

POLITICS AND THEOLOGY AT NICAEA. CONSTANTINE, OSSIIUS AND EUSEBIUS OF NICOMEDIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate what actually happened (rather than what is often assumed to have happened) at the Council of Nicaea. That involves rejecting the view that what happened was that a well-established 'orthodoxy' was challenged by Arius, an obvious heretic in the eyes of almost everyone. Rather, what happened at the Council was that orthodoxy was at least in part established in a rejection of various types of rather popular subordinationism. It will also be shown that the widespread belief that Athanasius played a major role at the Council (rather than after it) is mistaken and that the chief conciliar 'players' were Ossius, Alexander, Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia and the Emperor Constantine himself. In the course of this demonstration, the ambiguity of the word 'homooousios' will be an important theme.

Keywords: *homooousios*, subordinationism, *homoiousios*, imperial religion, Arianism, heresy

Constantine was far from the first Roman emperor to plan for the religious unification of his Empire: such aspirations are already visible under Decius, whose persecution of Christians in 248 – the first Empire-wide project of this sort, so quite different from the pogroms of earlier times – was part of a wider campaign to promote religious uniformity. Aurelian had hoped that *Sol Invictus* would serve the same purpose, while Diocletian and his colleagues in the Tetrarchy wanted to eliminate religions which might seem to counter the needs of society – such as military service – or to bring down the wrath of the gods: hence his onslaught in 303 on Christians and before that on Manicheans.

By presenting himself and his chosen ally Maximian as sons respectively of Jupiter and Hercules, Diocletian attempted to base his rule on divine right, perhaps hoping thus to distract his subjects from the military power which underlay his throne. This