

Siding with the Arians

by [Robert M. Grant](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome, by Richard E. Rubenstein

Richard Rubenstein's concern with the question of Jesus's divinity began in his boyhood, when some Catholic boys knocked him down and called him a Jewish Christ-killer. He began to research and write about the subject in the '70s, when a French landlord provided him with an extensive library on the Arian controversy. His story of the Council of Nicaea and the squabbles that followed it is interestingly written, though the book's title is theologically sloppy. Could Jesus "become" God? And could judgments by various church councils turn a human Jesus into God?

Rubenstein fully identifies with the Arians' denial of Jesus's divinity, though some of his language in talking about the issue is suspect. "Athanasius's theory mixes God with the creation, [and] removes Jesus entirely from human society, from the universe of moral turmoil, and places him in the unchangeable heavens," Rubenstein writes.

If Christ is not a changeable, choosing creature at least something like us, how can we hope to imitate him? And if he is God Himself, not our representative and intermediary, how can he intervene on our behalf? Athanasius apparently thinks that Christlike behavior is to be limited to a few desert saints like Antony, while the rest of us sinners wait in hope of unmerited salvation. It substitutes the sacraments of the Church for individual action in the world. What, one wonders, would Jesus have made of that?

Most Nicenes would not have recognized this description of themselves. The appeal to Jesus neglects the whole modern problem of guessing what he "really" taught about anything.

A more serious problem lies in the author's neglect of the earlier history of Christology, out of which the Nicene decision grew. Instead of exploring this history, he focuses on the exciting political events of the fourth century. Rubenstein barely mentions the Old and New Testament basis of the various parties' arguments. His sketchy accounts of philosophical abstractions and vivid analyses of political and social-economic pressures miss the basic point that the scriptural texts themselves reflect the conflict among believers over christological questions. Theologians' patient and continuing exegetical examination of these questions began long before the fourth century. Yet Rubenstein deserves high praise for sticking with his thorny topic, choosing excellent guides through its history, providing a lively account of it, and insisting that Nicaea finally solved nothing.