

The Augustan Heavens

[Hymn, Psalm XIX]

JOSEPH ADDISON

1712

The spacious firmament on high,
With all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.
The unwearied Sun from day to day
Does his Creator's power display;
And publishes to every land
The work of an Almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail,
The moon takes up the wondrous tale;
And nightly to the listening Earth
Repeats the story of her birth:
Whilst all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.

What though in solemn silence all
Move round the dark terrestrial ball;
What though nor real voice nor sound
Amidst their radiant orbs be found?
In Reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice;
Forever singing as they shine,
"The Hand that made us is divine."

In *The Spectator*, No. 465, August 23, 1712.

Here is an incomprehensible question, which, for more than sixteen hundred years, has furnished exercise for curiosity, for sophistic subtlety, for animosity, for the spirit of cabal, for the fury of dominion, for the rage of persecution, for blind and bloody fanaticism, for barbarous credulity, and which has produced more horrors than the ambition of princes, which ambition has occasioned very many. Is Jesus the Word? If He be the Word, did He emanate from God in time or before time? If He emanated from God, is He co-eternal and consubstantial with Him, or is He of a similar substance? Is He distinct from Him, or is He not? Is He made or begotten? Can He beget in his turn? Has He paternity? or productive virtue without paternity? Is the Holy Ghost made? or begotten? or produced? or proceeding from the Father? or proceeding from the Son? or proceeding from both? Can He beget? can He produce? is His hypostasis consubstantial with the hypostasis of the Father and the Son? and how is it that, having the same nature—the same essence as the Father and the Son, He cannot do the same things done by these persons who are Himself?

Assuredly, I understand nothing of this; no one has ever understood any of it, and that is why we have slaughtered one another.

The Christians tricked, cavilled, hated, and excommunicated one another, for some of these dogmas inaccessible to human intellect, before the time of Arius and Athanasius. The Egyptian Greeks were remarkably clever; they would split a hair into four, but on this occasion they split it only into three. Alexandros,

bishop of Alexandria, thought proper to preach that God, being necessarily individual—single—a monad in the strictest sense of the word, this monad is triune.

The priest Arios or Arious, whom we call Arius, was quite scandalized by Alexandros's monad, and explained the thing in quite a different way. He cavilled in part like the priest Sabelius, who had cavilled like the Phrygian Praxeas, who was a great caviller. Alexandros quickly assembled a small council of those of his own opinion, and excommunicated his priest. Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, took the part of Arius. Thus the whole Church was in flame.

The Emperor Constantine was a villain; I confess it—a parricide, who had smothered his wife in a bath, cut his son's throat, assassinated his father-in-law, his brother-in-law, and his nephew; I cannot deny it—a man puffed up with pride and immersed in pleasure; granted—a detestable tyrant, like his children; transeat—but he was a man of sense. He would not have obtained the Empire, and subdued all his rivals, had he not reasoned justly.

When he saw the flames of civil war lighted among the scholastic brains, he sent the celebrated Bishop Ozius with dissuasive letters to the two belligerent parties. "You are great fools," he expressly tells them in this letter, "to quarrel about things which you do not understand. It is unworthy the gravity of your ministry to make so much noise about so trifling a matter."

By "so trifling a matter," Constantine meant not what regards the Divinity, but the incomprehensible manner in which they were striving to explain the nature of the Divinity. The Arabian patriarch, who wrote the *History of the Church of Alexandria*, makes Ozius, on presenting the emperor's letter, speak in nearly the following words:

"My brethren, Christianity is just beginning to enjoy the blessings of peace, and you would plunge it into eternal discord. The emperor is only too right to tell you that you quarrel about a very trifling matter. Certainly, had the object of the dispute been essential, Jesus Christ, whom we all acknowledge as our legislator, would have mentioned it. God would not have

sent his son on earth, to return without teaching us our catechism. Whatever he has not expressly told us is the work of men and error is their portion. Jesus has commanded you to love one another, and you begin by disobeying him and hating one another and stirring up discord in the empire. Pride alone has given birth to these disputes, and Jesus, your Master, has commanded you to be humble. Not one among you can know whether Jesus is made or begotten. And in what does his nature concern you, provided your own is to be just and reasonable? What has the vain science of words to do with the morality which should guide your actions? You cloud our doctrines with mysteries—you, who were designed to strengthen religion by your virtues. Would you leave the Christian religion a mass of sophistry? Did Christ come for this? Cease to dispute worship, humble yourselves, edify one another, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and pacify the quarrels of families, instead of giving scandal to the whole empire by your dissensions."

Ozius addressed an obstinate audience. The Council of Nicea was assembled and the Roman Empire was torn by a civil war. This war brought on others and mutual persecution has continued from age to age, down to our own day.

C. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, LETTER TO EZRA STILES (1790).
Source: The Works of Benjamin Franklin..., ed.
Jared Sparks, 10 vols (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and
Company), 10:422-425.

You desire to know something of my religion. It is the first time I have been questioned upon it. But I cannot take your Curiosity amiss, and shall endeavour in a few Words to gratify it. Here is my Creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet with them.

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the system of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if the Belief has the good Consequence, as probably it has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Unbelievers in his Government of the World with any peculiar Marks of his Displeasure....

I shall only add, respecting myself, that, having experienced the Goodness of that Being in conducting me prosperously thro' a long life. I have no doubt of its Continuance in the next, though without the smallest Conceit of meriting such Goodness.'"...

I confide, that you will not expose me to Criticism and censure by publishing any part of this Communication to you. I have ever let others enjoy their religious Sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me unsupportable and even absurd. All Sects here, and we have a great Variety, have experienced my good will in assisting them with Subscriptions for building their new Places of Worship; and, as I have never opposed any of their Doctrines, I hope to go out of the World in Peace with them all.