

32. Rubenstein, Richard E., *When Jesus Became God; The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome* (Harcourt Brace and Company 1999)

This book caught my eye because its title promised to address the very specific topic of Christians persecuting heretics out of existence. Since the Gnostics were in the thick of this argument over Jesus and godhood, believing he set an example of achieving godhood and left the necessary Gnosis among the true Christians, the Gnostic Christians. Given the history alleged in the books by Freke and Gandy (item # 18, 19), with the original Gnostic Christians being done away with by competing literalists, however, I was surprised by the subtitle's reference to the "Last Days of Rome." That would put such warfare quite late, not at all during the formative years of Christianity.

So, I had two questions entering this book. One was answered right away: it was not the Gnostic view of the Godhood of Christ that was the source of controversy, it was an argument of the fourth century, taking place in Alexandria, about when the Christian Christ became God, before his birth or after his passion and resurrection. The basic argument involved Arius, a priest who taught that Jesus was a man made God by his Father, and Athanasius, a bishop who taught that Christ was God the Father incarnated. The bishop declared the priest and his followers heretics.

At the risk of reducing the book to an absurd caricature, it goes into the history of persecution in the Roman Empire, showing that pagans who were in power were killing those who refused allegiance to the Gods that guaranteed Rome's prosperity, including the Emperors. When Christianity took over and attempts were made to close pagan temples murderous riots broke out and the upper hand in controlling

the violence changed hands. At the same time the antagonism between the two views of Christ and God was heating up as a controversy between true Christianity and the doctrines of the Anti-Christ. Violence became part of that fight, with dastardly acts on both sides by largely coming from the orthodox winners: the Athanasian view.

But the real war broke out after Constantine made the power of the state available in the fight and exiled Arius. Arius appealed and Constantine heard both sides argued, and for a time changed his mind siding with Arius and then shifting back to Athanasius after hearing his case again. The story walks through these vacillations and the split of the Roman Empire into east and west under the reign of Constant and Constantius, Constantine's heirs. Constantius in the east favored Arian Christianity, it had a hierarchy in the Godhead and a positive view of the human potential and the duty and ability of humans to contribute to their own salvation (see p. 179). Constantius, unified the Empire once more after an attempted takeover by a usurper killed his unpopular brother running the western empire. Arianism almost became dominant for a time. But Constantius wasn't about to be a puppet for theologians on either side. He did try to have the violence-fomenting Athanasius arrested, who fled into exile. He also acted to call councils of Bishops to come up with a compromise and achieved it on the last day of 359 A.D. The relatively unknown creed of Rimini-Seleucia was to replace the "vexatious Nicene Creed" of Athanasius (p. 191, 211)

History is full of wars and divisions in empires and within a few decades of the unification the empire was again divided, this time it was the emperor and army of the east that were devastated, and the new western-dominated emperor and military machine tried to undo what Constantius had done. Theodosius when very ill and worried about survival had himself baptized and thereafter pursued having the true

Christianity triumph in the empire. As a consequence Arian bishops were dismissed and replaced, peacefully in some cases, as a result of violence in other cases. The Nicene Creed was put in front of Arian leaders for ratifying signatures, and refusal to sign meant exile. (pp. 220-221).

Theodosius was consolidating his power in the newly unified empire through doing these things. He was a pragmatic ruler, and when in the early 380s Christian mobs burnt a Jewish synagogue and a Valentinian church ("a tiny sect of heretical Christians"), he ordered the local bishop to make restitution. These were subjects under his protection, after all. Bishop Ambrose of Milan threatened the emperor with excommunication for this order, and he called the restitution order back. Years of violence against pagans, among whom the Arian Christians were now classed, followed, and went on for decades. (pp.; 224-227)

It was open war, and was won by the Great Church, just as Freke and Gandy said. But it occurred at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, not between the groups vying for dominance in Christianity in the first hundred years of the Common Era. In fairness to Freke and Gandy, however, on page 113 Rubenstein makes clear that the reason the Arians were not dealt with in earlier suppressions of Gnostics and Manicheans is because they were Christians until the 380s when they were reclassified. Arians were Christians responding to the interpretations of Christ's life and its meaning as promulgated by a priest, after all. And almost half the Christian faith was Arian for a time.

So, when and where and how were Gnostics dealt with? We see Valentinians being attacked in the last part of the fourth century. They may have been Christian heretics as Rubenstein says, but they were Gnostic Christians.

Apparently they had their own churches even toward the end of the fourth century.