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Christendom at the Crossroads: *The Council of Nicaea (325 CE), Arianism, and the Mediterranean History of Monotheism.*

A Cristandade na Encruzilhada: *O Concílio de Niceia (325 d.C.), o Arianismo e a História Mediterrânica do Monoteísmo.*

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Resumo: Este artigo examina o Concílio de Nicéia (325 d.C.) não apenas como um evento eclesiástico interno ao cristianismo, mas como um momento fundamental na história mais ampla do monoteísmo mediterrânico. Situado no dossiê 'Concílios e Cristianismos. Mobilidades, Religiosidades e Espiritualidade na Antiguidade e na Idade Média', o estudo olha ao passado helenístico — através das controvérsias de Tertuliano (c. 160-220 d.C.) e Orígenes (c. 185-253 d.C.) — e ao futuro medieval, através dos reinos arianos germânicos. Analisa a cristologia subordinacionista de Ário de Cirene, cuja insistência em que Jesus era uma criatura e mensageiro de Deus o situou na encruzilhada de tradições radicalmente monoteístas que anteciparam o ambiente teológico do Islã. Através de quatro enquadramentos analíticos — teologia histórica, teologia política, história social dos reinos arianos germânicos e estudo comparativo do monoteísmo —, o artigo argumenta que a supressão do arianismo em Nicéia dispersou o monoteísmo subordinacionista pelo Mediterrâneo através dos reinos visigótico, ostrogótico e vândalo, criando condições religiosas e sociais que facilitaram a recepção do Islã no Norte de África, na Península Ibérica e no Levante.

Palavras-chave: Arianismo; Cristologia; Concílio de Nicéia; Reinos Germânicos; Monoteísmo Mediterrânico.

Abstract: This article examines the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) not merely as an internal Christian ecclesiastical event but as a pivotal moment in the broader Mediterranean history of monotheism. Situated within the dossier 'Councils and Christianisms. Mobilities, Religiosities and Spirituality in Antiquity and the Middle Ages', the study looks to the Hellenistic past — through the Christological controversies of Tertullian (c. 160-220 CE) and Origen (c. 185-253 CE) — and to the medieval future, through the Germanic Arian kingdoms. It analyzes the subordinationist Christology of Arius of Cyrene, whose insistence that Jesus was a created servant and messenger of God placed him at the intersection of radical monotheistic traditions that later shaped the theological environment in which Islam emerged. Drawing on four analytical frameworks — historical theology, political theology, the social history of the Germanic Arian kingdoms, and comparative monotheism — the article argues that the suppression of Arianism at Nicaea dispersed subordinationist monotheism across the Mediterranean through the Visigothic, Ostrogothic, and Vandal kingdoms, creating social and religious conditions that facilitated the reception of Islam in North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Levant.

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Keywords: Arianism; Christology; Council of Nicaea; Germanic Kingdoms; Mediterranean Monotheism.

Introduction.

In 2025, the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea has prompted renewed commemoration across the Christian world. Convened by Emperor Constantine I at the city of Nicaea in Bithynia (modern İznik, Turkey) in 325 CE, this first ecumenical council of the Christian Church sought to resolve the most volatile doctrinal controversy of the fourth century: the dispute surrounding the Alexandrian priest Arius of Cyrene (c. 256-336 CE), whose subordinationist Christology (the view that the Son is ontologically derived from and inferior to the Father) held that Jesus was a created being — the Word and Messenger of God — but emphatically not co-eternal with the Father.[2]

The present study approaches the Council of Nicaea from the historiographical perspective invited by this dossier: examining it against both its Hellenistic past and its medieval future and attending to the multiplicity of Christological interpretations that characterize Mediterranean Christianity in East and West from the third century through the Middle Ages. Before Nicaea, the theological controversies associated with Tertullian of Carthage (c. 160-220 CE) and Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-253 CE) had generated the conceptual vocabulary within which the Arian controversy was later conducted. After Nicaea, the suppression of Arianism dispersed subordinationist monotheism across the Mediterranean in forms that shaped the religious landscape of late antiquity and the early medieval period — most consequentially through the Germanic Arian kingdoms of the fifth and sixth centuries and, ultimately, through structural theological affinities that facilitated the reception of Islam in regions with deep Arian traditions.

The argument developed here draws on four intersecting analytical frameworks: historical theology (Hanson, Ayres), political theology (Peterson, Hollerich), the social history of the Germanic Arian kingdoms (Wolfram, Goffart, Heather, Berndt and Steinacher), and the comparative history of monotheism (Tannous, Griffith, Khalidi). Together, these frameworks support a reading of the Council of Nicaea as a decisive but unstable political intervention in a long, complex, and ultimately unresolved controversy

[2] HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; AYRES, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

— a controversy whose Mediterranean dimensions extended far beyond the episcopal assembly that formally decided it.

The Pre-Nicene Theological Inheritance: Tertullian, Origen, and the Christological Question.

To understand the controversy that erupted at Nicaea, it is necessary to situate it within the longer trajectory of second- and third-century Christian theological debate. Two figures are indispensable to this prehistory: Tertullian of Carthage and Origen of Alexandria, whose formulations generated the conceptual tensions that Arius would later exploit and that the Council of Nicaea would seek — incompletely — to resolve.

Tertullian (c. 160-220 CE), writing in Latin from Roman North Africa, was the first Christian theologian to deploy the term *trinitas* to describe the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His polemic against Praxeas — a modalist who denied any real distinction between the divine persons — established the vocabulary of substance (*substantia*) and person (*persona*) that would underpin later Trinitarian theology.[3] Yet Tertullian's own formulation contained unresolved tensions: his insistence that the Son was 'of one substance' with the Father coexisted with language implying a degree of subordination, reflecting the persistent difficulty of reconciling strict monotheism with the veneration of Christ. These tensions, unresolved, passed to succeeding generations as the theological inheritance within which Arius would work.

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-253 CE) systematized early Christian theology on a grander scale and introduced distinctions that proved even more consequential for the Arian controversy. In his *De Principiis*, Origen developed a theology of the Logos as a distinct divine being eternally generated by the Father — yet subordinate to the Father in an ordered hierarchy of divinity. The Son, for Origen, was 'God' (*theos*) but not 'the God' (*ho theos*); a 'second God' (*deuteros theos*). This Origenian subordinationism became the immediate theological background against which Arius developed his own, more radical, position.[4]

[3] TERTULLIAN. *Adversus Praxean*, c. 213 CE. For analysis, see KELLY, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th ed. London: A&C Black, 1977, pp. 111-115.

[4] ORIGEN. *De Principiis*, c. 225 CE; see HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 52-67.

The multiplicity of Christological interpretations that characterize Mediterranean Christianity in this period is thus rooted in these pre-Nicene debates. Tertullian's vocabulary and Origen's subordinationist framework represent not deviations from an established orthodoxy but contributions to a fluid theological conversation in which no consensus yet existed.[5] It was within this environment of productive theological plurality that Arius of Cyrene developed the position that would bear his name.

Arius of Cyrene and the Emergence of Subordinationist Christology.

Arius was a North African and Mediterranean intellectual whose biography challenges the Eurocentrism of much early Church historiography.[6] Born around 256 CE in Cyrene — the Libyan city of Eratosthenes and the Cyrenaic philosophical school — Arius pursued his theological education in Antioch under Lucianus, a theologian later martyred for his faith and known for marked subordinationist tendencies, before serving as a presbyter in Alexandria.

Arius's central theological claim was deceptively simple, formulated in the phrase *ēn pote hote ouk ēn*: 'there was a time when [the Son] was not.'[7] Drawing on scriptural passages describing Christ as the 'firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:15) and the 'beginning of God's creation' (Revelation 3:14), Arius insisted that the Son was a created being — however exalted — whose existence was contingent upon the will of the Father. Jesus was the Word (*Logos*) and Spirit of God, but not God himself. The Father alone was eternal, unbegotten, and transcendent; the Son was the first and greatest of creatures.

This position found widespread resonance. Arius was, by all accounts, an effective communicator, capable of expressing complex theological positions in popular hymns and accessible language that circulated in the markets and public squares of Alexandria and beyond. His alliance with Eusebius of Nicomedia, one of the most influential bishops of the eastern Empire, gave the movement powerful ecclesiastical patronage. When Bishop Alexandros of Alexandria moved to suppress Arius around 318 CE, the controversy rapidly escaped the boundaries of Egypt, and the doctrinal dispute became

[5] AYRES, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 20-30.

[6] HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 3-18; AYRES, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 12-16.

[7] The formula *ēn pote hote ouk ēn* is preserved in fragments of Arius's letters assembled by Athanasius; see HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 5-10.

entangled with questions of episcopal authority, ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and imperial governance.

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE): Political Theology and the Institutionalization of Trinitarianism.

Constantine I, who had defeated his last rival Licinius at the Battle of Chrysopolis in September 324 CE and now ruled as sole emperor, found that his eastern territories were convulsed by theological conflict. His response — the convocation of an ecumenical council at Nicaea, with bishops summoned at imperial expense from across the empire — was the first such systematic intervention of imperial power in Christian doctrinal definition.[8]

The political-theological logic of this intervention has been analyzed by scholars since Erik Peterson's 1935 essay on monotheism as a political problem.[9] As Michael Hollerich has demonstrated, Eusebius of Caesarea — Constantine's intimate and the council's most celebrated historian — constructed a political theology in which the Christian emperor functioned as a vicegerent of the one God on earth, with ecclesiastical unity serving as the indispensable foundation of imperial unity.[10] The council's adoption of the Nicene formula of *homoousios* ('of the same substance') was driven as much by its utility as an unambiguous political marker as by genuine theological consensus — a clarity that, as Hanson and Chadwick emphasize, remained fiercely contested.[11]

As R. P. C. Hanson demonstrated across nearly nine hundred pages of scholarship, many of the bishops who signed the Nicene Creed did so under imperial pressure and without genuine theological conviction — a finding that fundamentally challenges the retrospective image of Nicaea as the spontaneous consensus of the apostolic tradition.[12]

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[8] BARNES, Timothy D. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 205-212; EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA. *Vita Constantini*. Trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, II.65-66.

[9] PETERSON, Erik. *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*. Leipzig: Hegner, 1935.

[10] HOLLERICH, Michael J. "Religion and Politics in the Writings of Eusebius". In: *Church History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. 59, No. 3, 1990, pp. 309-325.

[11] CHADWICK, Henry. *The Early Church*. Rev. ed. London: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 130; HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 156-163.

[12] HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 156-172.

Lewis Ayres reinforced this judgment: the pro-Nicene theology that eventually triumphed was itself a new theological construction rather than a recovery of apostolic faith.[13]

The settlement proved unstable almost immediately: within a generation, Constantine reportedly embraced the Arian position on his deathbed, receiving baptism from Eusebius of Nicomedia.[14] His successor Constantius II (r. 337-361 CE) actively promoted subordinationist theology across the eastern empire, effectively reversing Nicene decisions at the Councils of Sirmium and Milan in the 350s.[15] Jerome, writing in the heat of the controversy, observed that 'the world was full of Arianism'[16] — a remark that, for the mid-fourth century, was no exaggeration. The Council of Nicaea was thus not the conclusion of the Christological controversy but its escalation.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the Nicene and Arian Christological positions, including the historically shifting pattern of imperial endorsement.

Table 1 — Comparison of Nicene and Arian Christological Positions

Feature	Nicene (Trinitarian) Position	Arian (Subordinationist) Position
Nature of Jesus	Eternal Son of God; of the same substance (homoousios) as the Father	Created being, servant and messenger of God; not co-eternal with the Father
Relationship to Father	Co-eternal and equal with the Father	Not co-eternal: 'there was a time when he was not' (en pote hote ouk en)
Key Proponents	Athanasius of Alexandria; Bishop Alexandros	Arius of Cyrene; Eusebius of Nicomedia
Imperial Support	Constantine I (at Nicaea, 325 CE); Theodosius I (from 381 CE)	Constantius II (337-361 CE); Constantine I (reportedly, deathbed, 337 CE)

The Dispersal of Arianism: Germanic Kingdoms and the Westward Transmission of Subordinationist Monotheism.

The suppression of Arianism under Theodosius I, who definitively re-established Nicene Trinitarianism at the Council of Constantinople (381 CE), did not extinguish the

[13] AYRES, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-30.

[14] SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS. *Historia Ecclesiastica*, c. 439 CE, I.38; cf. BARNES, Timothy D. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 226.

[15] HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 316-340.

[16] JEROME. *Dialogus adversus Luciferianos*, 19. For context, see HANSON, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 316-320.

subordinationist tradition; it dispersed it. The most consequential vehicle of this dispersal was the conversion of the Germanic peoples of the Roman frontier to the Arian form of Christianity in the mid-fourth century.

The Gothic bishop Ulfilas (c. 311-383 CE), consecrated by Eusebius of Nicomedia at the moment of Arianism's greatest imperial influence under Constantius II, translated the Bible into Gothic and evangelized the Visigothic and Ostrogothic peoples.[17] As Wolfram and the contributors to *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* have argued, the Arianism adopted by the Germanic peoples was not simply derivative of the theology condemned at Nicaea; it developed as an independent tradition shaped by their own historical experience and their need to differentiate themselves from the Catholic Roman establishment that had persecuted them. The Germanic peoples who professed subordinationist Christianity called themselves 'catholic' and 'orthodox' — a testimony to the contingency of the label 'Arian' as a polemical construction imposed retrospectively by the victors of the controversy.[18]

The **Visigothic Kingdom** (c. 415-711 CE) established Arian Christianity as the defining religious identity of the Gothic ruling class in Spain, Portugal, and southern France. Alaric I, whose 410 CE sack of Rome demonstrated the vulnerability of the 'Eternal City', was an Arian Christian seeking a secure homeland free from Catholic Roman oppression. The kingdom's defining internal crisis came when Recared I converted to Catholicism in 589 CE for political reasons, creating a fracture between court and the broadly Arian Gothic population.[19] When Tariq ibn Ziyad entered Andalusia in 711 CE, many Arian Visigoths, exhausted by Catholic persecution, allied with the Muslim forces; cities opened their gates without resistance in numerous instances.

The **Ostrogothic Kingdom** (493-554 CE), centered on Italy under Theodoric the Great (r. 493-526 CE), offers the most eloquent illustration of what Walter Goffart famously termed 'techniques of accommodation':[20] practical arrangements by which

[17] WOLFRAM, Herwig. *History of the Goths*. Trans. Thomas J. Dunlap. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 75-82.

[18] BERNDT, Guido; STEINACHER, Roland (eds.). *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, pp. 1-15; WOLFRAM, Herwig. *History of the Goths*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 82-95.

[19] HEATHER, Peter. *The Goths*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 180-210.

[20] GOFFART, Walter. *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 3-10.

Arian Germanic rulers governed diverse religious populations without coercing theological conformity. Arian Goths and Nicene Romans lived under separate but parallel legal systems; no group was persecuted for its beliefs. The Catholic Church's subsequent effort to erase this past — scraping faces from the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, burning books, and participating in a historiographical tradition that would, from the eighteenth century onward, encode this erasure in the very vocabulary of cultural destruction — is itself testimony to the depth of what it felt compelled to suppress.

The **Vandal Kingdom** in North Africa (429-534 CE) is perhaps the most directly relevant to the Mediterranean trajectory of the argument. Gaiseric's crossing into Africa in 429 CE, welcomed by local Christian populations as liberation from Roman persecution, established an Arian polity in the heartland of Latin Christianity. When Belisarius destroyed the Vandal kingdom in 534 CE, the reimposition of Nicene order was experienced by local populations as the return of oppression — a social memory that, within a century, would shape the reception of Islam.

Table 2 provides a comparative overview of these three kingdoms and their contribution to the Mediterranean transmission of subordinationist monotheism.

Table 2 — The Germanic Arian Kingdoms as Bridges of Subordinationist Monotheism

Kingdom	Primary Region	Notable Rulers	Historical Significance
Visigothic (c. 415-711 CE)	Spain, Portugal, Southern France	Alaric I; Theodoric I; Recared I	Established Arianism as collective identity; internal fracture after Recared's conversion (589 CE); fell to Islamic forces in 711 CE
Ostrogothic (493-554 CE)	Italy, Balkans, Central Europe	Theodoric the Great	Model of religious toleration; 'techniques of accommodation' (Goffart) between Arians and Catholics; precursor to Islamic dhimmi institutions
Vandal (429-534 CE)	North Africa (Carthage)	Gaiseric	Welcomed as liberation from Roman persecution; created social conditions facilitating reception of Islam within a century of the kingdom's fall

1. Subordinationist Monotheism and the Mediterranean Reception of Islam

The fourth analytical framework of this study — comparative monotheism — brings the argument to its most distinctive and most carefully qualified dimension. The Qur'anic

portrayal of Jesus (ʿIsa ibn Maryam) has long attracted scholarly attention for its structural convergences with certain pre-Nicene and non-Nicene Christological positions, and the relationship between those convergences and the Mediterranean social history traced in the preceding sections constitutes the central analytical claim of this article. That claim must be approached with methodological rigour: structural similarity is not historical causation, and the Qur'an is not a derivative of Arianism. What the comparative framework illuminates is not genealogical dependence but the conditions of reception — the theological pre-dispositions of specific Mediterranean populations that shaped how the Qur'anic proclamation was encountered and assimilated.

The Qur'an addresses Jesus in some ninety-three verses across fifteen surahs, and its portrait is both theologically precise and historically situated. Jesus (ʿIsa) is identified as the Messiah (al-Masih), a prophet and messenger (rasul) of God, born of the Virgin Mary without a human father, endowed with the capacity to perform miracles by divine permission, and destined to return before the Day of Judgement — but he is not God, not the Son of God in any ontological sense, and not co-eternal with the divine. Surah 4:171 encapsulates the Qur'anic Christological position with striking economy: 'The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of God, and His Word which He directed to Mary, and a soul from Him. So believe in God and His messengers. And do not say "Three."' The explicit rejection of the Trinity — 'do not say Three' — targets precisely the Nicene formulation, while the affirmation of Jesus as God's Word (kalimatuhu) and a soul [ruh] from God preserves his singular status among the prophets without elevating him to co-divinity.[21]

The title kalimatullah — Word of God — is, as Sidney Griffith has observed, without parallel among the Qur'anic prophets: no other figure receives it. Its semantic relationship to the Greek Logos of the Johannine prologue has been extensively discussed by scholars of early Islamic theology. The Qur'anic usage, however, deflects the ontological implications of the Logos tradition: rather than asserting the pre-existence of the Word as a divine being, kalimatullah in the Qur'anic context refers to the creative divine command by which Jesus was brought into being in Mary's womb — the word 'Be' (kun), which

[21] GRIFFITH, Sidney. *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 45-80; KHALIDI, Tarif. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 3-25.

in Surah 3:59 is explicitly compared to the command by which Adam was created: 'Indeed, the likeness of Jesus to God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust; then He said to him, "Be," and he was.' The logic is precisely subordinationist: Jesus is created, however miraculously, by the will of the Father; his status is exalted but derivative. This is structurally the same move that Arius of Cyrene made in the fourth century: the Son is the first and greatest of God's creative acts, the Word and agent of creation, but not co-eternal with the Father and not of the same substance.[22]

The points of structural convergence between Arian Christology and Qur'anic Christology are significant and well-documented in the scholarly literature, and they are presented systematically in Table 4. Both traditions insist on the absolute unity and transcendence of God — tawhid in Islamic theology; the Arian insistence on the Father as the sole unbegotten, eternal, and infinite divine being. Both describe Jesus as a created servant ('abd) and messenger (rasul) of God — the Word and Spirit of God, but not God himself. Both explicitly reject the Trinitarian formula that identifies the Son with the Father in substance. And both traditions, working in the monotheistic intellectual environment of the late antique Mediterranean, were responding to the same Hellenistic theological problematic: how to reconcile the veneration of Jesus with the absolute unity of God that both Judaism and broader Abrahamic monotheism required. The Arian answer and the Qur'anic answer arrived independently at structurally similar solutions. It must be stated with equal clarity, however, that the differences between Arian and Qur'anic theology are real and must not be obscured by the analogy. Arian theology remained a Christian theology: it affirmed the crucifixion, resurrection, and salvific role of Christ; its scriptures were the Christian Bible; and its liturgical life was continuous with broader Christian practice. The Qur'an, by contrast, denies the crucifixion (Surah 4:157: 'they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so'), does not regard Jesus as the agent of human salvation in the Christian sense, and positions Muhammad, not Jesus, as the seal of the prophets. These are fundamental divergences that no structural analogy can dissolve.

The Islamic tradition's engagement with Jesus extended well beyond the Qur'anic text. As Tarif Khalidi has demonstrated in his compilation and analysis of what he terms

[22] GRIFFITH, Sidney H. "The Gospel in Arabic: An Enquiry into Its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century". In: *Oriens Christianus*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, Vol. 69, 1985, pp. 126-167; PARRINDER, Geoffrey. *Jesus in the Qur'an*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1995, pp. 16-45.

the 'Muslim gospel' — some three hundred sayings and stories of Jesus preserved in Arabic Islamic literature from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries — Jesus occupied a distinctive and beloved position within Muslim piety from the earliest centuries of Islam. In this literature, Jesus appears as an ascetic prophet, a miracle worker, and a moral exemplar of singular authority; he is addressed with the honorific 'servant and messenger of God' ('abdu'llah wa-rasuluhu), a formula that echoes both the Qur'anic designation and the Arian insistence on the creaturely servanthood of Christ. This richly textured tradition of devotion to Jesus within Islamic literature reinforces the point that the Qur'anic Jesus was not a marginal or polemical figure but a central object of reverence — and that this reverence was structured around precisely the categories of exalted creaturely status that subordinationist Christology had elaborated for three centuries before the emergence of Islam.[23]

A remarkable philological bridge exists in the preserved text of the Prophet Muhammad's letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (c. 628 CE), recorded in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*. The letter contains a reference to the 'Arians' (al-Arisiyyin) in a warning to Heraclius: 'if you turn away, upon you will be the sin of the Arians.' This reference is best understood not as a casual allusion to agricultural labourers or rural subjects — as some later translators have rendered the term — but as a deliberate theological marker identifying the Arians as the representatives of the subordinationist monotheistic tradition closest to the Islamic proclamation of divine unity. That the Prophet's diplomatic correspondence would invoke the Arians as a point of theological reference intelligible to Heraclius is itself evidence of the continuing visibility and currency of the Arian tradition in the early seventh-century Mediterranean world — a world in which the Germanic Arian kingdoms had been the dominant political force across much of the western Mediterranean for over a century before their formal suppression.[24]

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[23] KHALIDI, Tarif. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 3-25; 77-110.

[24] Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith 2940; WATT, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 341-345. The reading of *al-Arisiyyin* as a reference to the Arians, rather than to rural agricultural labourers ('those of Arius' vs. 'those of the land'), is adopted here following the philological argument of Watt and is consistent with the theological context of the letter; for the alternative reading see BUHL, F. "Al-Arisiyyūn". In: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1960, vol. I, p. 629. The theological reading is treated as a working hypothesis rather than a settled finding.

The social conditions of reception must be understood as operating at multiple levels simultaneously. At the level of formal theology, the Qur'anic rejection of the Trinity was not foreign to populations whose theological formation had been shaped by subordinationist Christianity — whether through Arian ecclesiastical structures in North Africa and Spain, or through the non-Chalcedonian Miaphysite and Nestorian traditions that dominated Syria, Egypt, and much of the eastern Mediterranean. At the level of popular piety, the Qur'anic Jesus — born of the Virgin, possessed of miraculous power, beloved servant of God, destined to return at the end of time — was recognizable and venerable to communities whose devotional lives had been oriented around a creaturely Christ for generations. At the level of social and political memory, the experience of Catholic imperial persecution — the suppression of Arian bishops, the confiscation of churches, the imposition of Nicene orthodoxy by legal compulsion and military force — had created conditions of exhaustion and alienation that made the transition to a new dispensation, one that guaranteed religious autonomy through the dhimmi framework of protected minority status, a rational alternative to continued Nicene dominion. These three levels — the theological, the devotional, and the socio-political — reinforced one another, and it is their confluence rather than any single factor that explains the speed and relative ease with which the Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries transformed the religious map of the Mediterranean.

Jack Tannous's work on the religious continuities of the late antique East provides the most rigorous methodological framework for understanding these social conditions of reception. His demonstration — grounded in an extensive reading of Greek, Syriac, and Arabic primary sources — that the Christian populations of Syria, Egypt, and the Levant, most of them adhering to non-Chalcedonian theologies broadly characterized by subordinationist tendencies, experienced the Islamic conquests of the seventh century not as catastrophic rupture but as transition preserving fundamental religious continuities, is directly applicable to the Arian populations of North Africa and Iberia whose trajectories form the central argument of the present article.[25] Crucially, Tannous demonstrates that Muslims remained a demographic minority in the conquered territories well into the ninth

[25] TANNOUS, Jack. *The Byzantine World and the Rise of Islam: A Social and Cultural History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 310-340; 369-398. For the broader late antique framework see also BROWN, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 15-25.

and tenth centuries, and that conversion to Islam was gradual, multi-generational, and driven by social and economic pressures alongside theological ones. This finding complicates any linear narrative of rapid Islamization and reinforces the importance of the long-term theological pre-conditions explored in this article: it was not that populations converted to Islam because its Christology resembled their own, but that the theological familiarity of the Qur'anic Jesus removed what might otherwise have been an insuperable barrier to receptivity, allowing the slower processes of social integration and religious reorientation to unfold without the acute cognitive dissonance that Nicene Trinitarianism would have imposed.

Sidney Griffith's scholarship on the intertwined history of the Bible in Arabic-speaking communities provides a further dimension of the argument. His demonstration that the earliest Arabic translations of the Bible were produced after and in response to the emergence of Islam — stimulated by the Qur'an's retelling of Biblical narratives and its implicit challenge to the scriptural communities to re-examine their own traditions — reveals a dynamic of encounter in which the boundaries between Christianity and Islam were still porous and contested. Christian theologians writing in Arabic in the eighth and ninth centuries found themselves compelled to respond to the Qur'anic Jesus on his own terms, engaging with the kalimatullah tradition and the Surah 4:171 rejection of Trinitarianism as live theological interlocutors. In this environment, the Qur'anic Jesus was not encountered as an alien intrusion but as a position within a theological conversation that Mediterranean Christianity had been conducting for centuries. The Qur'an did not introduce a foreign Christology into the Mediterranean world; it articulated, in its own terms and on its own theological foundations, a position on the creaturely status of Jesus that had been a live option within that world since at least the time of Origen of Alexandria.[26]

The historical record of the Islamic conquests in the regions most directly relevant to this argument — North Africa, Iberia, and the Levant — supports the social-conditions-of-reception thesis without requiring the claim of simple theological equivalence. In North Africa, the Vandal kingdom's century of Arian rule (429–534 CE) had reconfigured the religious landscape of the region so thoroughly that the subsequent reimposition of

[26] GRIFFITH, Sidney H. *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 45-80; 135-168.

Nicene order under Byzantine reconquest was experienced by significant portions of the local population as the return of persecution. When the Arab armies pushed westward across the Maghreb in the 640s to 700s CE, they encountered populations whose allegiance to Constantinople was, at best, conditional. The Miaphysite Coptic Christians of Egypt, who had endured sustained imperial coercion to conform to Chalcedonian theology, welcomed the Arab conquest as deliverance from Byzantine religious oppression — a dynamic documented in the Coptic sources and analyzed by modern historians of late antiquity. The Arian Berber populations of the former Vandal kingdom were in an analogous structural position, though their institutional Christianity had been suppressed for a full century before the Arab arrival, making the tracing of direct continuities correspondingly more difficult.

In the Iberian Peninsula, the dynamics were shaped by a century of acute theological conflict between Arian Gothic rulers and the Catholic ecclesiastical establishment following Recared I's conversion in 589 CE. The subsequent decades saw intensifying legal pressure on the Gothic population to conform to Nicene orthodoxy, while the Jewish communities of Iberia — who had suffered severe persecution under the Catholic Visigothic monarchy since the late sixth century — were subjected to forced baptism and repeated efforts at expulsion. When Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 CE, he found a kingdom fractured by these internal conflicts. The chronicle evidence records that in numerous cities the gates were opened without significant resistance; that Jewish communities actively assisted the Muslim forces in several documented instances; and that the Visigothic nobility was divided rather than united in its response. Whether surviving Gothic Arian populations made parallel calculations cannot be documented with equivalent precision from the surviving sources, but the social logic is consistent with the broader Mediterranean pattern: populations exhausted by religious persecution and theologically alienated from Nicene Trinitarianism had diminished reason to defend the political order that had oppressed them.

It is essential to restate, in conclusion of this section, the epistemological limits of the argument. The thesis advanced here is not that Arianism caused Islam, nor that the Qur'an was derived from Arian theology, nor that individual Arian populations made collective decisions based on conscious theological calculation. The causal chain between theological pre-disposition and social behavior is never simple, and the evidence available

for the seventh- and eighth-century Mediterranean does not permit the reconstruction of such a chain in the specific, direct terms that a stronger thesis would require. The thesis is more modest: that the suppression of subordinationist monotheism at Nicaea dispersed a theological tradition across the Mediterranean in forms that shaped the religious landscape of late antiquity; that this landscape included substantial populations for whom the absolute unity of God and the creaturely status of Jesus were not merely doctrinal positions but living devotional realities; and that these populations, when they encountered the Qur'anic proclamation in the seventh and eighth centuries, found its central Christological position — Jesus as God's Word, Spirit, and Messenger, but not God — theologically familiar in a way that populations formed entirely by Nicene Trinitarianism would not have. In the Mediterranean history of monotheism, the boundaries between the Abrahamic traditions were, for several crucial centuries, not fixed walls but contested and permeable frontiers, shaped by the long aftermath of decisions made — incompletely and under imperial compulsion — at Nicaea in 325 CE.

Tables 3 and 4 synthesize, respectively, the chronological trajectory from pre-Nicene controversies to early Islamic expansion, and the structural theological affinities between Arianism and Qur'anic Christology.

Table 3 — Chronology of Key Events from the Pre-Nicene Controversies to Early Islamic Expansion

Year (CE)	Event	Significance
c. 160-220	Tertullian's theological writings (Carthage)	First Latin use of trinitas; introduces unresolved tensions between divine unity and subordination
c. 185-253	Origen's De Principiis (Alexandria)	Develops Logos-subordinationism (deuteros theos); direct theological background of Arian controversy
c. 256	Birth of Arius in Cyrene (Libya)	Origins of the Arian subordinationist tradition in Roman North Africa and the Mediterranean East
325	Council of Nicaea	First ecumenical council; official condemnation of Arianism; Nicene Creed promulgated under imperial coercion
337-361	Reign of Constantius II	Active imperial promotion of Arianism; Nicene decisions effectively reversed at Sirmium (351, 357 CE) and Milan (355 CE)
381	Council of Constantinople	Theodosius I definitively establishes Nicene Trinitarianism as imperial orthodoxy; suppression of Arianism intensifies

410	Sack of Rome by Alaric I (Visigothic)	Demonstration of Arian Germanic power against the Nicene Roman establishment
c. 628	Prophet Muhammad's letter to Heraclius	References the 'Arians' (al-Arisiyyin) as bearers of authentic monotheism proximate to the Islamic proclamation
711	Tariq ibn Ziyad enters Andalusia	Islamic expansion facilitated by Arian Visigoths exhausted by Catholic persecution; many cities open without resistance

Table 4 — Structural Affinities between Arianism and Qur'anic Christology

Concept	Arianism	Qur'anic Christology
Status of Jesus	Created servant of God; Word and Messenger, not co-equal Deity	Servant ('Abd) and Messenger of Allah; a human prophet (Q. 4:172; 4:157)
Nature of 'Word'	Jesus as the Logos/Word of God — created, not co-eternal with the Father	Jesus as Kalimatullah (Word from God) — bestowed upon Mary (Q. 4:171)
Divinity	Explicit rejection of the full divinity of Christ and of the Trinity	Explicit rejection of the Trinity and of Jesus' divinity (Q. 5:72-73)
Monotheism	Absolute unity of the Father; only the Father is unbegotten and eternal	Tawhid: absolute divine unity and transcendence (Q. 112:1-4)

Conclusion.

The 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is an occasion that invites more than ecclesiastical commemoration; it invites historical reckoning. What Nicaea established in 325 CE was not the definitive recovery of apostolic faith against heretical innovation but the political institutionalization of one Christological option within a richly diverse field of early Christian belief — an institutionalization achieved through imperial coercion, contested for most of the fourth century, and only definitively secured at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE.[27]

The theological traditions that Nicaea sought to suppress — rooted in the pre-Nicene formulations of Tertullian and Origen, developed by Arius of Cyrene, and carried across the Mediterranean by the Germanic Arian kingdoms — were not extinguished. They were

[27] The Church of St. Neophytus (also identified as the Church of the Koimesis) lies submerged beneath Lake İznik (ancient Nicaea), flooded following dam construction in the twentieth century. Its underwater remains, including mosaic floors and architectural elements, have been documented by Turkish archaeologists; see UYSAL, Atatürk; ŞAİN, Mustafa. "İznik Gölü Altındaki Bizans Kilisesi". In: *Bursa Araştırmaları*, Vol. 12, 2006, pp. 4-9. The image is employed here as a closing figure for the persistence of the Nicaean controversy beneath the surface of official Christian history.

dispersed, preserved in the religious memory of populations across North Africa, Spain, Syria, and Egypt, and continued to flow beneath the surface of official Christian history for centuries. The 'techniques of accommodation' practiced by the Germanic Arian kingdoms, structurally analogous to the later Islamic dhimmi institutions, created social frameworks that made the transition to Islam, in many Mediterranean regions, a continuation rather than a rupture.

The multiplicity of Christological interpretations identified by this dossier as the hallmark of Mediterranean Christianity — in East and West, in antiquity and in the Middle Ages — is not a failure of orthodoxy but testimony to the enduring vitality of theological questions that no council, however imperially backed, could finally close. The stones of the submerged Church of St. Neophytus at the bottom of Lake Iznik speak not the language of victors but the language of duration: of a controversy that outlasted every political settlement made in its name, and of a monotheistic current that the Mediterranean world continued to answer, in its own ways, for centuries after the bishops of Nicaea went home.[28]

Several dimensions of this history remain understudied and invite future scholarship: the preservation of Arian theological memory in regions where institutional Arianism had been formally suppressed; the philological and historical treatment of the Prophet's reference to the Arians in the letter to Heraclius; and the North African and Mediterranean dimensions of Arius's own biography, which challenge the Eurocentrism of much patristic historiography. These constitute significant open questions for the inter-disciplinary history of Mediterranean monotheism and for the broader comparative history of the Abrahamic traditions.