

Who do you say I am?

The soteriological theology of St Athanasius

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Introduction

Humans are both rational and relational creatures who are endowed with intelligence and freewill. In their world milieu humans try to impose rational order to make sense of what is happening around them. This is no different for the early Christians who were convinced that by following the Kyrios they would be saved and participate in the Kingdom without end. Thus, to properly understand Christ was, to them, a life and death issue. As the Holy Spirit revealed, more and more the truth of the Triune God, the early Church fathers, in a catena of writings, began to manifest that truth in the face of a hostile world through exposition and defence of their faith.

Thus each Father, by their particular expression, whether apologetic or polemic, added clarity to the faith as well as understanding towards answering the question posed by Christ to Peter.¹ Athanasius, in confronting the false vision of Arius in the background of the Church coming to its own awareness, received the torch of illumination from the fathers that preceded him and in turn passed it on to later Fathers who continued to expound and manifest the eternal truth as it became comprehended by them.

This essay will investigate the soteriological theology and role of Athanasius in the fight against Arianism within the context of the developing relationship between Church and State and growing tension within the Church itself. Finally, it will assess the impact of his work upon Christological and Trinitarian understanding, thus adding value to Peter's response that "you are the Christ the Son of the Living God."²

The Vision of God

The fundamental problem confronting early Christians was to arrive at an understanding of who Christ was. In the Gospels, Christ is referred to as "God and yet with God"³ and Christ

himself stated that "if you had known me, you have known my father also"⁴; and "the Father and I are one"⁵ yet "the Father is greater than I."⁶ Thus, to the enquiring mind, full of kratophany, the scriptural accounts appeared irreconcilable. It is clear that the Father is God, as is the Son and as is the Holy Spirit.⁷ Further, it is equally clear that the Father is not the Son nor the Holy Spirit, the Son is not the Father nor the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father nor the Son. Yet for all that, there is one God. The dilemma thus was seen as to how to fit one into three without rupturing God as Father or Son or Holy Spirit or questioning the integrity of unity of the three as one.

The antinomical problem of just who Christ was is fundamental to salvation. If Christ was God, then not only was he worthy of worship and prayer but stood as uncreated. If Christ was less than God, he was then an exemplar of conduct, a prophet and the first of creation. Thus, as the created cannot be part of the uncreated but flows from the uncreated God, then it follows that God is not triune and remains inaccessible in his relationship to man. Christ, as created, could not act as a bridge between God and man as he does not share in the uncreatedness of God. Therefore, his incarnation, death and resurrection would be personal to him only and not be the means of allowing salvation for humanity. For if God did not become man, then how could man become deified towards God?

The Role of the State within the Church

The Church in the fourth century was transformed by the State from an outlawed cult to the State sponsored religion. Indeed, with the Edict of Milan promulgated in 313, began "the longest experiment in Church - State relations throughout the entire development of Christendom"⁸ which ended only with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The State saw value in the Church as an institution to promote social cohesion in controlling a vast empire of diverse people, culture and language, and had little time for the nuances of theological disputes that preoccupied the Church from time to time. Hence, the Emperor who saw himself as equal to the Apostles, and guardian of the Church, saw no difficulty in involving himself during the life

of the Empire in the operations of the Church by seeking to impose his will and achieve what he saw as promoting the interests of the State.

This interference commenced with, and is no better illustrated than the involvement of the State in the heresy of Arianism. Constantine I, prior to Nicea, fell under in the influence of Eusebius of Nicomedia and, to a lesser extent, Eusebius of Caesaria, both of whom were versed in the Antiochene hermeneutical method. As practitioners of the rational, historical and literal interpretation of the Bible, they were sympathetic to Arius who taught that unlike the Father, Jesus was not without beginning. In 324, Constantine wrote a letter to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria demanding a resumption in communion with Arius who had been anathematized by the Church in Alexandria. Alexander, versed in the allegorical hermeneutical method, vehemently rejected the Emperors characterization of the dispute as being about trifling semantics and refused to do so.

In 325, Constantine convened a Church Council at Nicea, which right the State thereafter appropriated to itself. The purpose of convening was to let the Church sort out the problems posed by Arius, as the State saw disputes within the Church as more dangerous to its wellbeing than war. The Council adopted a creed and determined that the Son and Father were homousious (of one essence). The Council further anathematized those that held Christ as being of another hypostasis or substance of the Father, or that Christ was in any way less than the Father. The Emperor enforced the decree of the Church by exiling those who opposed the agreed formula and by condemning offending works. The Church had spoken, the State had acted and Arianism was dead - or so it seemed.

By 329, however, Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had fallen out of favour for not supporting the Nicene formula, was back in favour with Constantine and, as spiritual father, persuaded the Emperor that the Nicene creedal statements had fallen into the heresy of Sabellianism. Further, he was persuaded that the word "Homousios" used at Nicea to describe the relationship between Father and Son was ambiguous as to number and nature. Thus, the unbaptised Constantine, now pro-Arian, took it upon himself to undo the Council's work and

sponsored a reign of persecution to those Churchmen that remained faithful to Nicea. Thus, Bishop Athanasius was deposed at the Dedication Council of Antioch of 335, which Council formulated its own creedal statement that omitted references to hypostasis and homousios.

After Constantine died in 337, his two sons were divided in their preferences with Constantine in the West favouring Nicea and Constantinus in the East favouring Arianism. Thus, the Church, especially in the East, was in disarray as fourteen councils were held between 341 to 360 to find a suitable compromise replacement. Some groups favoured homios (like), others Homoiousios (of like essence) and even the notion of Anomois (unlike) was considered. The problem confronting them was neatly summed up by Florovsky who stated that "there was no common term to name the three ... the Divine being was one essence yet ... there was a number, but no noun to follow it."⁹ It was not until the second great Council, convened by Theodosius, that homousios was finally accepted by the Church as descriptive of the relationship of Father and Son and the heresy of Arianism laid to rest.

Arius and Arianism

Within this complexity of competing patriarchates and developing dynamics and tensions between Church and State, Arius and his teachings can now be considered. Arius (250 - 336) is said to have received his training from Lucian of Antioch and hence versed in Antiochene hermeneutics. In 313, he was ordained a presbyter in Alexandria, and in 318 came to prominence when he posited that Christ's sonship and substance made him different to God. For, to Arius "the point was hermeneutical: how was John 14:28 and similar texts to be understood."¹⁰ Not surprisingly, he was anathematized in Alexandria in 321. The heresiarch then found protection in Nicomedia under Eusebius where he published the treatise "Thalia" defending his position. After his exile, as a result of Nicea, he returned to favour through Eusebius of Nicomedia and died in 336 just prior to being reinstated into the Church in Alexandria as a result of the patronage of Constantine.

Although Arius was dead his ideas were assumed, modified and made less extreme by Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea who sincerely believed the first Ecumenical

Council was wrong. Thereafter followed a period of considerable instability in the developing church, which was only put to rest at the second ecumenical council which condemned Arianism, formalized creedal statements relating to the Holy Spirit, and established the patriarchate of Constantinople and declared it second to Rome.

Athanasius of Alexandria

Athanasius was born in Alexandria in approximately 296CE and died in 373. He was familiar with both Greek and Coptic and was Alexander's deacon at Nicea. In 328 he was elected Bishop and succeeded Alexander. During his enthronement, he was exiled on 5 occasions, totaling 16 years, for his staunch support of Orthodoxy and against the Arians and in opposition to the State. The greatness of Athanasius, who is referred by Quaster "as one of the most imposing figures in all ecclesiastical history and the most outstanding of all Alexandrian bishops"¹¹ rests upon his unremitting opposition to Arius and his sympathizers. Between the Council of Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, Athanasius was principally responsible for working out the theological defence of the Nicene creed that the Son was homousios (of one substance) with the Father, and for stopping the Church straying from the path of Orthodoxy.

Athanasius saw the Son assuming flesh so to redeem man, who as a consequence of the fall became subject to death. By the word becoming flesh and living amongst us, the way was open for humanity to be saved, and the absolute impassibility between God and creation to be bridged. Therefore, to Athanasius, humanity is redeemed as a consequence of incarnation.

Although generated, the Son is not lower than the Father, as "everything which is generated is always consubstantial with that which engenders it."¹² This is contrasted with creation as another mode of generation which always remains unlike and external to its creator. Thus, the Son is co-eternal. To Athansius, if there was a time when the Son was not, as claimed by Arius, then God also was not, which conclusion is a nonsense. Hence, Son and Father are of the one essence with the generation of the Son not resulting from any action of the Father. Therefore, the Son is of one essence with the Father whilst at the same time being the Son of

the Father and together with the Spirit allow for participation in a triune God, who is eternally self-contained and without any need to create as condition precedent to his fullness. Accordingly, the Father, Son and Spirit are three, yet one.

The teaching of Athanasius testified to a fundamental truth, namely, that Trinitarian doctrine is inseparable from the proper understanding of the person and work of Christ. Thus, through the God-Man, Athanasius was able to construct his vision of salvation of the historic revelation of the Lord within his creation.

Up to Athanasius, the ante Nicene writers reflected the fundamental profession of faith in the resurrected Kyrios. As Bobrinskoy states, "it is from the core of a Christological approach that the Trinitarian vision of the Apostolic Fathers and their successors unfold."¹³ Up to Athanasius, it had not been necessary for the Fathers to fully articulate a relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For instance, Origen, as a writer of speculative theology, asserted that the Father was God and Christ was second God. Indeed, in his treatise on prayer he stated, "we should not pray to anyone begotten, not even to Christ himself but only to the God and Father."¹⁴ Origen's theology rested on the monarchy of the Father which in turn controlled his understanding of Christology and hence the economy of salvation. Athanasius, however, made it plain that the Son is generated from the essence of the Father. To Athanasius "ousia and Hypostasis were still synonymous. This, however was corrected by the Cappadocians who asserted the birth of the Word from the Hypostasis of the Father, because the ousia is common to the three."¹⁵ For Athanasius, Christ "assumed humanity that we might become God ... He endured for men ... and by his own impassibility he kept and healed the suffering men on whose account he thus endured."¹⁶ Thus incarnation allows for deification, as the Word being co-eternal with the Father can thus act as bridge and mediator between God and his creation.

This does not deter from the proposition that the Father created all things by the Son in the Holy Spirit for "where the Word is, there also is the Spirit and whatever is created by the Father receives its existence by the Word in the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ Thus the Trinity manifests itself through

the incarnated Son, and although the work of creation is common to the whole Trinity, each hypostasis manifests itself in a particular way. However, the incarnated Christ is still the root of salvation for "when the Son is beheld, so is the Father, for he is in the Father's radiance; and thus the Father and Son are one."¹⁸

Athanasius had a clear position as to the heresy of Arius. In the introduction of "Life of St Anthony", Mary Keenan S C N maintains that "if Arianism had not been crushed, Christianity, humanly speaking would not have survived."¹⁹ In that vita, Athanasius referred to Arians as brute beasts and extolled his readers not to "defile yourselves with the Arians, for their teaching is not of the Apostles, but of the demons and their father, the Devil; indeed it is the barren and senseless product of a distorted mind, resembling the senselessness of mules."²⁰

To Athanasius, the bankruptcy of Arius' teaching is that God does not need a demiurge (Christ) to create as he can do so by his will and needs no instrument to create for him. Thus, as the Son reveals God in and through himself and not as a result of his generation, he points to the great mystery of the Trinity. Everything that is given, including being, is given in the Trinity by the Son through the Spirit as sanctification thus allowing participation in God. The Spirit himself proceeds from the Father and has the same unity with the Son that the Son has with the Father, thus the Spirit is the proper image of the Son, as the Son is the proper image of the Father.

Athanasius saw Arianism as an extremely dangerous heresy maintained by those who were sympathetic to the literal interpretation of scripture. To them, Athanasius was seen as heretical and hence all means to eradicate the cancer were permissible. To Arius, it was scandalous to admit Christ into the Godhead as he divided God, hence Christ had to be lesser than God and hence emanated from the will of the Father. Pro Arians understood the decision of Nicea as equating the Father, Son and Spirit as successive operations of God which was the heresy of Sabellius. Therefore, from their perspective, the creed agreed at Nicea was heretical and should be eradicated. Athanasius, in holding the position of Nicea in the face of a hostile State

and Church, captured by pro-Arian forces, was *contra mundum* in maintaining the faith, which he did to preserve the right teaching of the Church.

Conclusion – Assessment of Athanasius

Athanasius was neither a speculative thinker or a systematic theologian. He walked the narrow path of Orthodoxy and defended the true teaching of Christ transmitted to the Church through Holy Scripture and tradition, and expressed that teaching rightly, accurately and honestly.

Athanasius did not invent the idea of deification as it was "by far the most widespread understanding of salvation in the early centuries of the Catholic Church."²¹ What is unique to Athanasius, however, was his emphasis upon that concept as being humanity's ultimate destiny and fulfillment thus allowing for salvation. This of course is not to say that deification elevates man to the level of God, for humanity is never equal to God in essence, and remains subordinate to and apart from the essence of God.

Athanasius interpreted "the whole Bible by the New Testament and interpreted the New Testament by the Gospel of John."²² Therefore, he viewed the references in the Johannian Gospel (Jn 1:18, 6:46, 8:42, 10:30 and 14:10) as basis for the word *homousios* ascribed by the Church to the relationship within the Godhead.

Arianism was the product of the literal interpretation of Antioch that arose in opposition to the allegorical approach of Alexandria. Further, it arose at a time when the Church was trying to establish for itself its own awareness and ecclesiology in relation to its new status. Chadwick maintains that "it was misfortune of the fourth century Church that it became engrossed in a theological controversy at the same time it was working out its institutional organization."²³ However, it is arguable that the controversy assisted the Church to better define itself. Up to Arianism, the Church had no clear Trinitarian or Soteriological theology and the dispute helped remedy that position.

The dispute over Arianism also exemplified an uneasy relationship between the partnership of Church and State. The State saw value in a united Church as an adjunct to social cohesion

and attempted to control the Church as an instrument of policy. That the State failed is clear evidence that one person could carry the entire Christian consciousness and resist the State in utilizing the Church for its own political ends. Thus, although the State continued to interfere in the affairs of the Church, the will of Orthodoxy always prevailed. Therefore, any notion of caesaropapism and that the Church was obedient to the State is an incorrect assessment in the face of Athanasius and his resistance to the State.

To the State, Arianism may have been seen as much ado about nothing. However, to Christians it was a struggle for authentic understanding of the Kingdom to come. Arianism also demonstrated that churchmen, as instanced in this case by Eusebius of Nicomedia, did try and impose their vision of God upon the Church. That they failed demonstrated that true teaching will inevitably prevail within God's Church.

Although the Church, as a result of the political milieu of the fourth century, began to drift into a notion of East and West, the irony is that but for the West resisting Arianism and supporting Athanasius, Arianism might have succeeded. What of Athanasius himself? His greatest gift was to guard Orthodoxy from captivity of heresy and from the State and thereby preserve its true teaching. Arianism had attacked the co-eternity of the word and had failed. Athanasius thus stands out as an example to the Church to be vigilant and test everything and hold onto the good.²⁴ Athanasius saw as his duty to expand, explain and bear true witness to the Word of God, and undertook to explain the theandric relationship, thus making real the economy of salvation as promised by Christ the Son of the living God to his people.

Endnotes

- ¹ Matt 16:15
- ² Matt 16:16
- ³ John 1:1
- ⁴ John 14:7
- ⁵ John 10:30
- ⁶ John 14:28
- ⁷ Romans 1-17, John 16:5-16
- ⁸ Chryssavgis, John. *The Way of the Fathers, Exploring the Patristic Mind*. Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies: Thessalonki, 1998, p. 36
- ⁹ G Florovsky. *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century, Vol 7*. (Trans C Edmunds, Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, 1978) p. 26
- ¹⁰ Esubius, *Life of Constantine*. Quoted in *The Way of the Fathers: Exploring the Patristic Mind*. John Chryssavgis, Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies: Thessalonki, 1991, p. 37
- ¹¹ Johannes Quaster. *Patrology*. Vol 3. Christian Classics: Allen, Texas p. 20
- ¹² G Florovsky. *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century, Vol 7*. (Trans C Edmunds, Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, 1978) p. 52-55
- ¹³ Boris Bobrinsky. *The Mystery of the Trinity*. Trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (SVSP: Crestwood, New York, 1999) p. 198
- ¹⁴ IBID p. 212
- ¹⁵ IBID p. 221
- ¹⁶ St Athanasius. *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*. Trans. by a religious CSMV (Mowbray & Co: London, 1979) p. 93
- ¹⁷ Epistle III to Serapion. p. XXVI 632. Quoted in *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. V Lossky (SVSP 1976) p. 100
- ¹⁸ St Athanasius. *Four Discourses Against the Arians: Discourse III Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol 4. (Ferdmans Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1975) p. 401
- ¹⁹ St Athanasius. *Life of St Anthony*. Trans. by Sister Mary and E. Keenan, SCN Early Christian Biographies ed. Roy Deferrari, (Catholic University of America Press: 1952) p. 127
- ²⁰ St Athanasius. *Life of St Anthony*. Trans. by Sister Mary and E. Keenan, SCN Early Christian Biographies ed. Roy Deferrari, (Catholic University of America Press: 1952) p. 207
- ²¹ *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 - 600)* (University of Chicago Press, 1971) p. 153
- ²² David S. Dockery. *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the 11fht of the Early Church*. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Mich. p. 99
- ²³ Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church*. (Penguin: Middlesex, 1978) p. 133
- ²⁴ 1 Thes 5:21

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