# The Role of Emperor Constantine in the Dogmatic Disputes of the Fourth Century

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**Abstract**

*In this study I tried to emphasize the central role that Constantine the Great had in the dogmatic disputes of the fourth century, referring in particular to the council of Nicaea in 325. The stately and providential figure Emperor Constantine for the affirmation of Christian faith in the context of the pagan world was put in relationship to the definition of the dogma of Nicaea and emperor's desire to combine politics with a religious vision: one religion, one God, one emperor. Here I revealed some aspects of theology that the dogma from council of Nicene involved, being delimited from the heresies of that times and the polytheism of ancient religions and philosophies. The Emperor Constantine played a decisive role not only in disputes between Christians and pagans, but also in disputes between Christians and Christians, giving force and rights to the Christian Church.*

Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) changed the history of Christianity; his political and religious gestures marked deeply the course of Christianity over the centuries.

The greatest challenge of the Church during the reign of Constantine the Great was not related to the disputes between Christians and pagans,

but between Christians and Christians. The Church began to be challenged to give key answers for its existence, answers that were required to be stated beyond its piety and worship. Of course, the empire needed peace and unity, just as the Church needed peace and unity. Both the Empire – the political power – and the Church – the spiritual power – was needed to reach a formula of coexistence. Therefore, the logic was: the dogmatic unity of the dogmatic was the guarantee of the security and unity of the empire, of all around the king, ensured the unity of the faith, the emperor becoming the defender of the Church's faith.

In this study I tried to present the role that Constantine the Great had in the dogmatic disputes of the fourth century.

## I. Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) - the role of Emperor Constantine the Great

Constantine's conversion to Christianity did not occur suddenly, but there has been a trend in which the king received the "signs of God" and gradually formed a Christian conception of the empire. The unit of the Empire was mainly linked to the unity of the worship of one God, developing a politic of consensus that both Christians and pagans could join.[1] After the victory in the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 against Maxentius, Constantine the Great and Licinius, make a joint statement at Milan in 313 and proclaimed the toleration of Christians.

In 324 Emperor Constantine - after defeating Licinius who remained devoted to pagan cults - receives at Nicomedia many complaints from both opponents and supporters of Arius, and answered in a letter – sent by Hosius of Cordoba – to Bishop Alexander and to Arius. In this letter he in showed the need to maintain religious peace within the Empire. Emperor Constantine, aware of its role as "messenger of peace", writes:

> "I try to raise your consciousness by putting before you the example of philosophers, who - even when they are in the service

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[1] Pierre Maraval, *Când Imperiul roman devine creştin* in vol. „Istoria creştinismului", coord. Alain Corbin, Editura Rosetti Educaţional, Bucureşti, 2010, pp. 59-60. This study was presented at the international conference organized by the Faculty of Theology in Cluj-Napoca, under the title *Credinţă şi politică. Sfinţii Împăraţi Constantin şi Elena, promotori şi apărători ai libertăţii religioase* (10-11 noiembrie 2013).

of the same creed - often happens to have many different views about any aspect of their theories; and yet even when the quality of their knowledge makes them differ from each other, the unity of the creed enables them to find the same language. Or, if so with the philosophers, is not more suitable that within the same teachings of faith, also we who are made to be servants of the great God to understand each other in the same spirit? (...) Therefore, allow me, servant of the Almighty, that under the protection of His Providence to take all the efforts to achieve my goal, which would mean that through my exhortations, through my care and the perseverance of my reproofs I return to Him the mops together in harmonious understanding (...) Return therefore to one another in the spirit of love and goodwill; give back to the people the right to embrace itself in his arms".[2]

The opinions on Constantine's theological knowledge were divided. For example A.H.M. Jones[3] believes that Constantine was not able to understand the metaphysical subtleties of the dogmatic disputes within Christianity, while T.G. Elliot[4] believes that regarding the theological issues, Constantine was a "neutral ignorant". Timothy Barnes[5] in his analysis that he made on Constantine's letter to Alexander and Arius notifies his message of unity in Christian love, to overcome doctrinal differences, as an example for the pagans. On his return Hosius of Cordoba explained to Emperor Constantine the full extent of Arianism and its implications within the Empire. Consequently, the emperor summoned by *imperial edict* the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (325) to solve the dogmatic problems. To resolve conflicts within the Church, synods are summoned, this call becomes a kind of "mechanism of Church's life"[6] by which it solves its problems. This was a new way of delimitation from the heresies of the time - the ecumenical councils were convened to formulate *creeds* in order

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[2] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare,* I, 71 în „Scrieri" partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol. 14, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (EIBMBOR), Bucureşti, 1991, pp. 119-121.

[3] A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe,* New-York, Toronto, 1978, pp. 122-124.

[4] T. G. Elliott, *Christianity of Constantine the Great,* Scranton, PA, 1996, pp. 183-186.

[5] Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius,* Cambridge, 1981, p. 213.

[6] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Istoria creştinismului,* trad. Cornelia Dumitru şi Mihai-Silviu Chirilă, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2011, p. 209.

to delimitate the faith of the Church from the heresy. These creeds will condemn the content of the heresies and will affirm the faith of the Church. Such *creed* as it is the one of Nicaea in 325 is, in a way, a continuation of that *regula fidei* from the second and the third centuries. His main aim was not a missionary one, but delimitation against the heresy of Arius, in this category are other documents of the fourth century, until the Council of Constantinople in 381.[7] The emergence of so-called "declarative creeds" is linked to doctrinal disputes of the fourth century, during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great. Through the council of Nicaea there is a mutation in the formulation of the creeds, they become "synodal and imperial, from positive summaries of faith for the catechumens, they become tests of orthodoxy for the bishops against the heretics".[8] After Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381) no council has made a symbol or creed[9] that begins with *pisteuomen eis,* this formula is replaced by *homologoumen* - to confess. So the canon / rule of faith or the canon / rule of truth has been used since the late second century as a guide for interpreting Scripture, in the fourth century the "canon of faith" will become the "symbol of faith", showing by this that, on the one hand, that the Church's faith precedes and generates the Scripture and not vice versa, on the other hand, that there is a "primacy of testimony". Thus, the confession of faith of the Church is essential, the Creed cannot precede the faith, but it is the expression of the Church's faith to which participates each person integrated into the community through baptism. The scheme *lex orandi = lex credendi* expresses the relationship between faith and prayer and thus between the Creed and Liturgy, and the scheme *lex credenda = modus vivendi* expresses the assuming of the faith and the delimitation of the Christian from the ones who do not believe like him.[10]

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[7] Wolfram Kinzig, *Ce este un Crez? Observaţii istorice asupra dezvoltării unui gen literar*, in „Anuarul Facultăţii de Teologie Ortodoxă", Universitatea Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2010, pp. 55-56.

[8] Diac. Ioan I Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei,* vol. I, Editura Deisis/Stravopoleos, 2008, p. 212.

[9] If in East, the creeds were called symbolon tes piesteos od simple pistis, in West sometimes was still used the latin equivalent, fides and symbolum or symbolum fidei (Wolfram Kinzig, *op. cit.,* p. 52).

[10] See also Pr. Dr. Daniel Benga, *Receptarea simbolului niceo-constantinopolitan în Sfânta Liturghie bizantină – dublarea mărturisirii credinţei* in „Anuarul Facultăţii de Teologie Ortodoxă „Patriarhul Justinian", pp. 151-166.

The role of Emperor Constantine in the council of Nicaea (325) was overwhelming; he *summoned*, *chaired* and even *leaded* some of the discussions.

Eusebius of Caesarea had earned a special prestige in his period, through his contributions as a scholar, historian, exegete, being a close friend of Emperor Constantine the Great. *Vita Constantini* is a panegyric, a tribute of Eusebius to the Emperor Constantine as the providential man in releasing Christian Church from persecutions.[11] He also presents the role of Emperor Constantine during the Council of Nicaea: "At a sign – announcing the approach of Constantine – the whole assembly stood. Then came the emperor, penetrating to its very middle, like an angel sent by God from heaven".[12]

From the speech of the emperor addressed to the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council we retain his concern for the disunion and strife within the Church perceived to be "more terrifying than war or than a battle, no matter how difficult it may be". Thus, issues of faith of the Church were more feared than any outside threat. Therefore, Constantine invited those present at the Council of Nicaea to *peace*. Eusebius emphasizes the role of Emperor Constantine in the meetings of the council:

> "The king listened to all the speakers and weighed the grounds
> of their words attentively and without partiality. And retaining
> something of theses of each group, he has made their irreducible
> furiously to be progressively replaced by approach".[13]

Constantine the Great reminds the bishops gathered in council of their responsibility to overcome the divisions especially that Christianity enjoys the support of the emperor and the enemies of Christianity are being removed. Moreover, he urges them to use the "evangelical and apostolic books" as well as the "predictions of the prophets" who taught about God in an inspiring manner, supporting the "apostolic dogmas".[14] The emperor

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[11] For suplimentary datum regarding this work see also Prof. Dr. Emilian Popescu, *Studiu introductiv* la Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare,* in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol. 14, EIBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1991, pp. 19-60.

[12] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare*, III, 11, p. 129.

[13] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare,* III, 13, p. 131.

[14] Teodoret episcopul Cirului, *Istoria bisericească,* I, 7 in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol. 44, trad. Pr. Prof. Vasile Sibiescu, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 1995, pp. 40-41.

Constantine claimed that the term *homoousios* clarifies better the unity and equality of the Son with the Father, also understanding – In consultation with some of the theologians of the Church – that this term could provide a good theological solution to the controversies aroused. Moreover, when the supporters of Arius challenged the term *homoousios*, Constantine himself gave theological references about its implications, discussing from theological position the cause of unity in faith.[15] Constantine the Great sends a letter to all the provinces of the empire and stated that all the decisions made at the council, *must* be understood as "so many appearances of the will of God".[16] In this letter Constantine considers himself as "fellow servant" of the bishops assembled at Nicaea, to investigate the definition of faith.[17]

The attitude of Emperor Constantine the Great towards the council of Nicaea became oscillating in the years that followed. Aleksandr Vasiliev believes that the reasons behind this oscillation were: 1) the influence of the court; 2) when Constantine tried to solve the problem of Arianism he was not aware of the real situation in the East, where the dominant sentiment was in favor of Arianism. Later, when he understood that the decisions of Nicaea were contrary to the spirit of the majority of the Church, Constantine the Great adopted a more nuanced and conciliatory towards Arianism, it even was accepted at court, and many supporters of the Nicene Creed were exiled.[18]

Emperor Constantine the Great mediates the conflicts of Church of Egypt related to Arianism crisis, which was preceded by the Donatist crisis. Again, the emperor called before him the parties "mediating between one and others with patience" and making known to all of them the decision through which he "sealed the dogmas established by the council and advising them to harmony".[19] Emperor Constantine actions in order to affirm the faith of the Church were multiple: closing of pagan temples and schismatic and heretical congregations – Marcionites, Valentinians – until the consecration of Sunday which gave him the authority to assert in the

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[15] Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantin şi imperiul creştin,* trad. Mihaela Pop, Editura All, Bucureşti, 2006, pp. 182-183.

[16] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare,* III, 20, p. 134

[17] Teodoret episcopul Cirului, *op. cit* I, 10, p. 48

[18] A. A. Vasiliev, *Istoria imperiului bizantin,* trad. Alexandru Tudorie, Vasile-Adrian Carabă, Sebastian-Laurenţiu Nazâru, Editura Polirom, 2010, pp. 100-101.

[19] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare,* III, 23, p. 136.

face of bishops: "You are bishops over the issues the inside the Church; I, God placed me bishop, for the ones outside the Church".[20]


## II. Theological Aspects of Faith Defined at Nicaea

Arius' vision of the Son contained several issues that theology and Church experience did not reflected in their depths: a) the Son is inferior or subordinate to the Father; b) Son was created by the Father from nothing; c) there was a time when the Son did not exist, he was created for the creation of the world.

With the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, the Logos is no longer reported to the Platonic logos, and no longer has assigned a beginning nor is perceived as an intermediate power between God and the world. The inaccuracies of the apostolic fathers, apologists and church writers such as Origen – Arius being their heir in many ways – are thus overcome by developing an unambiguously terminology, appropriate to the expression of dogma. But first, is exceeded the Gnostic cosmology before the Nicaea, which was highly virulent and very confusing. St. Athanasius the Great had a decisive role in the delimitation of the Christian faith from the old Greek philosophy extended in early Church through various Gnostic systems. St. Athanasius made a radical distinction between uncreated and created contrary to the philosophical distinction between unborn and born; this distinction underlies the distinction that St. Athanasius will make between theology and oiconomia.[21] St. Athanasius also states for the Bishop Serapion of Thmuis that those he wrote, were "according to the apostolic faith preached us by the Fathers, not adding anything new, but what I learned, I put in writing in accordance with the Holy Scripture".[22] Arians cogitating "outside of the Holy Scripture" understand "God-breathed Scriptures by human thinking".[23] Against such interpretations outside the Scriptures,

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[20] Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viaţa lui Constantin cel Mare*, IV, 24, p. 168.

[21] Nikolaos Matsoukas, *Istoria filosofiei bizantine,* trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Coman, Nicuşor Deciu, Editura Bizantină, Bucureşti, 2003, p. 89.

[22] Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola I către Serapion* XXXIII, in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti" vol 16, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 1988, p. 65

[23] Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola a II-a către Serapion* I, in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol. 16, p. 67.

St. Athanasius insists regarding the dogma about the divinity of the Son that "this is the content of faith received from the Apostles through the Fathers".[24]

The formulation of the faith at the Councils was not made against the Holy Scriptures or as a pretext for the fact that there would not be enough this faith, but was made to affirm it in accordance with the Scriptures, as well as interpreting them in light of Tradition. Those who read the canons of Nicaea can remember through the faith in present the Scriptures.

In a saving manner, Council of Nicaea delimited between God and the world of angels and thus between God and creation, considering Christ as God and thus avoiding the mythological of previous trinitarian traditions. The Nicene Council also underlines very clearly that the Logos, the Word identified with Christ, *is born, not created*. In fact St. Athanasius asked Arians not to make confusion between birth and creation. Thus he asked: "So remove the Word from the creatures and let Him be united with the Father as Creator and let Him be confessed as Son; or, if he is creature let Him be confessed as being in the same relationship with other creatures in between. Or to say that each of those can be called creature but not as one of the creatures; or born, or made, but not as one of the creatures or the born ones. In fact you said that the born and the created are the same thing, by writing: born or created".[25]

Redefining "supernatural" based on the Biblical conception of the Old Testament, the Church does not draw a line between "spiritual world" and this world, but between the Creator God and everything that He created.[26] The term "angel" had a special place in the vocabulary of Arianism, trying to speculate with it a distortion of the relationship between Creator and creature, saying that angels are mediators between God and the world, this

[24] Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola a II-a către Serapion*, VIII, p. 75. A se vedea şi Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola către episcopul Adelfie împotriva arienilor* VI, in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti" vol 16, p. 183; Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola I către Serapion* XXVIII, in „Scrieri", partea a II-a, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol 16, p. 58.

[25] Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Trei cuvinte împotriva arienilor,* II, 20, in „Scrieri", partea I, col. „Părinţi şi Scriitori Bisericeşti", vol. 15, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 1987, p. 252.

[26] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Tradiţia creştină. O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei I. Naşterea tradiţiei universale (100-600)*, trad. Silvia Palade, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2004, pp. 158-159.

function could be extended to the Logos who held the highest rank among them. In this respect Pelikan considers Arianism as "a «remarkable crowning» of angelic Christology which had its origins in the late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic vision and made a last effort of opposition to the «new Hellenistic Christology», even if the testimony in support of the universality of this form of interpretation of the divine nature of Christ is not fully convincing".[27]

However the Logos-Son as He was conceived in Arianism was meant to be a soteriological and cosmological mediator even if "what resulted in the end in the Arian system was a picture of Christ suspended between man and God, a Christ who was identical to none, but related to both: God was interpreted in a deistic perspective, man in a moral perspective and Christ from a mythological perspective".[28] The Nicene Creed had within its confession both a soteriological and cosmological character, i.e. the same God is Creator and Savior, Christ-Logos is the Creator and Redeemer of creation. The term *homoousios* has direct implications at soteriological level and in ecclesial-liturgical Christian life so that all Christian life would have suffered if Christ was not considered of the same substance as the Father. The error of Arius was due to the application of the philosophical categories in Christology which led to total confusion regarding the person of Jesus Christ. Ioan I. Ică jr. notes that through the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea "soteriology now is ahead of cosmology: Christ is not only intermediary cosmic Logos between God and the world, but the eternal Son of the Father, consubstantial (*homoousion*) with Him. The purpose of this key-term was the establishment of ontological distinctions between Trinity and the world and of epistemological dissociation between contemplation and speculation, between mysticism and reason, between theology and philosophy. Thus, we return to an ecclesial biblical theology, liturgical and existential, ascetical-mystical. St. Athanasius starts from the clear disassociate in God between being and will, or between creation (*genesis*) of the Son in the "immanent" Trinity and creation (*genesis*) which is the work of the Trinity. Based on full *homoousia* of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father and God replacing the cosmological scheme God-Logos through the soteriological relationship Father-Son, Trinitarian theology serves in the thinking of St Athanasius as a foundation of Christology and

[27] J. Pelikan, *Tradiţia creştină...*, pp. 212-213.
[28] J. Pelikan, *Tradiţia creştină...*, pp. 212-213.

of theology of creation and soteriology; latter two being dominated by the realism of the Incarnation of the Logos which has the correlative "deification of man".[29] We note that both triadology and Christology and cosmology in relation to them are treated in a close and autonomous manner, for the sake of forming a rigid system unrelated to life, but in St. Athanasius' thinking all of them are related to soteriology, which culminates with the deification of man and transfiguration of all creation.

Among the "heroes" of Nicaea, certainly was also the Emperor Constantine, who thought and assumed the defining of the dogma and divinity of the Son with the Father in accordance with the Scriptures and the patristic tradition.

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[29] Diac. Ioan I Ică jr, *Mystagogia trinitatis. Probleme ale teologiei trinitare patristice şi moderne cu referire specială la triadologia Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, în „Mitropolia Banatului", an IX (1998), nr. 10-12, p. 17.