

WAS ARIUS THE FIRST UNITARIAN?



It is common in Unitarian Universalist circles to name the theologian Arius of Lybia (256-336 C.E.) as the first theological unitarian, and therefore as a founder of our religious tradition. But was he the first Unitarian?

Born in a Libyan Berber family, Arius, son of Ammonius, was early attracted to the new Christian faith swirling around him. He was of ascetic character and had a reputation of pure morality. All, both theological supporters and adversaries, reported that he had decided convictions in theology. He migrated to the famous theological school at Antioch, and then to the bustling intellectual hub of Alexandria. In both centers he studied and disputed with many scholars on the nature of Jesus and the developing concept of a triune God, the Trinity of God in three Persons. This Greek and mystical concept perplexed Arius, who did not find substantiation for it either in the Bible or reason.

Arius was not the first to question the Trinity. Arius learned from the perspectives of Origen of Alexandria, the true founder of the heritage that came to be Unitarian Universalism, and who had died just two years before Arius was born. Origen had seen God, the Father who encompassed the universe, as a purely spiritual Unity. Jesus personified the Wisdom of God, while the Holy Spirit is the “power” proceeding from that Wisdom. Thus, to Origen, divinity is represented not as a mystical Trinity but a graded hierarchy of God being manifested in Jesus and Jesus being manifested in the Holy Spirit. Jesus thus owed his existence to the pre-existing, Universal, Unity of God.

Arius adapted Origen’s concepts, further defining the distinction between God and Jesus. God, to Arius, had produced in his special Son Jesus, a divinely “created being” as the Word or wisdom, with a stature between that of the universal God and temporal humans. These ideas drew popular support, and so at the Council of Nicaea in 324 Arius’s ideas were declared heretical and Arius himself was banished. Arius died suddenly in 336, perhaps of poisoning. Yet “Arian Christianity” became widely accepted in the Roman Empire and among Germanic tribes, and so to wipe out the heresy the church further condemned him in 381. Arianism, however, did not die, and today there is an Arian Catholic Church that in 2006 canonized the Venerable Arius as St. Arius.

Was Arius the first Unitarian? Not really. Origen had discarded the Trinity a generation before. Both Origen and Arius, however, had thought for themselves, and rejected theological notions that did not make sense to them, an approach that is now central in modern Unitarian Universalism. Still, the theological foundations of the Unitarian movement in the 16th century and later did not derive from the concepts of Origen or Arius of Jesus as a special divine creation between God and humanity, but the idea popularized by Faustus Socinus and became widely accepted in the developing Unitarian movement that Jesus, although perhaps inspired by God, was and remained fully a human being.

Ref: *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); “Arius of Alexandria: Priest and Martyr,” at http://www.holy_catholic.org/arian/arius.html; Edward Moore, “Origen of Alexandria (185-254 A.D.)” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/o/origen.htm>.

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