

## *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State*

by Charles Freeman

A Review by Barbara Buzzard



Not being enamored of history per se, I searched out this book because of a quotation to the effect that it wasn't the church bishops who instituted the Trinity, but rather a Roman emperor.

"The story, as this book hopes to show, is well documented, but an *alternative narrative*, that the Church itself came to a consensus on the nature of the Godhead, is *still the dominant one* in histories of Christianity" (emphasis mine). Wow! What a find!

Yet another credible source that attests to the fact that our world is upside down; that what is believed to be factual history is actually an *alternative narrative*! As Freeman states: "The 380's were truly a turning point, and the story of how freedom of thought was suppressed needs to be brought back into the mainstream of the history of European thought." He explains that by the 12th century church and state were united in suppressing freedom of religious thought and that it wasn't until the 17th century that the principle of religious toleration was again reasserted in Europe.

These words were part of an edict sent out by Theodosius in 380 AD: "We shall believe in the single deity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We judge demented and insane, shall carry the infamy of heretical dogmas. Their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by Divine Vengeance, and secondly by the retribution of hostility which We shall assume in accordance with the Divine Judgment." No gracious "if you please" here! Uncompromising language and sustained condemnation took the place of the former diversity of spiritual life and a long-standing tradition of freedom of speech. It should be pointed out that that many societies at this time were highly sophisticated, study guides and discussion groups being important features. (One poet's library contained 62,000 papyrus rolls!) On a humorous note, social climbers in that day "filled their houses so full of papyrus rolls that it would have taken them a lifetime just to read the titles."

Freeman expertly explores for his readers the relationship between church and state, at a time of chaos when Christians agreed on little or nothing, when men like Constantine, described as ambitious and ruthless, were after absolute power. Freeman says, "There is no evidence that Constantine became any more pious or less brutal in either his public or private life after his victory, so was this a genuine conversion?" This was also the time when the church first became rich. "In this way a pagan custom, the worship of gods through impressive buildings, was transferred successfully into Christianity. Such display was completely alien to the Christian tradition, and the ascetic scholar Jerome must have spoken for many traditionalists when he complained that 'parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are dressed up in jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying.' Now opulence became central to Christianity's public identity."

"The greatest turbulence centered on a confrontation between Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria...and one of his priests by the name of Arius...The particular debate focused on defining the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. This had become one of the most challenging issues in Christian theology." What followed was termed the Arian controversy. In an effort to deal with this issue, the Nicene Creed was drawn up by a number of bishops in 325 AD, but as Richard Hanson described it, "the Creed was a mine of potential confusion." No positive mention of it is found until it was revived in the 350s. Interestingly, it said nothing about the Trinity and did not personalize the Holy Spirit. It appears that following Nicea, Constantine believed the debate impossible to resolve; it is said that good order was more important to him than good doctrine.

“The original conception of Jesus in the context of the Jewish world in which he lived and taught was that he was fully human. It was impossible to conceive, in fact blasphemous for a Jew to believe, as it would later be for Muslims, that he could be divine...Even here there were many Christians who continued to see Jesus as no more than a man, though one of great spiritual qualities.” This quotation makes me think of all the times I hear or read that Jesus was no mere man. Granted, he certainly wasn’t a mere man. What mere man can resurrect the dead, control the sea, exorcise demons, etc? But doing miracles does not turn one into God (especially if there is only one!) any more than it leaves one in a “mere” state. The disciples prophesied that greater miracles would be done by Christians in the future and that will not make them God.

The ongoing argument between subordinationists who took seriously John 14:28, “The Father is greater than I,” and those who believed Father and Son were of one substance (Nicene Creed) is explained as follows: “Anyone who wished to argue that Jesus was equal in divine majesty to God the Father would need to exercise considerable literary ingenuity to find alternative explanations of these texts. To the subordinationists they seem incontrovertible, and this helps to explain why the gulf between them and the followers of the Nicene Creed, with their insistence on ‘one substance,’ became so wide.” Freeman summarizes very well what the issue was then and indeed still is: “The challenge to insisting that Jesus (and in later debates, the Holy Spirit) is divine and distinct without there being two (or three) gods was one of the main conceptual difficulties in the whole debate, and remains so today.” Other factions concentrated on the differences between the Father and the Son, i.e. the Father unbegotten and the Son begotten. This group was led by Eunomius who apparently employed relentless logic, his opponents arguing that the Godhead was beyond reason and invoking the “it’s a mystery” argument. It is interesting that during this time a pagan emperor came to power and had this to say regarding the controversy: “No wild beasts are such enemies to mankind as are most of the Christians in their deadly hatred of each other.” One Christian apologist who I know sympathizes with this picture and says “Give me a good atheist any day. It is the Bible clutching types I have trouble with.”

Athanasius was an important player in this drama and Freeman candidly says of him: “His emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, *even if not explained in any coherent way*, meshed well with western thinking and so strengthened the Nicene cause there” (emphasis mine). Even more importantly, Freeman informs us, there was a dark side to this man who seemed to enjoy pouring venom on his enemies. Freeman mentions him as one who marked a departure from former intellectual debate and through the use of invective lowered the tone of the exercise and contributed to the demise of free speech.

At this point, allow me to include the publisher’s description of *AD 381*: “In AD 381, Theodosius, emperor of the eastern Roman empire, issued a decree in which all his subjects were required to subscribe to a belief in the Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This edict defined Christian orthodoxy and brought to an end a lively and wide-ranging debate about the nature of God; all other interpretations were now declared heretical. It was the first time in a thousand years of Greco-Roman civilization free thought was unambiguously suppressed. Yet surprisingly, the popular histories claim that the Christian Church reached a consensus on the Trinity at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. *Why has Theodosius’s revolution been airbrushed from the historical record?* [emphasis mine]. In this groundbreaking new book, acclaimed historian Charles Freeman shows that the council was in fact a sham, only taking place after Theodosius’s decree had become law. The Church was acquiescing in the overwhelming power of the emperor. Freeman argues that Theodosius’s edict and the subsequent suppression of paganism not only brought an end to the diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs throughout the empire, but created numerous theological problems for the Church, which have remained unsolved. The year AD 381, as Freeman puts it, was ‘a turning point which time forgot.’”

Freeman functions as an astute whistleblower in attempting to enlighten us as to actual history rather than the alternative one which is commonly believed. We have lost much by the faulty assumption that the church worked it out, got it right, and had pure motives, the matter needing no further investigation. As Freeman points out, nothing could be further from the truth! He quotes Gregory of Nazianzus and his teaching of how the Trinity came about: “The doctrine of the Trinity has been subject to progressive revelation. First, God the Father has to be revealed, in the Old Testament; then, through the gospels, Jesus

the Son; and finally the Holy Spirit, who appears to enthuse the disciples after the Passion and through the fiery tongues at Pentecost. ‘God meant it to be piecemeal additions...by progress and advance from glory to glory...During Jesus’ time on earth there had simply been too much for the disciples to take in.’

“While free discussion of the issue was now limited, the premature ‘settlement’ of the Trinity by Theodosius in 381 had left important questions unresolved. The one that was to consume the eastern Church for many years to come was how to relate the fully divine Jesus, one in substance with the Father, to Jesus as a human being as he appeared in the gospels. What was the nature of Jesus’ divinity while he was on earth? Was it somehow suspended at the moment of his birth and taken up again at the Resurrection, or did it persist throughout his earthly ministry? Could he, for instance, have a divine soul, of a different quality from that of an ordinary human being, in a human body? When Mary gave birth, what did she give birth to — a man or a god? In his everyday life, did Jesus pass backwards and forwards from divinity to humanity, acting as divine when he carried out miracles and as human when he ate and drank with his disciples? Were his teachings to be allocated to either his divine or his human capacity according to their content? Did his divinity affect the degree to which he could endure the suffering he apparently underwent for the saving of mankind?” The Chalcedonian formula attempted to answer these questions: is Jesus a single hypostasis, consisting of two natures, human and divine, “without change, without division, without separation. This explained nothing.”

Again the core revelation of this book: “It was the emperors who had actually defined Christian doctrine. This definition was then incorporated into the legal system so that orthodoxy was upheld by both secular and Church law, and heretics were condemned by the state. It is important to reiterate just how radical a development this was and the degree to which it diminished intellectual life...The core of orthodoxy was, of course, the Nicene Trinity. Yet if the thesis of this book is right, this doctrine had only become orthodox because it had been enforced by the state.” Freeman then questions what part, if any, reason played in the formation of doctrine and notes its diminishing importance. Imagine a situation where doctrine had become established and then scripture had to be interpreted to support it!

Augustine felt compelled to write a defense of the Nicene Trinity. It is said that he dreaded it and he writes in his book *Confessions*, “Who understands the omnipotent Trinity? Yet who among us does not speak of it, if it indeed be the Trinity he speaks of? Rare is the soul that knows whereof it speaks, whatever it may say concerning the Trinity.” Legend has it that Augustine was at the seashore when he met a young boy who was filling a shell with sea water and pouring it into a hole in the sand. The boy told Augustine that it is easier to empty the sea into a hole than to explain a single iota of the mystery of the Trinity. Augustine, even after 20 years of research and writing his defense of the Trinity, maintained that it was a mystery. Freeman finds “something even more ominous about Augustine’s legacy...It brings to an end the long tradition...that one should not use force to convince.” And from that point came acceptance of persecution in medieval Europe.

Peter Abelard was known as the most brilliant logician of the 12th century and was challenged to defend the Trinity. His first writings were condemned and ordered to be burned. (Dangerous business this see-saw paradigm of heresy: now you are a heretic, now you aren’t.) He became obsessed with finding the right arguments and, in doing so, his arguments became more and more complex. For example, try believing this from Abelard: “Although God the Father is entirely the same essence as God the Son or God the Holy Spirit, there is one feature proper to God the Father insofar as he is Father, another to God the Son, and yet another to the Holy Spirit.” Freeman relates that scholars remain unconvinced. Importantly, to have orthodoxy imposed on one was to stifle all original thinking as it could be deemed heretical. It was recently stated at a biblical scholars’ conference that orthodoxy is always right but never simple, and heresy always simple but never right. Food for thought!

There is an amazing legal detail here: “The common front of Church and state was underpinned by the rediscovery of Roman law. A single sixth-century manuscript of the Digest of Justinian’s law code had survived in the west and turned up in Padua in about 1070. The code included Justinian’s and Theodosius’ laws against paganism and in support of the Trinity, so those states that now absorbed Roman law, including the Holy Roman Empire, also took on the defense of Christian orthodoxy. Thus,

the Trinity, embedded at the core of Church doctrine, was upheld in secular and ecclesiastical courts alike.” And the end result: even when, many years later, Catholicism was condemned, it mattered little as its core doctrine had been absorbed into Protestantism. The author concludes that there are two approaches to 381. The first is theological, rooted in the writings of Augustine and tradition, both Catholic and Protestant. This is the standard approach but it denies that there could have been any other outcome from the Council of Nicea and it also omits any reference to the role of Theodosius. The second uses historical evidence as its foundation. “It is the central argument of this book that the events of 381 cannot be airbrushed from the narrative.”

I am most grateful to Charles Freeman for the vastness of his research and for the passion for Truth displayed by his analysis. His ferreting out of historical facts that give us answers to the origin of this doctrine is to be applauded. As Pascal’s wise proverb says, it is only the concealing of the origin of this doctrine that keeps it alive.

May I conclude with the words of Michael Servetus who was murdered by John Calvin on this theological issue: “To me not only the syllables but all the letters and the mouths of babes and sucklings, even the very stones themselves, cry out there is one God the Father and [as a separate being] his Christ, the Lord Jesus...Not one word is found in the whole Bible about the Trinity nor about its persons, nor about the essence nor the unity of substance nor of the one nature of the several beings nor about any of the rest of their ravings and logic chopping.”

Respectfully submitted,  
Barbara Buzzard