

- The symbolism of Arius’ death sought to forge a link between what the Church perceived as theological and doctrinal errors with the accusation of personal depravity. Arius is not just someone who adheres to an erroneous theology, but is portrayed as a wicket person deserving excommunication, even death.
- By relying on the text of Acts 1:18 (which speaks of Judas’ suicide and the protrusion of the bowels in both cases), the letter draws a scriptural parallel allowing Athanasius to present Arius as the arch-betrayer or the new Judas.<sup>10</sup>
- Because Arius’ ultimate expulsion is necessary and justified—after all, he was found guilty by the Council—the Bishop’s prayer seeks to bring divine killing power to bear upon the situation by asking God to “take Arius off” (the prayer is duly recorded, eye-witnessed by the Presbyter Macarius, also mentioned in the letter).
  - Pollution must be prevented from entering the church, ‘lest God gives his inheritance to destruction’.
  - The Bishop, as the ecclesial representative, shows no compunction in pronouncing the death penalty upon the man whose teaching the Council had already declared ‘anathema’.
- The collective condemnation of Arius by the Council was a year later re-confirmed by the coincidence of the Bishop’s prayer and Arius demise. It provided further evidence for all members of the Church that Arius was a heretic whose condemnation was just, and his removal an act of God himself who wanted to keep his Church free from pollution with false doctrine. God was therefore endorsing the formal curse (anathema) which the

Church had already pronounced the year before when the Council condemned Arius and his doctrine. What is more, the Bishop's concern for institutional purity trumped the Emperor's personal agenda; while not central, this detail about the question who was in charge would not have gone unnoticed.

In this context, it is also worth remembering that the Nicene Creed in its original form proclaimed not only what the Church believed but also what it condemned as heretical teaching. In other words, as soon as Christianity's institutional identity became a priority, the rhetoric of expulsion entered the practice of the Church, and it is no secret that during its history the Church has made copious use of it.

What goes unnoticed is the single-victim mechanism that lies at the root of all religion and culture, and whose function it is to shield human sociality against the instability of mimetic rivalry. Since this mechanism could never achieve lasting stability, it had to be re-established time and again through the same victimary solution invoking "sacred violence." According to Girard, this is the evil from which Jesus came to deliver us. The conclusion we may draw from the forgoing then is this: the culture-forming influence of universal mimesis is an unavoidable reality, which includes the mechanism of the scapegoat. The above paradox will remain and even determine the character of the institutional Church as long as human sociality draws its stability from personal and institutional differentiation rather than from peaceful imitation of the only model that "is our peace." Hence Zachhuber's apt comment, "[the Church is] the place where the gospel is preached *and* where the gospel is betrayed; [where] both Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor represent her reality."<sup>11</sup>

Extending these thoughts to a broader canvas of culture, we begin to see also that many causes of human suffering cannot be attributed to the ill-will or moral failure of individuals but must be regarded as the result of collective processes operating in society beyond the control of individual participants.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Socrates. “The Death of Arius,” *The Ecclesiastical Histories of Socrates Scholasticus*.

Retrieved 2 May 2012. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arius> Accessed 29 February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Zachhuber is a prolific author and Professor for Historical and Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford; ———, “The Rhetoric of Evil and the Definition of Christian Identity” in *Studien des Bonner Zentrums für Religion und Gesellschaft*, Band 9, Paul Fiddes and Jochen Schmidt (eds.) *The Rhetoric of Evil* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2013): 193-216 (here p. 194 -195).

<sup>3</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 215.

<sup>4</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 196.

<sup>5</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 196.

<sup>6</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 196.

<sup>7</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 197.

<sup>9</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1: 18 “Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.”

<sup>11</sup> Zachhuber, *Rhetoric of Evil*, 215-216.