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# *The Word "Homoousios" from Hellenism to Christianity*

PIER FRANCO BEATRICE

*Homoousios* is one of the most important words in the Christian theological vocabulary, since it was used at the Council of Nicaea to express the divine consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. However, long and complicated debates have not yet produced any significant agreement among scholars concerning its origin and meaning.

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the word *homoousios* was inserted in the Nicene Creed solely by the personal order of Constantine. But this statement is highly problematic. It is very difficult to explain the seemingly paradoxical fact that this word, along with the explanation given by Constantine, was accepted by the "Arian" Eusebius, whereas it has left no traces at all in the works of his opponents, the leaders of the anti-Arian party such as Alexander of Alexandria, Ossius of Cordova, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Eustathius of Antioch, who are usually considered Constantine's theological advisers and the strongest supporters of the council. Neither before nor during Constantine's time is there any evidence of a normal, well-established Christian use of the term *homoousios* in its strictly Trinitarian meaning.

Having once excluded any relationship of the Nicene *homoousios* with the Christian tradition, it becomes legitimate to propose a new explanation, based on an analysis of two pagan documents which have so far never been taken into account. The main thesis of this paper is that *homoousios* came straight from Constantine's Hermetic background. As can be clearly seen in the *Poimandres*, and even more clearly in an inscription mentioned exclusively in the *Theosophia*, in the theological language of Egyptian paganism the word *homoousios* meant that the Nous-Father and the Logos-Son, who are two distinct beings, share the same perfection of the divine nature.

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This conception was very similar to Eusebius's doctrine of two *ousiai* and of the eternal generation of the second, subordinate god. This is why Eusebius found it reasonable, under certain conditions, to adhere to Constantine's order. On the other hand, the anti-Arian theologians Ossius and Marcellus, after the death of Constantine and Eusebius, felt free to recast the Nicene Creed at the Council of Sardica by abolishing the new "pagan" word *homoousios* and replacing it with the traditional, reassuring *mia hypostasis*.

No absolute certainty can be reached in this field, given the extreme scantiness of the available sources. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly worth reconsidering the origin and first appearance of *homoousios* during the initial phase of the Arian controversy, having recourse to these Egyptian documents. They shed new light on the theological debates culminating in the Creed of Nicaea, and help us understand how great Constantine's personal contribution to the formulation of Christian doctrine was. The results of the present research seem to be even more interesting in light of the fact that the later developments and controversies of the fourth century have until recently obscured the true origin of the Nicene *homoousios*.

This essay focuses not only on the everlasting problem of the connections between Christian doctrine and the Hermetic tradition, but also, inevitably, on Constantine's intellectual biography.

### I. THE *HOMOOUSIOS* OF NICAEA

During the last century the question of the origin and significance of the word *homoousios* has been the object of a long and impassioned discussion among the historians of Christian doctrines. Such attention is fully justified if one considers that *homoousios* is the key word of the Creed approved by the Council of Nicaea, where the Arian heresy was condemned, and that, as all the theologians of the fourth century well knew, it is not to be found in the Holy Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the undeniable progress made by scholars, thanks to an admirable joint effort of erudition, many problems have not yet been solved. There are still quite important doubts as to the obscure history of the term *homoousios* before 325 C.E., the real reasons

1. See for example Athanasius, *Ep. ad Afros*, 6 (PG 26, 1040 B); Marius Victorinus, *Adv. Arium* II,3-7 (CSEL 83,173 ff.); Hilary of Poitiers, *De synodis* 81 (PL 10, 534 B). I employ the following abbreviations: CCL = Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina; CH = Corpus Hermeticum; CIL = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum; CSEL = Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum; GCS = Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte; ILS = Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae; PG = Patrologia Graeca; PL = Patrologia Latina; RAC = Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum; SC = Sources Chrétiennes

for the introduction of this word in an official document of the church, and the identity of the person or persons responsible for this. Such a situation has given rise among scholars to a skeptical attitude and even to a certain discouragement.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, the few texts available do not leave us much choice: we are reduced to three witnesses, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria and Ambrose of Milan.

According to Ambrose, the word *homoiousios* was used to openly contradict the Arian sentiment of a letter by Eusebius of Nicomedia which had been read out at the Council of Nicaea: "If we speak of a true and uncreated Son of God, we begin to confess him 'consubstantial' with the Father."<sup>3</sup> This tactical choice would, therefore, seem to have been inspired only by the polemical need to refute the Arian doctrine whose supporters had already rejected that word as heretical.

This point of view is still widely accepted in the secondary literature. The explanation offered by Ambrose could contain some elements of truth. However, it does not inspire much confidence because it was formulated at a very late date (the second half of the fourth century). As a matter of fact, Ambrose had no direct contact with the Council of Nicaea and its protagonists, and does not seem to be well informed about the details of the council.

Athanasius, whom Hilary of Poitiers labels as *vehemens auctor* of the Nicene faith,<sup>4</sup> says that the Fathers of the council wrote the word *homoiousios* in order to avoid, once and for all, the tendentious and corrupted interpretations of the Arians.<sup>5</sup> According to the Arians, however, the Nicene Creed was presented by Ossius of Cordova in his capacity as president of the assembly.<sup>6</sup> A similar claim is made by the Arian historian Philostorgius when he speaks of a preventive agreement between Ossius and Alexander of Alexandria concerning the doctrine to be imposed at the council.<sup>7</sup>

2. See for example George Christopher Stead, "Homousios," *RAC* 16 (1992): 364–433, 411: "Die genaue Bedeutung von homoiousios im nizänischen Credo ist folglich nicht nur schwer auszumachen, sondern es ist auch vergeblich, sie zu suchen."

3. Ambrose, *De fide* III,15,125 (CSEL 78,151 = Hans-Georg Opitz, *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 3, pt. 1: *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites* 318–328 [Berlin und Leipzig: W. de Gruyter, 1934–35], *Urk.* 21): "Si verum Dei filium et increatum dicimus, ὁμοούσιον cum Patre incipimus confiteri."

4. Hilary, *Fragm. hist.* B II,11,6 (CSEL 65,154).

5. Athanasius, *Ep. ad Afros* 6 (PG 26, 1040 B).

6. See Athanasius, *Hist. Arian.* 42 (PG 25, 744 A): οὗτος καὶ τὴν ἐν Νικαίᾳ πίστιν ἐξέθετο.

7. Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* I,7–9 (GCS 21, 8–10). Philostorgius's report is judged "probable" by Øyvind Norderval, "The Emperor Constantine and Arius: Unity in the Church and Unity in the Empire," *Studia Theologica* 42 (1988): 113–50, 125.

Also, according to some modern German scholars, beginning with Theodor Zahn<sup>8</sup> and Adolf von Harnack,<sup>9</sup> *homoousios* would have been adopted at Nicaea precisely because it expressed the “Western” theology of the Spanish bishop Ossius, based on Tertullian’s idea that the Father and Son are one and the same substance. This theory, however, fell irreversibly into crisis after the publication of Victor C. de Clercq’s book on Ossius<sup>10</sup> and, above all, because of the acute criticism of Christopher Stead.<sup>11</sup> It was judged unlikely even by Adolf Martin Ritter,<sup>12</sup> who had previously agreed to it.<sup>13</sup> The late Richard P. C. Hanson stated conclusively: “We have no satisfactory evidence that it [i.e. *homoousios*] was a term at home in Western theology.”<sup>14</sup>

Even if it is plausible to admit that Ossius was the official promoter of the Nicene Creed in his capacity as one of the presidents of the council,<sup>15</sup> this does not necessarily mean that the word *homoousios* itself was an integral part of his undeniably “Western” theological background. It is no coincidence that at the council of the “Western” bishops held at Sardica in 343, where Ossius could freely express his thoughts in agreement with Marcellus of Ancyra, the word *homoousios* was totally ignored and replaced by *mia hypostasis*: “We have received and been taught, and we hold the catholic and apostolic tradition and faith and confession which teach, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost have *one hypostasis*. . . . But we believe and maintain and think that those holy words ‘I and the Father are one’ (John 10:30) point out the *oneness of the hypostasis*, which is one both of the Father and of the Son.”<sup>16</sup> To this we may add that Tertullian, the first

8. Theodor Zahn, *Marcellus von Ancyra. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Theologie* (Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1867), 22 ff.
9. Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1909), 2:233–34.
10. Victor C. de Clercq, *Ossius of Cordova. A Contribution to the History of the Constantinian Period*, *Studies in Christian Antiquity*, 13 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 250–66.
11. George Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 190–222; 223–66.
12. Adolf Martin Ritter, “Dogma und Lehre in der alten Kirche,” in *Handbuch der Theologie- und Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, *Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Katholizität*, ed. Carl Andresen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 99–283, 169 f.
13. Adolf Martin Ritter, *Das Konzil von Konstantinopel und sein Symbol. Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des II. Ökumenischen Konzils*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte*, 15 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 270–93, esp. 273–77.
14. Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God. The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 201.
15. Eusebius, *Vita Const.* III,13,1 (ed. Friedrich Winkelmann, *GCS Eusebius Werke*, I, 1,88) speaks of “presidents” (τοῖς τῆς συνόδου προέδροις) in the plural.
16. See Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* II,8,47 (GCS 19, 116): διὰ τὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως ἐνότητά, ἥτις ἐστὶ μίᾱ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μίᾱ τοῦ υἱοῦ. The English translation is taken from James

Western Christian writer to use the expression *una substantia/unius substantiae* in a Trinitarian context,<sup>17</sup> has recourse to other Latin words such as *consubstantialis*<sup>18</sup> or *consubstantivus*<sup>19</sup> when translating the Gnostic term *homoousios*.

I therefore believe that the thesis according to which the word *homoousios* was the Greek equivalent of the Latin *unius substantiae*, and its introduction into the Nicene Creed the inevitable consequence of the victory of the Western tradition represented by Ossius, is definitely to be rejected, as it is not backed up by any available texts.<sup>20</sup> By exclusion, there remains only the explanation provided by Eusebius of Caesarea.

Eusebius had clearly denied in his apologetic work, written before Nicaea, that intelligible beings share the same substance of God.<sup>21</sup> In his letter to the Church of Caesarea, Eusebius consequently had to justify in some way the fact that he had subscribed to the Creed of Nicaea containing the word *homoousios*. Among other things, he states in this fundamental document that the creed he proposed to the assembly<sup>22</sup> was declared to be absolutely orthodox and accepted without reserve by Constantine: "On this faith," Eusebius writes, "being publicly put forth by us, no room for contradiction appeared; but our most pious emperor, before any one else, testified that it was most orthodox. He confessed, moreover, that such were his own sentiments; and he advised all present to agree to it, and to subscribe its articles and to assent to them, with the insertion of the single word 'consubstantial.'"<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the apologetic tendentiousness of this report provided by one of the main protagonists immediately after the end of the council,

Stevenson, *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies. Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337–461*, new ed. rev. by William H. C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1989), 13 f.

17. See for example Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 2,4 (CCL 2, 1161); 29,6 (1203).

18. Tertullian, *Adv. Hermog.* 44,3 (CCL 1, 433).

19. Idem, *Adv. Valent.* 12,5 (CCL 2, 764); 18,1 (767) ; 37,2 (778).

20. Good observations are made by Jörg Ulrich, *Die Anfänge der abendländischen Rezeption des Nizännums*, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, 39 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1994), 6–25: "Zur These der westlichen Herleitung des Nizännums."

21. Eusebius, *Præp. evang.* XI,21,6–7 (eds. Karl Mras and Édouard des Places, GCS Eusebii Werke VIII,2, 48): τὰς νοητὰς οὐσίας. . . μὴ ὁμοούσια. . .

22. A personal, private creed, not the official baptismal creed of the Church of Caesarea, according to Hans von Campenhausen, "Das Bekenntnis Eusebs von Caesarea (Nicaea 325)," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 67 (1976): 123–39.

23. Constantine's decision about the insertion of the new theological term is expressed by the Greek words: ἐνὸς μόνου προσεγγραφέντος ῥήματος τοῦ ὁμοουσίου (Opitz, *Urk.* 22,7). This text can be found in Athanasius, *De decr.* 33 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, 28–31); Socrates, *Hist.eccl.* I,8,35–54; Theodoret, *Hist.eccl.* I,12. English translation from James Stevenson, *A New Eusebius. Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, new ed. rev. by William H. C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1987), 344 ff.

it would seem impossible, or in any case methodologically daring, to deny its substantial reliability. But ascribing the Nicene *homoousios* to the explicit will of Constantine makes the attempt to find an explanation for this mysterious word even more difficult, if that were possible. If we admit Constantine's personal instigation, which seems necessary in view of Eusebius's narrative, a whole series of new questions arises concerning the political and ecclesiastical motivations that led Constantine to impose the use of *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed. Questions also arise concerning the theological sources of his thought on the Trinity—a matter even more obscure. For this reason it may be useful to review briefly the use of the word *homoousios* before the Council of Nicaea.

## II. *HOMOOUSIOS* IN Gnostic AND ANTI-Gnostic LITERATURE

Surprising though it may seem, there is total agreement among scholars on at least one point. Adolf von Harnack,<sup>24</sup> Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina,<sup>25</sup> Luis M. Mendizábal,<sup>26</sup> George Leonard Prestige,<sup>27</sup> Peter Gerlitz,<sup>28</sup> Éphrem Boularand,<sup>29</sup> John Norman D. Kelly,<sup>30</sup> Frauke Dinsen,<sup>31</sup> Christopher Stead<sup>32</sup>—all without exception agree in claiming that the Gnostics were the first theologians to use the word *homoousios*, or at least that before the Gnostics there is no trace at all of its existence. The late Aloys Grillmeier wrote: "The early history of the Nicene *homoousios* shows us that the theologians of the church were probably made aware of this concept, and thus of the doctrine of emanation, by the Gnostics."<sup>33</sup>

24. Adolf von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, 1:284–85, n. 3; 2:232–34, n. 4.
25. Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, "L' homoousios preniceno," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 8 (1942): 194–209; Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, *El Simbolo Niceno* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1947), 183–202.
26. Luis M. Mendizábal, "El Homoousios Preniceno Extraeclesiástico," *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 30 (1956): 147–96.
27. George Leonard Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1936; 2d ed., 1952), 197–218.
28. Peter Gerlitz, *Außerchristliche Einflüsse auf die Entwicklung des christlichen Trinitätsdogmas, zugleich ein religions- und dogmengeschichtlicher Versuch zur Erklärung der Herkunft der Homousie* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 193–221.
29. Éphrem Boularand, *L'hérésie d'Arius et la "foi" de Nicée*, vol. 2, *La "foi" de Nicée* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1972), 331–53.
30. John Norman D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3d ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 245.
31. Frauke Dinsen, *Homoousios. Die Geschichte des Begriffs bis zum Konzil von Konstantinopel (381)*, Diss. Kiel 1976, 4–11.
32. Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance*, 190–202, and his masterly synthesis in *RAC* 16, 374 ff.
33. Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 109.

I shall not reproduce at this point all the texts already amply studied in the above-mentioned bibliography. I will only observe that in Gnostic texts the word *homoousios* normally indicates the following: (1) identity of substance between generating and generated; (2) identity of substance between things generated of the same substance; (3) identity of substance between the partners of a *syzygy*. In these contexts the word *homoousios* substantially corresponds to words such as *homogenes* and *homophyes*: it exclusively implies a sharing of nature or of essential properties, an identity of substance and, in the third case alone, a hypostatic identity or unity of number.<sup>34</sup> For example, Basilides, the first known Gnostic thinker to use *homoousios* in the first half of the second century, speaks of a threefold sonship consubstantial with the god who is not.<sup>35</sup> The Valentinian Gnostic Ptolemy claims in his letter to Flora that it is the nature of the good God to beget and bring forth only beings similar to, and consubstantial with himself.<sup>36</sup> An anonymous Gnostic teacher, most probably Mark the Magician, states that in the original Tetrad Dynamis (Power) is *homoousios* with the Monas (Unit).<sup>37</sup> We could continue at length quoting other passages from the anti-Gnostic works of Irenaeus of Lyons,<sup>38</sup> Clement of Alexandria<sup>39</sup> and Origen.<sup>40</sup> So *homoousios* was certainly in current use by the second-century Gnostics, and through their works it became known to the orthodox heresiologists. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that in Gnostic texts *homoousios* has no reference to the specific relationship between Father and Son, as is the case in the Nicene Creed.

We may easily rule out the suggestion that Clement of Alexandria used *homoousios* in the Trinitarian meaning. In fact the expression *secundum aequalitatem substantiae unum cum patre consistit* (“the Logos

34. See Frauke Dinsen, *Homoousios*, 7.

35. According to Hippolytus, *Ref. omn. haer.* VII,22,7.12, ed. Miroslav Marcovich in *Patristische Texte und Studien*, 25 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1986), 290 f. = X,14,2: υἱότης τριμερής, κατὰ πάντα τῷ οὐκ ὄντι θεῷ ὁμοούσιος). See also, for the Gnostic use of the word, *ibid.*, V,8,10 (156); V,17,6.10 (186 f.).

36. This text is cited by Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33,7,8 (GCS 25, 457): τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φύσιν ἔχοντας τὰ ὅμοια ἑαυτῷ καὶ ὁμοούσια γεννᾶν τε καὶ προφέρειν. See the edition by Gilles Quispel, *Ptolémée. Lettre à Flora* (SC 24 bis, 70–72 and 103–4). English trans. by Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, vol. 1, Nag Hammadi Studies, 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 203.

37. According to Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I,11,3 (SC 264, 174) and Hippolytus, *Ref.*, VI,38,3 (*Patristische Texte und Studien*, 25), 254.

38. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I,5,1 (SC 264, 76); I,5,5 (86); I,5,6 (88); II,12,2 (SC 294, 98–100); II,14,4 (136); II,17,2–7 (158–66); II,29,1 (296). A good collection of texts is gathered by Stead in *Divine Substance*, 192 ff., and in *RAC* 16, 375 ff.

39. For example *Strom.* II,74,1 (GCS, Clemens II, 152); IV,91,2 (288); *Exc. Theod.* 42,3 (GCS, Clemens III, 120); 50,1–2 (123); 53,1 (124); 58,1 (126).

40. See Origen, *Com. Ioh.* XIII,25,149–50 (SC 222, 112); XX,24,205–6 (SC 290, 258).



is one with the Father according to the similarity of substance"), found in the Latin translation of a fragment of Clement's *Hypotyposesis*, has most probably nothing to do with the word *homoousios* but might simply translate an original Greek sentence such as καθ' ὁμοιότητα τῆς οὐσίας ἐν συνπαρχεί τῷ πατρί.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, Origen seems to have been the first ecclesiastical writer to use the word *homoousios* in a Trinitarian context. In an exegetical fragment on Heb. 1:3, cited in the first book of the *Apology for Origen* by Pamphilus and Eusebius, Origen has recourse to the following similes to explain the special relationship of Christ, the Wisdom of God (Wisd. 7:25), with the Father: "When it uses the term 'breath,' it has taken this from the physical realm, so that we can understand, at least partially, how Christ himself, who is Wisdom, by analogy with that breath which proceeds from some corporeal substance, comes into being from the power of God himself as a kind of breath. In this way Wisdom proceeds from him, being generated by the very substance of God; the case is the same when, again by analogy with a bodily emanation, Wisdom is said to be a pure and authentic 'effluence' of the glory of the Almighty. Both these metaphors quite clearly show that the Son has a communion of substance with the Father. For it would seem that an emanation is *homoousios*, i.e. of one substance, with that body whose effluence or breath it is."<sup>42</sup>

Since this text has come down to us only in the Latin translation of Rufinus, its authenticity is the object of divergent evaluations. For example, Hanson is convinced that Rufinus interpolated the text in order to prove Origen's Nicene orthodoxy.<sup>43</sup> Frauke Dinsen<sup>44</sup> and Rowan Williams<sup>45</sup> are equally very skeptical, whereas Christopher Stead<sup>46</sup> and Mark J. Edwards<sup>47</sup> are willing to accept the substantial

41. Clement, *Adumbrationes in Epist. I Ioann.* 1,1 (GCS, Clemens III, 210).

42. "Vaporis enim nomen inducens hoc ideo de rebus corporalibus assumpsit, ut vel ex parte aliqua intelligere possimus quomodo Christus, qui est Sapientia, secundum similitudinem eius vaporis qui de substantia aliqua corporea procedit, sic etiam ipse ut quidem vapor exoritur de virtute ipsius Dei. Sic et Sapientia ex eo procedens ex ipsa substantia Dei generatur; sic nilominus, et secundum similitudinem corporalis aporrhoeae, esse dicitur aporrhoea gloriae Omnipotentis, pura et sincera. Quae utraque similitudines manifestissime ostendunt communionem substantiae esse Filio cum Patre. Aporrhoea enim ὁμοούσιος videtur, id est unius substantiae, cum illo corpore ex quo est vel aporrhoea, vel vapor." (See PG 14,1308 and PG 17,580 C–581 C).

43. Hanson, "Did Origen apply the Word 'Homoousios' to the Son?", in *Epèktasis*. Mélanges Jean Daniélou (Paris: Beauchesne, 1975), 293–303.

44. Dinsen, *Homoousios*, 29–31.

45. Rowan Williams, *Arius. Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1987; 2d ed., 2001), 134 ff.

46. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 211–14.

47. Mark J. Edwards, "Did Origen apply the Word 'Homoousios' to the Son?", *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998): 658–70.

reliability of Rufinus's translation. In my opinion, the text could be considered authentic, with all due caution, except for the words *id est unius substantiae*, which are clearly Rufinus's explanatory gloss of the original Greek *homoousios*. Rufinus states elsewhere that Origen had used the word *homoousion* to designate the one substance of the Father and Son.<sup>48</sup> Actually, this word is probably to be found in a passage of the treatise *De principiis* where Origen, after having quoted Heb. 1:3 and Wisd. 7:25–26, writes that the Only-Begotten Son is the image of the invisible Father because of the oneness of their substance.<sup>49</sup>

In Origen's fragment on Hebrews there is a simple analogical usage of *homoousios*. The word appears for the first time with a literal application to the relationship of the Son to the Father (as far as we can see from the documentation currently available) in the theological language of some Libyan Christians towards the middle of the third century, during the so-called controversy of the two Dionysii.<sup>50</sup>

### III. HOMOOUSIOS AND SABELLIAN THEOLOGY

The facts are well known. Some Christians from the Libyan Pentapolis accused Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, of not having stated that Christ is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, and asked Rome to step in to settle the matter. Bishop Dionysius of Rome harshly condemned those who divided the Trinity into three distinct hypostases, running the risk of adopting an unacceptable tritheistic doctrine. However, in confirming the orthodox doctrine of the divine monarchy, he does not seem to have at the same time taken up the defense of the word *homoousios*, or to have tried to impose it by his authority. If he had done so, Athanasius would certainly not have failed to mention it in his report by means of a literal citation of Dionysius's words.<sup>51</sup> The silence of Dionysius of Rome may be easily understood if we admit that the word *homoousios* was surrounded by suspicion in Rome, too. Dionysius of Alexandria himself ended up by accepting it only as an innocuous synonym of *homogenes*, *syggenes* and

48. Rufinus, *De adulteratione librorum Origenis*, 1 (CCL 20, 8): "qui Patrem et Filium unius substantiae, quod Graece 'homousion' dicitur, designavit."

49. Origen, *De princ.* 1,2,6 (SC 252, 122): "Quae imago etiam naturae ac substantiae Patris et Filii continet unitatem."

50. For general information on this controversy see Wolfgang A. Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien. Zur Frage des Origenismus im 3. Jahrhundert*, Patristische Texte und Studien, 21 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1978), 200–21.

51. Dionysius's letter is cited by Athanasius, *De decr.* 26,2–7 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, 22–23). Elsewhere Athanasius seems to take for granted that Dionysius of Rome had accepted the word *homoousios*; see *Ep. ad Afros* 6 (PG 26, 1040 C); *De synod.* 43,4 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, 268), but there is the legitimate suspicion that Athanasius is only trying to show the basic consistency of his own doctrine with the teaching of the bishop of Rome.

*homophyes*,<sup>52</sup> thus giving it a meaning which was compatible, or at least not in open contradiction, with the distinction of Father and Son.

We might wonder who the accusers of Dionysius of Alexandria were, and what their Trinitarian theology was. Athanasius expresses a positive judgment, calling them "good orthodox brothers of the church,"<sup>53</sup> but Dionysius of Rome<sup>54</sup> and Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>55</sup> label them without doubt as "Sabellians." Such contradictory pieces of information may be explained in this tentative way.

*Homoousios* was used in the third century as a technical term of the identification-theology (that is, Christ and the Father are one and the same God) only by a small group of bishops of the Libyan Pentapolis, or members of the Church of Alexandria, who manifested a distinct inclination towards a kind of Sabellian monarchianism. The conflict between them and the bishop of Alexandria reflected the radical clash of two opposite Christological patterns. However, Athanasius tried tendentiously to demonstrate that they were all without distinction supporters of *homoousios* and that, therefore, the dispute arose only out of a regrettable misunderstanding. At any rate, we must remember that, according to an anonymous *Expositio fidei*, in the fourth century the Sabellians made use of the more specific term *monoousios*, no longer of *homoousios*, the word which in the meanwhile had become the flag of the Nicene party.<sup>56</sup> It is impossible to know whether Sabellius himself, in the first half of the third century, had already made technical use of this term. Basil of Caesarea would seem to confirm this when he writes that Dionysius of Alexandria suppressed the word *homoousios* with the precise intention of opposing Sabellius, who had wrongly used it to abolish the distinction of the three hypostases.<sup>57</sup>

The word *homoousios*, at its first appearance in the middle of the third century, was therefore clearly connected with the theology of a Sabellian or monarchian tendency. This fact also sheds some light on the affair of Paul of Samosata.

52. See Athanasius, *De decr.* 25,3-5 (Opitz vol. 2, pt. 1, 21); *De sent.* 18,1-3 (59-60); *De synod.* 44,1-2 (269).

53. Athanasius, *De sent.* 13,1 (Opitz vol. 2, pt. 1, 55).

54. Dionysius of Rome in Athanasius, *De decr.* 26,2 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, 22).

55. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* VII,6 (GCS 9/2, 642).

56. Ps.-Athanasius, *Exp. fid.* 2 (PG 25, 204 A).

57. Basil, *Ep.* 9,2, ed. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957) 1:38: τὸν μὲν ἀναίρων (scil. Dionysius) τὸ ὁμοούσιον διὰ τὸν ἐπ' ἀθετήσει τῶν ὑποστάσεων κακῶς αὐτῷ κεχρημένον (scil. Sabellius). For Basil's criticism on Dionysius of Alexandria see Volker Henning Drecoll, *Die Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre des Basilius von Cäsarea. Sein Weg vom Homöusianer zum Neunizäner*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte, 66 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 38-42.

At the synod of Antioch in 268 the bishops who condemned Paul also attacked the word *homoousios*, and, a century later, at the third synod of Sirmium in 358, the Homoeusians headed by Basil of Ancyra made use of that sentence in the so-called *Epistula sirmiensis* in order to back up their rejection of the unscriptural *homoousios* of Nicaea.<sup>58</sup> Athanasius, who had no direct knowledge of that letter, claims that the bishops condemned Paul's use of the word *homoousios* at Antioch only because they had taken it in a bodily sense, according to Paul's sophistic explanation. But Athanasius's report does not appear to be completely reliable because, in dispute with the Homoeusians, he tried tendentiously to resolve the apparent contradiction that *homoousios* was rejected at Antioch but accepted at Nicaea.<sup>59</sup>

Basil of Caesarea confirms that this word was condemned at Antioch because it was believed to imply the material divisibility of the divine substance.<sup>60</sup> But, if we accept the well-documented evidence of Hilary of Poitiers, mistakenly rejected by George Prestige,<sup>61</sup> we cannot but conclude that the word *homoousios* was condemned at Antioch precisely because Paul had used it to express his strictly monarchian conception of the Godhead. Hilary writes: "In using the expression 'of one substance' Paul declared that Father and Son were a solitary unit."<sup>62</sup> That is why Hilary comments from his Nicene point of view: "The Samosatene's confession of *homoousios* was wrong."<sup>63</sup>

#### IV. *HOMOOUSIOS* BEFORE AND DURING CONSTANTINE'S TIME

As for the prehistory of the Nicene *homoousios*, the two opposite and mutually exclusive contributions by Wolfgang A. Bienert and Luise Abramowski are unfortunately both untenable, despite their undeniable perspicacity.

58. I see no sufficient reason to follow Hanns Christof Brennecke, "Zum Prozeß gegen Paul von Samosata: die Frage nach der Verurteilung des Homoousios," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 75 (1984): 270–90. Nothing in his study leads me to think that the condemnation of *homoousios* at Antioch belongs rather to the history of the Arian controversies of the fourth century. On the contrary, the very use of *homoousios* should be considered the starting point for a reappraisal of Paul's monarchianism and, consequently, for a general reinterpretation of his theology in the frame of the controversies of the third century.

59. Athanasius, *De synod.* 43–45 (Opitz vol. 2, pt. 1, 268–70).

60. Basil, *Ep.* 52,1–2 (Courtonne 1:134–35).

61. George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 202 ff. See the keen criticism by Dinsen, *Homoousios*, 231.

62. Hilary, *De synod.* 81 (PL 10, 534 B): "per hanc unius essentiae nuncupationem solitarium atque unicum sibi esse Patrem et Filium praedicabat." That monarchianism was the true reason for Paul's condemnation is also stated by Eusebius of Caesarea, *De eccl. theol.* I,14 (GCS, Eusebius IV, 74).

63. *Ibid.* 86 (538 B): "male homoousion Samosatenus confessus est."

On the one hand, Bienert would like to trace the origin of *homoousios* back to Pope Callistus in the first half of the third century.<sup>64</sup> This explanation can hardly find acceptance. We have seen that the word *homoousios* was used in the third century only by certain Monarchians (Libyan Sabellians and Paul of Samosata) to mean the uniqueness of God and the personal identity of the Son with the Father (identification-theology) and, with a different, simply analogical meaning, by Origen and Dionysius of Alexandria. In any case, in pre-Nicene Christianity there is no evidence at all of an "orthodox" or "Roman" interpretation of *homoousios* that would have anticipated the formula adopted at Nicaea.

On the other hand, Luise Abramowski's attempt to deny any historical value to the documents of the controversy of the two Dionysii, and to place the origin of these alleged forgeries in the fourth century, is far from convincing.<sup>65</sup> Her proposal has been recently resumed and developed by Uta Heil.<sup>66</sup> The fact that Athanasius's tendentious interpretations, here as elsewhere, must be handled with caution does not mean that the texts themselves are not authentic. The main objection, however, to be raised against this highly speculative reconstruction is that both Luise Abramowski and Uta Heil too readily ignore, without any attempt at explanation, Eusebius of Caesarea's cumbersome statement about the pre-Nicene use of *homoousios*.

Eusebius, in order to justify himself to his own community for having signed the Nicene Creed, claims that it appeared well to assent to the term *homoousios* "since we were aware that even among the ancients some learned and illustrious bishops and writers have used the term 'Consubstantial,' in their theological teaching concerning the Father and Son."<sup>67</sup> In writing these words, Eusebius could not have

64. Wolfgang A. Bienert, "Das vornicaenische ὁμοούσιος als Ausdruck der Rechtgläubigkeit," in *Von Konstantin zu Theodosius. Beiträge zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts*. Wilhelm Schneemelcher zum 65. Geburtstag, hrsg. von Wolfgang A. Bienert und Knut Schäferdiek (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1979), 5-29 (= *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 90, 1979, 151-75).

65. Luise Abramowski, "Dionys von Rom (†268) und Dionys von Alexandrien (†264/5) in den arianischen Streitigkeiten des 4. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 93 (1982): 240-72; English translation: "Dionysius of Rome (d. 268) and Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 264/5) in the Arian Controversies of the Fourth Century," in Luise Abramowski, *Formula and Context. Studies in Early Christian Thought*, no. 11 (London: Ashgate, 1992).

66. Uta Heil, *Athanasius von Alexandrien. De Sententia Dionysii*, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, 52 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1999), 22-71 and 210-31.

67. See Opitz, *Urk.* 22,13: ἐπεὶ καὶ τῶν παλαιῶν τινὰς λογίους καὶ ἐπιφανεῖς ἐπισκόπους καὶ συγγραφεῖς ἐγνώμεν ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ θεολογίας τῷ τοῦ ὁμοουσίου συγχορησαμένους ὀνόματι. English trans. from Stevenson and Friend, *A New Eusebius*, 346.

been thinking of anyone other than the bishop Dionysius of Alexandria and the ecclesiastical writer Origen.<sup>68</sup> These two men were his favorite authors; he knew their works very well and had devoted to them two entire books of his *Ecclesiastical History* (book 6 and book 7). They were in fact the only two reliable pre-Nicene theologians who gave him the example of an acceptable, that is, non-monarchian, interpretation of the term.

The only evidence, however mysterious, of the use of *homoiousios* in a pre-Nicene creedal formula seems to be that offered by the *Dialogue with Adamantius*, an early fourth-century text of Syro-Palestinian origin.<sup>69</sup> But, in view of all that we have said so far, the word *homoiousios* in this document might just be a post-Nicene interpolation.

Suspected connections of the term *homoiousios* with "materialistic" representations of the Godhead explain the harsh reactions of both Eusebius of Nicomedia and Arius, who remind us of the bishops who condemned Paul of Samosata at the Synod of Antioch. Eusebius expressed his negative view in a letter produced at the Council of Nicaea,<sup>70</sup> while Arius explicitly claimed, in his *Thalia*, that the Son "is not equal to God, nor yet is he of the same substance."<sup>71</sup> In his confession to Alexander of Alexandria, Arius specifically connected the word *homoiousios* with the "materialistic" theology of Mani,<sup>72</sup> but in the same context he also criticized the similar views of other heretics such as Valentinus, Sabellius, and Hieracas.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, the orthodox supporters of the Nicene Creed are against all expectations strikingly reticent about *homoiousios*, in a way that reminds us of Dionysius of Rome. It is possible, and certainly legitimate, to speculate on the influence that could have been exerted by various anti-Arian theologians on the drafting of the Nicene Creed. According to Oskar Skarsaune, for example, the Creed of Nicaea should be considered a product of Alexander's party, probably in close cooperation with Ossius,<sup>74</sup> whereas in the opinion of Alastair

68. See Annick Martin, "L'origine de l'arianisme vue par Théodoret," in *L'historiographie de l'Église des premiers siècles*, eds. Bernard Pouderon and Yves-Marie Duval, Théologie historique, 114 (Paris: Beauchesne, 2001), 349–59, 357.

69. *Dial.* 1,2 (GCS 4, 12): καὶ τὸν ἐξ αὐτοῦ θεὸν λόγον ὁμοούσιον.

70. See Opitz, *Urk.* 21 cited above in n. 3.

71. See the "blasphemies of Arius" quoted by Athanasius, *De synod.* 15,3 (Opitz vol. 2, pt. 1, 242): οὐδὲ ὁμοούσιος. There is an English version in Williams, *Arius*, 102.

72. See Opitz, *Urk.* 6,3: οὐδ' ὡς Μανιχαῖος μέρος ὁμοούσιον τοῦ πατρὸς τὸ γέννημα εἰσηγήσατο (see Stevenson and Frend, *A New Eusebius*, 326: "nor as Mani taught that the offspring was a portion of the Father, consubstantial").

73. See the perceptive article by Rebecca Lyman, "Arians and Manichees on Christ," *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1989): 493–503.

74. See Oskar Skarsaune, "A Neglected Detail in the Creed of Nicaea (325)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 34–54.

H. B. Logan, Marcellus of Ancyra deserves pride of place.<sup>75</sup> Be that as it may, however, the indisputable fact is that Eusebius of Caesarea unambiguously stated that it was Constantine, and nobody else, who wanted the word *homoousios*, and that it was only later, on the pretext of explaining the insertion of this new word, that other bishops (possibly Ossius and Alexander) drew up a formulary quite different from the one that he himself had proposed with the emperor's approval.<sup>76</sup>

This is why the word *homoousios* is not to be found in the extant writings of Alexander of Alexandria and Marcellus of Ancyra.<sup>77</sup> It was not mentioned—beyond any doubt an intentional omission!—by Ossius at the Council of the Western bishops at Sardica (343).<sup>78</sup> Eustathius of Antioch openly manifested his dissatisfaction with the formula approved at Nicaea, complaining that the ablest speakers (he is evidently alluding to himself and his anti-Arian fellows) had been reduced to silence under the pretence of preserving peace.<sup>79</sup> This means that all the leaders of the anti-Arian party were unwillingly forced to accept Constantine's decision in favor of *homoousios*, but that none of them was really interested in the addition of this new word.

There are, therefore, no serious grounds for claiming that this term was "suggested" to Constantine by his "orthodox" advisers to spite the Arians, or that this concept was primarily anti-Arian.<sup>80</sup> *Homoousios* was in fact a foreign body or stumbling block for all the people

75. See Alastair H. B. Logan, "Marcellus of Ancyra and the Councils of AD 325: Antioch, Ancyra, and Nicaea," *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992): 428–46. Logan's argument is accepted by Thomas G. Elliott, *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1996), 207.

76. See Eusebius's letter to the Church of Caesarea in Opitz, *Urk.* 22.7. According to Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 81 (ed. Courtonne, 1:183), the text of the Nicene Creed was drafted by the Cappadocian Hermogenes. His name is found again in *Ep.* 244,9 (Courtonne, 3:82) and 263,3 (Courtonne, 3:123).

77. Gerhard Feige, "Markell von Ancyra und das Konzil von Nizäa (325)," in *Denkender Glaube in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, eds. Wilhelm Ernst and Konrad Feiereis, Erfurter Theologische Studien, 63 (Leipzig: St.-Benno, 1992), 277–96, rightly denies that Marcellus was one of the leading theologians of the Council of Nicaea.

78. Text and thorough commentary of the confession of Sardica in Jörg Ulrich, *Die Anfänge*, 26–109. See also Joseph T. Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum. Marcellus of Ancyra and Fourth-Century Theology* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 144–52.

79. From Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* I,8: ὁμοῦ τινες ἐκ συσκευῆς, τὸν νομα προβαλλόμενοι τῆς εἰρήνης, κατεσύγησαν μὲν ἅπαντας τοὺς ἄριστα λέγειν εἰωθότας. This is the frag. 32 of Michel Spanneut, *Recherches sur les écrits d'Eustathe d'Antioche avec une édition nouvelle des fragments dogmatiques et exégétiques* (Lille: Facultés Catholiques, 1948), 104 f.

80. This commonly held opinion has been recently welcomed also by Holger Strutwolf, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea. Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung seiner Platonismusrezeption und Wirkungsgeschichte*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte, 72 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 54 f.

attending the council, without distinction, Arians and anti-Arians, and for this very reason it soon disappeared in the following debates. To find *homoousios* again in Christian documents, we have to wait for Athanasius, about fifteen years after the council.<sup>81</sup> But with Athanasius a new phase of the controversy begins.

At the end of the first section of this research, the question legitimately arises: where did Constantine get the idea of introducing into the Creed a word that not only the Arians openly rejected, but even the anti-Arians viewed with suspicion if not with hostility? What was the meaning of this word in Constantine's intention, and what compelled him to challenge both parties in this way? The Christian tradition does not offer the key to the solution of these problems. It is necessary, therefore, to turn to the pagan world.

#### V. HOMOOUSIOS IN A HERMETIC TRACTATE

The word *homoousios* appears in the writings of some Neoplatonist philosophers—Plotinus,<sup>82</sup> Porphyry,<sup>83</sup> and Iamblichus<sup>84</sup>—but only in the general meaning of "made of the same nature" or "of the same substance," without any particular theological connotation. For the present research I find of more interest an anonymous alchemical text which mentions the "Orphic consubstantiality" (τὸ Ὀρφαϊκὸν ὁμοούσιον) and the "Hermaic chain" (ἡ Ἑρμαϊκὴ λύρα). This is the mystic doctrine of the Egyptian *hierogrammateis* (scribe-priests) relating to the universal harmony based on the divine kinship and sympathetic interlinking of natures consubstantial with one another.<sup>85</sup> This alchemical fragment directly introduces us to the Hermetic use of the term *homoousios*. In fact, the only pagan text known so far in which *homoousios* is used in the context of a discussion specifically and exclusively concerned with the nature of God and his cosmogonic activity is the *Poimandres*, the first tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

In the course of the revelation of *Poimandres*, Hermes learns that the Nous (Mind) is the supreme God, and that the Logos (Word) that

81. Athanasius, *Or. adv. Arian.* I,9 (PG 26, 29 A).

82. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV,4,28; IV,7,10.

83. Porphyry, *De abst.* I,19; *Sent.* 33; *Ad Gaur.* 6,2;18; *De regr. an. frag.* 10 Bidez (=Augustine, *Civ. Dei* X,29: *consubstantialem*).

84. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* III,21.

85. Published for the first time in Fabricii, *Bibl. graeca*, XII, Hamburgi 1724, 762, this text is recorded as frag. 307 by Eugenius Abel, *Orphica* (Leipzig-Prag: Freytag-Tempsky, 5th ed., 1885, repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1971), 270, and as frag. 348 by Otto Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1922), 338–39.



proceeds from him is the Son of God. The Nous and his Logos are not divided from one another, for their union is life.<sup>86</sup> This idea is confirmed at the beginning of the twelfth tractate, where we read that the Nous comes from the very essence of god, but has not been cut off from god's essentiality and has expanded like the light of the sun.<sup>87</sup>

Poimandres goes on to reveal that the Nous, who is the androgyne supreme God, by speaking generated a second Nous, the Demiurge, god of the fire and spirit, who crafted the seven archons that encompass the sensible world; and their government is called fate.<sup>88</sup> The Logos, Son of God, from the elements that fall downwards, leapt up to the pure craftwork of nature and united with the Nous-Demiurge "because he was of the same substance" (ὁμοούσιος γὰρ ἦν).<sup>89</sup>

It is worth noting that, in the fluid terminology of the tractate, the Nous of the Highest Power (that is, the supreme God or Poimandres) is also called the Logos of sovereignty,<sup>90</sup> while the Logos is identified in turn with the Pneuma.<sup>91</sup> If the word *homoousios* is explicitly used to define the relationship between the Logos and the Nous-Demiurge, then it may be deduced from the context that all the forms in which the divine world is articulated are consubstantial with one another. The concept, if not the term, *homoousios* characterizes the overall Hermetic conception of the Godhead.

This Hermetic text, which is of exceptional importance for the present research, has not yet been given the attention it deserves. It was mentioned in passing by Ortiz de Urbina in 1942,<sup>92</sup> and was also recorded by Dinsen<sup>93</sup> and Stead,<sup>94</sup> but has always been connected in an equivocal manner with Christian Gnostic texts. In any case, as far as I know, it has never received any special treatment in the previous investigations on the history of the Christian dogma of the Trinity. Now it must be stressed that the *Poimandres* cannot simplistically be labeled as a "Gnostic" text. Also, other attempts made so far to

86. *Poimandres* 6. I quote from the standard edition by Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière, *CH* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1946), 1:8–9: ἐγὼ Νοῦς ὁ σοὺς θεὸς. . . ὁ δὲ ἐκ Νοῦς φωτεινὸς Λόγος υἱὸς θεοῦ. . . οὐ γὰρ διύστανται ἀπ' ἀλλήλων ἕνωσις γὰρ τούτων ἐστὶν ἡ ζωή.

87. *CH* XII, 1 (174): ὁ νοῦς. . . ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ οὐσίας ἐστίν. . . ὁ νοῦς οὖν οὐκ ἐστὶν ἀποτεμμημένος τῆς οὐσιότητος τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἠπλωμένος καθάπερ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς.

88. *Poimandres* 9 (9).

89. *Ibid.* 10 (10).

90. *Ibid.* 2 (7) and 30 (17).

91. *Ibid.* 5 (8) and 9 (9).

92. See the article cited above in n. 25.

93. Dinsen, *Homoousios*, 6.

94. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 201–2, and *RAC* 16, 374–5.

discover in the Hermetic *Poimandres* the marks of a specifically Jewish-Hellenistic influence are on the whole to be considered misleading.<sup>95</sup> This alleged influence rests in fact only on a vague resemblance of *Poimandres* 18 with Gen. 1:28 and of the final hymn (ch. 31) with Isa. 6:3.

It is even worse to interpret this Hermetic tractate as a paganized gospel that in the third century C.E. was used polemically against Christianity.<sup>96</sup> Just because Numenius of Apamea knew the Bible and held Moses in high regard, no one would dream of saying that he was a Jewish-Hellenist, or that he borrowed his concepts and his theological language from the Jewish-Christian tradition, or that he was reacting against Christian theology!<sup>97</sup> So, I am reluctant to accept Büchli's opinion that the presence of the term *homooousios* in the *Poimandres* is a reminiscence of the disputes of Christian theologians, and that the Hermetic author therefore intended to appropriate Christian theology.<sup>98</sup>

The *Poimandres*, as well as all the other extant Hermetic tractates, rather elaborates, with the support of Hellenistic philosophical terminology, the genuinely pagan doctrine the Egyptian priests circulated under the name of Thoth-Hermes.<sup>99</sup> As Erik Iversen has brilliantly shown, this doctrine is to be understood in the light of the evidence of

95. See especially Charles Harold Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder and Stanghton, 1935; 3d ed., 1964), 201–9, and Jens Holzhausen, *Der "Mythos vom Menschen" im hellenistischen Ägypten. Eine Studie zum "Poimandres" (=CH I), zu Valentin und dem gnostischen Mythos, Theophaneia*, 33 (Frankfurt am Main: Hain, 1994). For a more balanced point of view, see Birger A. Pearson, "Jewish Elements in Corpus Hermeticum I (Poimandres)," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Études préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain*, 91 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 336–48. This article is reprinted in Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 136–47.

96. This is the thesis held by Jörg Büchli, *Der Poimandres, ein paganisiertes Evangelium. Sprachliche und begriffliche Untersuchungen zum 1. Traktat des Corpus Hermeticum*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 2. Reihe, 27 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987).

97. See the collection of his extant fragments in Édouard des Places, *Numénius. Fragments* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973), esp. frag. 8 (Plato is an Atticizing Moses), 13 (citation of Exod. 3:14), and 30 (citation of Gen. 1:2).

98. Büchli, *Der Poimandres*, 65–6: "Der Wortgebrauch von ὁμοούσιος weist nämlich eindeutig in den christlichen Bereich . . . Da ὁμοούσιος innerhalb des CorpHerm nur hier im Poimandres einmal vorkommt, können wir hier mit Bestimmtheit eine Reminiszenz an die Auseinandersetzung der christlichen Theologen annehmen." This conclusion is based on the questionable assumption that "dort ist der christliche Einfluß gesichert, wo ein Wort nur durch den christlichen Sprachgebrauch erklärt werden konnte" (203).

99. See Iamblichus, *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* I,1,1–2.

ancient mythographers on the typical motives on which Egyptian theology was based.<sup>100</sup> For example, Iamblichus knows about the dominant role attributed in the Egyptian religion to the Nous-Demiurge—called by the different names of Amun, Ptah, and Osiris.<sup>101</sup> Diodorus Siculus, for his part, states that the Egyptians identified the Pneuma with Zeus or Amun, since they considered it the source of the breath of life to be found in all animate beings, and therefore they called it the Father of the universe.<sup>102</sup> Plutarch confirms that the Egyptians called the Pneuma Zeus (or Amun).<sup>103</sup> Egyptian theology already knew the divine consubstantiality of the Nous with the Pneuma, an idea that was then faithfully adopted by the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Pneuma, as a fine breath of the Nous, hovered over the waters of the original chaos before creation,<sup>104</sup> while the Nous comes from the very essence of god, if god has any essence; the Nous has not been cut off from god's essence, but has expanded like the light of the sun.<sup>105</sup>

As further confirmation of the relevance of the Egyptian tradition for a correct historical understanding of the origin and true meaning of *homoousios*, I am now pleased to be able to add a new text to the dossier of the discussion. This text has been up till now completely overlooked by all those who have dealt with the interpretation of *homoousios*. I am referring to a work entitled *Theosophia*, an anonymous monophysite collection of various sources in four books, dating back to the early years of the sixth century C.E.<sup>106</sup>

## VI. HOMOOUSIOS IN AN EGYPTIAN INSCRIPTION

Five Egyptian oracles, recorded solely in the first book of the *Theosophia*, exalt the supreme God (called Nous or Logos) and his Son the Logos, who fully share their divine nature with the Pneuma. At Ombos, a fortress town of the Thebaid in Upper Egypt, the following oracle was engraved:

100. Erik Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, Opuscula Graecolatina- Supplementa Musei Tusculani, 27 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 1984).

101. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VIII,3.

102. Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* I,12,2.

103. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 36 (365 D).

104. *CH* III,1 (Nock-Festugière, 44).

105. *CH* XII,1. See n. 87.

106. All the questions concerning this work, its origin, purpose and structure, are discussed in the general introduction to my edition: Pier Franco Beatrice, *Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia. An Attempt at Reconstruction*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), XI–LXXII.

They call the Logos “Son of God” and “God-Logos”:  
a shared divinity is in the Son and in the Father.<sup>107</sup>

In another oracle from Coptos we can read the following dialogue:

—Did the sky create itself? O Sun, teach me.  
—No, the Logos created it, generating the Son Logos.  
The two are one, the Father and the illustrious Son.  
—But tell me this: who was it who, coming to the divine earth,  
taught the ineffable wisdom to the mortal race?  
—From the halls of the Father, from the celestial peaks,  
the Son gave order [κόσμησε] to all the weary human race  
and a pure virgin [παρθενική], having no wedding experience,  
brought him forth without the pains of Eileithyia.<sup>108</sup>

Another oracle on the Trinity comes from Elephantine:

The life-giving Pneuma, uttered by God, surrounds the image [εἰκόνα] of  
the Father; the Father has the Son, the Son the Father;  
they are three, but they are only one nature [μία φύσις], being  
themselves in themselves.<sup>109</sup>

The fourth oracle states:

The God who generates himself eternally, the wise men called “pure  
Logos,”  
and “splendid Logos” they called the Son of the God author of oracles.  
In the two is the Pneuma, pure, divine.  
They are a pure trinity [τριῶς], being the one in the other.<sup>110</sup>

Our attention is especially captured by the fifth and last “theological” oracle of the series. The author of the *Theosophia* drew it from a work, now lost, written by an otherwise unknown Antiochus, a priest of Heliopolis.<sup>111</sup> This oracle was engraved in the so-called *Syringes*, that is, the burial vaults or the subterranean passages of the Valley of the Kings near Thebes in Upper Egypt.<sup>112</sup>

107. *Theosophia* I,41 (Greek text in Beatrice, *Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia*, 21 f.).

108. *Theosophia* I,42 (22).

109. *Theosophia* I,43 (22).

110. *Theosophia* I,44 (22).

111. According to the Greek geographer Strabo, who lived in the age of Augustus, Heliopolis was in ancient times a settlement of priests who studied philosophy and astronomy. Strabo, however, complained that in his day the place was entirely deserted and that the learned tradition of the local temples had completely evaporated (see *Geogr.* XVII,1,27–29). This means that Antiochus might have written his collection of Egyptian religious texts at the latest at the end of the Hellenistic age (2d–1st c. B.C.E.). But nothing really prevents us from thinking of him as a representative of the pagan revival of the 3d–5th c. C.E.

112. *Theosophia* I,45 (Beatrice, 22): κατὰ τὰς λεγόμενας σύριγγας. For the right meaning of this rare word see Beatrice, *Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia*, XLII, n. 128, and apparatus.

There was a unique Nous, more intelligent than all, incorruptible beginning,  
 from him the intelligent Logos, creator of the universe, eternally incorruptible  
 Son, reflection of the intelligent Father, one with the Father.  
 Distinct from the Father only by name,  
 but one with the Father and one from one, same disposition,  
 being from the glory of the Father, *consubstantial* [ὁμοούσιος],  
 eternally incorruptible  
 with the prime holy Pneuma and beginning of life.<sup>113</sup>

The similarities between these "Egyptian" oracles and the Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth of the Son-Logos are so striking as to arouse the suspicion that they might be only apologetic "forgeries" fabricated with the aim of artificially demonstrating the harmony between pagan wisdom and the Christian revelation. Pierre Batiffol, for example, was convinced that this entire group of oracles reveals the Christian Trinitarian monotheism of the author of the *Theosophia*.<sup>114</sup> This suspicion could be partly justified by the fact that the *Theosophia* actually does at times report some blatantly bogus oracles, such as the monophysite Christological confession of faith placed in the mouth of the Delphic Apollo,<sup>115</sup> Apollo's response to the Athenians on the Church of the *Theotokos*,<sup>116</sup> the Sibylline oracles on the coming of the Lord and the end of the world,<sup>117</sup> and the prophecy of Zoroaster to Hystaspes on the Incarnation of the Messiah.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, I think that an unbiased and in-depth analysis clearly shows the relationship of these oracles with traditional Egyptian theology, just as we have seen it expressed in the *Poimandres* especially.

In these oracles the supreme God and Father is called "Nous" and "Logos," and the Logos is also defined "Son of the Father," separate by name but really one with him. The word *homoousios* appears in the last oracle, designating the consubstantiality of the Logos-Son with the Nous-Father. The Trinity is completed by the holy Pneuma, a definition which reminds us of the holy Logos of the *Poimandres*.<sup>119</sup> The theme of the Virgin Birth of the Logos-Son, mentioned in the

113. *Theosophia* I,45 (Beatrice, 23).

114. Pierre Batiffol, "Oracula hellenica," *Revue biblique* 13 (1916): 177-99, esp. 196 ff.: "Nous sommes ici en plein monothéisme chrétien trinitaire."

115. *Theosophia* I,5 (Beatrice, 10-12).

116. *Theosophia* I, 54-55 (26 f.).

117. Book 3 is entirely devoted to the Sibylline prophecies.

118. Only this fragment of book 4 has been salvaged in a Syriac translation.

119. *Poimandres* 5 (Nock-Festugière, 8).

oracle from Coptos, has a precise parallel in a pagan Alexandrian festival devoted to the annual celebration of the day (the morning of January 6) in which the virgin Kore gave birth to the god Aion.<sup>120</sup>

Further confirmation of the Egyptian origin of these oracles comes from another Hermetic fragment again recorded only in the *Theosophia*. In his hymn to the Almighty, Hermes Trismegistus says that the Father of the universe, the one God who originates from no-one, has an only Son, generated from the beginning with great power and without undergoing any change, as his own uncreated Logos (υἶόν. . ἀγέννητον λόγον). The Son-Logos is God as is the Father, since his substance is derived from the substance of the Father (θεὸν ὄντα τῆν οὐσίαν ἐκ τῆς σῆς οὐσίας). He bears the incorruptible and similar image (εἰκόνα) of the Father, and he is in the Father as the Father is in him.<sup>121</sup> It is worth noting that the expression “from your (that is, of the Father’s) substance” is no more than a variation of the *homoousios* we read in the *Poimandres* and in the fifth Egyptian oracle quoted in the *Theosophia*.<sup>122</sup>

In conclusion, the word *homoousios* is an integral part of the theological terminology of Hellenistic-Roman Egypt, and has a “Trinitarian” significance both in the *Poimandres* and in the fifth oracle of the *Theosophia*. These two texts are particularly valuable because they converge, definitively excluding the Gnostic origin of the term, and demonstrating that the specifically theological use of *homoousios* should be traced back to its real Egyptian, pre-Christian roots. The Gnostics evidently drew this word from their Egyptian and Hermetic sources, introducing it for the first time into the Christian lexicon.<sup>123</sup>

120. The only extant source is Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51,22,9–11 (GCS 31, Epiphanius II, 285 f.): ταύτη τῆ ὥρᾳ σήμερον ἡ Κόρη (τουτέστιν ἡ παρθένος) ἐγέννησε τὸν Αἰῶνα. This obscure text has been discussed at length by Hugo Rahner, *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung* (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1957), 180–83, and Glen W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21–27, but they do not mention the oracle from Coptos on the Virgin Birth of the Logos-Son (see above, n. 108).

121. *Theosophia* II,37 (Beatrice, 38). It is needless to emphasize the affinity of this Hermetic hymn with the Fourth Gospel.

122. Unfortunately Hartmut Erbse has not paid sufficient attention to the Egyptian and Hermetic connections of these five oracles. In particular, with regard to *homoousios*, he does not quote the *Poimandres*, and limits himself to referring the reader to the obsolete pages of Harnack’s *Dogmengeschichte*. See his *Theosophorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), 32: “de significatione et historia vocis cf. de Harnack, D. G. I 284 n. 3.”

123. This conclusion is in substantial agreement with the observations of Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 113 ff. on the relationship between pagan Hermetism and Christian gnosticism, even though the word *homoousios* is not discussed in this book.

However that may be, what seems certain is that, if *homoousios* was unwelcome to all the bishops of Nicaea without distinction, Constantine's decision to insert it in the Creed can be explained only as an expression of his personal familiarity with the Hermetic tradition we have so far traced.

## VII. CONSTANTINE AND HERMETISM

This is not the most suitable place to analyze Constantine's intellectual formation and religious evolution.<sup>124</sup> Here I would like to point out only that in his youth he certainly had contact with pagan philosophers at Diocletian's court in Nicomedia. There he probably had the opportunity to hear Porphyry's public attack on Christianity and to meet Lactantius on the eve of the Great Persecution.<sup>125</sup> He also went to Egypt, where with his own eyes he saw the ruins of Memphis.<sup>126</sup> It is likely that his refusal of bloody sacrifices was inspired by the Hermetic spirituality. Now, the results we have acquired so far allow us to establish a few important points concerning the Hermetic background of Constantine's ideas about God and Christ.

First, Constantine did not confine himself to imposing, by his authority, the inclusion of *homoousios* in Eusebius's creed. He also supplied a "philosophical" explanation with the intention of dispelling any possible misunderstanding connected with the usual "materialistic" interpretation of this word. He thus tried to make *homoousios* more attractive for the Arians and to overcome their resistance. Eusebius highly appreciated his intervention: "Constantine said that the Son is 'consubstantial' (ὁμοούσιος) not according to bodily affections, and that the Son subsisted from the Father neither according to division, nor severance: for the immaterial, and intellectual, and incorporeal nature could not be the subject of any bodily affection, but that it became us to conceive of such things in a divine and ineffable

124. Among the best books on this topic see Hermann Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins*, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, 3d ser., no. 39 (1954); Heinz Kraft, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, 20 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1955); Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century A.D. to the Conversion of Constantine*, 2d ed. (London: Penguin, 1988); Harold Allen Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). But further research needs to be carried out.

125. On Porphyry's anti-Christian activity at Diocletian's court see Pier Franco Beatrice, "Antistes philosophiae. Ein christenfeindlicher Propagandist am Hofe Diokletians nach dem Zeugnis des Laktanz," in *Ricerche patristiche in onore di Dom Basil Studer* (Rome: Inst. Patr. Augustinianum, 1993 = *Augustinianum* 33), 31–47.

126. See Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 16,4 (ed. Ivar A. Heikel, GCS 7, 177).

manner. And our most wise and most religious emperor reasoned in this way.”<sup>127</sup>

This statement is paralleled not only by the profession of faith of Alexander of Alexandria,<sup>128</sup> but also by the twelfth tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>129</sup> Constantine enunciated his “philosophy” in a more extensive way in the so-called *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints*.<sup>130</sup> Here the emperor’s position can be clearly seen. Constantine praises Plato for having said many true things about God: “(Plato) describes as first God the one who is above being, rightly so doing, and subordinated to this one also a second, and distinguished the two beings numerically, the perfection of both being one, but the substance of the second receiving its subsistence from the first. For the first God is the Demiurge and governor, being clearly above the universe, while the other, in obedience to his mandates, brings back to him the cause of the constitution of the universe. Thus according to the accurate account, there would be one God who takes care of all things, having by his Logos put all in order; but the Logos himself is himself god and the son of God. For what other name could one give him except son of God without making an enormous mistake? For the Father of all things also might rightly be called the Father of his own Logos.”<sup>131</sup>

This statement evidently has no relation at all with Plato’s real doctrine. Neither is Numenius likely to have exerted any influence on

127. Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his Church (= Opitz, *Urk.* 22,7). English version by Stevenson and Friend, *A New Eusebius*, 345.

128. In his circular letter to Alexander of Thessalonica, cited by Theodoret, *Hist.eccl.* I,4,46 (= Opitz, *Urk.* 14): οὐ κατὰ τὰς τῶν σωμάτων ὁμοιότητος ταῖς τομαῖς ἢ ταῖς ἐκ διαρῆσεων ἀπορροαῖς, ὡσπερ Σαβελλίῳ καὶ Βαλεντίνῳ δοκεῖ. This text should be compared with Arius’s confession quoted above in n. 72.

129. See esp. *CH* XII,1 cited above in notes 87 and 105.

130. The date of the *Oration* is still a controversial point. According to Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 627–56, this speech was held at Antioch immediately before the Council of Nicaea, on the Good Friday of Apr. 325, but Harold Allen Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 292–308, would take it just as a particular version of one basic, much-reworked speech on Providence. What really matters here is its authenticity which nobody seems to doubt anymore.

131. Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 9 (ed. Ivar A. Heikel, GCS 7,163): πρῶτον μὲν θεὸν ὑφηγήσατο τὸν ὑπὲρ τὴν οὐσίαν, καλῶς ποιῶν, ὑπέταξε δὲ τούτῳ καὶ δευτέρον, καὶ δύο οὐσίας τῷ ἀριθμῷ διεῖλε, μιᾶς οὐσίας τῆς ἀμφοτέρων τελειότητος, τῆς τε οὐσίας τοῦ δευτέρου θεοῦ τὴν ὑπαρξίν ἐχούσης ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου· αὐτὸς γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ δημιουργὸς καὶ διοικητὴς τῶν ὅλων δηλονότι ὑπερναβεβηκῶς, ὃ δὲ μετ’ ἐκείνου ταῖς ἐκείνου προστάξεσιν ὑπουργήσας τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς τῶν πάντων συστάσεως εἰς ἐκείνον ἀναπέμπει. εἰς ἃν οὖν εἴη κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον ὃ τὴν πάντων ἐπιμέλειαν ποιούμενος προνοοῦμενός τε αὐτῶν θεὸς λόγῳ κατακοσμήσας τὰ πάντα· ὃ δὲ λόγος αὐτὸς θεὸς ὢν αὐτὸς τυγχάνει καὶ θεοῦ παῖς. ποῖον γὰρ ἂν τις ἄλλο ὄνομα αὐτῷ περιτιθεῖς παρὰ τὴν προσηγορίαν τοῦ παιδὸς οὐκ ἦν τὰ μέγιστα ἐξαρμαρτανοῖ; ὃ γὰρ τοῖ τῶν πάντων πατὴρ καὶ τοῦ ἰδίου λόγου δικαίως ἂν πατὴρ νομίζοιτο.



Constantine's speech, if we remember that for Numenius the first God, the Father and King, lies absolutely idle, whereas the creation is the exclusive work of his son, the Demiurge.<sup>132</sup> On the contrary, Hermetism offers more significant similarities, and a careful scrutiny reveals strong analogies of thought and language between Constantine's theology and the tradition found in both the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the five Egyptian theological oracles of the *Theosophia*. The author of the eleventh Hermetic tractate clearly states that God is the Creator and denies that God is idle.<sup>133</sup> Also, according to the *Poimandres*, the Logos is the instrument used by the holy Nous to constitute the universe.<sup>134</sup> This does not, however, rule out the divine nature of the Logos himself and his "consubstantiality" with the supreme Nous. Even though the word *homoousios* does not yet appear in the *Oration*, the concept is already there, and the Plato recalled by Constantine is just a name used to cover precisely the Egyptian and Hermetic theology of the "consubstantiality" of the Logos-Son with the Nous-Father, having recourse to a traditional apologetic argument.

In the years of the outbreak of the Arian controversy, Lactantius might have played a decisive role in influencing Constantine's Hermetic interpretation of Plato's theology and consequently the emperor's decision to insert *homoousios* in the Creed of Nicaea. Actually, Lactantius, too, claims that "Plato spoke about the first God and the second god, not as a philosopher, but as a prophet" and then reveals the true source of this inspired doctrine when he says that Plato perhaps was following the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>135</sup>

Recognizing two distinct gods does not, however, prevent Lactantius from thinking at the same time that the Father and the Son have in common one Mind, one Spirit, one Substance, according to the Hermetic doctrine of the "consubstantiality" of the first God, the Nous-Father, with the second god, the Logos-Son.<sup>136</sup> This second god

132. See Numenius, frag. 12 (Édouard des Places, 54). John M. Rist, "Basil's 'Neoplatonism': Its Background and Nature," in *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteenth-century Anniversary Symposium*, ed. Paul Jonathan Fedwick (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 1:137-220, esp. 155-59, seems to have overlooked this important difference.

133. *CH XI*, 15 (149): οὐ γὰρ ἄργος ὁ θεός.

134. *Poim.* 31 (18): ἅγιος εἶ, ὁ λόγῳ συστησάμενος τὰ ὄντα.

135. Lactantius, *Epit.* 37,4 (SC 335,154): "Denique Plato de primo ac secundo deo non plane ut philosophus, sed ut vates locutus est, fortasse in hoc Trismegistum secutus." For the interpretation of this text see Michel Perrin, "Le Platon de Lactance," in *Lactance et son temps. Recherches actuelles*, eds. Jacques Fontaine and Michel Perrin, Théologie historique, 48 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1978), 203-34, in particular 216-19.

136. Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* IV,29,4 (SC 377, 238): "Cum igitur et pater filium faciat et filius patrem, una utrique mens, unus spiritus, una substantia est."

is also identified as Spirit: not by chance, Lactantius claims elsewhere that God himself, before the creation of the universe, brought forth a holy and incorruptible Spirit, to be called his Son.<sup>137</sup> At any rate, the presence of the word *mens* in this context once again confirms the basically Hermetic inspiration of Lactantius's "binitarian" theology, even though this does not necessarily rule out other possible Christian sources for his thought.

Everything becomes clear if we read the strikingly similar texts of Lactantius and Constantine against the background of the Hermetic tradition, rather than of the Christian controversies of their time. There is therefore no reason to suspect, with P. S. Davies, that the mention of two *ousiai* in Constantine's *Oration* is an Arian interpolation introduced by its editor Eusebius after Constantine's death<sup>138</sup>. On the contrary, this distinction fits in with the Hermetic idea of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, in the sense that the notion of consubstantiality does not rule out the numerical distinction of two beings sharing the same divine nature. The Arian Eusebius of Caesarea understood and welcomed Constantine's explanation of the word *homoousios* at Nicaea because this formula was not in contradiction with the "mild subordinationism" implied in his own distinction of the two divine hypostases. In other words, Eusebius accepted the *homoousios* not because he had been unwillingly forced to yield to his monarchian (or Sabellian) opponents, led by Ossius and Marcellus (as is usually claimed), but rather because his theology had significant, objective affinities with Constantine's Hermetic philosophy of the consubstantiality of the two gods. In the *Oration* and at the Council of Nicaea Constantine's thought appears to have been basically the same. The only difference is that at Nicaea he put out the new decisive term, *homoousios*.

Constantine's involvement with the theological traditions of Egyptian paganism is again confirmed by a disconcerting document, the letter to the Church of Nicomedia written just a few months after the council. After having claimed that Christ, who is Lord, God, and Savior, is at the same time Father and Son, he adds that Christ is called Father as he eternally begets his Aion, and that he is called Son as he

137. Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* IV,6,1 (SC 377, 62): "Deus igitur machinator constitutorque rerum . . . antequam praeclarum hoc opus mundi adoriretur, sanctum et incorruptibilem spiritum genuit, quem filium nuncuparet."

138. P. S. Davies, "Constantine's Editor," *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1991): 610–18, esp. 612. For criticism from a different point of view see also Mark J. Edwards, "The Arian Heresy and the Oration to the Saints," *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995): 379–87.

is the Will of the Father.<sup>139</sup> Aiōn is also the name of the Son of the virgin Kore, whose birth was celebrated in the Egyptian ritual mentioned by Epiphanius.<sup>140</sup> It is interesting to note that in the Hermetic tradition Aion (Lat. *Aeternitas*) always accompanies God as his eternal offspring<sup>141</sup> and is the perfect image (εἰκὼν) of God.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, for Constantine the Son is the consubstantial Will of the Father, the creator and administrator of the universe, the guide to immortality.<sup>143</sup> The notion of the creative will (βουλή) of God is, for example, found again in the *Poimandres*<sup>144</sup> and in the *Asclepius*.<sup>145</sup>

At this stage it is also useful to recall that already in 313 C.E., that is, many years before the Council of Nicaea, the speech of the anonymous pagan panegyrist of Trier indicated the divine Mind (*divina mens*)—yet again the Hermetic Nous—as the source of the emperor's inspiration,<sup>146</sup> and that the victory of Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge against Maxentius is attributed in the inscription on the arch (315 C.E.) to the inspiration of the Divinity and the greatness of the divine Mind.<sup>147</sup> This is certainly to be connected in some way with the notion of *religio mentis* as found in the *Asclepius*.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, we should not forget that, besides Lactantius, one of Constantine's favorite advisers was the Neoplatonist Sopater of Apamea, the disciple and successor of Iamblichus who had opened the doors of Greek philosophy to the Egyptian mysteries and Hermetic speculations.

Heinz Kraft was the first, and up till now the only scholar who justly noted both the strong influence of the Hermetic tradition on

139. Opitz, *Urk.* 27,1: Τὸν δεσπότην θεὸν δηλαδὴ καὶ σωτήρα Χριστὸν ἀκριβῶς ἅπαντες ἴστε, ἀγαπητοὶ ἀδελφοί, πατέρα τε καὶ υἱὸν εἶναι, πατέρα φημι ἀναρχον ἄνευ τέλους γονέα τοῦ αἰῶνος αὐτοῦ, υἱὸν δὲ τοῦτ' ἔστι τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς βούλησιν. . .

140. See n. 120 above.

141. *CH XI,2* (147 f.): ὁ θεὸς αἰῶνα ποιεῖ. . . ὁ οὖν αἰὼν ἐν τῷ θεῷ. . . ὁ μὲν αἰὼν ἔστηκε περὶ τὸν θεόν; see *Ascl.* 31 (Nock-Festugière 2:339): "deus ergo stabilis fuit semper semperque similiter cum eo Aeternitas constitit."

142. *CH XI,15* (149).

143. *Urk.* 27,2.

144. *Poim.* 8 ff. (9).

145. *Ascl.* 19–20 (2:320 f.). More details in Jean-Pierre Mahé, "La Création dans les Hermetica," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986): 3–53, esp. 21 ff.

146. *Paneg. lat.* XII,2,5; 16,2; 26,1.

147. *CIL* vol.6, no.1139 = *ILS* no.694: "instinctu divinitatis mentis magnitudine."

148. *Ascl.* 25 and 29 (2:329, 336). On the Hermetic *religio mentis* see in general Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 95–115. The Hermetic origin of Constantine's *religio mentis* has been so far overlooked. See for example C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors. The Panegyrici Latini*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 295 ff.; Linda Jones Hall, "Cicero's *instinctu divino* and Constantine's *instinctu divinitatis*: The Evidence of the Arch of Constantine for the Senatorial View of the 'Vision' of Constantine," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 647–71.

Constantine’s religious thought and his considerable independence from contemporary Christian theology.<sup>149</sup> This is a point of view which deserves to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, he did not develop his keen intuition coherently, as he still thought, conditioned as he was by the traditional interpretation, that the Western influence of Ossius could not be completely excluded from Constantine’s decision in favor of *homoousios*. Also, he did not succeed in freeing himself of the idea that Hermetic theology is in some way part of the Gnostic tradition.

#### VIII. FROM NICAEEA TO SARDICA: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to conclude by recalling an epigraphic document dated 326 C.E. This inscription reports the thanksgiving that the Athenian torchbearer of the Eleusinian Mysteries, Nicagoras, son of Minucianus and father-in-law of the rhetor Himerius, addressed to the gods and to the most pious emperor Constantine. The reason for this thanksgiving was that Constantine had allowed him the opportunity to make a long journey to the *Syringes*—that is, the underground passages of the Valley of the Kings near Thebes in Upper Egypt—many centuries after the one made by the “divine” Plato to the same places.<sup>150</sup>

Without speculating on the mysterious motivations of this journey, we cannot help but note that Constantine was in close personal contact with “pagan” intellectuals such as Nicagoras and that the latter maintained vital relations with places filled with Egyptian theological memories such as the *Syringes*. So, it is important for our purposes that the word *homoousios*, which was certainly introduced in the Nicene Creed only in obedience to Constantine’s will, has also been preserved (not by chance) in the inscription of the *Syringes* recorded by the *Theosophia*.

Constantine was deeply convinced of the possibility of interpreting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by means of the categories he had inherited from the most sophisticated pagan theology of his day. For this reason, he fully shared the concern of the Fathers of Nicaea in sustaining the divine nature of the Logos-Son against the threat of Arian subordinationism. Thus, we can be sure that *homoousios* was imposed by him in order to place the Logos-Son unequivocally on the

149. Heinz Kraft, “ΟΜΟΟΥΣΙΟΣ,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 66 (1954–55): 1–24.

150. See Wilhelm Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1905), 2:462, nos. 720 and 721: Ὁ δαδούχος τῶν ἀγιωτάτων Ἐλευσίνι μυστηρίων Νικαγόρας Μινουκιανοῦ Ἀθηναῖος ιστορήσας τὰς σύριγγας πολλοῖς ἕστερον χρόνοις μετὰ τὸν θεῖον Πλάτωνα ἀπὸ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν ἐθαύμασα καὶ χάριν ἔσχεον τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ τῷ εὐσεβεστάτῳ βασιλεῖ Κωνσταντίνῳ τῷ τοῦτό μοι παρασχόντι. Ἰλεως ἡμῖν Πλάτων καὶ ἐνταῦθα.

side of the transcendent Father and to favor, by his philosophical explanation, the creation of a general theological consensus.<sup>151</sup> Constantine did not in fact consider the word *homoousios* an ambiguous and empty term, liable to receive different theological interpretations, nor did he adopt it with the sole "political" aim of isolating Arius from his supporters and recovering church unity by using a formula devoid of any clear and fixed theological meaning.<sup>152</sup> My opinion, instead, is that in Constantine's view *homoousios* was a pregnant technical term, with its own precise, traditional Hermetic meaning. In his thought the word *homoousios* did not contradict the distinction of two divine *ousiai*, precisely because it was the heritage of the ancient Egyptian theology and of the revelation of Hermes Trismegistus, and had therefore nothing to do with the Sabellian or monarchian identification-theology of the one hypostasis. Hermetism forms the conceptual background of the emperor's theology.

If this is true, the time has come to rule out, once and for all, the old and misleading thesis of Theodor Zahn, according to which the Nicene *homoousios* implies the Western theory of the numerical identity of the divine substance (*Wesenseinheit*). This mistaken interpretation is based on undue confusion between Nicaea and Sardica.

Marcellus of Ancyra was well aware that Eusebius of Caesarea had often maintained the existence of two distinct divine *ousiai*.<sup>153</sup> This is why in one of his extant fragments Marcellus accuses Eusebius of speaking in a way similar to that of Valentinus and Hermes Trismegistus, that is, as a heretic and as a pagan.<sup>154</sup> In another writing, entitled *De sancta ecclesia* (especially §§ 8–16), Marcellus again introduces Hermes Trismegistus, along with Valentinus, Plato, and Aristotle, as the main "pagan" source for the doctrine of two gods preached by the "Ariomaniacs" Asterius the Sophist and

151. Friedo Ricken, "Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus," *Theologie und Philosophie* 44 (1969): 321–41, rightly observes in conclusion: "Homoousios heißt: Der Sohn steht auf der Seinstufe des transzendenten Gottes." However, this is not enough, as he fails to take Constantine's role and his Hermetic background into consideration.

152. This is said against Eduard Schwartz, *Kaiser Constantin und die christliche Kirche* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913), 140 f., and Friedrich Loofs, "Das Nicänum," in *Festgabe Karl Müller* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 68–82, repr. in idem, *Patristica. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Alten Kirche*, hrsg. von Hanns Christof Brennecke und Jörg Ulrich, *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte*, 71 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1999), 105–21. For Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 255–57, *homoousios* was just a catchword that had the advantage of exposing and isolating the Arians.

153. See for example Marcellus of Ancyra, frag. 116, 117, and 120. I quote from Markus Vinzent, *Markell von Ankyra. Die Fragmente. Der Brief an Julius von Rom*, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae*, 39 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 108 ff.

154. Marcellus, frag. 118 (110): τοῦ μὲν Εὐσεβίου Οὐαλεντίνῳ τε καὶ Ἑρμῆ ὁμοίως εἰρηκότος.

Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>155</sup> He writes: "Now with the heresy of the Ariomaniacs. . . . These then teach three hypostases just as Valentinus the heresiarch . . . and he is discovered to have filched this from Hermes and Plato. That is also why they again devise a second god created by the Father before the ages, as their esteemed Asterius said, instructed by Hermes surnamed Trismegistus. . . . This then was the source from which their notion of a first and second god originated. It was on account of this, too, that Eusebius of Caesarea wrote 'unbegotten' . . . And what too was the source of their declaring that it was by the will of God that the Word of God subsisted? Did they not learn this too from Trismegistus? . . . In paying attention to these they were deprived of the true knowledge, boasting of being disciples of Hermes and Plato and Aristotle rather than of Christ and his apostles."<sup>156</sup>

As far as is known, Marcellus nowhere explicitly says that *homoousios* is a Hermetic word. Nevertheless, he states that the theology of Eusebius, who had publicly accepted that word at the Council of Nicaea, was inextricably connected with the Hermetic doctrine of two gods. Very likely Marcellus's silence on *homoousios* is due to the fact that the real target of the heavy charge of Hermetism, beyond Eusebius and his fellow Arians, was Constantine himself, who had imposed that word on the assembly of Nicaea! In this way, Constantine's harsh reaction against Marcellus becomes easily understandable.

I would also be inclined to guess that the very disagreement over the choice of the word *homoousios* was the true reason why Ossius, deeply disappointed, left Constantine immediately after the conclusion of the Council of Nicaea and suddenly disappeared, keeping silent until the death of both Constantine and Eusebius. By the reformulation of the Nicene Creed in the Western confession of Sardica, characterized by the formula *mia hypostasis* in the place of *homoousios*, Marcellus and Ossius took their belated revenge on Constantine's innovation—that is, the Hermetic notion of the consubstantiality of the two divine *ousiai* which at Nicaea had been easily, but not surprisingly, welcomed by their common Arian foe Eusebius of Caesarea.

In this way, also, Ossius's unexpected surrender finds a reasonable explanation. At the end of his long life, spent in fighting against the

155. This short text was discovered and edited for the first time by Giovanni Mercati, "Anthimi Nicomediensis episcopi et martyris de sancta ecclesia," in *Note di letteratura biblica e cristiana antica*, Studi e testi 5 (Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1901), 87–98. Marcel Richard had no difficulty in attributing it to Marcellus of Ancyra in his article "Un opuscule méconnu de Marcel évêque d' Ancyre," *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 6 (1949): 5–28, repr. in idem, *Opera Minora* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), vol. 2, no. 33.

156. I quote from the recent, exhaustive study by Alastair H. B. Logan, "Marcellus of Ancyra (Pseudo-Anthimus), 'On the Holy Church': Text, Translation and Commentary," *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000): 81–112, 95 f.

Arian heresy, Ossius gave his unconditional consent to the so-called “blasphemy” of Sirmium (357), persuaded as he was that neither *homoousios* nor *homoiousios* was used in the Holy Scriptures, and that inquiries about God’s essence are beyond human understanding.<sup>157</sup> This is the decisive proof that Ossius had no responsibility at all for the introduction of *homoousios* in the Creed of Nicaea.

Many centuries before being portrayed on the floor of the Siena cathedral (at the end of the fifteenth century), Hermes Trismegistus had already entered the body of Christian doctrine in the semblance of Constantine, setting his seal on the formulation of the Nicene Creed.

157. See Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* IV,12,6 (SC 418, 242): συνεχώρησε μήτε ὁμοούσιον μήτε ὁμοιούσιον λέγειν, ὡς μηδὲ ταῖς ἱεραῖς γραφαῖς ἐγνωσμένων τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἀνθρώπων ἴν οὐσίαν θεοῦ πολυπραγμοεῖν.