What caused doctrinal controversies in the Early Church?
The Case of the fourth century

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It is difficult to imagine a student approaching the history of the Early Church who would not, at an early stage of his involvement with this subject, be struck by the observation that he is dealing with an age of innumerable controversies. From every new page of any textbook he (or she, for that matter) is greeted by yet another name of yet another conflict that appears to have all but torn apart the Christian community of its time. It must appear that, indeed, those Christians have been quarreling all the time.

If this impression is true for the history of the Early Church in general, it is probably truer of the fourth century than of most other times in that period. Church history of that century seems to be a mere chain of one conflict following another: the principal being the trinitarian or Arian controversy which lasted for the most part of the century. But the fourth century also, with the conflict about Apollinarius of Laodicea, started the christological controversy, which was to dominate several centuries to follow, it knew the Donatist, the pneumatomachean, the Origenist controversies, not to mention many smaller conflicts of which some, like the Antiochene schism, had serious repercussions for the Church in general.

One might demur that conflict and controversy are omnipresent in human history and that permanent quarrelling is, unfortunately, something that we witness ourselves all the time. True enough, but the real riddle to us of many of those conflicts are their subjects. In some cases we probably find it relatively easy to understand why people could be crucially divided about the respective problem. We understand that a religious group, as the Early Church, that has lived for a long time under heavy pressure from outside – that has at times even been persecuted – finds itself in a difficult position once this pressure is released. We realise that questions about individual or collective conduct during those times must be nagging. Who was faithful? Who lapsed? Which bishop left his flock in times of persecution? That conflicts about such problems were bound to arise in the Constantinian age (after 312) we may perhaps not be surprised to hear.
However, the bitterest and the most enduring controversies of the time were not about such issues – at least not openly, at least not primarily. They were about doctrinal differences – about the nature of the Trinity, more specifically about the intratrinitarian relation between Father and Son (‘was the Son from the being of the Father?’), later also on the Person of the Holy Ghost; about the Person of Jesus Christ (‘was he in two natures or out of two natures?’), about his having had a human soul, a human soul and a human mind or – perhaps – neither of the two etc.

We are notoriously at a loss as to why such questions could cause rifts for decades, even centuries, why some of them could and did actually separate churches and cause churchmen, who are otherwise known to have been pious, sober and charitable, to lash out against their Christian opponents in an at times rather less charitable way. This brings us to the central question to be addressed in this paper. The question is this: how could it be that problems now scarcely intelligible even to the specialist should have divided the church for decades, even centuries? How can we understand why issues of extreme subtlety were capable of developing such force at that time?

But perhaps some may argue that to put the question in this way really means begging it. Perhaps, these people may urge, we should not be misled by those doctrinal subtleties, but rather look for the real reasons underlying those controversies – for their political or social causes which were only masked by the theological arguments conducted on their surface.

Be this as it may, the task before us is clear: to get something of an answer to the question of what exactly caused those doctrinal controversies, to find reasons for their emergence, be these eventually of a theological, a political or a social nature. Since this is perhaps the most notorious question with regard to those conflicts, it has been answered, explicitly or implicitly, countless times, whenever scholars dealt with those controversies. Therefore, I propose to proceed by reviewing and evaluating important answers or rather types of answer that have been given and are being given to explain this problem. Those types or patterns seem to me to have often governed the general approach to the study of doctrinal controversies. It will be crucial to see how far they helped understand those controversies better and where they rather prevented an appropriate understanding of certain of their aspects.

The types are the following:

1. The heresiologist type. It answers our question by asserting that it was one
particular person, the heretic, or a small group that caused the controversy.

2. The history-of-dogma type. It claims that the development of doctrine in itself is the reason for those conflicts as it results at certain stages with some necessity in contrary or even contradictory positions.

3. The political-history type. It denies that doctrine played any great part in the emergence of the great controversies and claims that instead political ambition and rivalry are responsible.

4. The religious-studies type. It points to changes in other aspects of religious life, e.g. the liturgy, that accompany doctrinal developments; those are regarded as the real causes of controversy.

5. The social-history type. It is also sceptical about the relevance of doctrine but stresses more strongly the role of emerging social formations in the generation of conflicts.

1. The heresiologist type. I start with what is by far the dominant pattern of explanation in our sources and, consequently, has dominated the general perception of those events for a long time. I call this the heresiologist type or pattern. In a nutshell, this type of explanation works like this:

“The church would live in perfect peace were it not for certain people, heretics or schismatics, who come along causing trouble by introducing new teaching which is alien to the true and traditional doctrine of the church.”

The extent to which this paradigm has been and is still influencing our view of those controversies is mirrored by usage: even today we often name controversies after the supposed heretic, i.e. we speak of the Arian or the Apollinarian or the Origenist controversy, thus seemingly indicating that it was crucially a conflict about this particular person and his theological views. The most conspicuous feature of the heresiologist pattern, then, is its strong stress on the asymmetric character of those conflicts. They are seen as confrontations of an individual and his followers with the church, not as conflicts of two or more groups within the church. The reason for this asymmetric description of doctrinal conflicts is that this pattern has no intention of being impartial. All heresiologist accounts of doctrinal controversies live of the strong feeling that there is clear right and wrong, true and false, eventually ‘them’ against ‘us’. Heresiolo-
gist accounts of doctrinal controversies have played a crucial role for the definition of Christian identity – throughout the centuries creedal texts would tirelessly reiterate that Christians abhor the error of Arius, Apollinarius and many others.

What answer does this kind of account give to our main question, how does it explain the emergence of doctrinal controversies? At first sight, the heresiologist can be content to point to the heretic as the sole cause of the conflict. If a further interpretation is needed he may perhaps mention metaphysical forces, like the devil, as being instrumental in raising such a foe to Christianity.

This, to be sure, is the hard-line version of the heresiologist pattern. There is, however, a somewhat ‘weaker’ variety of it, which offers a more nuanced answer to our question also. In this second version the doctrinal controversy is still caused by an individual heretic but more care is taken to understand his motives. It is realised that the perpetrator comes from within the church, that he personally intends to offer an appropriate account of the Christian faith, that there are strands in Scripture and tradition he draws on, which seem to support his teaching.

I must admit that, in my view, this pattern even in its soft version is open to some serious doubt. Are we really to believe that great conflicts are brought about by one trouble-making individual? Is it not much more likely that in most cases we find at the bottom of a controversy a simmering conflict between two or more groups? Will we not usually find it impossible to decide finally ‘who started it’ because both sides will, with some plausibility, argue that their respective actions were re-actions to something the other side did? Is not the asymmetric character of this pattern of explanation at best confounding the distinction between the one who was wrong in the end and the one who started it all?

In my opinion, there is only one of the major controversies in the fourth century that might seem to yield to the heresiologist pattern at all. This is the Apollinarian controversy. We have to apply the soft version, of course: Apollinarius of Laodicea was not an instrument of the devil, rather a bishop in Syria, a defender of Christianity against the emperor Julian, an ardent advocate of the Council of Nicaea when this was still dangerous, and not least a close friend of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, up until the latter’s death in 373. Many regard him as one of the cleverest theologians of the fourth century, and what is extant of his writings bears this out completely. The teaching on the Person of Jesus Christ for which he became notorious, denying as he
did a human mind to the saviour, must be seen as an attempt on his side to bring the Christian idea of a god-man into a most coherent form.

However, focussing on the question of how the conflict about him was started it would appear that it really was him who brought it about. There is, in my view, little evidence suggesting that the primary cause of the controversy was anything but Apollinarius’ own missionary zeal. All our early, ‘orthodox’ witnesses for the outbreak of the Apollinarian controversy seem genuinely disturbed and sorry and all in all rather inclined to turn a blind eye to the worrying developments that are reported from Syria. This seems certainly true for Athanasius, his old friend, and also for Basil of Caesarea, the leading church politician of the 360s and 370s; it seems even, to some extent, true for the most ardent heresiologist of the time, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis. Epiphanius, to be sure, kicked off the real controversy with the inclusion of a lengthy account of Apollinarius’ errors in his famous book titled *Panarion* or ‘medicine chest against all heresies’, published c. 375. But at that point Apollinarius had already appointed a schismatic bishop in Antioch and sent letters and envoys to many places in the Orient making it clear enough that he was not prepared to accept anybody as a fellow-Christian who differed from him in Christology.

If there is thus, on the face of it, one doctrinal conflict in the fourth century that might be seen as supporting the basic assumption of the heresiologist pattern, there remain, no doubt, open questions: granted that it was that individual, why did he find this particular doctrinal question so crucial and how was he able to convince others of his point of view? Should we believe that it was doctrine that mattered only or at least primarily as this type wishes us to think? Or should we perhaps see the doctrinal issue rather as a vehicle for some other concern?

We shall return to these questions later. For the moment it is crucial to see that the majority of controversies in the fourth century cannot be explained by means of the heresiologist pattern once we depart from its biased point of view. A simple attempt at impartiality raises serious doubts about most heresiologist accounts, old and new, of doctrinal conflicts. This kind of consideration, then, leads directly to a different type of explanation. Before leaving the heresiologist type I should, however, like to make two brief remarks.

First, there is a particular difficulty in forsaking this type of explanation for doctrinal conflicts of the fourth century. This is the problem of sources. As things are, most
texts that inform us about those controversies are so strongly partisan that one may reasonably doubt whether any interpretation could ever alleviate this tendency.

Second, there has sometimes been a trend among liberal scholars to tell the story of those conflicts in a way that makes the traditional heretic the hero and the ‘orthodox’ the culprit, who is alone responsible for the controversy. Naturally, this way of simply turning the tables would equally fall in the present type of explanation, i.e. it would be a heresiological account.

2. The history-of-dogma type. This type may be characterised as the liberal version of the heresiologist pattern. Like the former it believes in doctrinal differences as the main reason for controversies, but unlike it, the history-of-dogma pattern attempts to show that the historical development of the Christian doctrine brought about those conflicts by some necessity. A short sketch of its idea of the origin of a doctrinal controversy might sound like this:

“The teaching of the church at one particular moment of its history is always ambiguous and can be logically developed into two (or more) directions. Therefore, conflicting doctrinal positions appear from time to time and it is only by means of those controversies that the initial ambiguity is eventually overcome.”

Why do doctrinal conflicts emerge? To this question the history-of-dogma pattern answers: the reason is the development of doctrine itself which at times leads to contrary or even contradictory positions.

It is clear that this paradigm in all its varieties has dominated scholarly study of the fourth century during the last century – at least in Germany – and is to some extent still doing so. In my view, there can be but little doubt about its merits and, in particular, about its advantages over against the heresiologist pattern. Consider the case of the most notorious of the fourth-century conflicts, that of the trinitarian controversy.

The heresiologist account of it would claim that it was Arius, the heretic, who caused the controversy. This, to be sure, is the message we are supposed to get from most anti-Arian sources of the fourth century. However, once we decide to doubt the impartiality of this message and look instead at the early sources of the conflict (they date from c. 320), it is, in my view, almost impossible not to depart from that view. For, the impression we get from those sources is that of two parties accusing each
other of wrongdoing, offering effectively two different accounts that are not easily reconciled.

On the one hand we have Arius, presbyter of Alexandria and, incidentally, at that time an elderly, much respected person, whom we find driven from his native city to Caesarea in Palestine, writing letters explaining that he had suffered from his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria. Alexander, he alleges, had introduced new and incorrect doctrines about the Son of God while his own teaching was consonant with tradition. There is little in those letters to take exception to. Arius claims that his opponent had argued for a completely symmetric relationship of Father and Son which he rejected in unison with Scripture and tradition. On the basis of this account Arius managed to convince some of the most learned and most respected theologians of the Christian East of that time that he was the victim of gross unfairness.

In sharp contrast we have the story told by his bishop, Alexander, who alleges that Arius taught heretical doctrines, introducing a sharp notion of subordination and degradation of the Son vis-à-vis the Father. Accordingly, it had been his, Alexander’s, duty to intervene. Reading Alexander’s epistle we may be inclined to follow his logic. The problem is this: Alexander’s report of Arius’ teaching differs from Arius’ own account as much as, vice versa, Arius’ account of Alexander’s heresies differs from the latter’s description of his own position. Thus we have two contradictory stories of the origin of that conflict. What is to be done about it? Of course, one of the two individuals could have lied or, at least, have been diplomatic with the truth. But in the absence of supporting evidence and with no possibility of testing their respective characters we will find such a decision quite difficult to make.

We can see here, I think, how in cases such as this the history-of-dogma pattern can offer what seems to be a rather elegant way out. Adherents of this pattern could argue that in a sense both sides were right. These scholars would attempt to show that both combatants felt entitled to be faithful to doctrinal tradition, in this case to that of Origen’s theology.

In fact, scholars have devoted considerable care to the demonstration that in the thought of Origen, the great champion of Christian theology in the former half of the third century, strands could be isolated that would lead to both Arius and his opponents. They constructed schools or parties of ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ Origenists as trajectories from the time of Origen to the early fourth century. The outbreak of the
trinitarian controversy would thus be the inevitable clash of those rival descendants of Origen. Only in its wake could one party with some justification claim to be orthodox and denounce the other as heretic.

Even so, it would be naïve to assume that the victorious doctrine was simply identical with that of either side in the initial conflict. Rather, in the course of the controversy a new doctrine had to emerge that was able to answer the questions raised in the conflict. Only when such a new doctrine had been established, the controversy had a chance of subsiding. In the case of the trinitarian controversy this is clearly the case. The resulting, post-Nicene theology is by no means simply identical with that of any participant in the early conflict of the 320s.

If thus the history-of-dogma pattern can avoid the most apparent pitfalls of the heresiologist type, it is itself by no means without problems. Its main drawback may be seen in its strong intellectualist tendency. As its main originators were all professors of theology, one is bound to suspect that they somehow projected their own situation back into the fourth century. We are, it seems, supposed to picture those fourth-century churchmen sitting in their studies and trying to perfect a ‘system’ of doctrine (a treacherous word, often encountered in the respective literature!) faithfully preserving the tradition of the teacher of their school – which, nevertheless breaks into a right and a left wing, just the way it happened to that of Hegel in the 1830s.

Surely, there are good reasons to be sceptical here! For all we know about the fourth century, those involved in the great doctrinal controversies were people of many obligations, bishops, church politicians, organisers of monastic communities. Should we read their writings as though they were mere scholars, primarily concerned to smoothen a ‘system’ of thought? And, what is perhaps more: even assuming there were those ‘intellectuals’, what about the many others? The history-of-dogma pattern has the dangerous tendency to present doctrinal controversies as conflicts of learned theologians, but is this essentially what they were? To be sure, it is notoriously difficult to ascertain how many people really were involved in those conflicts. In any case, the great controversies must have involved many whose theological education is open to some serious doubt. Most of the combatants will have understood rather little of the underlying theological or philosophical questions.

This last point brings us to what is perhaps the most fundamental problem about the history-of-dogma pattern which it actually shares with the heresiologist type. Both
are open to the critical question whether they do not seriously overestimate the role of doctrinal issues in bringing about those conflicts that rattled the church in the fourth century. Should we believe that something as elusive as theological subtleties was in itself able to move people in such a genuine way as to cause a major conflict as we see it happen in that time? Are we prepared to accept that those extremely abstract questions caused a movement that shattered the Christian church to its foundations?

It is at this point that something like a further horizon of my initial question becomes apparent. Asking for the causes of doctrinal conflicts entails considering the nature of Ancient Christianity. If we are to believe, and I think we must, that those controversies constitute defining moments in the emergence of the Church, then they must be closely related to its true, or perceived, character. In other words, our answer to the former question will inevitably be indicative of our view on the latter issue: the heresiologist type makes sense within an ecclesiological understanding of Christianity, which sees it essentially as the visible aspect of a major stage in the history of salvation, the principle of the presence of the Holy Spirit in human history. The history-of-dogma type perceives the Early Church as something like a philosophical school working out the ideal formulation of their dogmas. Yet while these two views may have their own justification, it is also evident that they leave out rather major aspects of what the Early Church was as well.

This, I think, is not a trivial observation. An explanation of the causes of doctrinal controversies will and must be judged ultimately by its contribution to an appreciation of what the Early Church was. What this means in practice will, I hope, become clearer, when now proceed to three alternative answers to our main question which, in spite of their differences, have this in common that they are sceptical about a primarily intellectualist explanation of the origin of doctrinal conflicts.

3. The political-history type. This type of answer was developed in direct opposition to the history-of-dogma pattern. Its reply to the question of why doctrinal controversies emerged is that they were caused by political rivalries, by scrambling for power and influence, in brief, by all those factors that stand behind secular, political conflicts as well.

Scholarly work following that hint has discovered remarkable facts. Many of the fath-
ers, bishops and patriarchs of the fourth and fifth centuries turned out to be extremely clever, and at times, rather cruel politicians who were eager to promote the interests of their sees, their personal ambitions, or both. It seems clear now that the great controversies cannot be understood properly without taking into account that background. Particularly notorious were the Alexandrian bishops. Let us consider once more the case of the so-called Arian controversy!

This controversy, as I noted earlier, was started by a somewhat opaque conflict between Bishop Alexander and his presbyter, Arius, resulting in the latter’s expulsion from Alexandria. However, this was only its first stage. No sooner had Arius found support by some Oriental (Palestinian and Bithynian) bishops, than we find Alexander diligently shifting the focus of his polemic from the presbyter Arius to those rather influential bishops.

This is the constellation that was to dominate the time of that controversy and beyond: Alexandria with its Egyptian hinterland, traditionally allied to Rome, pitted in a bitter feud against the Oriental provinces which for the longest time enjoyed the support of the Constantinian dynasty. Alexander’s successor, the famous Athanasius, used every means at his disposal in this struggle, was hated by most of his fellow bishops, but never really crushed.

Thus there seems no principal doubt as to the merits of the political type of explanation. Two considerations serve, however, to show its limits.

1. The most obvious problem seems to be its explicit objection against the more theological explanations. In its stronger, reductionist version the political pattern denies that doctrinal considerations played any role in those conflicts, except as some kind of camouflage. But there is little evidence supporting that assumption. The fact that doctrinal issues could be used for political purposes does not belie the possibility that people cared genuinely about those issues. Rather, I think, conversely, it makes the latter more likely.

2. In very few cases, I think, political reasons can be said to have actually caused doctrinal controversies. In the case of the trinitarian controversy of the fourth century, at any rate, this was certainly not so. I would suggest here to make a distinction between two stages or two levels of conflict, local and global. The former is between people or groups of people who are close to each other and whose conflicts are the result of more or less intimate knowledge of each other. The latter concerns large groups of
people, most of whom have little direct contact with the ‘opponent’ and, accordingly, only a vague idea of how the ‘other’ really is. The latter, global conflicts, normally emerge out of local ones. It is those global conflicts that become often heavily charged with political relevance in the process of their emergence.

I would hypothesise, then, that the political explanation is most useful for the interpretation of the escalation of a local into a global doctrinal conflict. This makes this type most useful for those conflicts that did actually develop in such a way, in other words the great doctrinal controversies. At the same time it rather restricts its uses for the identification of the origin of the initial local conflict.

4. The religious-studies type. This type is less hostile to the initial two models than the political pattern. Conflicts are explained by reference to differences in certain basic elements of the religious life, e.g. liturgy. Its supporters argue that such differences make it much easier to understand the actual emergence of conflict and controversy than theological speculation. Why? Because those elements of the religious life will be known to every member of the respective community. What is more, religion in particular seems to live strongly of the fixed and unchangeable character of at least some of those elements. It is rather easy to understand how whole religious communities can be roused to the defence of such elements in prayer or worship as have become dear to them through tradition.

There is, no doubt, something very plausible about that argument. Perhaps the best known case in the history of Christianity (though not in the fourth century) where this would seem to apply is the Great Schism of 1054 which was largely triggered by disagreement about a Western addition to the accepted Creed, the so-called *filioque* (the Creed now reads: "I believe.... in the Holy Spirit..... who proceeds from the Father and the Son."). In the fourth century one might feel reminded of the fact that the Council of Nicaea (325) had on its agenda a dispute on the exact date of Easter, a dispute, which, incidentally, it was unable to resolve finally. More important here is the so-called pneumatomachean controversy, the conflict about the nature of the Holy Ghost, for it offers a case of the intertwining of liturgy and doctrine. We know that an argument about the doxological formula was relevant for the course of an essentially doctrinal conflict.

A hearer of a sermon preached by Basil of Caesarea complained to a fellow bishop
that the metropolitan bishop had used an allegedly novel formula, praising the Father with (μετά) the Son and with (σύν) the Holy Spirit. This in turn prompted Basil to write his book *On the Holy Spirit* which was to become the central text for the entire controversy.

How does this type explain the interaction of doctrine and the religious life? Two versions seem possible. One, the ‘weak’ version, would accept that doctrine did in fact play a major role, that e.g. the change done to the liturgical formula reflected doctrinal considerations and that it is primarily the very outbreak of the controversy involving wide circles unfamiliar with doctrinal subtleties, that must be explained by reference to that liturgical change.

The other, ‘stronger’ version would claim that doctrine, in general, is only an expression or a symbol of such forms of religious life. Its proponents would have to contend that while people seemed to debate doctrinal issues all they were really concerned about was liturgy etc. Now, I am not arguing here for a philosophy of religion, but try to see how fourth-century sources can help understand the outbreak of doctrinal controversies. I think it is quite safe to say that from those sources it would be rather difficult to substantiate this stronger version of the pattern. Liturgical and other practical issues play a role in some, not in all of those conflicts and where they do, as in the pneumatomachean controversy, it is by no means clear that they actually produced the doctrinal problem at issue.

As for the ‘weak’ version, this is, as I said, *prima facie*, quite probable. The main problem in the fourth century is probably lack of clear evidence. This is the case, unfortunately, for more or less the entire trinitarian controversy. One might think of creeds, which do play a major role throughout that conflict. But, as far as I see, all attempts at arguing the case of different baptismal creeds that would supposedly reflect local traditions of the rule of faith have proved rather tricky.

In view of the link I postulated between doctrinal controversies and the nature and character of the Early Church, the religious-studies type is valuable in pointing out a dimension which the first three types have all rather tended to obscure: Whose conflicts were these controversies? Were they conflicts between churches? Or rather conflicts of individual bishops, theologians or church politicians? The former assumption is often taken for granted. But on what grounds? The present type makes us aware that it is difficult to maintain the involvement of many people in a controversy if they
had no chance of understanding its subject.

This same intention lies behind the fifth and last type to which we have to turn now.

**The social-history type.** It agrees with the last two types in that the origins of doctrinal controversies are to be sought below the surface of theological arguments. With the religious-studies type it concurs in raising the issue of the involvement of groups rather than individuals in those controversies. Its answer to the main question of the present survey would be the following: Doctrinal conflicts mirror tensions in the evolving social structures of the Christian Church. They can be of varying kind, but in any case we have to look to the social groups behind the quarrelling factions to understand the nature of the controversy.

Of all the types this one has had the briefest history so far. So it is more difficult here to speak very definitely about its ultimate success and limitation. No doubt, it has worked well enough in many areas of historical study so there is *prima facie* every reason to think it will benefit the understanding of doctrinal conflicts of the fourth century also. The more so as it would seem clear that in that time the church had to undergo most basic social changes due to the dawn of the Constantinian age. Quite generally it would appear that the demise of the enemy without – or at least its utter reduction – would foster tensions within that had so far been concealed rather than absent.

The main problem is, no doubt, the lack of explicit evidence available in our sources. Thus we might be quite happy to believe that the original conflict between Arius and Alexander in the church of Alexandria was in some way related to conflicting groups in what must have become an increasingly heterogeneous Christian community in the Egyptian metropolis. Or again, as Rowan Williams suggested, that we are dealing here with conflicting theological ‘institutions’—the self-assertion of the new ‘bishop’s theology’. Yet, as far as I see there is little evidence forthcoming to support such assumptions on a larger scale.

There is certainly one doctrinal controversy in the fourth century to which this method has been applied with great success, the Origenist controversy. The reason is that this, more than any other controversy of the time, appears in our sources as a conflict of groups, namely of ascetics. Also, the line between unquestionably orthodox and
doubtlessly heretical participants is not as clearly drawn as in other conflicts, so we are able to follow the literary fencing on both sides in much more detail than usual. The result is that, as E. Clark has shown in admirable clarity, the conflict in many ways is the outcome of controversial acts of self-reflection necessitated by emerging asceticism. To cite but one example, the perception of the body, doubtlessly an ascetic concern, was shown to correlate to the theological debate about the controversial interpretation of creation and Fall.

Much depends on whether we believe that those findings can, in principle, be applied to other conflicts as well. I personally think that we probably can do that to a considerable extent, but that we have to be careful here piecing together available bits of information without jumping to premature conclusions. A lot would seem to depend on whether social realities can plausibly be combined with doctrinal differences. There is, I think, a long way to go before the final word is spoken in this question.

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Let me conclude with four observations. The first is this. My review has suggested, I think, some of the ‘types’ work better with one than with the other controversy. This might encourage venturing on a distinction of kinds of doctrinal conflict. Lumping them together as ‘doctrinal controversies’ in a way is a leftover from the traditional heresiologist accounts for which they were, of course, all more or less the same. To work that out in detail is not my job tonight, but we might find that some conflicts were indeed started by arguments of learned bishops, while others originated from conflicting self-definitions in ascetic communities, others again from differences in rite, liturgy, or ethics.

Even within one and the same controversy aspects, elements or phases might be isolated that lend themselves to different types of explanation. This would particularly apply to the great controversies, e.g. the Arian one of the 4th century. We might come to the conclusion that its first outbreak in Alexandria is best explained by the history-of-dogma, in combination with the social-history type, but that the political-history type is needed to understand its escalation into a major conflict etc.

A second observation is that the complete exclusion of doctrinal issues from an account of those controversies will fail to do justice to our sources. The reductionist versions of type three, four and five are all highly dubious. We have to accept that those doctrinal issues were important for the participants of those controversies. Sociology-
gists have argued that a salient feature of modern developments in the West has been a differentiation of social spheres, which allowed conceptualising, for the first time, politics, law, science and religion as such. This emergence of the idea of pure religion, science etc. creates for us a rather major hermeneutical problem when discussing pre-modern realities for which this differentiation has not yet existed.

In our explanation of doctrinal controversies we should strive, then, to demonstrate the interaction of the theological with the non-theological issues in order to understand why doctrinal differences that seem minute to us, apparently struck to the heart of those Christians’ identities causing uncompromising attitudes and thus bitter controversies.

Thirdly and finally, reviewing these different approaches to the outbreak of such conflicts alerts us to the difficulty of understanding what Ancient Christianity was, which is created I think by the fact that, while it developed in the world of Late Antiquity and is therefore necessarily conceptualised in the categories available in that world, does not fit any of them properly: it is neither ‘religion’, nor a mystery cult, nor a philosophy – even though it shares features with all of them. What may be even worse is the fact that Christianity’s terms of self-designation—church, bishop, theology—are equally deceptive as they conjure up for us ideas quite alien to the realities of much of the Early Church. Understanding the causes of the so-called doctrinal conflicts must therefore ultimately serve the aim of helping us understand this sui-generis phenomenon.