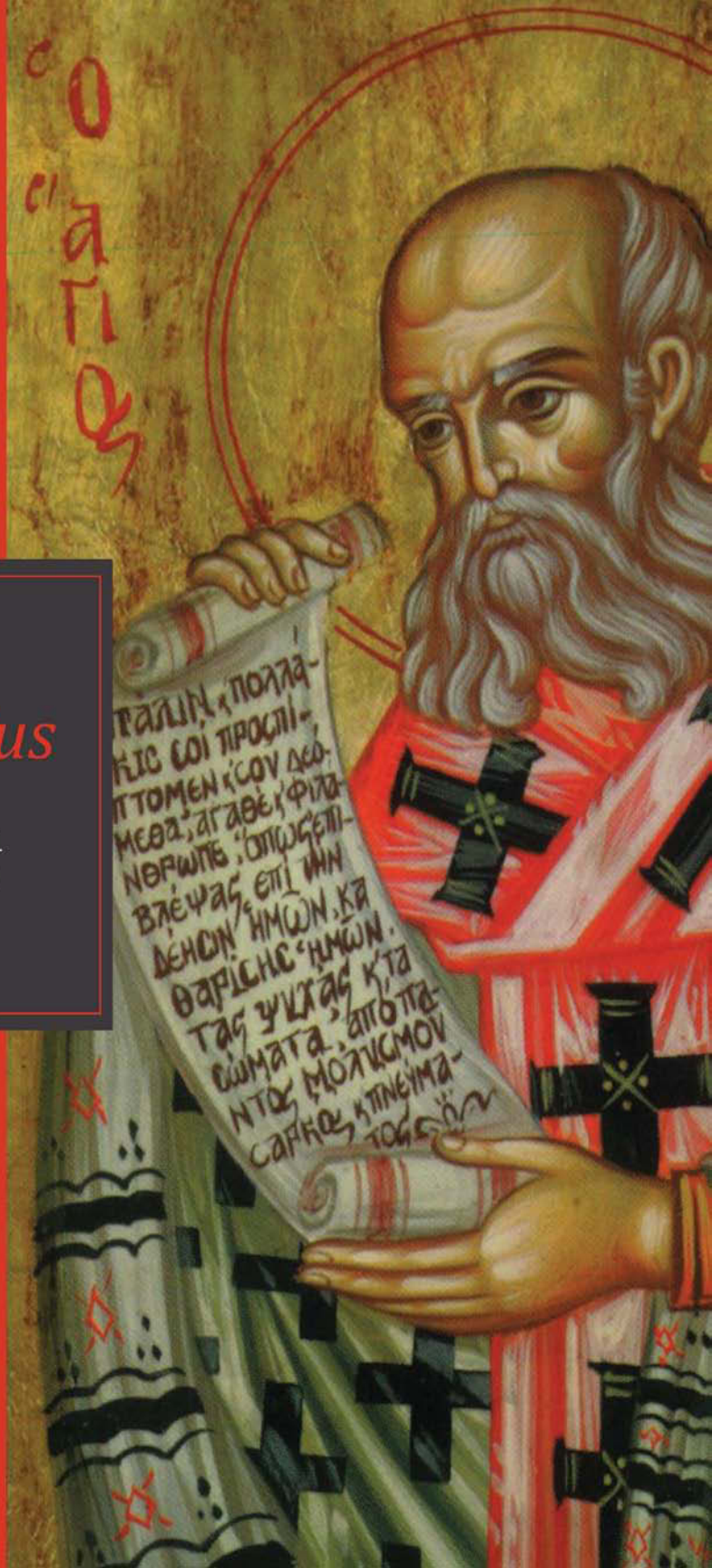


Athanasius

A THEOLOGICAL
INTRODUCTION

THOMAS G.
WEINANDY
OFM, Cap.



ATHANASIOUS

As the Patriarch of Alexandria in the critical fourth century, Athanasius' significance was without doubt profound both as a pastor and theologian. With resolute conviction and powerful personality he became the ardent champion of the Council of Nicea's affirmation of the full divinity of the Son, and in so doing he became the most resourceful and innovative theologian of his day. His Christology provided significant theological clarifications that would become decisive for Cyril of Alexandria and the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Athanasius is a theologian of great importance and relevance today when many of his concerns are still our own.

This book offers a fresh scholarly introduction to the theology of Athanasius that will benefit not only the student but the educated lay reader as well. Weinandy explores, in a lucid and insightful manner, all of the key theological controversies, questions and themes that appear within Athanasius's thought: Revelation, Scripture and Tradition; Creation and the Fall; The Nicene Crisis; The Incarnation and Salvation; the Divinity of the Holy Spirit; the Church and Sacraments; and the Christian Life and Monasticism.

Athanasius

A Theological Introduction

THOMAS G. WEINANDY
Capuchin College, Washington DC, USA



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Preface.

St Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373) is traditionally designated as one of the four great Doctors of the Eastern Church (the other three being St Basil the Great [c. 330–79], St Gregory of Nazianzus [c. 329/30–389/90], and St John Chrysostom [c. 347–407]). This honour was bestowed for two interrelated reasons. The first, and foremost, is Athanasius' theological significance in ardently defending and clearly articulating the full divinity of the Son of God, specifically in steadfastly upholding the creed of the Council of Nicea (325) during the ensuing Arian controversy. The second reason is the 40 years of hardship that he endured at the hands of his theological, ecclesial and political foes. Besides being accused of various crimes and misdemeanours, he was exiled from his diocese five times – 335–37, 339–46, 356–62, 362–64 and 365–66. Nonetheless, almost single-handedly, Athanasius stayed the course to victory and so earned the accolade: '*Athanasius contra mundum*'.

This present volume is an introduction to Athanasius' theology. Being an introduction, its primary audience is students of theology – undergraduate and graduate. Even so, it is hoped that the professional patrologist, on the one hand, and the educated layperson, on the other, will find this work beneficial and rewarding. It attempts to address all of the major themes and issues within the Athanasian corpus and to do so in a lucid, logical and creative manner. It also addresses various controversial scholarly interpretations of significant aspects of Athanasius' thought and thereby clarifies what he was actually attempting to teach.

The overarching theme and premise of this book is that the whole of Athanasius' theological programme is thoroughly soteriological. Everything he teaches and upholds, every theological conflict he engages, is motivated and driven by his desire to ensure that the Christian Gospel of salvation, as expressed in Scripture and as taught within the ecclesial tradition, is upheld, as well as correctly conceived and properly expressed. This book is structured to demonstrate that Athanasius' theology is soteriological.

Chapters two and three examine his combined work, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, and show that from the onset of his theological career Athanasius was concerned with demonstrating that the whole economy, from creation to the second coming of Christ, was an economy of salvation. Athanasius' later writings, almost all of which were written in the heat of controversy, do not depart from his earlier soteriological concerns. This becomes evident in the following three chapters. Chapter four looks at Athanasius' understanding of the ontological relationship between the Father and the Son so as to establish their oneness of being. Chapter five examines his conception of the Incarnation. For soteriological reasons Athanasius insists not only that the Son is truly God, but also that he has truly come to exist as a genuine human being. In so becoming man, Athanasius maintains that the Son of God both acts in a human manner and is the sole subject of all human experiences. Chapter six studies Athanasius' scriptural defences of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit with its

soteriological implications. This allows him to conceive more fully and to articulate more clearly his positive understanding of the Trinity. Chapter seven considers how Athanasius' soteriological theology finds its salvific home in the personal lives of Christians, exemplified most perfectly in St Antony, the first of the great desert Fathers. The Conclusion will examine aspects of Athanasius' theology that are of contemporary relevance.

I have quoted extensively from Athanasius. This allows Athanasius to speak for himself so as to assure the reader that the voice they are hearing is Athanasius' and not merely mine. Moreover, the reader is able to 'get a feel' for the man and appreciate Athanasius' personal integrity and theological acumen.

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and friends have helped me in writing this book. I first want to thank James Growdon and Andrew Nelson for helping me locate bibliography. Then there are those who have provided useful comments and suggestions – Drs Jon Robertson, Mark Edwards, David Gwynn, and especially Dr Daniel Keating, who read the entire manuscript and, as always, offered some very helpful advice. Above all I want to thank Dr. Matthew Steenberg, who not only offered excellent counsel on particular questions of interpretation, but who also ensured that the translations of Athanasius' works in this book are accurate and readable. The reader and I owe a great debt of gratitude to him. I also need to express my appreciation to Mr Michael McShurley and Dr William J. Collinge, both of whom proofread the entire manuscript and in the process also offered helpful comments concerning style and content. Any typographical errors that may still remain are, nonetheless, my responsibility.

Mr and Mrs Alan Reno provided me with a very comfortable cabin and Christian hospitality in the mountains of Colorado where the final draft of this book was completed. I am also deeply grateful to Professor John Webster, who, as a true friend and patient editor, encouraged me in this endeavour. In addition, I want to thank Sarah Lloyd of Ashgate Publishing, publishers of the original edition, for her patient endurance in waiting for a manuscript that was long overdue; Kirsten Weissenberg, my desk editor and typesetter; and Bibi Stoute who dealt with the production of this book – both also of Ashgate. And finally Joanne Murray for her copy-editing of the manuscript.

I must mention as well the friars and academic Fellows of Greyfriars, Oxford, in whose company I prospered for so many years, especially Frs Raymund Hewlett, Prins Casinader and Adrian Marsh, and Drs Alan O'Day, Richard Lawes and Nicholas Richardson. While I am no longer a member of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oxford, yet I wish to express my gratitude to the members of that faculty for they provided, over many years, an environment of collegial friendship and academic excellence. I am now grateful to my present fellow workers here at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and to my Capuchin brothers at Capuchin College in Washington, DC, all of whom have supported me with their kindness and fraternal care.

For many years I have wanted to write a book on the theology of Athanasius. Athanasius is not only one of my great heroes, but he has long been, along with Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyon, Cyril of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas, a revered and beloved friend. My hope is that those who read this book will obtain a greater appreciation of Athanasius as a theologian. Through his teaching we can come to a fuller knowledge of, and admiration for, the Christian tradition and the faith that it expresses, specifically concerning the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Moreover, Athanasius epitomizes what it means to be an authentic Christian theologian, and in so doing, he also embodies what it means to be a faithful man of the Church.

*To
Irenaeus of Lyons
and
Cyril of Alexandria*

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Life and Times of Athanasius

To appreciate Athanasius' theology more fully one should be acquainted with his life and times, for he, like all theologians, did not write in an historical vacuum. However, there is presently no definitive life of Athanasius published. Moreover, scholars dispute the historicity of various alleged events in his life, and they also find it difficult to date some events and writings with any certainty. Nonetheless, as best as can be discerned, the main features of Athanasius' life and times will be presented here.¹

The Early Years

Athanasius was born around 296. Little is known of his early life. In the tenth century Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa, an Egyptian bishop, wrote an Arabic *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. It is difficult to judge the accuracy of Severus' account, but he speaks of Athanasius' mother having worshipped idols and having been wealthy. Sometime during his youth Athanasius and his mother were baptized and he was subsequently trained and educated by Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria. It was from Alexander that Athanasius obtained not only his cursory knowledge of contemporary philosophy, but also his thorough understanding of scripture and the theological tradition of Alexandria. In his panegyric on Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus stated:

He was brought up, from the first, in religious habits and practices, after a brief study of literature and philosophy, so that he might not be utterly unskilled in such subjects, or ignorant of matters which he had determined to despise ... [rather] from meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament, with a depth such as none else has applied even to one of them, he grew in contemplation, rich in splendour of life, combining them in wondrous sort by that golden bond which few can weave; using life as the guide of contemplation, contemplation as the seal of life.²

1 For brief biographies of Athanasius see, K. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London, 2004), pp. 1–39; C. Kannengiesser, 'Prolegomena to the Biography of Athanasius', *Adamantius* 7 (2001), pp. 25–43; and M. Molloy, *Champion of Truth: The Life of Saint Athanasius* (New York, 2003). See also D.W.H. Arnold, *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria* (Notre Dame, 1991). I closely follow here the brief life of Athanasius given in Anatolios' *Athanasius*.

2 Oration 21, 6.

Athanasius' life takes on historical significance at the Council of Nicea in May–July of 325 where he, as a young deacon, accompanied Alexander, acting as his personal secretary. We do not know what role, if any, Athanasius played in the deliberations of the first Ecumenical Council. Nonetheless, while at the time he could hardly have conceived or appreciated the full theological significance of its creed – which professed the full divinity of the Son – it would become the decisive defining moment of Athanasius' entire life. It not only shaped the whole of his theology, but his unwavering defence of its teaching also became the cause of his many exiles. Like a beloved but incommensurable friend the Council of Nicea constantly shadowed Athanasius, and that association dictated the course of his theological career and his ecclesial life.

Only three years after the Council, Alexander having died, Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria on 17 April 328. His election was immediately contested on various grounds, but the main catalyst for protests arose from events which had taken place during the Diocletian persecution in 313. Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis and his followers, soon to be named the Melitians, opposed the leniency Bishop Peter of Alexandria displayed towards those who had lapsed during the persecution. A schism within the Egyptian Church ensued. The Council of Nicea attempted to address the various issues but without success and, as a consequence, when Athanasius was elected bishop, the Melitians protested – ultimately without success – that he was not the authentic Bishop of Alexandria.³

As Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius became shepherd of one of the most vibrant cities within the Roman Empire. It was not only a major port, but it was also the agricultural capital of the empire. It was from Alexandria that Rome governed Egypt and northeast Africa. Moreover, it had been for centuries a centre of culture, at one time boasting the largest library in the ancient world. It was the home of various schools of philosophy, such as the Stoics and Platonists, and was equally a very cosmopolitan city composed of Egyptians, Greeks, Jews and other minor nationalities. The relationship among these various competing groups was not without turmoil, even riots. The Jews, who emigrated there at the time of the exile and were the largest body of Jews living outside Palestine, were often persecuted. It was also the residence of Gnostic and Manichaean communities. Alexandria, because of its political, cultural and social status within the empire, had also become the major see for the Christian Church in Egypt. Athanasius' task then was not merely to oversee his Christian community, but to also ensure its standing and well-being amidst all of the other interlocking political, philosophical and religious constituencies. Not insignificantly, it was also at this time, in the midst of this robust and diverse culture, that Christian monasticism began to flourish in the Egyptian desert. Athanasius, as we will see, spent many years in exile, but the Church of Alexandria was his first love and his foremost concern.

3 For brief histories of the Melitians see, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. E. Ferguson (London, 1990) and *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. A. Di Berardino (Cambridge, 1992).

Life after the Council – 325–346

While Arius, who was condemned by the Council for denying the full divinity of the Son, had been exiled immediately following the Council of Nicea, he soon returned at the Emperor Constantine's own request. However, Bishop Alexander refused to receive him back into communion. Athanasius followed his predecessor's policy despite pressure from Constantine and Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia to accept Arius. Athanasius worked to build alliances throughout Egypt, especially among the monks. It is thought that Athanasius wrote his first works – *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* – at this time, articulating what he considered the true faith in a climate of growing theological and political tension. Nonetheless, Eusebius of Nicomedia and the Melitians accused him of various crimes, including paying bribes to obtain votes at his Episcopal election and having plotted the murder of a Melitian bishop, Arsenius. However, Athanasius, having found the supposedly murdered Arsenius hiding in Tyre, brought him before Constantine, who subsequently dismissed all the charges against Athanasius.

Because of the continued accusations of Eusebius of Nicomedia and the Melitians, Constantine summoned a Council at Trye, predominantly composed of Athanasius' opponents. The Council found Athanasius guilty, upheld the theological position of Arius, and accepted the Melitians back into full communion. Athanasius fled to Constantinople to appeal to the emperor. Constantine was sympathetic at first, but became distressed upon hearing the further accusation that Athanasius was manoeuvring to withhold grain shipments. Athanasius was exiled to Trier in Gaul in 335, precipitating riots in Egypt on his behalf.

Athanasius remained in exile until the death of Constantine two years later in 337. The empire was divided among Constantine's three sons: Constantinus, who was a friend of Athanasius, Constans, and Constantius, who became emperor of the east. Under the lead of Constantinus all three emperors issued an edict that permitted all exiled bishops to return to their sees. While Athanasius returned amidst a cheering crowd, Eusebius of Nicomedia and his supporters renewed their accusations against him. At a Council in Tyre, they elected Pistis as bishop of Alexandria. Both Athanasius and Pope Julius protested the legitimacy of the election and noted that Pistis had been a supporter of Arius. Even so, Athanasius' adversaries were gaining power and at a synod in Antioch in 338–339, which Constantius attended, the old charges were once more levelled against Athanasius, along with new accusations that he embezzled money and was responsible for rioting in Alexandria upon his return. This resulted in Athanasius being deposed and a new candidate, a Cappadocian by the name of Gregory, being appointed Bishop of Alexandria. His arrival in Alexandria caused extensive rioting, even among the non-Christians. Fearing for his life, Athanasius fled to Rome at the invitation of Pope Julius.

During his Roman exile Athanasius became acquainted with another deposed bishop, Marcellus of Ancyra. While an adversary of Arius, he was, however, accused by many eastern bishops of Sabellianism, that is, not properly distinguishing between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and seeing them as mere modal expressions of the one God. It was during this time that Asterius, a Cappadocian, became prominent as an Arian sympathizer, but holding a much more sophisticated theology than that

of Arius, even stating that ‘the Son is the exact image of the substance, will, glory and power of the Father’.⁴ In response to Arius and Asterius, Athanasius wrote his three-volume work, *Orationes contra Arianos* (339–343). His defence was primarily one of analyzing various disputed texts of scripture, demonstrating that they clearly uphold the full divinity of the Son. The thought contained in this work became the basis for his later writing where he more explicitly articulates and defends the creed of Nicea.

Pope Julius held a synod in Rome in 341 with the hope of reinstating Athanasius as Bishop of Alexandria. However, the synod, having supported Marcellus as well, invoked the ire of the east who considered him to be Sabellian. This complicated an already complex affair, with the east demanding that the Council of Tyre be upheld with its condemnation of Athanasius. The tension between the east and the west intensified when the eastern bishops, including Asterius, met at Antioch to dedicate the ‘Golden-Domed’ Church built by Constantius. The synod produced three creeds known as the ‘Dedication Creeds’ which attempted to rectify what it considered the Sabellian leanings of the Nicene ‘homoousion’.⁵ However, in so doing it left open an ‘Arian’ understanding of the Son’s relation to the Father, which Athanasius was quick to criticize.

With the encouragement of Pope Julius and Athanasius, Constantine convened a Council at Sardica in 343. The east sent a delegation that refused to attend upon learning that Athanasius and Marcellus would be present, and only returned once they and Pope Julius were excommunicated. The western bishops reaffirmed their support of Athanasius and Marcellus, and condemned those eastern bishops whom they considered to be Arian. Despite further attempts at reconciliation between the various parties, initiated by Constantine in the east and Constantine in the west, including another Council at Antioch in 344, enmity remained. Nonetheless, Constantine invited Athanasius to visit him in the hope of resolving the conflict. Their encounter went surprisingly well and Athanasius was permitted to return to Alexandria, the usurper Gregory having died in 345. In what was to be his longest residency, Athanasius spent the next ten years in Alexandria.

Life in Alexandria – 346–356

Athanasius’ return to Alexandria was accompanied with great celebrations,⁶ however, his joy at being among his flock once more was soon to be tested. The western Emperor Constantine, who had consistently been Athanasius’ ally, was assassinated by his general, Magnentius, in 350. Constantine took up arms against Magnentius, who committed suicide, recognizing that his cause was lost. Constantine thus became the sole emperor of the whole Roman Empire. This was not to Athanasius’ advantage, for Constantine, no longer constrained by his brother, could now freely revive his anti-Nicene policies.

4 Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p. 18.

5 This issue will be discussed below.

6 See *Historia Arianorum ad Monachos*, 25.

The battle was newly engaged when Constantius called a Council to be held in Sirmium in 351. The Council, with its 'First Sirmian' creed, denounced the Nicene *homoousion*. In his *De Decretis* (c. 352–353) Athanasius, having previously said very little about it, now vigorously defended the *homoousion* doctrine and the authority of Council of Nicea that proclaimed it. Constantius continued to pursue his policy and held Councils in Arles in 353 and in Milan in 355 in order to place pressure on the western bishops to reject Athanasius and to accept a doctrine that was contrary to that of Nicea. Most of the bishops succumbed to Constantius' coercion. Constantius then went after Athanasius directly, sending his secretary, Diogenes, to apprehend him by force. Because of Athanasius' popular support, Diogenes was foiled at first, but he gained the support of Syrianus, the Roman commander of Alexandria. At midnight on 8 February 356, while Athanasius was celebrating with his congregation in the Church of Theonas, Syrianus and his soldiers launched a surprise attack. Athanasius narrates the events:

It was now night, and some of the people were keeping a vigil preparatory to a communion on the morrow, when the General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers, having arms and drawn swords, bows, spears, and clubs, as I have related above. With these he surrounded the Church, stationing his soldiers near at hand, in order that no one might be able to leave the church and pass by them. Now I considered that it would be unreasonable in me to desert the people during such a disturbance, and not to endanger myself in their behalf; therefore I sat down upon my throne, and desired the deacon to read a psalm, and the people to answer, 'For his mercy endureth for ever,' and then all to withdraw and depart home. But the general having now made a forcible entry, and the soldiers having surrounded the sanctuary for the purpose of apprehending us, the clergy and those of the laity who were still there, cried out, and demanded that we too should withdraw. But I refused, declaring that I would not do so, until they had retired one and all. Accordingly I stood up, and having bidden prayer, I then made my request to them, that all should depart before me, saying that it was better that my safety should be endangered, than that any of them should receive hurt. So when the greater part had gone forth, and the rest were following, the monks who were there with us and certain of the clergy came up and dragged us away. And thus (Truth is my witness), while some of the soldiers stood about the sanctuary, and others were going round the church, we passed through, under the Lord's guidance, and with his protection withdrew without observation, greatly glorifying God that we had not betrayed the people, but had first sent them away, and then had been able to save ourselves, and to escape the hands of them which sought after us.⁷

The Third Exile – 356–362

Athanasius was once more in exile, his third (356–362). While hiding among the monks, he wrote his *Apologia ad Constantium*, which he wanted to present to the emperor personally. However, when he found out that Constantius had exiled many of the pro-Nicene bishops of Egypt, as well as the venerable Hosius of Cordoba, and even Pope Liberius, he discarded that hope as futile. Constantius wrote a letter

7 *Apologia de Fuga*, 24.

to the Christians in Egypt in which he vehemently berated Athanasius' character and integrity and deposed him from his see. In his place Constantius installed another Cappadocian by the name of George, who ruthlessly persecuted Athanasius' supporters.

The latter part of the 350s saw the rise of other theological opinions with various resulting Councils. Aetius and Eunomius held that the Son was not like God, but actually unlike (*anomoios*) God, and so became known as the Anomians. The Council of Sirmium (357) emphasized the subordination of the Son while maintaining his eternal existence. A new personage came to the fore in Bishop Basil of Ancyra. He repudiated the Council of Sirmium and held his own Council at Ancyra in 358. His goal was to affirm the ontological likeness of the Father and the Son and to deny that the Son was a creature. He advocated that the Son was *homoiousios* (of like *ousia*) with the Father. He believed that this term preserved the Son's divinity and the proper distinction between him and the Father, thus rejecting what he considered the Sabellian tendencies of the Nicene *homoousion*.⁸ Constantius was amenable to Basil's theological strategy and exiled Aetius and Eunomius. There was an attempt to find common ground between the *homoians* (who spoke of likeness) and the *homoiousians* (who stressed likeness of being), in what came to be known as the 'Dated' creed (22 May 359), by stating that the Son is 'like in every way'; but this failed to convince the various parties. Western bishops reaffirmed their loyalty to Nicea. Constantius coerced them into affirming a creed that undermined even more the Son's likeness to the Father than did the 'Dated' creed. Some of the eastern bishops in turn affirmed what came to be known as 'the Creed of Nice'. These events precipitated Jerome's famous remark, 'the whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.'⁹ Basil of Ancyra and his followers were exiled.

Athanasius, hiding in the desert, was far from idle in the midst of all this bewildering theological and ecclesial activity. Actually, this was his most prolific period of writing. Besides his *Apologia ad Constantium*, he also wrote his *Apologia de Fuga*, *Historia Arianorum ad Monachos* (all in 357) and his *De Synodis* (359). It was also during this time that he wrote his very influential *Vita Antonii* (c. 356). Lastly, in his letters *Ad Serapionem* (357–359) he defended the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, even to the point of affirming that Holy Spirit is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son.

Constantius died in 360 and his cousin Julian became emperor. In 361 George, having provoked such hatred in Egypt, was vengefully killed by a mob. In 362 Julian allowed all exiled bishops to return to their sees. Athanasius once more returned to his beloved Alexandria, but his stay would be short-lived.

The Final Years – 362–373

Athanasius was desperate to find a theological solution, both in concepts and in language, which would be acceptable to all parties who upheld the full divinity of

8 More will be said of this below.

9 *Dialogue against the Luciferians*, 19.

the Son. The followers of the theological tradition of Antioch, the *homoiousians*, came to speak of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three *hypostases*. Those who favoured the Nicene *homoousion*, Athanasius and the west, tended to speak in terms of one *hypostasis*. While always faithful to the creed of Nicea, Athanasius was consistently more interested in the truth proclaimed than in the manner in which it was proclaimed. At the Council of Alexandria in 362 both parties agreed that one could speak of three *hypostases* so long as one did not intend to deny the oneness of God, and that one could equally speak of one *hypostasis* as long as one did not intend to deny the genuine distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Council also upheld the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the human soul and mind in the incarnate Christ.

However, Emperor Julian, 'the apostate', having rejected Christianity, attempted to revive the ancient pagan religions. Fearing Athanasius' theological status and ecclesial clout, he reinterpreted his decree saying that exiled bishops were allowed back to their home country, but were not permitted to resume their sees. He particularly singled out Athanasius, stating that he was forbidden to reside in Alexandria. Because of the outcry, Julian declared that Athanasius must even leave Egypt, thus, Athanasius, having resided in Alexandria for only eight months, entered into his fourth exile on 23 October 362. The desert monks joyfully accepted Athanasius into their company, but he was able to return to Alexandria upon the death of Julian in 363. The new emperor, Jovian, befriended Athanasius, but he died shortly afterwards in 364 and was succeeded by Valentinian. His brother, Valens, was appointed governor of the east. He was an opponent of Nicea and demanded that all pro-Nicene bishops be exiled. Athanasius refused, whereupon Valens' general attacked the Church of Dionysios in order to arrest him, only to find that he had already fled. This was to be Athanasius' shortest and final exile. Within a few months, wanting to maintain stability in Egypt in the midst of mounting political pressure, Valens allowed Athanasius to return to Alexandria.

Athanasius lived his remaining years in relative peace. Even when an anti-Nicene bishop from Antioch was sent to Alexandria, so strong was the support for Athanasius that the bishop had to be escorted back under military escort for fear that the populace would attack him. In these last years Athanasius was primarily concerned with Christological issues, writing his letters *Ad Adelphium* and *Ad Epictetum*, both of which would have considerable significance in the fifth century Nestorian controversy. Athanasius died on 2 May 373, having spent 17 of his 46 years as bishop in exile. Nonetheless, he died knowing that the creed of the Council of Nicea, for which he suffered all those years of exile because of his ardent defence, had triumphed.

Athanasius' Character

In concluding this introduction on the life and times of Athanasius, it is necessary to say something about his character, for it bears upon the integrity of his theology. During his own life time, as seen in the above sketch of his life, Athanasius elicited great loyalty and love from the people of his own diocese, from many of his fellow

bishops, and from the monks among whom he hid. He also found supporters from many Latins, such as St Hilary of Poitiers, 'the Athanasius of the West'. Yet, he also attracted many foes. Because Athanasius ultimately won the battle for the doctrine of Nicea, amidst much personal hardship, he was extolled through the centuries as a holy and selfless man of steadfast and fearless faith, of long suffering patience, and of zealous passion for the truth of the Gospel.

This positive assessment of Athanasius' character remained constant through the centuries, the high point probably being the nineteenth century.¹⁰ However, in the early twentieth century, the persona of Athanasius was being radically questioned, such that many contemporary scholars, not unlike the detractors of his own time, portray him as a very sinister and self-promoting individual.¹¹ For example, T.D. Barnes states: '[Athanasius] maintained the popular support which he enjoyed from the outset and buttressed his position by organizing an ecclesiastical mafia ... Like a modern gangster, he evoked widespread mistrust, proclaimed total innocence – and usually succeeded in evading conviction on specific charges.'¹²

Or, again from Barnes:

Despite his protestations of innocence, Athanasius exercised power and protected his position in Alexandria by the systematic use of violence and intimidation ... If the violence of Athanasius leaves fewer traces in the surviving sources than similar behaviour by later bishops of Alexandria like Theophilus, Cyril, and Dioscorus, the reason is not that he exercised power in a different way, but that he exercised it more efficiently and that he was successful in presenting himself to posterity as an innocent in power, as an honest, sincere and straightforward 'man of God'.¹³

Being a sinner as well as a saint, Athanasius no doubt possessed his own personal faults and shortcomings. Moreover, he obviously became a shrewd and astute ecclesial politician during the course of the Arian controversy. However, the casting of Athanasius as a menacing theologian and an unprincipled politician is incongruent with much of the historical data. Such an assessment also often fails to take account of the intrigues and plots of his political and ecclesial rivals. The embattled Athanasius was well aware that, if he were to win the day, he had to be

10 See for example, E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1897), vol. 2, p. 362; J.A. Moehler, *Athanase le Grand et l'église de son temps en lutte avec l'arianisme* (Paris, 1840); and J.H. Newman, *Select Treatises of Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians* (London, 1881).

11 See for example, E. Schwartz, *Zur Geschichte des Athanasius*, GS III, (Berlin, 1959) and his 'Zur Kirchengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 34 (Berlin, 1935), pp. 129–213.

12 T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 230.

13 Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 32–3.

R.P.C. Hanson, while noting that Athanasius was a genuine theologian, nonetheless states that he was 'an unscrupulous politician' (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* [Edinburgh, 1988], p. 422.) For a summary of various assessments of Athanasius' character, see D.W.H. Arnold, *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria*, pp. 9–22. Arnold's entire work is basically a defence of Athanasius' character. See also Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 239–46.

as resourceful and as clever as his opponents. However, it would be unwarranted to accuse him of simply being careless with the facts and driven by self-aggrandizing motives that bear little upon his concern for the salvific truth of the Gospel. The fact that he ultimately bested his opponents in no way implies that Athanasius was more malevolent than they. Such a victory could simply mean that the Gospel found a worthy defender in Athanasius and that the Holy Spirit ensured that he and the truth that he proclaimed would prevail.

Chapter 2

Athanasius' Soteriological Theology

Part I: *Contra Gentes*

Athanasius read the Bible, from beginning to end, as the historical narrative of the economy of salvation, that is, of God's providential actions, beginning with the act of creation and culminating in the redemptive actions of the Son of God incarnate.¹ The divinely established goal of this economy was to ensure that human beings would obtain eternal life and so everlasting communion with God.

In this, and the following chapter, we will examine Athanasius' foundational understanding of the biblical narrative and thus the soteriological concerns that governed his entire theological enterprise. We will do this by focusing on his two-part work – *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*.² This combined work is apt for such a study since it is almost entirely free of intra-Christian theological controversy and

1 In his *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Leiden, 2004) J.D. Ernst states that Athanasius 'regards Scripture as a unified whole. It is unified in the sense that one voice speaks through its many authorial voices, one protagonist carries the action from start to finish, and one plot – the story of human salvation – is constituted by the various phases of this action' (p. 131). For another excellent discussion of this point and other relevant points on issues that pertain to Patristic exegesis, see, J.J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore/London, 2005). C. Kannengiesser speaks of Athanasius possessing a 'biblical mind-set' for he addresses all issues from within a biblical framework. 'More importantly his knowledge of the OT and the NT, memorized "by heart" was centred on the revelation of God's incarnation'. (*Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, [Leiden, 2004], vol. 2, p. 709).

2 The dating of *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* is somewhat disputed. Traditionally they had been thought to be early works of Athanasius, approximately 319–323, being regarded as prior to the Arian controversy. However, since Athanasius would be quite young at this time, they are now thought to have been written later. H. Nordberg argued for the dates of 362–363. See his 'A Reconsideration of the Date of St. Athanasius' *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*', *Studia Patristica* 3 (1961) 262–66. However, C. Kannengiesser has equally argued persuasively for a date around 336. See his 'Le Témoignage Des *Lettres Festales* de Saint Athanase Sur La Date de L'apologie *Contra Le Paiens sur L'incarnation de Verbe*', *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 52 (1964) 91–100. Kannengiesser's view was revised by A. Pettersen and M. Slusser, placing the date just prior to Athanasius' first exile in July 335. See respectively, 'A Reconsideration of the Date of the *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione* of Athanasius of Alexandria', *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982) 1030–40 and 'Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*: Place and Date of Composition', *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1986) 114–17. See also, K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London, 1998), pp. 26–9. In this study the dates 335/336 are accepted.

was written, at the request of man named Macarius, primarily and simply as a primer or introduction to the Christian faith – ‘the knowledge of our religion’ (1.1).³

While ‘the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth’, yet Athanasius, following in the footsteps of earlier blessed teachers, hopes ‘to communicate in writing to you [Macarius] what we learned from them – the faith, namely, of Christ the Saviour’. In so doing he wants to ensure that others would not ‘hold cheap’ Christian doctrine or think ‘faith in Christ unreasonable’. While the Gentiles may ‘scoff at, and laugh loudly at us’ because of the cross of Christ; yet, they do so in utter ignorance, for they do not recognize Jesus’ ‘divine nature’. Actually, Athanasius argues, they should recognize ‘this man as Saviour of the world, and that the Cross has been not a disaster, but a healing of Creation’. Demons are driven away by the sign of the cross; Christ alone is worshipped; the Father is known only through him; and daily Jesus, though invisible, wins over those who previously mocked him. These triumphs are due to the fact that the man who ‘ascended the Cross is Word of God and Saviour of the World’ (all quotations are from 1.3–5).

At least four foundational theological and soteriological premises emerge from Athanasius’ introduction. Athanasius is convinced that the Christian faith is reasonable and so defensible. It is ignorance of the Gospel, not rationality that breeds the scorn of the Jews and the mockery of the Greeks. Thus, in explicating this Gospel faith for Macarius, Athanasius, within his two volume work, is equally and intentionally writing an evangelistic apologetic, one that confirms the faith of the believer and so equips such a believer for adequately engaging in the defence and proclamation of the Gospel. The truth of the Gospel is well attested to in the divinely inspired scriptures and within the tradition of previously blessed teachers. Therefore, Athanasius, at least within his own conscience, scrupulously attempts to be faithful to both scripture and tradition. Jesus, as an historical man, stands at the centre of this Gospel, for he is the culmination and climax of the whole historical economy of the Father’s saving actions. This centrality is rooted precisely in his being the Son or Word of God incarnate. Athanasius is not merely affirming that the historical Jesus is both God and man, but also a central Gospel tenet. He is confirming both that *God* acts in history and that it is within history that God acts. History is the stage, for Athanasius, upon which God acts, and through the Incarnation, he has actually done so as a man. At the very heart of Jesus’ redemptive work is the historic event of the cross, for it embodies the healing power of all creation and so establishes all that the Father originally intended for creation, especially humankind, that is, eternal communion with him. The cross, for Athanasius, historically achieved this goal of the Father’s economic plan.

It is around these four theological premises that Athanasius constructs his understanding and interpretation of the Gospel, and they equally govern his response to what he considers erroneous, for all error is, in some way, a denial of one or

For other excellent introductions to *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* see, Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, pp. 26–84 and J. Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *The Nicene Faith*, Part I (Crestwood, 2004), pp. 168–207.

3 All quotations cited in the text are from *Contra Gentes*.

more of these foundational tenets. Subsequent chapters will show, whether it be in treating his understanding of the Trinity in the midst of the Arian controversy or his Christology, that these same soteriological concerns guide his response to whatever issue is at hand.

Contrary then to the mind of the pagans (the *Gentes*), who held Christianity in disdain, Athanasius wanted, in this first part of his work, to refute the errors of pagan philosophy and, in turn, to present the alternative – the truth of Christianity. Thus *Contra Gentes* focuses on those topics most central to pagan philosophy: the nature of God and his relation to the world and humankind, and the nature of man and the origin of evil.

Being Created in the Image of the Word

Athanasius asserted at the onset that ‘from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς) wickedness (κακία) did not exist’ (2.1).⁴ Evil is not constitutive of any nature. This is so because everything was created by the one good God and humankind was specifically created in the image of God. The themes contained in the following quotation are at the heart of Athanasius’ soteriological apologetic:

For God, the fashioner (δημιουργός) and king of all, who subsists beyond all essence (ὁ ὑπερέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας) and human conception (ἐπίνοια), inasmuch as he is good and exceedingly noble, made the human race (τὸ ἀνθρώπινον γένος) after his own image through (διὰ) his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Through this likeness (ὁμοιώσεως) to himself, he constituted man able to see and to know essential realities (τῶν ὄντων), giving him also a conception (ἐννοιαν) and knowledge (γνώσιν) of his own eternity, in order that, preserving his nature intact, he might never depart from his idea of God, nor recoil from the communion of the saints, but having the grace of [God] who gave it (τοῦ δεδωκότος), and possessing also the power proper to the Word of the Father (ἐκ τοῦ πατρικοῦ Λόγου), he might rejoice and have fellowship with the deity (τῷ θεῷ), living an immortal life, unhindered and blessed. For, having nothing to hinder his knowledge of the divinity, he ever beholds, by his purity, the image of the Father, God the Word (τὸν Θεὸν Λόγον), after whose image he was made. He is filled with awe in contemplating that providence which through him [the Word], [extends] to the universe (εἰς τὸ πᾶν) ... (2.2).

This passage summarises Athanasius’ understanding of God’s original desire and plan in creating humankind. What is contained in the quotation will be expanded,

4 The Greek text is from P. Th. Camelot, ed., *Athanasie D’Alexandrie: Contre les païens*, 3^e edition, vol. 18 bis, *Sources Chrétiennes* (Paris, 1983).

Unless otherwise noted all translations of Athanasius’ works are based upon the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, St. Athanasius, ed. A. Robertson (Edinburgh, reprinted 1987). However, they have frequently been altered, sometimes significantly, in order to conform more closely to the Greek and so ensure accuracy and clarity. Also, unless otherwise noted, where available the following Greek texts were employed: *Athanasius Werke*, eds. M. Tetz and H.-G. Opitz (Berlin, 1935–2000). Also used was: B. Montfaucon, *S.P.N. Athanasii archiepiscopi Alexandrini opera omnia quae exstant*, J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 25–6 (Paris, 1857).

within the context of sin and pagan error, throughout the remainder of the work. What must be noted here are not simply the various truths on evil, creation and image that Athanasius articulated, but also the three logical connections he perceives as binding them together.

Firstly, it is the act of creation that ontologically distinguishes God from all else. As 'Maker of all (δημιουργός)' and 'King of all (παμβασιλεύς)' God's transcendent being is beyond all 'essence (ὁ ὑπερέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας)',⁵ not in the sense that he himself is not a being, but rather that his being is beyond all that is created. It is this transcendent otherness of God that makes him incomprehensible to the finite human mind. Yet, this same otherness is equally the foundation, for Athanasius, of his goodness and nobility, virtues that compel him to create humankind in his own image through his very own Word.⁶

It is here, secondly, that Athanasius has established the ontological and epistemological connections between God and humankind; at the centre of which is the Word. For Athanasius, the Word is the perfect divine image of the Father and for human beings to be made in God's image is to be made in the image of that Word. Human beings, then, are ontologically in the image of God because they are ontologically in the image of the Word. Athanasius equally implies that it is precisely because God created human beings through his Word that human beings have taken on the likeness of his Word, and so his own likeness as well.

Thirdly, human beings are able, after the likeness of the Word, to know and so be in communion with the Father. Having been ontologically created by the Word and in the Word's own image, human beings are thus naturally empowered by that same Word to share equally in their epistemological ability to know the Father. Because of 'this likeness (ὁμοίωσις) to himself' humankind is able to know God 'even of his own eternity'. Having been given God's own power 'from the Word of the Father', humankind is able to 'rejoice and have fellowship with the Deity', and even 'beholds, by his purity, the Image of the Father, God the Word, after whose image he was made'. In contemplating the Word humankind 'sees in him also the Father of the Word'. Thus, for Athanasius, humankind, in being created in the image of the Word, possesses the 'purity of soul' that is in itself 'sufficient to reflect God' and so come to know him (2.3).

The whole of Athanasius' theological programme revolves around the above themes and their logical interconnectedness. It will be sin that tarnishes the divine image in humankind and so hinders them from knowing God and so being in fellowship with him. It will be the incarnate Word, through his work of redemption, culminating in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who will be called upon to restore humankind to its original divine likeness, and thus once more appropriating immortality and communion with the Father.

5 Camelot in *SC* notes that this phrase is from Plato's *Republic* (VI, 509 b) and is found in Justin (*Dial.*, 4.1), Irenaeus (*Epid.*, 3) and Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.*, 5.6.38).

6 See A. Gaudel, 'La Théologie du ΛΟΓΟΣ chez Saint Athanase', *Revue des Sciences* 11 (1931) 1–26.

The Nature of Sin and Its Consequences

Human beings, having been created in the image of God so as to be able to contemplate him and so have communion with him, 'began to seek in preference things nearer to themselves' (3.1). While the material body is not evil, yet human beings, instead of pondering the heights of God, 'fell into lust of themselves preferring what was their own to the contemplation (θεωρία) of divine realities (τὰ θεῖα)' (3.2). The mind, through the bodily senses, refocused its attention to what was nearer at hand, and so human beings 'entangled their soul with bodily pleasures, vexed and troubled with all kinds of lust, while they wholly forgot the power they originally had from God' (3.2). Sin, for Athanasius, is the turning away from God and all that pertains to him and a lustful self-centred turning inward to what pertains to man and his earthly bodily life with all its sensual pleasures. Sadly, human beings became 'habituated to these desires, so that they were afraid to leave them' (3.4). Thus the soul anxiously feared death for in death all bodily lust and pleasures ceased.

For Athanasius, sin, takes on its own momentum. The soul 'having fallen in love with pleasure, began to work it out in various ways', for the soul, by nature, is mobile (εὐκίνητος), and 'she cannot at all cease from movement' (4.2–3). The soul possesses the ability to direct the body either toward God or not, and to move away from God is to move away from what is, and to move toward evil is to move to what is not. 'By what is, then, I mean what is good, inasmuch as it has its pattern in God Who is (ἐκ τοῦ ὄντος Θεοῦ τὰ παραδείγματα ἔχει). But by what is not I mean what is evil, in so far as it consists in a false imagination in the thoughts of men' (4.4). Sin and evil, for Athanasius, are movements towards non-being, for the soul's pleasure in the sensuous body is merely a vaporous mental illusion and so enjoys no existence. Only good actually exists, for it participates in the goodness of the God Who is. While the soul, like a charioteer, could have directed itself towards God, it drives 'the members of the body beyond what is proper, or rather, driven herself along with them by her own doing, sins and makes mischief for herself...[having] swerved from the goal of truth' (5.2).⁷

In the light of his own understanding of creation and the source of evil, Athanasius sets out to refute erroneous views. He first argues against those who posit some form of substantive and independent existence to evil, as do the Gnostics and the Manicheans. Such a position implies either that evil exists on its own or was created by another god other than the good God, 'for evil does not come from good, nor through (διὰ) good, or the result of good' (6.2). However, either the evil god is superior to the good God, or vice versa; or they are both equal in power, but this would create a situation whereby both would be equally weak and equally strong – 'equally, because the existence of either is a defeat of the other's will; weak, because what happens is counter to their wills; for while the good God exists counter to the will of the evil one, the evil god exists [equally] counter to the will of the good' (6.5).

Athanasius continues to argue that if the visible material world were created by an evil God, then there would be no evidence that a good God existed for 'there would

7 Plato first employed this image in his *Timaeus* (69C).

be no works of his by which he may be known' (7.1). There is only one conclusion that can be drawn – that of the Christian faith: 'That evil is not from God, nor is it in God, nor has it existed from the beginning (οὔτε ἐξ ἀρχῆς γέγονεν), nor is it of any substantive existence (οὔτε οὐσία τις ἔστιν αὐτοῦ); but men, in departing from the contemplation of the good (τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ φαντασίας), began to devise and imagine that which is not (τὰ οὐκ ὄντα), according to their desires' (7.3).

This falling away from the vision of the good inevitably led human beings, Athanasius argues, to idolatry. Having become consumed with earthly and bodily pleasures, human beings lost all vision of the heavenly reality. The soul no longer 'sees God the Word (τὸν Θεὸν Λόγον) after whose [likeness] (lit. 'after whom': καθ' ὄν) she is made; but having departed from herself, imagines and feigns what is not' (8.1). 'Truth' and 'goodness' are now solely, but falsely, perceived in the visible and the earthly. Thus, human beings 'made gods for themselves of things seen, glorifying the creature rather than the Creator, and deifying (ἐκθειάζοντες) the works rather than their Cause, Fashioner (δημιουργός) and Master (δεσπότην), God' (8.3). The irony, for Athanasius, is that these pagan deities are believed to have committed all kinds of abominable and licentious deeds – fornication, adultery, incest, the corrupting of children – yet those who worship them 'do not blush to ascribe to those they call gods things which the laws forbid to exist even among men' (12.4). The Old Testament testifies to this very same truth and so Athanasius confirms Paul's condemnation that all human beings became fools, though they thought themselves wise, having changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of corruptible man or birds, or beasts, or creeping things (see 19.2). Moreover, quoting Psalm 19:1, Athanasius asserts that creation itself cries out in protest against such idolaters (see 27.3–4). In the end, how is it possible for human beings to deify that which is corruptible, visible, composed of parts, powerless, for God is 'incorporeal (ἄσώματος) and invisible (ἀόρατος) and intangible (ἄψαυτος) by nature (τῇ φύσει)'? Likewise, he 'is almighty, and while nothing has power over him, he has power and rule over all' (29.1).

Summary and Theological Comments

Before examining the second part of Athanasius' *Contra Gentes*, a number of summary points concerning the above need to be emphasized. Athanasius insists that God is the good God, and thus all that he made is good.⁸ In creating human beings in the image and likeness of his Word, the Father has necessarily endowed them with freedom. This freedom was to be employed in the loving contemplation of God and in the virtuous doing of good. However, it is this same divinely bestowed freedom that made possible, for Athanasius, the outset of sin as the voluntary turning from God to the voluntary turning inward upon oneself. For sin, to Athanasius' mind, is more than a turning toward and seeking after the sensuous things of the world; rather,

⁸ See G. Florovsky, 'The Concept of Creation in Saint Athanasius', *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962) 36–52.

these are but symptoms of human beings being more concerned about themselves than they are about God.⁹

Unlike the Gnostics or Manicheans, matter and the body, because they are created by the good God, are not intrinsically and ontologically evil. The intellectual soul may be superior to the body, and so the governor or charioteer of the body; yet, it is precisely because of the soul's governorship, and not because of some inherent sensuous weakness within the body itself, that a human being is at fault with regard to sin. While it was through the bodily senses and the pleasures associated with these bodily senses that attracted the soul, it was the soul, not the body, which became inordinately enamoured of and so ultimately seduced by earthly and bodily pleasure to the exclusion of God.

Athanasius' employment of human freedom to account for sin allowed him to refute the common ancient philosophical tenet, as found in the Mesopotamian creation myths – Platonism, Gnosticism, and Manicheism – that matter is the ontological ground of evil. Equally important, it permitted him to deny that evil finds its source in some substantive existing malevolent deity who could rival and so stifle the providential plan of the all good God. Thus Athanasius transformed evil from being something ontologically grounded either in matter or an evil deity into moral evil, that is, something that springs forth from the voluntary abuse and so immoral use of what is good. Athanasius could then stress that evil, far from existing in its own right, is actually a parasite upon the good. The 'God Who is' gave good existence to all that is and so all that is is good. Moreover, as long as human beings lived virtuous lives, pursuing the good, they would grow in their existential likeness to the good God Who is. However, since human beings are, by nature, always active, having enmeshed themselves in the web of sin, they drove themselves headlong toward non-being, for the pleasures of sin never impart the joy and happiness they deceptively promised. Sin, for Athanasius, by its very turning away from the God Who is, turns the sinner toward non-existence.

While human beings fabricate gods fashioned after their own likeness or the likeness of some creature whom they hope ensures their earthly, and so sensuous, well being, they actually make a mockery of humankind's rationality by such irrational behaviour. Creation itself, as Athanasius' Bible taught him, cries out that it is not divine, but rather by its very splendour directs human beings to adore its even more splendid Creator.

Lastly, it is fascinating that, while much is often made about the differences between the Greek and the Latin Fathers, Athanasius' understanding of human beings as made in the image and likeness of the Father's Word, his understanding of the nature of sin as the voluntary turning of humankind inward on themselves as they

9 In a similar manner Origen states:

But since these rational creatures, as we have frequently shown and will show yet again in its proper place, were endowed with the power of free will, it was this freedom which induced each one obey his own voluntary choice either to make progress through the imitation of God or to deteriorate through negligence (*De Prin.*, 2.9.6).

passionately pursue the sensuous pleasures of this world, as well as humankind's falsely deifying creation – which refuses to be deified and protests that its Creator be adored instead – probably finds its most supreme echo, not in another Greek Father, but in Augustine. Here is not the place for an in-depth study of their similar positions, but a few brief quotations are in order.

Rebuffing his Manichean past, Augustine came to believe what Athanasius held about evil: it is 'not a substance', but rather resides in the inordinate elevating of earthly and human goods over love and contemplation of God.¹⁰

The life which we live in this world has its attractiveness because of a certain measure in its beauty and its harmony with all these inferior objects that are beautiful ... Yet sin is committed for the sake of all these things and others of like kind when, in consequence of an immoderate urge towards those things which are at the bottom end of the scale of good, we abandon the higher and supreme goods, that is you, Lord God, and your truth and your law. These inferior goods have their delights, but not comparable to my God who has made them all. It is in him that the just person takes delight; he is the joy of those who are true of heart.¹¹

Equally, Augustine stresses, as did Athanasius, that sin moves the sinner toward nothingness:

Life knows no death save wickedness which derives its name from nothingness. For this reason wicked men are called men of no worth. A life, therefore, which by voluntary defect falls away from him who made it, whose essence it enjoyed, and, contrary to the law of God, seeks to enjoy bodily objects which God made to be inferior to it, tends to nothingness.¹²

Moreover, Augustine expresses Athanasius' belief that creation heralds, not its own, but its Creator's glory, and he does so in a manner that Athanasius would joyfully envy:

'What is the object of my love?' I asked the earth and it said: 'It is not I.' I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession. I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: 'We are not your God, look beyond us.' I asked the breezes which blow and the entire air with its inhabitants said: 'Anaximenes was mistaken; I am not God.' I asked heaven, sun, moon and stars; they said: 'Nor are we the God whom you seek.' And I said to all these things in my external environment: 'Tell me of my God whom you are not, tell me something about him.' And with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us.' My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty.¹³

Similarly Athanasius and Augustine recognize that evil is not 'a something', a substance that exists on its own, but that it is a perversion of something that exists as good because it was created by the good God. Thus Augustine states:

10 *Conf.*, 7.18. Translation by H. Chadwick (Oxford, 1991).

11 *Conf.*, 2.10.

12 *De Vera Religione*, 9.21. See also *De Moribus Manichaeorum*, 2.2.

13 *Conf.*, 10.9.

It is not nature, therefore, which is contrary to God, but vice ... Moreover, the nature that it vitiates is good, and it is therefore contrary to this good also. But while contrary to God only as evil is to good, it is contrary to the nature that it vitiates, not only as evil, but also as harmful. For no evils are harmful to God, but only to natures which are mutable and corruptible even though, as the vices themselves attest, they were originally good; for, if they were not good, the vices could not injure them ... But if good were entirely absent, there could be no removal of it, and therefore no vice; for there cannot be a vice which does no harm ... We can, therefore, say this: that vice cannot exist in the Supreme Good, but it can only exist in some good.¹⁴

On these, and similar issues surrounding the origin of human beings and their subsequent sinful demise, Athanasius and Augustine would never have thought that the one's Greek and the other's Latin would have undermined or disconnected the one truth of which they both passionately spoke.

The Rational and Immortal Soul

In part two of *Contra Gentes* Athanasius further considers the powers of the soul. His goal is twofold – to demonstrate that the soul, being rational, is capable of obtaining the knowledge of God, and furthermore that, unlike the body, it is immortal and so has an affinity to the eternal God.

Athanasius begins by categorically stating that if we want to obtain accurate knowledge of God, 'we need none other than ourselves' (30.1). Quoting Moses to the effect that the word of God is within us (Deut. 30:14) and Jesus that the Kingdom of God is equally within us (Lk. 17:21), he concludes that it is by the soul and its intelligence 'alone that God can be contemplated and perceived' (30.3). Why is this so?

It is rationality that differentiates humankind from the animals. Moreover, human beings consider things external to themselves, reason about things not seen, and exercise rational reflection and judgement concerning alternatives. Thus, rationality is something more than the bodily senses, which only perceive what is present and are incapable of making judgements. 'What one ought to touch, taste and smell is a question beyond the senses, and belonging to the soul and to the intelligence (*νοῦς*) which resides in it' (31.3).

Moreover, the body dies, but the soul is immortal.¹⁵ For Athanasius this is demonstrated in that 'man reasons on the things of immortality, and often, where virtue demands it, courts death' (32.1). The body 'could not have thus reasoned (*τοιούτᾳ λογίσηται*) about itself, nor could it think upon what is external to itself' (32.1). Again, Athanasius speaks of the soul being the governor and master of the body, and, thus, the soul is distinct from the body and is immortal, unlike the body which dies. The conclusion to be drawn is that human beings are made in the image

¹⁴ *De Civ. Dei*, 12.3. See also 12.8. Translation taken from *The City of God against the Pagans*, R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998).

¹⁵ See A. Louth, 'The Concept of the Soul in Athanasius' *Contra Gentes – De Incarnatione*', *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975) 227–31.

of God's Word; it is, therefore, the rationality and immortality of this image that empowers them to contemplate God. In a beautiful passage Athanasius writes:

For this is the reason why [the soul] thinks of and reflects upon things immortal and eternal, namely, since it is itself immortal. And just as the body, being mortal, contemplates with its senses mortal things, so the soul, since it beholds and contemplates immortal things, is necessarily immortal and lives forever. For ideas and considerations about immortality never desert [the soul], but abide in it and are, as it were, the fuel which assure its immortality. For this reason [the soul] has the thought (τὴν ἐννοίαν) of contemplating God (τῆς περὶ Θεοῦ θεωρίας), and arrives thus by its own way, receiving not from without but from itself the knowledge and apprehension of the Word of God (33.4).

The ability to contemplate God resides inherently within the soul itself for, again, it mirrors the rationality and immortality of the Word in whose image it was created.

However, it is sin, the turning from the rational contemplation of God to the worshipping of irrational creatures that, Athanasius asserts, makes human beings irrational:

But they are able to turn back, if they lay aside the filth of all lust, with which they have clothed themselves, washing it away intently until they are rid of all that, as foreign, was joined to their soul, and thus manifest it alone, as it was made, in order to behold by it the Word of the Father (τὸν τοῦ Πατρὸς Λόγον), after whom they were made (καθ' ὃν ... γεγέννησιν) from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς) (34.3).

Cleansed of sin the soul regains its pure brightness and so it then 'beholds as in a mirror the Word, the Image (εἰκὼν) of the Father, and in him contemplates (λογίζεταί) the Father, whose image the Saviour is' (34.3). Even if the soul's ability is insufficient to contemplate God because it has been weakened by the external things that cloud it, the soul can still 'attain a knowledge of God from the things which are seen, since creation, as though in written characters, declares in aloud voice, by its order (τάξις) and harmony (ἁρμονία), its own Master (δεσπότην) and Creator (ποιητήν)' (34.4).

What we find here is Athanasius clearly articulating and ardently defending human beings' natural ability to come to a knowledge of God because they were 'naturally' created in the image of the divine Word who embodies all divine truth. Moreover, to contemplate God demands that the rational soul be immortal since only then would it have the spiritual power, unlike the bodily senses which only perceive the sensible, to grasp the eternal God. Thus, human beings, from within their own inherent constitutive nature, possess the surest access to the knowledge of God. However, sin has rendered such access difficult, for human beings, instead of contemplating God from within the temple of their own souls, have culpably become enmeshed in the world of the sensible. Yet, even here all is not lost for Athanasius for, as he has stated now on two occasions, the material creation itself points human beings away from itself and back toward God.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that, while Athanasius would ascribe to a more Platonic view concerning the relationship between the body and soul, the manner of his argument on the soul's immortality is quite similar in essence to that

of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶ All three founded the immortality of the soul upon its intellectual ability to obtain truth that exceeds the singular, the material and the sensible. Thus, we witness here in Athanasius the growth of a Christian tradition on why the soul is immortal that would become universal both in the east and the west.

Creation and Its Relation to the Word

Having focused his attention on the created nature of human beings and their innate aptitude to know and so contemplate the truth and goodness of God, Athanasius now turns his attention to the relationship of the created order to the Word and in so doing clarifies the exact nature and role of the Word. He picks up where he had left off stressing that, though he is invisible and incomprehensible, God did not take his stand upon his divine nature, but rather showed kindness to humankind by ordering the whole of creation so that human beings, perceiving such an order, could come to knowledge of him. Who, perceiving the sun, the moon and all the stars arrayed in orderly movement within the heavens, 'would not conclude that these are not ordered by themselves, but have a maker (δημιουργός), distinct from themselves, who governs (κυβερνῶν) them'? (35.4, see also 38). While Athanasius here is arguing for the existence of God from what is commonly referred to today as the 'Design Argument', he has a more specific goal.

Firstly, he wants, contrary to pagan polytheism, to demonstrate that there is only one God. While the created order is composed of many beings, there is, nonetheless, one harmonious order among the plurality of all that exists. 'Since the cosmos that has been created is one, it is necessary also to believe (πιστεύειν) that its Fashioner (δημιουργός) is one' (39.6)¹⁷

Secondly, this harmony among the created plurality equally testifies that such an order sprang from a rational and wise source. This one rational and wise source is none other than the Father of Christ, 'who like an excellent pilot, by his own Wisdom and his own Word, our Lord and Saviour Christ, steers and orders all things for [our] salvation' (40.2). The Father is the author of all that is; yet, for Athanasius, he creates everything out of nothing by his Word, and the harmonious order within creation bears the imprint of Wisdom's hand. 'If it (creation) subsists in reason and wisdom and skill, and is perfectly ordered throughout, it follows that he that is over it and has ordered it is none other than the Word of God' (40.3). Athanasius also wants here to distance this Christian notion of 'the Word' from any false philosophical understanding. Thus 'the Word' is not some seminal principle (*logos spermatikos*) as found in the Stoics, which inheres in each creature, nor is 'the Word' that which belongs to rational creatures and is expressed and spoken forth in words. Rather, 'I

16 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I,75, questions 2, 5, and 6.

17 A. Pettersen speaks of Athanasius' view of the world as being 'sacramental' in that its existence and harmony manifest the existence of God. See his *Athanasius* (London, 1995), p. 46. Pettersen also sees the human body as 'sacramental' in that through its senses the harmony of the world and the activities of God could be perceived. See his *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bristol, 1990), p. 4.

mean the Word of the good God of the universe, the living and active God, the Word himself ([τὸν ζῶντα καὶ ἐνεργῆ Θεὸν ἀυτολόγον] (40.4)).¹⁸

Athanasius is then proposing a unique and multifaceted relationship between ‘the Word’ and creation. The good Father, who ‘begrudges nothing, for which reason he does not grudge even existence’, has created all that exists through his Word and so the Father’s Word possesses an immediate and unbreakable relationship to that creation (41.2).¹⁹ This unbreakable relationship is itself twofold: first, the unbreakable union is established when the Father creates everything out of nothing through the Word; second, the union is sustained as the Father governs everything through the Word.

He [the Father] made all things by his own eternal Word, and granted substantive existence to creation (οὐσιωσάς τὴν κτίσιν),²⁰ not leaving it to be troubled and tossed about in its own nature, lest it risk returning to non-being (ἵνα μὴ κινδυνεύσῃ πάλιν εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι); but, since he is good, he governs and settles the whole creation by his own Word, who himself is also God (καὶ αὐτῶ ὄντι Θεῶ) (41.3).²¹

Thus, this immediate relationship to creation as creation’s author and artificer equally testifies to ‘the Word’s’ divinity and so his singular transcendence as distinct from, but not apart from, all else that is, in that all else exists only in being immediately related to him. Thus the act of creation with its subsequent harmonious ordering firmly establishes both ‘the Word’s’ intimate relationship to that creation and, simultaneously, distinguishes ‘the Word’ as God from that creation.²²

18 Camelot in *SC* notes that ἀυτολόγος first appears in Origen’s *In Jon.*, 2.3, *C. Cels.*, 3.41 and *Exhort. Mart.*, 10.

19 See A. Pettersen, ‘A Good Being Would Envy None Life: Athanasius on the Goodness of God’, *Theology Today* 55 (1998) 59–68.

20 This is literally translated: ‘ousia-ated the creation’.

21 Athanasius employs four similes to illustrate the Word’s relation to the created order. First, the Word is like a musician playing a lyre who produces ‘a single tune as the result, so also the Wisdom of God, handling the Universe as a lyre ... produces well and fittingly, as the result, the unity of the universe and of its order, himself remaining unmoved with the Father ... (for) by one and the same act of the will he moves all things simultaneously, and not at intervals, but all collectively’ (42.3–4). Second, the Word is like a conductor conducting his choir or, third, like the soul moving all the several senses, or fourth, like a king who builds and administers his city (43.1–3). The conclusion being that ‘with the single impulse of a nod, as it were of the Word of God, all things simultaneously fall into order, and each discharge their proper functions, and a single order is made up by them all together’ (43.4). See also 44.

22 While one of the similes that Athanasius employs to illustrate the relationship of the Word to creation is that of the soul’s relation to the body, it would be erroneous to conclude, as Kelly does, that the Word, as in Stoic philosophy, is the soul of creation (see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th Ed. [London, 1968], p. 285). The Word does govern and order the whole of creation, but he does so, as seen above, not as one who is a constituent principle inherent within it, but as its transcendent divine Creator. The ‘soul/body’ analogy merely highlights that as the bodily senses are responsive to the will of the soul so the whole created order is responsive to the transcendent divine will of the Word. This is why he colloquially speaks of the Word governing with ‘a nod’ for the whole of creation readily and promptly obeys his every command (see 43–44).

The Word's Relationship to the Father

Having established the Word's relationship to and differentiation from creation, Athanasius proceeds to clarify further the Word's relationship to and differentiation from the Father. The Word 'is the unchanging Image of his own Father'. However, while human beings are composed of parts and made out of nothing,

God is the one who exists (ὁ Θεὸς ὧν) and is not composite (σύνθετος), wherefore his Word also exists and is not composite, but is the one and only-begotten (μονογενής) God, who proceeds (προεβθῶν) in his goodness from the Father as from a good fountain, ordering and holding together all things (41.1).

We begin to see here what Athanasius will fully develop during the course of the Arian controversy, that is, both the unity and distinction between the Word and the Father. Both are the one truly existent indivisible God, yet the Word proceeds from the Father as his perfect and so unchanging Image. Athanasius employs the metaphor of a fountain to illustrate both that the Father is distinct from the Word since the Father is the source of the Word's existence, and that they are one as water remains united to the source from which it springs.

This is equally demonstrated when Athanasius says that as we perceive the Word from beholding the harmony of the created order 'so, in reflecting upon (νοοῦντας) the Word of God, one necessarily also reflects on God his Father, proceeding from whom (ἐξ οὗ προΐών) he is rightly called the Interpreter (ἑρμηνεύς) and Messenger (ἄγγελος) of the Father' (45.1).²³ This intimate relationship is witnessed, as all of the foregoing shows, in that the Father created and governs all in and through his Word. Athanasius compiles a whole host of scripture passages from both the Old and New Testaments to illustrate this, one of which is Genesis 1:28 where the Father speaks to the Word ('Let us') in the creation of human beings after their own image and likeness (see 46.5). Thus, the Word is the Offspring of the Father and the true Son.

He is the power (δύναμις), wisdom (σοφία) and Word (Λόγος) of the Father, not by participation (οὐ κατὰ μετοχήν), nor as if these qualities were granted him from without (ἔξωθεν), as they are to those who participate in him (αὐτοῦ μετέχοντες) and are made wise through him (δι' αὐτοῦ), and who receive power and reason in him (ἐν αὐτῷ); but he is himself wisdom (αὐτοσοφία), himself Word (αὐτολόγος), himself the very power of the Father (αὐτοδύναμις ἴδια τοῦ Πατρός), himself light (αὐτοφῶς), himself truth (αὐτοαλήθεια), himself justice (αὐτοδικαιοσύνη), himself virtue (αὐτοαρετή), the very type (χαρακτήρ), brightness (ἀπαύγασμα) and image (εἰκόν). Or to speak in summary, he is the wholly perfect fruit of the Father, alone the Son (μόνος ἐστὶν Υἱός) and unchanging image (εἰκὼν ἀπαράλλακτος) of the Father (46.8).

In these final sections of *Contra Gentes* Athanasius is attempting to assert two truths about the Word's relationship to the Father and in so doing ensure the Father's proper relationship to creation. Firstly, the Word or Son shares in the Father's Power and

²³ It is interesting that Athanasius is willing to call the Word 'a Messenger (ἄγγελος)' following the example of early Jewish Christianity and Justin Martyr. See *Apol.*, 1.6.

Wisdom not by way of participation, as if the Son were given a share in a manner corresponding to that of creatures. Thus this Power and Wisdom was not bestowed upon him as someone from without, that is, as someone who was a separate being from the Father, and so existed 'outside' the Father. Rather, Athanasius' employment of the emphatic personal (for example, 'himself the Word', 'himself truth'), as well as such predications of the Son as 'wholly perfect', emphasise the truth that the Son possesses all of these attributes naturally as one who resides within and so shares from within the very nature of God. The Son shares the very attributes of the Father because he participates in the Father's very divine being.

Secondly, while he wants to confirm the singular being of the Son in that he possesses the very attributes of the Father, Athanasius equally wants to distinguish the Son from the Father. There is no taint, even in this pre-Arian work, of modalism. While the Son is the very Word, Wisdom, Power, Truth, Light and Righteousness of the Father, he is so precisely as the Son and therefore as the perfect unchanging image and icon of the Father.

It is this unity and distinction which allow Athanasius to emphasize both the immediacy of the Father's presence as the Creator of all and the distinction that it is through his Word or Wisdom that he does create. While the Father creates everything through his Son, there exists no gap between the Father and all that he creates because the Son is the Father's very Word, very Wisdom, and very Power. Thus, the Father creates all through his very Word, Wisdom, and Power, but the Son is not a distinct third ontological mediator between the transcendent Father and all else that exists. Rather, it is specifically because the Son is the very Word, Wisdom and Power of the Father that it is through him that the Father is the immediate Creator and so ever intimately present to and active within the created order.²⁴

Athanasius concludes the *Contra Gentes* by emphasizing again that it is precisely because the Word is the true and perfect image of the Father that he is able to make immediately present the salvific presence of Father.

For, as he is the Word and Wisdom of the Father, thus he condescended to created things and, that he may impart the knowledge of him who begat him (ἡ τοῦ γενέτορος γνῶσις), he became (γίνεταί) himself life (αὐτοζωή), and door, and shepherd, and way, and king, and guide, and above all Saviour, life-giver, light and providence (πρόνοια) over all (47.1).

24 On Athanasius' understanding of the immediacy of the Father's relationship to creation through his Word, see J. Robertson's doctoral dissertation, *Whoever Has Seen Me Has Seen the Father: An Investigation of Christ as Mediator in the Theologies of Eusebius of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra and Athanasius of Alexandria* (University of Oxford, 2002). I am greatly indebted to Robertson for this interpretation of Athanasius. Anatolios also rightfully makes much of this same point, making it the foundational principle of Athanasius' theology. 'Thus the focus of my interpretation will be what I see as an intrinsic center of coherence in Athanasius' theology: the distinction, and simultaneous relation, between God and the world' (*Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, p. 3). See also pp. 3–6, 24–5, 33, 41, 45 and 124. This notion is in contrast to the Greek pagan notion of the God/world relationship. See pp. 7–13.

It should be noted that all of the above titles attributed to the Son make the Father present to human beings (Word, Wisdom, Brightness, Light and Life) and in so doing the Son is the means by which the Father leads human beings to himself (Door, Shepherd, Way, King, Guide and Saviour). Because the Son possesses these divine 'fatherly' attributes, the Father does not hide the Son from creatures but reveals him and in so doing the Father 'reveals himself also' (47.2). Yet, for one last time, Athanasius laments that human beings have turned from the Father's life-giving Word and have instead honoured that which he made, seemingly so awestruck by creation's beauty that they became blind to the glory of its maker and deaf to creation's proclamation of the Word (see 47.2–4).

Conclusion: The Salvific Centrality of the Word

Having examined *Contra Gentes* we find that Athanasius had a twofold end in mind. Firstly, as the title suggests, he wanted to refute false pagan notions as taught by the philosophers and other religious mentors. These errors cluster around the nature of God or the gods and specifically included such notions as the origin of the universe, the source of evil, and the status and role of the Logos. Secondly, Athanasius, at the same time, wanted to positively articulate and defend the Christian teaching on all of these issues and he does so from within the pastoral context of wanting the reader to grasp the salvific significance of this Christian Gospel.

It would be good here, by way of conclusion, to summarize, in a logical manner, Athanasius' teaching. Athanasius insists on the obvious Christian truth that there is one God who is all good, all powerful and all loving. It is upon this foundational truth that Athanasius both refutes the pagan errors that there are many gods and specifically that there are two gods, one of whom is malevolent and so responsible for the evil that resides within material creation, and affirms instead the goodness of all creation. The goodness of God's creation is reflected specifically within human beings, who are created in the image and likeness of Son, his Word and Wisdom. This filial image is founded, for Athanasius, upon the biblical truth that the Father created all through his Word and Wisdom and so human beings assumed the likeness of him through whom they were created.

Being in the image and likeness of the Word and so in communion with the Word, human beings innately possessed the intellectual ability to know, love and serve the Father. However, human beings became so enamoured with the pleasures and beauty of the created order that they freely turned from serving God to serving their own earthly selfish passions and desires. Contrary to the pagans, it is the misuse of the good of human freedom that is the source of all evil and not some ontological defect in either human beings or the material world that they inhabit.

Humankind forsook the God Who is in turning inward upon its own sensual delights and, instead, pursued the road to non-being, that is, the enchantments of evil which does not truly exist. Thus, despite the continual presence and governance of the Father's Word and Wisdom, human beings lost the knowledge of God, although they could have repented of their sin and so once more aligned themselves to the divine truth and life of the Word. In the midst of this sinful situation the voice of

orderly creation continually echoed the presence of the Word who created it, but humankind deliberately turned a deaf ear to creation's plea.

Central to all of the above is Athanasius' understanding of the person and work of the Son of God as the Father's Word and Wisdom. The Son is the mediator between the Father and the created order, particularly human beings. He does not stand between the Father and creation as a third being connecting the two. Rather, for Athanasius, the Son mediates an immediate and intimate relationship between the Father and all else. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, as the very Word and Wisdom of the Father, the Son is equally God in unity of being with the Father. Thus, when the Father creates through his divine Word, he establishes an immediate relationship between himself and what he creates through his Word, most specifically with human beings who are created in the Word's image. As the Son/Word (Λόγος) is the perfect divine image of the Father, so human beings, as created by the Word, are his image, that is, his λόγικοι. Secondly, because human beings are created through the Word and so bear his image, human beings possess an immediate relationship to the Word by which they have immediate and intimate access to the Father. The Son of God as the Father's Word and Wisdom is then the ontological bond between the Father and human beings and, being such, he, by necessity, is equally the epistemological bond through whom the Father and human beings come to know and love one another. In the aftermath of sin, as will be seen in *De Incarnatione*, it will also be the Word through whom the Father acts so as to re-establish this communal bond of fellowship.

While Athanasius' articulation of the first principles and foundational truths of the Christian Gospel within *Contra Gentes* is often profound and imaginative and so often admirable and even eloquent, there is one notable truth that is completely absent – the person and role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's absence can be accounted for by the nature of the treatise itself, that is, the refutation of pagan philosophical and religious errors within which the person and role of the Holy Spirit does not appear, for he is absent, unlike the Logos, from within their own thought and beliefs. Yet, it could also be that Athanasius, at this time, had not yet given sufficient thought himself to the person and role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son and in their relationship to creation and specifically to human beings. Athanasius could have made more of the Spirit's role in the creation, for example by noting that God's 'breath/wind/spirit' hovered over the chaotic waters or that God breathed into man the breath of his spirit (see Gen. 1:2 and 2:7). Likewise, he could have developed more fully, in relationship to the Son being the Father's Word and Wisdom, the notion that the Spirit is the Spirit of truth who leads human beings to and so allows them to share in the truth of the Word. Nonetheless, as will be seen, Athanasius does more than make up for the Spirit's absence in *Contra Gentes* in his later works. Moreover, it must be remembered that Athanasius, in this, his first book, is only setting forth the initial proper principles and crucial first truths upon which the remainder of the Christian Gospel is founded. In *De Incarnatione* he will take up where he left off and treat more fully the salvific nature of the Incarnation and the work of redemption.

Chapter 3

Athanasius' Soteriological Theology

Part II: *De Incarnatione*

In *Contra Gentes* Athanasius expounded the preliminary and foundational truths of the Christian Gospel. He wrote concerning God as Father and Son, their act of creation with their subsequent providential relation to creation, specifically with human beings, and the origin of evil. In so doing he refuted the fundamental errors of the pagans. In *De Incarnatione*, the second work addressed to Macarius, Athanasius continues his articulation of the Christian faith by taking up, as the title suggests, the Incarnation and the work of the redemption.

What needs to be noted at the outset is that Athanasius perceives and so constructs an inherent and necessary bond between the topics considered in *Contra Gentes* and those that he will now look at in *De Incarnatione*. The bond is the Son of God.¹ Athanasius, therefore, states at the commencement that 'We have by God's grace noted somewhat also of the divinity of the Word of the Father, and of his universal Providence and power, and that the good Father through him orders all things, and all things are moved by him, and in him are quickened' (1.1).²

Moreover, human beings were created in the Son's image and so he makes present to them the Father, in that they can come to know the Father immediately through his Word and mediately through creation, which bears witness to Wisdom's divine governance. Now, in the light of sin and death, it will be the same Son of God, as the Word and Wisdom of the Father, who will restore humankind to immortality and so re-establish its communal relationship to the Father through his Incarnation and the work of redemption. So Athanasius tells Macarius that we 'will follow the faith of our religion, and set forth also what relates to the Word's becoming man (ἐνανθρωπήσεως τοῦ Λόγου) and to his divine appearing amongst us' (1.1).

In *De Incarnatione* Athanasius again observes that the Jews and Greeks may laugh at and scorn such a notion, thinking it either impossible or unbecoming; yet, it is through the very humility of the Word that he demonstrates his divine power, 'subduing the pretensions of idols by his supposed humiliation – by the cross – and those who mock and disbelieve invisibly winning over to recognise his divinity and power' (1.2). Nonetheless, Athanasius also tells Macarius that he must recall what

1 For a study of the Word of God in *De Incarnatione*, see C. Kannengiesser, 'Le Verbe de Dieu selon Athanase d'Alexandrie', *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 45/2 (1989): 229–42.

2 All passages in the text are from *De Incarnatione* unless otherwise noted. The Greek text is from C. Kannengiesser, *Athanase d'Alexandrie: Sur l'Incarnation du Verbe*, vol. 199, *Sources Chrétiennes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973).

was said previously ‘in order that you may [not] fail to know the cause of the bodily appearing of the paternal Word (ἐν σώματι φανερώσεως ... πατρικοῦ Λόγου)’ (1.3). The heart of Athanasius’ concern is not merely in relating the cause for the Incarnation, but more so to ensure the linkage between the Word as Creator and the Word as Redeemer.³

It is, then, proper for us to begin the treatment of this subject by speaking of the creation of the universe, and of God its Artificer, so that it may be duly perceived that the renewal of creation has been the work of the self-same Word that made it at the beginning. For it will appear not inconsonant for the Father to have wrought its salvation in him by whose means he made it (1.4).

For Athanasius, as the Son of God was the original acting agent within the order of creation, so the Son will now be the acting soteriological agent within the order of redemption. Following the biblical historical narrative of God’s revelation, Athanasius insightfully perceives that the Son of God, as the Father’s Word and Wisdom, inextricably conjoins protology and soteriology and, ultimately, eschatology.

From Incorruptibility to Corruptibility

Athanasius once more takes up the topic of erroneous views of creation. He has three in mind specifically: the Epicureans, the Platonists and the Gnostics.

Firstly, the Epicureans hold that things come into existence of themselves and are not guided by divine providence, however, Athanasius argues, that if that is the case, there would be no distinctions among beings. Everything would be sun or moon, or hand or foot (see 2.1–2). Athanasius’ argument seems to be that, since the universe is one, then if it came into being of its own accord, it could only be one thing – all moon or all sun, etc. This is, obviously, absurd for Athanasius since there is a multiplicity of different types of beings, and it is this multiplicity of beings, which exist in an orderly fashion, that allows us to ‘apprehend God also as the Maker and Orderer of all’ (2.2).

Secondly, Plato held that God ‘made the world out of matter previously existing and without beginning’. However, this merely illustrates the supposed weakness of God for he, like a carpenter, is now dependent upon pre-existing matter in order to make anything. God now merely becomes ‘a Mechanic only, and not a Creator out of nothing (εἰς τὸ εἶναι) ... For he could not in any sense be called Creator unless he is Creator of the material of which the things created have in their turn been made’.

Thirdly, the Gnostics believe that some being other than the Father through his Word created all things, but this, Athanasius states, is contrary to scripture which clearly testifies that the creator is not ‘distinct from the Father of Christ’ (all from 2.3–6).

3 For an overview of the Word’s role in creation and redemption within the thought of Athanasius, see J.B. Berchem, ‘Le Rôle du Verbe dans L’Œuvre de la Creation et de la Sanctification d’après Saint Athanase’, *Angelicum* 15 (1938): 201–32 and 515–58.

These errors allow Athanasius once again to affirm firmly the Christian notion of creation. Employing various passages of scripture, he asserts that God, who is the source of all good, created everything out of nothing (see 3.1–2).⁴ He emphasizes once more that he made man in his own image, 'giving them a portion even of the power of his own Word; so that having, as if were, a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise' (3.4). The human intellect reflects the Word and so allows man to know the truth, but his will gives him the ability to choose either good or evil. However, having promised them incorruption, God, in order to preserve them in grace, gave Adam and Eve a law and placed them in the garden where they could live without sorrow or pain. Nonetheless, if they did transgress God's law, then they would die and so incur the corruption 'which was theirs by nature' (3.4–5).

Athanasius is very straightforward here: he sees corruption as intrinsic to human nature. This is so because only God, as existing eternally, possesses an essential incorruptibility. For Athanasius, nonetheless, God's great promise and gift to human beings was that they were to share in his incorruptible life. It is this super-eminent gift of incorruptible life that will be lost in sin and death and so what needs to be restored through Christ.

At this juncture, Athanasius realizes that it may appear that he is off on a tangent and has lost his theme of the Incarnation, but, as he assures Macarius, 'we must needs speak also of the origin of men, that you may know that the reason of his coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word' (4.2).⁵ This being the case, Athanasius proceeds to underscore the evil of human corruptibility so as to accentuate emphatically the need for the Incarnation. Athanasius weaves together a two-pronged approach to this issue: firstly, that human beings were created for incorruptibility and, secondly, that sin has now made them corruptible.

God had made man, and willed that he should abide in incorruption (ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ); but men, having despised and rejected the contemplation of God, and devised and contrived evil for themselves ... received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened; and from thenceforth no longer remained as they were made, but were being corrupted according to their devises; and death had the mastery over them as king. For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so just as they had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time (4.4).

4 On creation out of nothing Athanasius also quotes *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate, 1.

5 Despite the above quotation, in his 'A Special Aspect of Athanasian Soteriology', *Franciscan Studies* 6 (1946), Part 1, pp. 30–53 and Part II, pp. 171–94, D. Unger makes a strong case that for Athanasius the Son of God would have become man even if man had not sinned. 'If only the Incarnate Word could make man incorruptible and give man a knowledge of the Father, it would seem that the Word had in mind from the very beginning to become incarnate, since man was destined to that incorruptibility and knowledge from the beginning' (p. 35).

For Athanasius, human beings are corruptible by nature, having been created from nothing; yet, as long as they remained united to the God Who is, they were preserved in incorruptibility. This union could be maintained and incorruptibility preserved because human beings were created in the image of God (see 4.5). Thus, it is precisely through the Word, the perfect divine image from which human beings were fashioned, that this unity is sustained. 'For because of the Word dwelling with them, even their natural corruption did not come near them, as Wisdom also says: "God made man for incorruption, and as an image of his own eternity; but by envy of the devil death came into the word (Wis. 2:23)"' (5.2).

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve fell to the wiles of Satan and the ever growing effects are now abundantly evident. Athanasius, after the manner of Paul, enumerates the depravity and debauchery that has consumed humankind (see 5.3–8). The net effect is obvious. 'Death having gained upon men, and corruption abiding upon them, the race of man was perishing; the rational man made in God's image was disappearing, and the handiwork of God was in the process of dissolution' (6.1).

The Father's Dilemma

'What was God in his goodness to do' (6.7)?⁶ For Athanasius, in the face of sin God was confronted with a number of dilemmas, not least of which was his own good name.

While death and corruption are 'at once monstrous and unseemly', God could not go back on his word that if human beings sinned, they would die: 'For God would not be true, if when he had said we should die, man died not' (6.3). Yet it is equally unseemly that human beings 'once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption', especially because of their weakness and the deceptiveness of the evil spirits (6.4–6). What profit is there in humankind's ruin?

Far better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness and not goodness on God's part – if, that is, he allows his own work to be ruined when once he had made it – more so than if he had never made man at all (6.7–8).

If God had not made human beings, then no weakness could be imputed to him for there would have been no one to accuse him, but now, having created human beings, not only can they accuse God of weakness in indifferently observing and feebly agonizing over their demise, but, worst of all, God would stand accused in his very own eyes. 'It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's goodness' (6. 10).

Athanasius suggests that repentance may resolve the dilemma. However, while repentance might keep human beings from further sin, it does not adequately address the issue of death and corruption (see 7.1–4).

6 See E. Mühlberg, 'Vérité et Bonté de Dieu: Une interprétation de *De Incarnatione*, chapitre VI, en perspective historique' in *Politique et Théologie chez Athanase d'Alexandrie*, ed. C. Kannegiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974) pp. 215–30.

What Athanasius has done, not unlike Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo*, though less contrived and more biblical in orientation, is to articulate the sinful human impasse such that the only resolution is the Incarnation and the salvific work accomplished by the incarnate Word. In chapters 7–10 Athanasius sets out his first cause for the Incarnation, that is, the restoration of incorruptibility and how this restoration is accomplished. While the following various facets of Athanasius' argument within these chapters are highly compressed and often variously intertwined in a somewhat repetitious manner, they do possess an inherent christological and soteriological logic that will hopefully become evident.

The Incarnation: The Restoration of Incorruptibility

Athanasius once again conjoins protology and soteriology by means of the Word and in doing so keeps theologically intact the historical nature of the biblical narrative. As it was through the Word that human beings were first created in his image, so:

His it was once more both to bring the corruptible to incorruption, and to maintain intact the just claim of the Father, and above all, he alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with the Father (7.5).

Athanasius later notes, citing Hebrews 2:10, that as the Captain of salvation, 'it belonged to none other to bring man back from the corruption which had begun, than the Word of God, who had also made them from the beginning' (10.3). The Word and human beings are intrinsically bound together for Athanasius, for it was through the Word that they were created in his own incorruptible image.

The Word, therefore, has an inherent responsibility for humankind's well-being. While he was always present to his creation, yet 'the incorporeal, and incorruptible and immaterial (ὁ ἀσώματος καὶ ἀφθαρτος καὶ ἄυλος) Word of God comes to our realm' (8.1). The motivation within such condescending love is, for Athanasius, in the Word's 'seeing'. The Word saw that rational creatures would perish because death reigned over them. He saw that corruption's embrace was due to the firm hold that sin had upon human beings. He saw the end to which all of this would lead, that is, all that he had created as its 'Artificer' was to come to an end. Moreover, he saw the wickedness of human beings and that such iniquity was mounting to an intolerable pitch. Lastly, he saw that human beings were 'under the penalty of death'. In the light of all the above the Word took pity on the human race lest 'his Father's handiwork in men be spent for nought' and so 'he takes unto himself a body (λαμβάνει ἑαυτῷ σῶμα), and that of no different sort from ours' (8.1–2).

Here we see the centrality of sin within Athanasius' thought and the calamitous consequences of death and corruption that are sin's penalty. While he does not have a developed notion of Original Sin as found in Augustine and later western tradition, Athanasius does, nonetheless, graphically portray the aggressive cancerous nature of sin within the human race as witnessed within humankind's sinful history. Yet, for Athanasius, the Word of God willingly assumed his responsibility both because of his love for creation – specifically because he sees the dire plight of human beings

who were originally created in his image – and because of his love for the Father, in that he does not want the work that the Father first achieved through him to come now to nought for such would humiliate his Father. In order to address all of these intertwined issues adequately, the Word of God, who is incorporeal, incorruptible and immortal, must, for Athanasius, assume what is corporeal, corruptible and mortal, and he does so precisely in becoming man.

Athanasius articulates a very significant twofold soteriological principle that at first glance may appear contradictory. On the one hand, the Word, as stated above, assumed a body that was like our own (see 8.2 and 37.2). While the Word of God could have merely dwelt in a body or have manifested his divinity in a spectacular manner, yet ‘he takes a body of our own kind’ or ‘one of like nature because all were under the penalty of the corruption of death’ (8.3–4). Again, quoting the Letter to the Hebrews 2:14, Athanasius insists that the Word assumed the same flesh and blood as his brethren (see 10.4). Here, I would argue, Athanasius is asserting that the humanity assumed by the Word was not some generic immunized, sanitized or quarantined humanity, but a humanity taken from the sinful race of Adam, a humanity ‘under the penalty of the corruption of death’; otherwise, as will be seen shortly, he would be unable to recreate it.⁷ On the other hand, this sinned-scarred humanity was ‘from a spotless and stainless virgin, knowing not a man, a body clean and in very truth pure from intercourse of men’ (8.3). In the Virgin ‘he equips unto himself a body as a temple and makes it his very own instrument’ (κατασκευάζει ἑαυτῷ ναὸν τὸ σῶμα, καὶ ἰδιοποιεῖται τοῦτο ὡσπερ ὄργανον) (8.3).⁸ Later Athanasius emphasizes the same point: ‘The body, then, as having the same nature with all, for it was a human body, though by an unparalleled miracle it was formed of a virgin only, yet being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers’ (20.4). Now it may appear that Athanasius is contradicting himself in that he wants the assumed humanity to be both of the sinful stock of Adam and from a spotless Virgin. However, Athanasius is establishing that the Word of God must assume a nature like our own if it is to be our nature that he recreates; nonetheless, he must do so as one who is himself not a sinner. He must offer a pure sacrifice to his Father in our stead, and so as one of our race and on our behalf, he must be pure and holy. Assuming a body from the flesh of the Virgin Mary assures, for Athanasius, both that it is a humanity bearing the scars of sinful corruptibility and equally that it be hallowed so as to allow the Son of God to obtain humankind’s salvation through it.

Athanasius now, employing his twofold soteriological principle, focuses upon the salvific nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The key passage is the following:

And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death he gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father – doing this, moreover, of his loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to

7 For a further discussion of this issue see T. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

8 Following Colossians 2:19 Athanasius is stating that the fullness of the Son dwells in his body not in an adoptionistic sense, but rather that it is through the body that the Son actually abides in this world and so his body becomes the means (instrument) through which the Son humanly acts. This will be discussed further later in this chapter.

have died in him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body [ἄτε δὴ πληρωθείσης τῆς ἐξουσίας ἐν τῷ κυριακῷ σώματι], and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers), and that, secondly, he might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of his body (τῇ τοῦ σώματος ἰδιοποίησει) and by the grace of the resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire (8.4).

Athanasius' argument, while sketchy, is quite clear. The Word assumed a humanity like our own and in so doing assumed our corruption and death. Because he was one of us, he could stand in our stead and so lovingly offer his humanity to the Father. This accomplished two goals. The first is that, being one with our sin-marred humanity, the Word and all human beings are conjoined and so, reminiscent of Paul, all have died in union with him, and thus the law by which all were condemned to die was fulfilled in him. Thus, the law of death was fully spent on Christ and so it no longer had any authority over 'his peers'. The second is that, having died on behalf of all human beings, Christ is now able to share with them his incorruptible resurrection, uniting them to himself through grace.

Athanasius further elaborates on the causal logic of Christ's redemptive work:

[The Word] takes to himself a body (ἐαυτῷ λαμβάνει σῶμα) capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might because of the Word which was come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the grace of the resurrection (9.1).

While the Word takes a corruptible body like our own, this body is worthy to die on our behalf for it shares in the holiness of the Word. Moreover, the body of the Word truly dies, but then it rises incorruptible since it is the body of the incorruptible Word. As a result, incorruptibility is shared with humankind through the grace of the resurrection.

The reason that the Word incarnate procures for human beings the incorruptible life of the resurrection is that he offers:

Unto death the body he himself had taken (ἔλαβε σῶμα προσάγων εἰς θάνατον), as an offering and sacrifice free from stain, straightway he put away death from all his peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument (εἰκότως τὸν ἑαυτοῦ ναὸν καὶ τὸ σωματικὸν ὄργανον) for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death (9.1–2).

Later Athanasius makes the same point:

But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die, for which especial cause, indeed, he came among us ... He next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his temple to death in the stead of all (ἀντὶ πάντων τὸν ἑαυτοῦ ναὸν εἰς θάνατον παραδίδούς) in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass ... For there was need of death and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all, that the debt owing from all might be paid (20.2, 5; see also 20.6).

While one would have liked Athanasius to have elaborated on the exact nature of this sacrificial offering, what he appears to be saying is that, because the Word, having assumed our very nature, offers his pure and stainless human life as a sacrifice in our stead and our behalf, he contravenes and offsets the debt of death incurred and so owed by sin.

Therefore, ‘the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption by the promise of the resurrection’ (9.2). Having joined himself to humankind’s sinful nature and having put away death by his death, so now all who are conjoined to his risen humanity share in his incorruptibility. Athanasius further states that the Word ‘showed himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all’ (20.2; see 21.1). Here we perceive clearly what has been implicit from the start. For Athanasius, Christ’s bodily resurrection is the culmination of the Gospel’s soteriological narrative, for human beings are only able to acquire incorruptibility once more by sharing in the incorruptible humanity of the risen Christ. As the first-fruits, Christ’s risen incorruptible humanity establishes and so becomes the exemplar of what will be the eschatological end of all faithful Christians – the fullness of incorruptible divine life as risen human beings.

What should be more than evident now is that incorruptibility is a central theme within Athanasius’ soteriology. The reason for this is not merely that it guarantees that human beings will live forever, but also, and maybe more so, it affirms that human beings will assume their full divine likeness in that God is eternally incorruptible as a self-existent being. Likewise, it implies that human beings, by assuming the divine attribute of incorruptibility, are in full communion with the incorruptible Father and Son and so fully share in their communion of love.

Hopefully, the above exposition elucidates Athanasius’ understanding of the logical causal progression of the incarnate Word’s work of redemption. One would have wished that Athanasius had fleshed it out more fully and, in so doing, clarified some issues, especially in what manner Christ’s death is a sacrifice; nevertheless, it is both insightful and faithful to the biblical proclamation. Athanasius concludes by providing his readers with a parable.

As a king enters a city and in so doing bestows honour upon that city and equally frees it from the assaults of its enemies, ‘so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all’ (9.3). The Word has come into the world and taken up ‘his abode in one body among his peers’ and in so doing humankind’s enemies of corruption and death are vanquished.

The Incarnation: The Restoration of Humankind’s Filial Image

Athanasius proceeds to articulate a second soteriological reason for the Incarnation, that is, recreating humankind once more in the image of God. While the restoration of humankind to incorruption – the first reason for the Incarnation – equally restored humankind in God’s image, here, in the second reason for the Incarnation, Athanasius emphasizes that this image is also refurbished through a renewed knowledge of the

truth of God. Again, it is the Word incarnate who confers this image restoring divine knowledge.

Athanasius once more states that God made human beings to know him and so raised them to a dignity that surpassed that of brute animals:

He gives them a share in his own Image, our Lord Jesus Christ, and makes them after his own Image and after his likeness: so that by such grace perceiving the Image, that is, the Word of the Father, they may be able through him to get an idea of the Father, and knowing their Maker, live the happy and truly blessed life (11.3).

For Athanasius, being made in the image of the Image means that human beings could know the Image, and so knowing the Image, know the Father himself. Nonetheless, Athanasius repeats the devastating tale of how humankind lost the knowledge of God through sin despite God's best efforts to insure that they could come to know him and live in that knowledge (see 11.4–12.6). Again, Athanasius asks the question: 'What was God to do?' (13.1). Allow humankind to remain in its ignorance? Why, then, would God have made humankind in his image in the first place? Better to have made human beings like brute animals. What profit would such ignorance be to God since human beings would not know him, and so not worship him, but instead, in their ignorance worship what is not God? 'What, then, was God to do? Or what was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know him' (13.7)? The only way this could be done is:

By the presence of the very Image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ ... Whence the Word of God came in his own person, that, as he was the Image of the Father, he might be able to create afresh the man after the image ... None other then was sufficient for this need, save the Image of the Father (13.7 and 9).⁹

For Athanasius, as one restores a stained and grimy portrait, so does 'the most holy Son of the Father, being the Image of the Father, come to our region to renew man once made in his likeness, and find him, as one lost, by the remission of sins' (14.2). Athanasius speaks of the need of our sins being forgiven and the need to be reborn into the Son's image (see 14.2–7). Nonetheless, his present theme is that only the Word can restore humankind to the image of God since, as the perfect divine image of the Father, it was by him and in his own likeness that humankind was created. Therefore, Athanasius now emphasizes that this renewal is accomplished by the incarnate Word revealing the truth of the Father.

Human beings, instead of gazing upward to God, have focused their gaze downward to the things of the earth and so, for Athanasius, the Word came 'to sojourn here as man, taking to himself a body like the others' (ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐπιδήμει, λαμβάνων ἑαυτῷ σῶμα ὁμοιον ἐκείνους) that through 'the works of his body' (τῶν τοῦ σώματος ἔργων) they might come to know 'the Word of God which is in

⁹ In 13.7 Athanasius states that even angels could not save human beings because they are not in God's image. For a discussion on human beings being made in the image of God while angels are not, see T. Weinandy, 'Of Men and Angels', *Nova et Vetera* 3/2 (2005): 295–306.

the body (τὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγον), and through him the Father' (14.8). Like a good teacher the Word has come down to the level of his students taking upon himself a body and 'as man walks among men and meets the senses of all men half way, to the end, I say, that they who think that God is corporeal may from what the Lord effects by his body perceive the truth, and through him recognize the Father' (15.2).¹⁰ For Athanasius, what the Word does bodily is of the utmost significance since it is through these bodily deeds that human beings, through their own bodily senses, perceive that such deeds were done by God. In perceiving his bodily deeds, the Word persuades human beings that 'he is not man only (ἄνθρωπον μόνον), but also God (ἀλλὰ καὶ Θεόν), and the Word and Wisdom of the true God' (16.1).¹¹ Thus the Word of God accomplished two ends in the Incarnation. Firstly, he puts away death from humankind and renews it through the resurrection, and secondly, he makes visible what is invisible, that is, that he is 'Word of the Father, and the Ruler and King of the universe' (17.5).

Defining the Incarnation

While Athanasius insists that the Word/Son, as the perfect image of the Father, is truly God and that he has truly become a bodily human being, he does not want the Incarnation to imply that the Word ceased quickening or governing the universe that was created through him or that he, in some manner, was separated from the Father. As God he simultaneously remained ontologically distinct 'in being from the universe' and yet he was present to all that existed through his power (17.1). Thus, 'he was at once walking as man (ὅτι καὶ ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐπολιτεύετο), and as the Word was quickening all things, and as the Son was dwelling with his Father' (17.5). When the Son was born of the Virgin, he did not suffer any change, nor did he cease to be divine, rather 'he sanctified the body' (17.5).

Here Athanasius is attempting to articulate the exact nature of the incarnational union. The Son, while remaining unchangeably God, actually does come to exist as

10 See K.J. Torjesen, 'The Teaching Function of the Logos: Athanasius, *De Incarnation, XX-XXXII*', in *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, ed. R.C. Gregg (Philadelphia 1985) pp. 213–21.

11 That the bodily deeds of the Word reveal his true divinity becomes a recurrent theme as Athanasius concludes his treatise. While the universe reveals the presence of the divine Word, the 'bodily works of Christ' are perceived to be 'not human, but are the works of the Saviour of all, the Word of God' (53.4). If one wishes to see God who is invisible, let him 'apprehend him by the works of his body, and test whether they be human works or God's works' (54.1). By saying that the works of the body are 'not human' Athanasius is not saying that such works are not humanly done, but rather, since these bodily works are done by the divine Word, they reveal that the one doing them is truly God, and in this sense 'God's works'. Here we have an example of Athanasius implicitly articulating his understanding of the communication of idioms. Since the Son of God actually exists as man, all human experiences and actions are rightly predicated of him and so his human actions, such as miracles and saving deeds, reveal that the one doing them is truly the divine Son of the Father. This will be further discussed shortly.

man. Already here in his early theological career, this can clearly be perceived in what he states next about how divine and human attributes are predicated of the one Son. It is important to quote here at length:

Accordingly when inspired writers on this matter speak of him as eating and being born, understand that the body, as body, was born, and sustained with food corresponding to its nature, while God, the Word himself, who was united with the body, while ordering all things, also by the works he did in the body showed himself to be not man, but God the Word. But these things are said of him because the actual body which ate, was born, and suffered, belonged to none other but to the Lord: and because, having become man, it was proper for these things to be predicated of him as man, to show him to have a body in truth, and not in seeming. But just as from these things he was known to be bodily present, so from the works he did in the body he made himself known to be Son of God (Ὅταν τοῖς υἱὸν ἐσθίουσα καὶ πίνοντα καὶ τικτόμενον αὐτὸν λέγωσιν οἱ περὶ τούτου θεολόγοι, γίνωσκε ὅτι τὸ μὲν σῶμα, ὡς σῶμα, ἐτίκτετο καὶ καταλλήλοις ἐτρέφετο τροφαῖς, αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ συνῶν τῷ σώματι Θεὸς Λόγος τὰ πάντα διακοσμῶν, καὶ δι' ὧν εἰργάζετο ἐν τῷ σώματι οὐκ ἄνθρωπον ἑαυτὸν, ἀλλὰ Θεὸν Λόγον ἐγνώριζεν. Λέγεται δὲ περὶ αὐτοῦ ταῦτα, ἐπειδὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἐσθίου καὶ τικτόμενον καὶ πάσχον, οὐχ ἑτέρου τινός, ἀλλὰ τοῦ Κυρίου ἦν· καὶ ὅτι ἀνθρώπου γενομένου, ἔπρεπε καὶ ταῦτα ὡς περὶ ἀνθρώπου λέγεσθαι, ἵνα ἀληθεία καὶ μὴ φαντασία σώμα ἔχων φαίνεται. Ἄλλ' ὡς περὶ ἐκ τούτων ἐγνώσκειτο σωματικῶς παρῶν, οὕτως ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ὧν ἐποίει διὰ τοῦ σώματος, Υἱὸν Θεοῦ ἑαυτὸν ἐγνώριζεν) (18.1–2).

While this issue will be examined in more detail in a later chapter, we see here Athanasius asserting clearly that since the Word became man, all that is human can be properly predicated of him – birth, eating and suffering. For Athanasius there is one subject, one 'who' – the Word – who, in that he exists as God, orders the whole universe and, in that he exists as man, lives a thoroughly human life. While divine and human attributes can be authentically predicated of the same subject, the same 'who', that is, the Son of God, yet both the divine manner of existing and the human manner of existing remain distinct and so are not confused and so changed. Prophetically anticipating Cyril of Alexandria, Athanasius later states that, while the Son endured the insolence of men, 'he himself was in no way injured being impassible and incorruptible and very Word and God (ἀπαθῆς καὶ ἀφθαρτος καὶ Αὐτολόγος ὧν καὶ Θεός), men who were suffering, and for whose sakes he endured all this, he maintained and preserved in his own impassibility (ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ ἀπαθείᾳ)' (54.3). As man, the Son truly suffered death on behalf of all. As God, the Son remained impassibly incorruptible.

Moreover, it is precisely what the Son did as a man that equally revealed that he was truly the divine Word. For Athanasius this is primarily seen within Jesus' miracles – exorcisms and healings. 'From these acts it is possible even for the most ordinary observer to see his Godhead' (18.4), and it was only right that he performed such acts for he was first the creator of the human body and all else, and thus the whole of creation must be obedient to his lordly command (see 18.5–6).

Human beings should have been able to discern the presence of God and so obtain a knowledge of him from his providential care of the universe; yet now, in their sinful state, they are only able to 'recover their sight' through the bodily actions of the Word and so 'receive an idea of the knowledge of the Father' (19.1). The cross

especially gives testimony that Jesus was God for even the created order trembled in fear at the sight – ‘the sun hid his face, and the earth quaked and the mountains were rent: all men were awed’— all of this ‘showed that Christ on the cross was God’ (19.3). What is important to grasp in the above is not that the bodily actions – miracles, suffering and the cross – were symbols that pointed to the divine presence of the Word. Rather, for Athanasius, because the Son of God actually existed as man, it was his very human actions that manifested in a human manner that the actual doer of these human actions was the divine Son of God. The divine doer and the human actions done are, for Athanasius, one, and so who it was who performed these human actions, and so humanly revealed who he was, was the divine Word. This christological principle will become even more evident in Athanasius’ later writings.

At this point in Athanasius’ exposition he pauses to summarize his christological arguments and his soteriological conclusions. Because he admirably and clearly does so, it will be quoted in full for our present benefit:

We have, then, now stated in part, as far as it was possible, and as ourselves had been able to understand, the reason for his bodily appearing; that it was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption, except the Saviour himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of nought; and that none other could create anew the likeness of God’s image for men, save the Image of the Father; and that none other could render the mortal immortal save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Very Life; and that none other could teach men of the Father, and destroy the worship of idols, save the Word, that orders all things and is alone the true Only-begotten Son of the Father (20.1).

Appropriateness of Jesus’ Death on the Cross

Almost in scholastic fashion Athanasius proceeds to address a series of questions concerning the appropriate manner of Christ’s death. These issues have both apologetic and salvific significance and, while some may appear to us today as contrived or of little value, yet they allow Athanasius to reinforce his previous soteriological concerns. Firstly, ‘Why, then, one might say, if it were necessary for him to yield up his body to death in the stead of all, did he not lay it aside as man privately, instead of going as far as even to be crucified’ (21.3)? Human beings have no choice in their death, but succumb by weakness to sickness.

If then he (Jesus) had laid aside his body somewhere in private and upon a bed, after the manner of men, it would have been thought that he also did this agreeably to the weakness of his nature, and because there was nothing in him more than in other men (21.5).

Moreover, it was fitting that Jesus die in full strength so that ‘he did not himself take, but received at other’s hands, the occasion of perfecting his sacrifice’ (21. 6).

Secondly, could he not have hid himself from the Jews and so not die? However, this would be contrary to the whole purpose of the Incarnation in that he came, not ‘to accomplish his own death, but the death of men; when he did not lay aside his body by a death of his own – for he was Life and had none – but received that death which came from men, in order perfectly to do away with this when it met him in his

own body' (22.3). Athanasius is noting here the importance of Jesus' death in that he did not become man to destroy death within himself, since, as Life itself, no death clung to him. However, he did assume humankind's death in becoming a member of sinful humankind, and so it was humankind's death that was put to death within him. More importantly, Jesus could manifest the reality of his defeat of death through his resurrection only if he died (see 22.4).

Thirdly, could his death still not have been private or secret? If Jesus had died in secret, then the manifestation and proclamation of his resurrection would have been undermined. Only a public death could validate that he did indeed die, and thus such a public display of death would enhance the validity of his resurrection appearances and the consequent authenticity of the proclamation of the resurrection by his disciples (see 23).

Some might object that, while his death should have been public, he should have died in a less humiliating manner. However, if he devised his own death, then it could be thought that he could not overcome the cruellest form of death. 'So death came to his body, not from himself, but from hostile counsels, in order that whatever death they offered to the Saviour, this he might utterly do away' (24.2). Thus the cross, as the cruellest and most humiliating instrument of death, actually becomes, in the light of the resurrection, the standard of victory.¹²

Moreover, Jesus must die on the cross in order to bear the curse of sin, for, as Paul stated, quoting Deuteronomy 21.23, 'Cursed is he that hangs on a tree' (see 25.2). Likewise, if the Lord's death was to ransom all nations, then he had to be crucified, for only on a cross does a man die with his hands outstretched. 'Whence it was fitting for the Lord to bear this also and to spread out his hands, that with the one he might draw the ancient people, and with the other those from the Gentiles, and unite both in himself' (25.3). Moreover, since the devil and his companions wander in the 'lower atmosphere', it is right that the Lord should die in the air, that is, on the cross, so as to rid the air of demons, and so he provides free access to the souls rising to heaven (see 25.5–6).

The Christians' Soteriological Testimony to the Resurrection

Not only was it appropriate that Jesus die on a cross, but that he should also rise gloriously after three days. If he had risen immediately upon dying, then it could be said that he never truly died at all. Being buried for three days, and thus allowing corruption to set in, proved the validity of Jesus' death. Moreover, if his body became completely corrupted, then he might be accused, upon rising, of having assumed another body. Lastly, while the apostles were sad and in suspense, Jesus rose on the third day that they might not become completely despairing (see 26).

For Athanasius, though, the real proof of Christ's resurrection is the testimony of his followers – Christians no longer cower in the face of death, for they know that 'Christ trod it down as dead' (27.1). Thus the soteriological significance of Christ's

12 It is fascinating that Athanasius states that Jesus was not beheaded like John the Baptist or sawed in two like Isaiah as a sign of the undivided nature of the church – his body remaining whole (see 24.4).

death is found in the witness of his followers. Where in the past, even holy men and women wept for the dead, now they know that death, in the light of Christ's resurrection, is the beginning of life for they become 'incorruptible through the resurrection' (27.2). Not only do Christians have contempt for death but, when persecuted, they eagerly embrace it as 'witnesses of the resurrection' (27.3). This is true not only of men, but also of the young, and even of women (see 27.3 and 29.4–5). Not only is the devil held up to mockery and scorn, but also

Death having been conquered and exposed by the Saviour on the cross, and bound hand and foot, all they who are in Christ, as they pass by, trample on him, and witnessing to Christ scoff at death, jesting at him, and saying what has been written against him of old 'O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?' (27.4, see also 29)

Athanasius proceeds to issue a challenge to those who do not believe. While 'he who has put on the faith of the Cross despises' death, just as 'he who has got asbestos knows that fire has no burning power over it', so too 'let him who is incredulous about the victory over death receive the faith of Christ, and pass over to his teaching, and he shall see the weakness of death, and the triumph over it' (28.2 and 5). Moreover, those who would disbelieve are confronted by many other facts. Who can doubt Christ's resurrection when peoples of every nation and race have come to faith in Christ and abide by his teaching (see 30.4)? Who can doubt when they see the changed lives of those who believe in Christ – 'the adulterer no longer commits adultery, and the murderer murders no more, nor is the inflictor of wrong any longer grasping, and the profane is henceforth religious' (30.5, see also 31.1–2)? If some are still blind to the truth, they should acknowledge the power of Christ in others and so 'not deny the Godhead of Christ and the resurrection accomplished by him' (32.3).

Apologetic Against the Jews and the Greeks

Athanasius continues his apologetic on behalf of the Gospel by specifically addressing the individual concerns of the Jews and the Greeks. While Athanasius has employed scriptural passages throughout his treatise, he now marshals, against the disbelief of the Jews, a whole range of Old Testament passages and events to argue for the validity of the Christian Gospel, for 'the whole inspired Scripture cries aloud concerning these things' (33.3). Taking up Old Testament passages alluded to or found within the Gospels themselves (Is. 7:14, Num. 24:15–17, Is. 8.4, 19:1 and Hos. 11.1) Athanasius illustrates how the Incarnation was foretold (see 33.3–5). Following the New Testament and the now Christian tradition, Athanasius sees Jesus' passion and death prophesied in the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah (Is. 53:3ff.), and the cross is foretold by Moses (Deut. 28:66), Jeremiah (Jer. 11:19), and by the Psalmist (Ps. 22:16ff.) (see 34–35.1–6, and 36). One also recognizes the prefigurement of Christ in the lives of the holy men and women, for he exceeded their great accomplishments in becoming man of a virgin and dying for the salvation of all (see 35.7–40).

Athanasius now turns his attention to the Greeks and once more takes up a theme that he first treated in *Contra Gentes*, that of the Word's relationship to the universe, though this time he does so in the context of the Incarnation. The Greeks consider it folly to think that the Word could become flesh. Yet, Athanasius argues, if their own philosophers recognize that the Word is united to the whole universe (which is a body), and governs it, why is it absurd to believe that the Word united himself to a part of the whole (a body) and so became man (see 41–42)? 'It cannot be absurd if, ordering as he does the whole, and giving life to all things, and having willed to make himself known through men, he has used as his instrument a human body (εἰ ὀργάνῳ κέχρηται ἀνθρώπου σώματι) to manifest the truth and knowledge of the Father' (42.6).

As was seen when treating this subject in *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius is not proposing that the Word is the soul of the universe and so now similarly becomes the soul of his body after the manner of Apollinarius. Rather, Athanasius is merely asserting, as he has done from the onset, that since there is a compatible union between the Word and the universe, as the Greeks themselves claim, then they should not be surprised that there can be, and is, a particular union between the Word and a human body. While a union persists in both instances, the Word establishes the former through 'his own power' by uniting the whole and all its parts to himself so as to govern all in an orderly fashion (42.6). The Word establishes the latter by 'using a human instrument (εἰ ἀνθρώπινῳ κέχρηται ὀργάνῳ) to manifest the truth and knowledge of the Father' just as the mind makes use of the tongue to manifest its thoughts without the mind lowering itself in so doing (42.6–7). While the union of the divinity and humanity within the Incarnation is founded upon the Word's apposite relationship to the universe as its creator and governor, it is, for Athanasius, a unique union that so closely unites the body to the Word that it becomes the means, 'the instrument' through which the Word personally acts.

However, would it not be better, the Greeks might ask, that the Word manifest himself in a more seemly and noble manner, such through the sun or the moon or the stars? Such an objection entirely misses the soteriological point of it all. Human beings had become incapable of recognizing the presence of the Word as the universe's creator and governor. Therefore, human beings, being as they are, 'will be able to know his (the Word's) Father more quickly and directly by a body of like-nature and by the divine works wrought through it, judging by comparison that they are not human but works of God, which are done by him' (43.5). If Plato could state that the author of the universe, seeing it tempest tossed and in perilous chaos, 'takes his seat at the helm of the soul', why should the Greeks now find incredible the claim that, since human beings are enslaved by error, 'the Word lighted down upon the world and appeared as man, that he might save it in its tempest by his guidance and goodness' (43.7).¹³

Nor could God save human beings by a mere fiat such as he issued when he first created. Since human beings now existed, their cure could only be rightly achieved if 'the Word should use a human instrument (ἀνθρώπινῳ κέχρηται ὀργάνῳ) and

13 Athanasius is paraphrasing *Politic.*, 273 D.

reveal himself everywhere' (44.3). Moreover, it must be remembered that corruption is not external to the body:

But if death was wound closely to the body and was ruling over it as though united to it, it was required that life also should be wound closely to the body, that so the body, by putting on life in its stead, should cast off corruption ... For this cause the Saviour reasonably put on him a body, in order that the body, becoming wound closely to the Life, should no longer, as mortal, abide in death, but, as having put on immortality, should thenceforth rise again and remain immortal ... Therefore he put on a body, that he might find death in the body, and blot it out (διὰ τοῦτο ἐνεδύσατο σῶμα, ἵνα τὸν θάνατον ἐν τῷ σῶματι εὐπῶν ἀπαλείψῃ) (44.5–6).

This passage, as well as the following passage, could be interpreted such that Athanasius sees the Incarnation itself as fulfilling the salvific goal, that is, the very uniting of the corruptible body to the incorruptible Word/Life imparts incorruptibility within it. As Athanasius states earlier: 'But by virtue of the union of the Word with it, it was no longer subject to corruption according to its own nature, but by reason of the Word that was come to dwell in it it was placed out of the reach of corruption' (20.4). There is obviously an element of truth in such an interpretation, for Athanasius does perceive that in taking on the corruptible, and so sinful, human nature he imparts to it his own incorruptible life. However, it would be false to isolate this truth from the whole of Athanasius' soteriology. The Incarnation, for Athanasius, initiates the salvific work of Christ which finds its completion and summation in the cross and so culminates in the ensuing resurrection. It is in the resurrection that the humanity of Christ assumes the full incorruptible life of the Word, but it could only assume this incorruptible life in the resurrection because it first began to assume this incorruptible life at the moment when the Word took flesh within the womb of Mary. Having wound the body of death closely to himself in the Incarnation, the Word of life transforms it into his incorruptible divine life through his death and resurrection, whereby his risen humanity is now wound closely to himself.

Athanasius concludes his arguments on the appropriateness of the Word becoming man by now emphasizing that the Word is present everywhere. He is present to the whole universe through his creative power and governance. Moreover, he is now present as one of us in our midst. Thus, 'the Lord touched all parts of creation ... For thus man, shut in on every side, and beholding the divinity of the Word unfolded everywhere, that is, in heaven, in Hades, in man, upon earth, is no longer exposed to deceit concerning God, but is to worship Christ alone, and through him come rightly to know the Father' (45. 5–6).

Salvation's Conclusion: Holiness of Life

The soteriological effects of the Word's renewed presence and the salvation that he has achieved are readily apparent to Athanasius. Only with the appearance of Christ did human beings begin to abandon idols and cease to fear death. Echoing Paul, Athanasius asks, 'In a word, at what time has the wisdom of the Greeks become foolish, save when the true Wisdom of God manifested itself on earth' (46.4).

Moreover, all the deceit of the oracles and the superstitious madness devised by the devil are vanquished by they who merely use 'the sign of the Cross' for the cross is the victory of Christ who is 'God of true God, God [the] Word (Θεὸς ἀληθινοῦ Θεοῦ Θεὸς Λόγος)' (47.2–3; see also 48–49). In a flurry of rhetorical questions Athanasius drives his point home that only in the name of Christ and by the sign of his Cross are the lives of sinful men and women transformed into lives of virtue, even to the extent that the young commit themselves to a life of virginity (see 50.4–53). With enthusiasm and confidence (maybe overconfidence) Athanasius perceives all evil and sin diminishing and the Gospel spreading everywhere to all men and women, thus testifying to the triumph of Jesus Christ and his cross and resurrection (see 55). Athanasius' consistent concluding refrain, in the midst of this triumphal soteriological narrative, is: 'Now this is at once a proof of the divinity of the Saviour' (52.4). It is clear 'to all eyes' that 'he who abides is God, and the true Son of God, his only-begotten Word' (55.6).

For Athanasius the soteriological benefits of Christ are irrefutably manifested for all to see if they have but the eyes and the will to perceive them. So he draws his argument to conclusion by professing (in probably his most memorable statement) that 'he [the Son] was made man that we might be made God; and he manifested himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality (Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν; καὶ αὐτὸς ἐφάνέρωσεν ἑαυτὸν διὰ σώματος, ἵνα ἡμεῖς τοῦ ἀοράτου Πατρὸς ἔννοιαν λάβωμεν; καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπένευε τὴν παρ' ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς ἀφθαρσίαν κληρονομήσωμεν)' (54.3). In the light of this statement and all that has gone before, it would again be erroneous to interpret Athanasius' soteriology as merely incarnational, that is, by merely assuming our humanity he divinized it and made it incorruptible, thus diminishing the significance of the cross and resurrection.¹⁴ Rather, Athanasius, throughout *De Incarnatione*, argues that the soteriological end, that is, human beings obtaining a proper knowledge of Father and the divinizing benefits of incorruptibility, are achieved only through the whole of the soteriological economy – the incarnation of the Word and the salvific actions that he undertakes as man, especially his death on the cross with his resulting glorious and incorruptible resurrection. It is through the whole economy of salvation that the Son accomplishes what needs to be done for human beings to be once more created in his likeness and so be divinized.

Athanasius concludes his work by pointing out to Macarius that all he has said is in conformity with Sacred Scripture and that he would be well advised to contemplate the Scriptures, 'for they were spoken and written by God, through men who spoke of God' (56.2). Moreover, Macarius will learn from them not only what concerns the Son's first coming in the flesh, but also:

14 Kelly states that '[T]he dominant strain in Athanasius' soteriology is the physical theory that Christ, by becoming man, restored the divine image in us'. While he does acknowledge the importance of the cross and resurrection, it is more that they are the dominant feature of the salvific work of the incarnate Christ and not simply the Incarnation itself. See *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 377.

His second glorious and truly divine appearing to us, when no longer in lowliness but in his own glory, – no longer in humble guise, but in his own magnificence, – he is to come, no more to suffer, but thenceforth to render to all the fruit of his own cross, that is, the resurrection and incorruption; and not longer to be judged, but to judge all by which each has done in the body, whether good or evil; where there is laid up for the good the kingdom of heaven, but for them that have done evil everlasting fire and outer darkness (56.3).

Nonetheless, in order to fully grasp the truth of the Scripture one needs to grow in holiness of life and so possess ‘a pure soul’ (57.1). For Athanasius, as for the patristic tradition as a whole, only as one conforms one’s life to the truth of the Gospel can one comprehend the truth of the Gospel, for, as the saints bear witness, only the holy can know the Holy.

He that would comprehend the mind of those who speak of God must needs begin by washing and cleansing of soul, by his manner of living and approach the saints themselves by imitation of their works; so that, associated with them in the conduct of a common life, he may understand also what has been revealed to them by God and thenceforth, as closely knit to them, may escape the peril of the sinners and their fire at the day of judgement, and receive what is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven (57.2).

Summary of *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*

We have come to the end of our exposition of Athanasius’ soteriological theology as found within his two volume work: *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. Before we address some outstanding issues, it would be good to summarize in a systematic manner the logical flow of Athanasius’ treatment.

Firstly, the logic of Athanasius is subsumed within the historical narrative of God’s revelatory and soteriological actions. Athanasius, thus, begins with the Christian notion of creation in *Contra Gentes* and in an orderly way proceeds to examine the various Christian truths in succession, concluding with the eschatological significance of Christ’s resurrection in *De Incarnatione*. His aim is not only to articulate the Christian faith clearly, but also, in so doing, to refute the errors and criticisms of the Jews and the Greeks. What gives continuity to the whole soteriological, historical narrative, and thus simultaneously brings it into one harmonious whole, is the Son of God. The eternal Son of the Father, who is himself God, lies at the heart of the Athanasius’ historical narrative for he is the principal soteriological actor. It is through him that the Father creates and it is through him that the Father recreates, thus uniting the beginning with the end. The following schema may be helpful:

- The Father creates everything out of nothing through his Word and providentially orders everything through his Word.
- Human beings are created in the image of the Word and so are capable of knowing the Father through the Word and through the ordered splendour of the cosmos created and

governed by him.

- Human beings are naturally corruptible as creatures; yet, as long as they remain united to the Word, they remain incorruptibly united to the Father of life, love and truth.
- Instead of growing in a knowledge and love of the Father through the Word, human beings have freely turned from God by sinfully enmeshing themselves in the false delights of this world. In so doing they have thrown themselves into the hands of death having separated themselves from the Word of life, truth and love, and so lost their incorruptibility. (All of the above is in contrast to the Greeks who held that the material world always existed and/or was formed by a malcontent deity, thus making the material world evil in and of itself.)
- It would be unbecoming and even scandalous of the Father to allow such a situation to continue. Thus the Son, in whom the Father first created all things, became man in order that he might recreate human beings once again into his own image and so restore them to an incorruptible life of truth and love with the Father.
- This recreation was accomplished in a twofold manner. Firstly, through the Word Incarnate's sacrificial passion and death, he put death to death and through his bodily resurrection restored incorruption to all who are united to him through faith. Secondly, by becoming man, the Word likewise made known the truth of the Father and so allowed humankind once more to obtain divine knowledge, thus restoring to human beings their proper divine image.
- The effects of Christ's salvific work can readily be seen within those who believe. They no longer fear death and even willingly bear witness to death's defeat by laying down their lives for the Gospel. Their lives are transformed in that they turn away from the deceptions of sin and the devil and lead holy lives of virtue. They eagerly await Christ's coming in glory at the end of time when they will share fully in his incorruptible risen life and so obtain the fullness of the divine image in which they were first created. Then they will equally possess the full communion of life, love and truth with the Father for which they were first created.

The Theological States of Play

Before moving on to Athanasius' later theological writings and the Arian controversy, it would be helpful to briefly discuss several doctrinal issues that arise out of *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* and will come more fully into play later – the divinity of the Son, the Incarnation and the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, it is apparent that Athanasius upholds the full divinity of Christ. This is seen not only in the manner in which he refers to the Son of God/the Father and Word of God/the Father as the true and authentic Son and Word, but more specifically in his simply employing the word Θεὸς in its various forms in reference to the Son/Word/Christ etc.¹⁵ His most striking designation is (ὁ) Θεὸς Λόγος, which highlights the fact that the Word as such, while distinct from the Father since he is the Word and not the Father, is simply God.¹⁶ This is particularly evident in his use of the phrase quoted above: Θεὸς ἀληθινοῦ Θεοῦ Θεὸς Λόγος (47.3). 'God of true

15 See for example *DI*, 1.2, 16.1, 18.4, 19.3 & 4, 32.5, 38.4, 45.4, 46.4, 53.2, 54.2 & 3, 55.6.

16 Athanasius employs this phrase twenty-nine times in *DI*. See for example 10.3, 12.1, 15.5, 18.1, 19.4, 42.1 45.3 46.1, 54.2, and 55.4 & 5.

God' distinguishes the Son from the Father for he is of the Father, and yet it specifies that both are God, since God (Son) is from God (Father); the implication being that they are the one God. 'God (the) Word', again, emphatically reiterates that not only is God the Father God, but also and equally is God the Word God. There is also the designation 'God (the) Word of the Father (τοῦ Πατρὸς Θεὸν Λόγον)'. While the Word is truly God, he is not the Father, for he is *of* the Father.

The full divinity of the Son/Word is essential to the whole of Athanasius' soteriology for it is only if the Word is truly God as the Father is God can he immediately make present the Father through his own actions in creation and redemption. While the Son and the Father are distinct, their unity is implied both within their designation as Father and Son, but also in that the Father acts through the Son and the Son, precisely because he is the Son, immediately makes present the Father. Moreover, it is only because the Word is the divine Word of the Father that human beings can, through the Word, come into immediate communion with the Father, again because the Father and Son are in communion with one another. Equally important, only if the Word is God can he divinize human beings by imparting to them his own incorruptibility by their sharing in his risen life. (The distinction between the Father and the Son as well as their being the one God will become explicit as Athanasius defends the Nicene definition.)

Secondly, what is more problematic in Athanasius is the manner in which he conceives the Incarnation and specifically how he envisions the humanity of Jesus. There are two issues here:

1. Does Athanasius understand the Incarnation as the Son taking on the whole of our human nature or merely 'the body'? On three occasions he speaks of the Word 'becoming man', using variations of γίγνομαι and ἄνθρωπος, which would imply that the Word assumed a complete manhood,¹⁷ but he also employs variations of γίγνομαι and σῶμα.¹⁸ Athanasius' most common manner of expressing the Incarnation is variants of 'He takes to himself a body (λαμβάνει ἑαυτῷ σῶμα)'.¹⁹ This would be in accord with his most common way of speaking of Jesus' humanity as σῶμα with its variants. Nonetheless, he also extensively uses ἄνθρωπος with its variants.²⁰ What is one to discern from all of this? Does the more common usage of σῶμα imply that, ultimately, Athanasius conceives the Incarnation as the Son assuming merely a body devoid of a human soul, and thus does his conception fall under what is commonly termed a Logos/Sarx Christology?²¹ Could Athanasius, then, even be an Apollinarian before Apollinarius?

17 See *DI*, 18.1 & 3, and 44.2.

18 See *DI*, 8.3 and 41.6.

19 See *DI*, 8.2–3, 9.1–2, 10.4, 13.9, 14.8, 15.2, 20.6, 31.4, 32.6, 43.4, 44.3 and 46.2.

20 See *DI*, 14.8, 15.2 & 7, 16.1 & 4, 17.4–5, 18.1–3, 19.3, 33.2, 37.2 & 4, 39.3, 41.5, 42.2–5, 43.7, 44.2, 45.1, 48.5 & 9, 49.6 and 50.3.

21 Grillmeier holds that Athanasius clearly espouses a Logos/Sarx Christology. See *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 308–328. By forcing all Patristic Christology to fall into either of two camps – Logos/Sarx vs Logos/Anthropos, thus making the presence or absence of a human soul in Christ the heart of every christological issue, Grillmeier has not only wrongly interpreted such Fathers as Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, but he has also taught a whole generation of students what is erroneous.

While these questions will be treated more extensively in Chapter Five, it can be said here that Athanasius uses σῶμα and its variants to emphasize the authenticity and genuineness of Jesus' body and thus the authenticity and genuineness of his human experiences, such as being born, suffering and dying, and likewise the authenticity and genuineness of his human actions, such as eating, drinking and offering his life as a sacrifice. Moreover, as already noted, Athanasius' focus is to ensure that all bodily experiences and actions are those of the Word. There is a divine immediacy here within the bodily experiences and actions in that such experiences are immediately those of the Word.

2. This leads logically to the second issue with regards to the Incarnation and actually allows us to form a clearer picture of Athanasius' conception of the Incarnation. As is evident from the above, Athanasius speaks of the Son's body as a human instrument, an ὄργανον.²² As such is the body merely something the Son employs to achieve certain effects, such as a person using a pen for writing or a fork for eating, and thus the body is not only distinct from the Son, but actually separate from the Son? Does the Son then use his body as an instrument in the manner of a human being employing a spacesuit? Or, is the body conceived as denoting the manner in which the Son now exists, and thus he employs it as a person uses his own hand to open a door?

While, again, this issue cannot be fully resolved here and must await a further examination of Athanasius' later works, it would seem that he conceives the Son's use of the body in the latter sense since he himself uses the analogy of a man using his tongue. In almost all instances of Athanasius' use of the term ὄργανον and its variants, he does so in order to stress that, having become man, the Son is now able to do human salvific deeds. For example, since human beings had fallen into sin, it 'was naturally consequent that the Physician and Saviour should appear in what had come to be, in order also to cure the things that were. For this cause, then, he has become man, and used his body as a human instrument (Γέγονε δὲ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τοῦτο, κιά ἄνθρωπείῳ ὄργάνῳ κέχρηται τῷ σῶματι)' (44.2; see 3). The body allows the Son to do things that he could not have done had he not become man, such as reveal to human beings, as one of them, who he is, or the truth of the Father, or suffer, die and rise. I would thus tentatively argue even at this stage that Athanasius does hold that the Son of God assumed a full humanity – body and soul, and that the reason he employs the term σῶμα so extensively is that 'the body', as physical and material, is now, for Athanasius, the visible means by which the Son humanly acts and so both discernibly reveals invisible divine truths and corporeally performs divine salvific deeds. Moreover, since Athanasius sees the Son as the immediate bodily *experiencer* and the immediate bodily *doer*, he can be so only if his body is personally and so actually his own and not some detached implement utilized by him. Likewise, Athanasius twice speaks of the body as the Word's temple, which he thus employs as his own corporeal or human instrument (see 8.3, 9.2 and 20.2). The image of the temple being the dwelling place of the Word should not be interpreted as though Athanasius were espousing a moral or adoptionistic union between the Word and his body. Rather, it is precisely because the fullness of the Word fully dwells in

22 See *DI*, 8.3, 9.2, 22.5, 41.7, 42.5–7, 43.4 & 6, 44.2–3, 45.1.

his body as in a temple that he can actually employ his body as an instrument and so act in an authentically human manner. Thus the body is not an impersonal instrument employed as a tool, but as the vehicle by which and through which the Son himself genuinely and truly experiences and acts in a personal human manner. Again, the reason for this is that, for Athanasius, the Son does actually exist as man.

While there are issues yet to be addressed and clarifications yet to be made, it can be said that Athanasius, within his early work *De Incarnatione*, already has in place a fairly mature and balanced understanding of the Incarnation. The principles that are evident here are the ones that he will exploit and develop in his later writings.

Thirdly, what is completely absent from Athanasius' presentation of the Gospel within *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* is the person and role of the Holy Spirit. This is a real weakness; if the Holy Spirit is divine as the Father and the Son are divine, then he must equally be involved within the whole soteriological narrative. But he is nowhere to be found except in the closing doxology of *De Incarnatione* (see 57.3). Why is this so? As was stated at the end of the second chapter, there could be two reasons for this. Firstly, Athanasius has simply not at this juncture adequately considered the person of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, nor his work within the economy of salvation. Secondly, because Athanasius, in this twofold work, was writing an apologetic against the Jews and primarily the Greeks; the concerns at hand focused exclusively on the Father and the Son as both being divine and their work, especially that of the Son, within the economy of salvation. Thus the person and work of the Holy Spirit did not come to conscious expression. Nonetheless, the absence of the Holy Spirit does substantially contribute to the incompleteness of Athanasius' presentation and defence of the full Gospel. Whether he rectifies this situation and so redeems himself in his later works will be seen as our study progresses.

Chapter 4

Athanasius: Defender and Interpreter of Nicea

In the previous two chapters, by way of introduction to his thought, we examined Athanasius' soteriological theology as was expressed in his two volume work *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. There we saw that Athanasius argued, from a scriptural perspective, for the full divinity of the only begotten Son as well as for the distinction between him and the Father. He did so in order to assure, again according to Scripture, that it was truly the divine Son through whom the Father created the world and specifically human beings who were formed in his own perfect image as the Son of the Father. This, in turn, provided the soteriological basis upon which human beings naturally possessed an affinity to the Son/Word through whom they could remain in communion with the righteous and holy Father. Moreover, in the face of sin, it was the Son, who rightly, fittingly and inherently possessed the ability to recreate human beings in his own likeness, since they were first created in his own image. He did this by assuming their own nature – his own likeness – and died as man on their behalf, reconciling them to the Father. As a human being, the Son also manifested and taught humankind how to live after his own manner and so return to communion with the Father.

Having situated Athanasius' soteriological theology, we now, in this and the following two chapters, examine more specific theological issues that bear directly upon his soteriology. In this chapter we want to examine critically Athanasius' long and impassioned defence and interpretation of the Council of Nicea, and so discern more clearly, within his mature thought, how he perceived the unity between the Father and the Son, as well as how he understood the distinction between them. In the following two chapters we will first address Athanasius' understanding of the Incarnation and redemption, and then his theology of the Trinity, specifically of Holy Spirit both as to the Spirit's divinity and to his precise role within the economy of salvation.

The Theological Setting Prior to the Arian Crisis

The history of the theological development of the doctrine of the Trinity within the early Fathers has been well documented and discussed.¹ Here we need only highlight a few points that bear upon the ensuing crisis that gave rise to the Council of Nicea.

¹ See for example J. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vols. 1 and 2; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1; S.G. Hall, *Doctrine*

Almost everyone prior to the Council of Nicea (and even some subsequent to the Council), including those who would be condemned for proposing an heretical understanding, such as Paul of Samosata, the Modalists or Sabellians, and Arius himself, presupposed that the Father alone and singularly constituted the fullness of the Godhead, when they attempted to conceive and articulate the Christian understanding of the unity and distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The source of this presupposition probably originated from within the Old Testament belief in one God, and it was then assumed that the one God was simply the Father. This could have also been reinforced by the Greek philosophical notions of one God (Platonic and Aristotelian), again the assumption would be that the one God, even within a foreign philosophic conception, must rightly be understood to be the Father. We see this both within the Apologists, such as Justin Martyr, and also quite clearly in Origen.² However, because of this presupposition, there was always an inbuilt necessity to conceive the Son and the Holy Spirit not only as deriving their being from the Father, but also as less divine than the Father and so subordinate to him, for he alone embodied the whole of the Godhead. There was a hierarchical conception within the Trinity.

Origen presents us with such a conception. In conceiving the Son and the Holy Spirit coming forth from the Father, he could rightly articulate their distinctiveness as three *hypostases* as over against Sabellian modalism. Moreover, by recognizing that the Son and the Spirit come forth from the Father and so share in his divine nature, he could uphold their divine status. Equally, because they shared in the Father's nature, he could profess their unity.³ However, such a conception and articulation of the Trinity is fraught with tensions. Since the Son and the Holy Spirit come forth from the Father, the more distinct they are in the coming forth, the less united they are to the Father and so the less divine. To 'shove' them back into the Godhead of the Father may increase their unity and divine status, but in so doing they become less distinct. Nonetheless, however one plays with this conception of the unity and the distinction of the persons, one ultimately cannot account for their divine equality. The model, of necessity, always conceives an ontological hierarchy, for the Father himself alone constitutes the whole of what it means to be God.

Origen seems to be aware of the tensions within his Trinitarian thought, but, despite its weaknesses, he did want to uphold the distinct *hypostases* of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, their divine unity, and their divinity. In this he was endeavouring to conceive and articulate the inherited Trinitarian faith tradition that

and Practice in the Early Church (London, 1991); J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago, 1971); and B. Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Edinburgh, 1993). For a creative and insightful interpretation of the Trinitarian theological development prior to Nicea, see L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 11–84.

2 See for example Justin Martyr, *Apologia*, 2.13 and Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.1.6 and 1.2.10; *Contra Celsum*, 7.38 and *In Joannem*, 2.2.16 and 2.10.75.

3 For a discussion of whether or not Origen spoke of the Son as being *homoousios* with the Father see, M. Edwards, 'Did Origen apply the Word *Homoousios* to the Son?', *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998) 658–70.

had come down to him, and so he could be labelled neither an Arian before Arius nor a proleptic dissenter to the Nicene doctrine.⁴ Nonetheless, it is these very tensions and weaknesses that Arius would recognize and exploit, but in so doing he will ardently adhere to the presupposition that had given rise to them all – the Father alone comprises the whole of the Godhead.

Arius' Conception of God and of the Son

There has been in the past twenty years a reassessment of Arius' position and especially of the various positions of what were traditionally called, due to Athanasius' own taxonomy, 'Arians' or 'Neo-Arians'. (Athanasius' preferred moniker was simply to dub them all 'Ario-maniacs'.) Thus, both the pre-Nicene controversy surrounding Arius has become more complex and the post-Nicene controversies, involving a myriad of players, positions and Councils, has become almost impossible to sort out historically and theologically. Because all of this has been rehearsed by not a few scholars and because space does not allow for another assessment here, we will leave, for the most part, these issues to the side.⁵ Since this is a book on Athanasius' theology, we will discuss these historical and theological issues as he himself saw and addressed them, even though there may be legitimate queries as to whether he did so correctly or even justly. What is most important here is to discern Athanasius' thought concerning the relationship and the distinction between the Father and the Son and only secondarily, whether or not he rightly understood and interpreted the positions of those he considered his opponents.⁶

4 M. Edwards rightly argues that Origen's understanding of the Trinity should not be considered heretical given the theological development of his day and given what he was ultimately attempting to express. See his *Origen against Plato* (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 65–74.

5 See J. Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *The Nicene Faith*, Part 1; R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*; and R. Williams, *Arius* (London, 2001).

6 Here, I would like to make one comment. It has been argued that Athanasius coined the names 'Arian' and 'Arians' as pejorative political and theological slurs against his opponents, even though many later theologians whom he so portrayed held widely different views from Arius himself and who actually distanced themselves from him. (See T. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, p. 15 and especially the comprehensive discussion of this issue in D. Gwynn, *Hoi peri Eusebion: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Early Arian Controversy* [D. Phil. Dissertation, 2004]). While many of his opponents, in the course of the extended controversy, may have held more nuanced views than Arius and may have differed widely from some of his arguments, it will be seen that they all agreed on one basic issue – the Son was not God as the Father is God, and thus he was not *homoousion* with the Father. Thus, while they may have denied that they were Arian and bristled at being called such, yet they nonetheless held fast to Arius' basic position. Williams states that 'Arius' role in "Arianism" was not that of the founder of a sect. It was not his individual teaching that dominated the mid-century eastern Church. "Arianism", throughout most of the fourth century, was in fact a loose and uneasy coalition of those hostile to Nicaea in general and the *homoousios* in particular' (*Arius*, pp. 165–6). Or, as Anatolios more forthrightly states: 'Moreover, we can point out that, despite the rather tendentious remark that Athanasius called "Arian" anyone who disagreed

Turning now to Arius, we find that, while he did not present his position with systematic rigor, his is a coherent philosophical and theological view, the conclusion to which demands that the Son/Word be a creature. Here we will attempt to portray the various elements of his argument in a sequential manner.⁷

God's singular, ineffable nature cannot be fully comprehended in itself. Arius begins his *Thalia* by stating that 'Alas, God himself, in his own nature, is ineffable by all. He alone has none equal, none like, and none of similar glory to himself'.⁸ Nonetheless, certain attributes can define more precisely his ontological nature in that they are in contradistinction to that which is not God. So Arius continues by saying that we call God 'Ingenerate' 'because of him who is generate by nature'. Moreover, we praise God who is 'without beginning because of him who has a beginning'. Equally, we adore him 'as everlasting, because of him who in time has come to be'.⁹ To be 'ingenerate', 'without beginning', and 'everlasting' demarcates God from all else that is 'generate' and so possesses a beginning in time, and, as the 'him' above implies, specifically the Son.

God's singularity demands as well that he possess other attributes that can only rightly and fully be predicated of him alone. In his Letter to Alexander of Alexandria he writes: 'We acknowledge One God, alone Ingenerate (ἀγέννητον), alone Everlasting, alone Unbegun, alone True, alone possessing Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign; Judge, Governor, and Providence of all, unalterable

with him, the case is rather that Athanasius called "Arian" anyone who could be understood to mean that the Son is a creature' (*Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, p. 96).

7 For studies on Arius and Arianism see: M.R. Barnes, 'Re-Evaluation of Arianism,' in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, eds. L. Ayres and G. Jones (London, 1998), pp. 47–67; J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, Part 1, pp. 130–49; R.C. Gregg and D. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia, 1981); R.C. Gregg, ed, *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments* (Philadelphia, 1985); Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 3–128; C. Kannengiesser, 'Arius and the Arians', *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 456–75; J. Lienhard, 'Recent Studies in Arianism', *Religious Studies Review* 8 (1982): 330–7; J. Lienhard, 'From Gwatkin Onwards: A Century of Studies on Arianism', lecture given at the North American Patristics Society Conference, 2005; B. Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 68–87; J.H. Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, reissued (Notre Dame, 2001), pp. 201–35; G.C. Stead, 'Arius on God's "Many Words"', *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985): 153–7; G.C. Stead, 'Arius in Modern Research', *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 24–36; G.C. Stead, 'Was Arius a Neoplatonist', *Studia Patristica* 32 (1997) 39–52; G.C. Stead, 'The Arian Controversy: A New Perspective', *Ερμηνεύματα: Festschrift in Honour of Hadwig Horner*, ed. H Eisenberger (Heidelberg, 1990), pp. 51–9 (These articles can also be found in G.C. Stead, *Doctrine and Philosophy: Arius, Athanasius, Augustine* [Aldershot, 2000]); R. Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1983): 56–81; R. Williams, *Arius*. Williams gives a very helpful and brief logical schematic of Arius' thought on pp. 230–2.

8 In Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 15. All quotations are taken from the works of Athanasius, unless otherwise noted.

9 *De Synodis*, 15.

and unchangeable, just and good, God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Covenant ...'.¹⁰

What distinguishes, for Arius, the ineffable God from all else is not simply his eternal, ingenerate nature without beginning or end, but also those singular characteristics that must accrue to such an eternal ingenerate nature. The whole emphasis that God 'alone' possesses a host of attributes (immortality, wisdom, goodness and immutability) and positions (Sovereign, Judge and Governor) marks out his unique oneness.

Because he alone is eternally ingenerate, and so singularly one, it would be ontologically impossible, and thus a contradiction of terms, for God to bring about another eternally ingenerate being; two eternally ingenerate beings would in itself nullify the reality of the one God. As eternally ingenerate, God, for Arius and the Arians, is a 'Monad' in that he alone possesses this singular mode of existence.¹¹

While the Christian tradition from the Apologists to Origen attempted to devise a concept and a formula by which the Father could share his divine nature with the Son such that the Father would remain one, and yet the Son would be, in some sense, divine, Arius perceptively grasps the futility of such endeavours. He rightly perceives that, if God, either before or after becoming the Father, is absolutely one and so alone constitutes the whole of the Godhead within himself, any sort of sharing of that divine nature with another would cause alteration and mutation, and so multiplicity, within God and thus destroy his immutable oneness.

Arius delineates and denounces what he considers to be all the various erroneous proposals by which the Father is said to share his nature with the Son. He, therefore, argues at length that God begot the Son not:

As Valentinus pronounced that the offspring of the Father was an issue; nor as Manichaeus taught that the offspring was a consubstantial part (ὁμοούσιος μέρος) of the Father; or as Sabellius, dividing the Monad, speaks of a Son-and-Father; nor as Hieracas, of one torch from another, or as a lamp divided into two ... [Moreover,] if the terms 'from him', and 'from the womb', and 'I came forth from the Father, and I am come' [Rom. 9:36; Ps. 110:3; Jn. 16:28], be understood by some to mean a consubstantial part of him, or as an issue, then the Father is according to them compoundable and divisible and alterable and material (σῶμα), and, according to their belief, he who is the incorporeal God has the attributes of a corporeal body.¹²

Arius names Valentinus and Manichaeus precisely because they were already condemned heretics, and in so doing may have wished to demonstrate that his position, not being similar to theirs, is not heretical. Nonetheless, he may also be giving a subtle condemnatory nod at Origen, who was the preferred theologian among many of Arius' contemporaries, for he too speaks of the Son coming forth from the Father. Be that as it may, the real theological point Arius wants to make is that if the Son issued from

¹⁰ *De Synodis*, 16.

¹¹ *De Synodis*, 16.

This argument may be more properly ascribed to later 'Arians', specifically Eunomius and Aetius.

¹² *De Synodis*, 16.

the Father and shared in his same nature, and in this sense were thus ‘one in essence (ὁμοούσιος)’ with the Father, this would demand that there would be two Gods. The ‘issuing’, in and of itself, would divide the one divine nature into two. Moreover, for Arius, even to conceive of the Son as coming forth from the Father by way of issue or emanation manifests that one is rendering unto the incorporeal God corporeality, for only material bodies are changed, divided and compounded.¹³ As Arius insists, it is impossible for God to be composed of material parts. Equally, if the ‘Monad’ were constantly alternating between displaying itself as Father and Son, as in Sabellianism, this too would denote change within the one immutable divine nature. In addition, while the analogy of one torch lighting another was historically employed to illustrate how God the Father could beget God the Son without demeaning or diminishing his own divinity (light), Arius recognizes that two distinct beings (torches), nonetheless, come to be and so, again, the oneness of God is eliminated.¹⁴ Deliberately, Arius is vigorously attempting to eliminate completely, logically and systematically, all possible modes of ‘begetting’ other than that of ‘creating’ on the grounds that all other forms demand change, division and mutation within the one eternal Godhead, which all parties would agree, is philosophically and theologically impossible. For Arius, then, it is inconceivable, and therefore impossible, for God to be one and simultaneously for the Son to be God.

Logic demands, for Arius, that if one wants to uphold the oneness of God, and again all do want to maintain this, then the Son must be, based on the above, a creature. However, it is precisely because of this seemingly inevitable conclusion that Alexander of Alexandria cast him out, ‘for who ever heard [the following] assertions before’:

God was not always a Father, but there was a when when God was not Father. The Word of God did not always exist, but originated from things that were not (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων γέγονεν); for God that is, has made him that was not, of that which was not; wherefore there was a when when he was not; for the Son is a creature (κτίσμα) and a work (ποίημα). Neither is he like in *ousia* to the Father; neither is he the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is he his true Wisdom; but he is one of the things made and created, and is called the Word and Wisdom by an abuse of terms, since he himself originated by the proper Word of God, and by the Wisdom that is in God, by which God has made not only all other things but him also. Wherefore he is by nature subject to change and variation, as are all rational creatures. And the Word is foreign from the *ousia* of the Father, and is alien and separated from it. And the Father cannot be seen by the Son, for the Word knows the Father neither perfectly nor accurately, neither can he experience him perfectly. Moreover, the Son does not know his own *ousia* as it really is. For he was made for us, that God might create us by him as by an instrument; and he would not have existed, had not God wished to create us.¹⁵

13 Within Platonic emanationism, such as in Plotinus, all comes forth by necessity from the effulgence of God’s or the One’s being. See A. Meredith, ‘Emanation in Plotinus and Athanasius’, *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 317–23.

14 This analogy is founded upon Hebrews 1:3 (‘He [the Son] reflects the glory of the God.’). ‘Torch from torch’ or ‘light from light’ can be found in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, 128; Tatian’s *Oratio*, 5; and Tertullian’s *Apologeticus*, 21.12.

15 *Depositio Arii*, 2. It is interesting that while Origen holds that the Son cannot see the Father since sight belongs to a corporeal nature, yet the Son does know the Father perfectly.

Athanasius quotes from Arius' *Thalia* in a similar fashion:

The Unbegun made the Son a beginning of originate things, and advanced him as a Son to himself by adoption. He has nothing proper to God in his own subsistence (ὑπόστασις), for he is not equal, nor one in essence (ὁμοούσιος) with him. Wise is God for he is the teacher of Wisdom. Sufficient is the proof that God is invisible to all beings, even to things which are through the Son; and to the Son he is also invisible ... Thus there is a triad, though not of equal glories, and their subsistences (αἱ ὑποστάσεις) do not intermingle. One is more glorious than the other in their glories to a boundless degree. Foreign from the Son in *ousia* is the Father, for the Father is without beginning. Understand that the Monad was; but the Dyad was not, before it came into existence. It follows that, though the Son was not, yet the Father was still God. Hence the Son, not being (for he existed of the will of the Father) is the Only-begotten God, and he is alien to others. Wisdom existed as Wisdom by the will of the wise God ... To speak in brief, God is ineffable to his Son. For he is to himself what he is, that is, unspeakable.¹⁶

Arius himself writes to Eusebius of Nicomedia lamenting that he is persecuted because he refuses to hold that:

God has always been, and the Son has always been: Father and Son exist together: the Son has his existence unbegotten along with God, ever being begotten, without having been begotten: God does not precede the Son by thought or by any interval however small: God has always been, the Son has always been; the Son is from God himself ... [He himself holds] that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; nor from some lower *ousia* [i.e., from matter]; but that by his own [i.e. the Father's] will and counsel he has subsisted before time, and before ages as God full, only-begotten, unchangeable. And that he was not, before he was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established. For he was not unbegotten.¹⁷

Arius also subsequently wrote a letter to Alexander attempting to explain the orthodoxy of his position:

[The Son was], as we say, at the will of God, created before times and before ages, and gaining life and being from the Father, who gave subsistence to his glories together with him ... Thus there are three subsistences (ὑποστάσεις). And God, being the cause of all things, is Unbegun and altogether Sole; but the Son, being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, was not before his generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father. For he is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unorginate with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, introducing two ingenerate beginnings, but God is before all things as being monad and beginning of all. Wherefore also he is before the Son, as we have learned also from your preaching in the midst of the Church. So far then as he has from God his being, glories and life, and all things are

See *De Principiis*, 2.4.3 and 4.4.8. Moreover, Aetius and Eunomius would later hold, unlike Arius, that the Son did know his own essence.

¹⁶ *De Synodis*, 15.

¹⁷ *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* taken from *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stevenson (London, 1987), p. 324–5.

delivered unto him, in such a sense is God his origin. For he is above him and before him, being his God.¹⁸

Athanasius sums up Arius' position as such:

God was not always a Father: The Son was not always: But whereas all things were made out of nothing, the Son of God also was made out of nothing: And since all things are creatures, he also is a creature and a thing made: And since all things once were not, but were afterwards made, there was a time when the Word of God himself was not; and he was not before he was begotten, but he had a beginning of existence: For he has then originated when God has chosen to produce him: For he also is one among the rest of his works.¹⁹

Arius' position has been quoted and summarized extensively, not simply to allow him and his opponents to state his thought, but also to allow the various nuances and the theological spin-offs to become evident, for they will loom large in Athanasius' rebuttal. It is now necessary to delineate and draw out the theological conclusions of Arius' position.²⁰

Unlike the early Christian tradition founded upon the New Testament and Origen's subsequent insight that because the Father is eternally the Father, then the Son must be eternally the Son (for the Father would not be Father without the Son), Arius argues that the one eternal ingenerate nature of God precedes that of his becoming a Father, for if God were eternally the Father, and thus too the Son, this again would imply that the eternal unoriginate oneness of God would be destroyed. Again, as Athanasius quotes from his *Thalia*, Arius was adamant that 'God was not always a Father, but once God was alone, and not yet a Father, but afterwards he became a Father', and therefore 'the Son did not always exist'.²¹ Similarly, 'Not always Father, not always Son; for the Son was not before his generation ... and in consequence God was not always Father of the Son; but, when the Son came to be and was created, then was God called his Father'.²² Thus, while the Father as Father is always God, God is not always the Father in that he did not always have a Son. 'There was once when he was not' and, 'before his generation, Christ was not',²³ or again 'He was not before his generation', and 'once he was not'.²⁴

Because God is not always Father and therefore the Son is not always in existence, it is by God's will alone, as is true with respect to all creatures, that the Son comes to be. Arius is here again wanting to thwart any notion that there was an inner ontological compulsion or necessity within the being of God, as in any form of divine 'issuing' or 'emanation', for the Son to come forth. This would again imply both that there would be an inner necessity for God always to be the Father and that God would then be changed or compounded in this compulsory issuing forth of the Son.

18 *De Synodis*, 16.

19 *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 12.

20 All that follows can be found within the above quotations, though I will add at times further important supplementary and corroborative quotations.

21 *Contra Arianos*, 1.5.

22 *De Decretis*, 6.

23 *De Decretis*, 15.

24 *De Decretis*, 18.

Moreover, because the Son is originated or begotten, and thus for Arius created, he, like all created beings, was created out of nothing (creation *ex nihilo*). 'The Son came of nothing (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων).'²⁵ The Son's nature, therefore, is alien or foreign to the nature of the Father, and thus, as created, he is a different kind of being from the Father. Quoting from the *Thalia*, Athanasius writes: 'The *ousia* of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate in nature, estranged, disconnected, alien and devoid of participation in each other.'

And, in his own words: 'utterly unlike each other in *ousia* and glory, to an infinite degree.'²⁶

While God eternally possesses his own inner Wisdom and Word, the Son is called Wisdom and Word only derivatively in that he shares, in a created manner, in these divine attributes.²⁷ Moreover, in conformity with the above quotations, the Son is called Son or Word, and even God, only by way of allowance. 'The Word is not the very God;' but 'by participation of grace, he, as others, is God only in name.'²⁸ Or again:

The Word is not the Father's own; rather, the Word that is in God is one thing, while this one, the Lord, is a stranger and foreign to the *ousia* of the Father, and he is only called 'Word' conceptually (κατ' ἐπίνοιαν), and is not by nature or in truth Son of God. He too is called Son, by adoption, as a creature.²⁹

As a creature, then, the Son is subject to all created attributes such as change and alteration. Also, he is unable to comprehend the ineffable God.

The reason that God created the Son, the only being that he did himself directly create, and in so doing became Father, is for our sake. That is, the Son is the created instrument by and through which all else is created.

Again, they say that God did not create us for his sake, but him [the Son] for our sakes. For they say, 'God was alone, and the Word was not with him, but afterwards when he wished to produce us, then he made him, and from the time he was made he called him Word, and Son, and Wisdom, in order that he might create us by him'.³⁰

But why is it necessary for the Son to create all else? According to Athanasius, Arius and his followers argued that 'other creatures could not endure to be wrought by the absolute hand of the Unoriginate, and therefore the Son alone was brought into being by the Father alone, and other things by the Son as an underworker and assistant'.³¹

This is why Arius places the Son in his own unique 'time warp'. God 'begat an Only-begotten Son before eternal times, through whom he has made both the ages

25 *De Decretis*, 15. See R.P.C. Hanson 'Who Taught ΕΞ ΟΥΚ ΟΝΤΩΝ' in *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, R. Gregg (ed.), pp. 181–211 and G.S. Stead, 'The Word "From Nothing"', *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998): 671–84.

26 *Contra Arianos*, 1.6.

27 Besides the above quotations, see also *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 12.

28 *Contra Arianos*, 1.6.

29 *De Sententia Dionysii*, 23. See also 12.

30 *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 12.

31 *De Decretis*, 8. See also 7.

and the universe ... perfect offspring, but not as one of things begotten'.³² Being the sole creature created by the Father, the Son, for Arius, possesses a unique ontological status and thus an ensuing unique time frame. There was a 'when' when he was not in that he did not exist from all eternity; yet, he does not exist within the ordinary time frame of the rest of creation because he created all else with its own distinct time frame. Thus, the Son/Word acted as a distinct intermediate cosmological mediator bridging the ontological gulf between the wholly other eternal God who existed apart from all else and the time-bound created order.

I have attempted to outline, in a logical and orderly fashion, the presuppositions, arguments and conclusions of Arius' theology. However, there is still one further reason that demands that the Son must be a creature. It would appear from the historical evidence that it was not prominent from the onset of the controversy, but only explicitly came to the fore in the immediate aftermath of the Nicene doctrine that the Son was indeed truly God. Yet, it is hard to imagine, given all of his philosophical and theological presuppositions, that it did not influence Arius' and his allies' original thinking, that is, that the Son became flesh.³³

If the Son is truly God, as Nicea had proclaimed, 'how could he, being God, become man?'³⁴ For the Arians (Athanasius employs this term at this juncture) this was an impossible position. Firstly, the term 'become' in and of itself implies change, and since God is immutable, he could not 'become' man. While the term 'become' will need closer definition than it presently possessed, Athanasius accuses the Arians of supposing 'that by reason of the flesh he (the Son) changed and becomes other than what he was.'³⁵ Moreover, the very manner of the Son's human life conclusively manifested that he could not possibly be God.

How can the Son be from the Father by nature, and like him in *ousia*, who says, 'All power is given unto me ...' If he was, as you [Nicens] say, Son by nature, he had no need to receive but possessed it as a Son. Or how can he be the natural and true Power of the Father, who ... says 'Now is my soul troubled ...?' How can he be the Word of the Father, without whom the Father never was ... who said upon the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' If the Son were, according to your interpretation, eternally existent with God, he would not have been ignorant of the [last] day, but would have known it as Word; nor would he have been forsaken who was coexistent; nor would he have asked to receive glory, who had it from the Father; nor would he have prayed at all; for being the Word, he needed nothing. But since he is a creature and one of the things originated, therefore he spoke in this way, and needed what he did not have, for it is proper to creatures to require and need what they do not possess.³⁶

The heart of the problem is that human affections and weakness are predicated of the Son and as such they would be unbecoming of God – the cross being the greatest of all. 'How dare you say that he is the Word proper to the Father's *ousia*, who had

32 *De Synodis*, 17. See also *Contra Arianos*, 2.19.

33 See R.P.C. Hanson, 'The Arian Doctrine of the Incarnation', in *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, ed. R.C. Gregg, pp. 181–211.

34 *Contra Arianos*, 3.27.

35 *Contra Arianos*, 1.36.

36 *Contra Arianos*, 3.26.

a body, so as to endure all this.' In short, 'How can he be Word or God who slept as man, and wept, and inquired?'³⁷ According to Athanasius, the Arians 'deny the Eternity and Godhead of the Word in consequence of those human attributes which the Saviour took on him by reason of that flesh he bore'.³⁸

It was this complex but still very clear and logical position that confronted the Bishops as they gathered together, under the auspices of the Emperor Constantine, at his summer palace at Nicea in 325. The issue of faith is simply asked: Is the Son, while distinct from the Father, ontologically God in the same sense as the Father is ontologically God? If one answers this question of faith in the affirmative, as Nicea did, then more intricate and subtle theological questions ensue: How is it possible to say that God is one and the Son is God simultaneously? Can such a position be philosophically and theologically conceived and properly articulated? Unless and until these questions can be adequately addressed, rationally and logically, the affirmation of faith, even though it may be true, is deprived of its theological integrity and intellectual respect. Whether the Council of Nicea provided an adequate basis to address these questions, and more importantly for this study, whether Athanasius properly conceived and effectively articulated the Christian understanding of God as Father and Son is the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

The Nicene Creed

While questions concerning doctrine were traditionally addressed by marshalling the appropriate and proper array of scripture passages, this proved to be inadequate at the Council of Nicea.³⁹ Bishops sympathetic to Arius were all too willing to recite

37 *Contra Arianos*, 3.27.

38 *Contra Arianos*, 3.27.

Williams notes that for Arius 'the Word who is subject in the experiences of Jesus of Nazareth is a passible being, and therefore distinct from God. As a distinct individual, *hupostasis* or *ousia*, he is not a part of God, and could never have been "within" the life of God; he is dependent and subordinate' (*Arius*, pp. 176–7).

One of the other factors that may have also contributed, within Arian Christology, to the denial of the Son's deity was the absence of a 'human soul' within Christ. Thus the Son as such directly bore the entire brunt of the flesh's attributes. This would be a clear example of 'Logos/Sarx' Christology and very close to Apollinarius' Christology. Besides Hanson's article noted above, see also Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 238–48, and J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 281–4.

39 Athanasius refers to the Council of Nicea as an Ecumenical Council. See *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 5.

It should also be noted here that Hanson's thesis that there was no 'orthodox doctrine' prior to the Council of Nicea and that such an orthodox doctrine only came into existence during the course of ensuing controversy is utterly naïve. See *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. xviii, 95, 145, and 870. The theological conception and expression of the doctrine of the Trinity may not have fully matured prior to the Council, but to think that there was no consensus of faith as to what was to be believed is entirely false. The condemnations of the Gnostics, the Adoptionists, and the Modalists all bear witness to the fact that the Great Church believed that the one God was the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. G.L. Prestige is

scripture and to formulate a creed employing biblical terminology, such as saying that the Son was ‘the only begotten Son from Father’, or ‘like’ the Father, or always ‘with’ the Father, or ‘in’ the Father. Having already judged the Son to be ontologically a creature, they could easily manipulate and so interpret biblical concepts and terms in a manner in keeping with their previous judgment – ‘Yes, the Son is the only begotten Son of the Father and so like him in that only he was the perfect creature to be created by the Father.’ Thus the Council was forced to make distinctions that hitherto had not been clearly made, as well as to define the Son’s divinity in a manner that assured that he is God as the Father is God, and in so doing protect what was considered the authentic traditional reading and interpretation of the New Testament concerning the identity of Jesus as the Son and Word of God. In the light of this the Council decreed the following.

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible;
 And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance [being] with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead;
 And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, ‘There was when he was not’, and, ‘Before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing’, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic Church anathematizes.⁴⁰

The primary objective in commenting on this creed is to highlight those doctrinal aspects that Athanasius will exploit and interpret both in his defence of the Council and in his own refutation of the various Arian positions through the ensuing tumultuous decades that followed it.⁴¹

The Council, as did Arius, declared its belief in one God. However, and this will be essential in Athanasius’ own refutation, defence and exposition, the Council gives that one God the biblical name of ‘Father’. ‘Father’ principally and fundamentally

absolutely correct when he states that ‘The problem which the Fathers (at Nicea) had to solve was not whether He (the Son) was God, but how, within the monotheistic system which the Church inherited from the Jews, preserved in the Bible, and pertinaciously defended against the heathen, it was still possible to maintain the unity of God while insisting on the deity of one who was distinct from God the Father’ (*God in Patristic Thought* [London, 1952], p. 76). See also *ibid.*, p. 213.

While he does not give adequate recognition to Athanasius as the premier interpreter of the Council, yet for a very good study of the theological significance of Nicea and its contemporary theological importance, see L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*.

40 The basis of this translation is taken from J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 232.

41 As we will find though, many of Athanasius’ theological principles and teachings are already present and operational within his two part work, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, which we examined in the previous two chapters.

defines who the one God is and not some extra biblical philosophical concept such as 'Ungenerate' or even as 'ineffable'. The one God did not become Father; rather the one God is eternally the Father because that is who the one God eternally is.

The Creed next professes that this God who is Father is almighty and thus, contrary to Arius' position that God created through his created mediator – the Son, 'the maker of all things, visible and invisible'. God the Father is transcendent in the sense of being wholly other than all that he creates and so ontologically distinct from all of creation, but as being the creator of all, the Father is not infinitely remote from all that he created. Unlike Arius' view, there is no longer a cosmological gulf between God the Father and all else. Thus, Nicea secures that God the Father has an immediate relationship to the created realm as its Creator.

Having defined the one eternal God under the biblical rubric as 'the Father', the Council implicitly affirmed that the one eternal God was Father of the Son, for the one God would not be eternally Father if the Son were not also eternal. The very concept and name 'Father' inherently contains within it the relational notion of 'begetting' and so the existence of an eternal 'offspring'. The Council now proceeds to make explicit what is implicit in the affirmation of God as Father.

There is 'one Lord Jesus Christ' and he is 'the Son of God'. As there is one Father so there is only one Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the one Son of God. Now, this Son of God is 'begotten from the Father' as the 'only begotten' and what this means is that he is 'from the *ousia* of the Father'.⁴² What Nicea is here insisting upon, and will be accentuated in the *homoousion*, is that if the one God is ontologically in and of himself 'Father', he can be so only if the Son is equally ontologically the divine 'Son'. If the Son were not truly a divine 'Son', that is, ontologically God as the Father is God, then the Father, as God, would not be ontologically the Father. The very ontological nature of the one God is constituted by the one Father begetting – not from something other than himself but from within his very own substance as Father – the only begotten Son; the Father, in what he is ontologically, is the Father begetting the only begotten Son who must then be 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God'. If the Son were not such, then not only would he not be truly God, but neither would the Father be truly God. Rather, Arius' position would be affirmed in that 'fatherhood' is not eternally and ontologically constitutive of the very nature of the one God.

Prior to Nicea the concepts of *agenetos* and *agennetos* (unoriginated and unbegotten) and *genetos* and *gennetos* (originated and begotten) were largely thought to have similar meanings. While Christian theologians and Aristotelian and Platonic philosophers would want to hold that God is unoriginate, in that no other being caused

42 There is some difficulty in translating *ousia* into English, partly because various authors at the time meant different things by it. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series* translates it as 'essence', but this gives the impression of some abstract concept rather than a concrete reality. 'Substance' would be better, though this could give the impression of some material 'stuff'. I would prefer to translate it as 'being', but this may appear to be, though I think not, an anachronistic translation, so I have settled on leaving it untranslated. Athanasius, though, commenting on 'I Am Who Am', seems to agree with my theological instinct. 'For the *hypostasis* is the subsisting *ousia*; for it means subsisting (ἡ γὰρ ὑπόστασις καὶ ἡ οὐσία ὑπαρξίς ἐστιν. ἔστι γὰρ καὶ ὑπόρχει)' *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 4.

him to be, a problem ensues when Scripture and the Christian tradition designate the unoriginated Father as unbegotten and the Son as begotten. Does this demand that the Son is, therefore, originated and so a creature? Arius assumed so. He argued that, since the Son was begotten, he must be originated; God alone is the one eternal unoriginated and unbegotten being.

However, Nicea now inserts a very important distinction founded upon what it had previously affirmed. Because the Son is from the substance of the Father, and so is true God as the Father is true God, the Son is 'begotten and not made'. It is actually this distinction in conjunction with the Son being from the *ousia* of the Father that refutes Arius and equally becomes the hermeneutical key for interpreting the *homoousion*. What is clearly acknowledged here is that what is originated/made is always of a different nature, a different kind of being, than the originator/maker. However, what is begotten is always the same kind of being as the begetter. Bees make beehives, but beget bees. Ants make anthills, but beget ants. Human beings make houses, but beget human children. Thus, the Father creates the world, which ontologically differs in nature from himself, but he begets the Son who is ontologically the same nature as himself, that is, God. And this is precisely what Nicea, in the clause that immediately follows, states.

He who is the Son, begotten from the substance of the Father and so true God as the Father is true God, and therefore not made or originated as a creature, is *homoousion* (of one/same substance/being) with the Father. The non-scriptural '*homoousion*' is that controversial word and concept that was conscripted to secure the full divinity of the Son and so protect the right reading and interpretation of the New Testament faith. However, there has been, both in the past and present, much sophisticated and erudite discussion as to how the Fathers of the Council themselves defined and understood the word.⁴³ While we will examine how Athanasius understood and interpreted the concept shortly, here a few fundamental points of clarification and interpretation must be made.

There are two manners in which *homoousion* can be understood. The first is to conceive the Son as the same *ousia* as the Father in what might be called 'the generic' sense, that is, that the Father and the Son shared the same generic nature/substance as two copper coins share in the same common generic substance of copper. If it is understood in this manner, then, while the Father and the Son might be both equally God, there would be two Gods, just as there are two copper coins sharing the same substance of copper. This appears to have been the common understanding prior to Nicea, in that Paul of Samosata earlier on, and now most recently Arius, claimed that such a view demanded change and division within the Godhead. Arius would, by this reading, be vindicated in that there would be no way that one could say that God is one and that the Son is God simultaneously. Because of these historical precedents the common scholarly opinion is that this is what the majority of the Fathers held, not that they wanted to proclaim two divine entities, but that they simply wanted to uphold the

43 On the interpretation of *homoousios* besides the standard works on early Christian doctrine see: B. Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea*, pp. 88–104; G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, pp. 197–218; and G.C. Stead, 'The Significance of the *Homoousios*', *Studia Patristica* 3 (1961): 397–412.

full divinity of the Son without addressing the question of the divine unity.⁴⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, who provides a rather grudging endorsement of the Council's creed in his letter to his diocese, emphasises only that the Son is fully divine, and never addresses the question of divine unity.⁴⁵

The second option would be to understand *homoousion* as the Father and the Son being one and the same substance in the sense that they were one and the same being or entity – one and the same God. Scholars have tended to think that this interpretation is highly unlikely. However, in the light of the disorderly decades that were to come, it would seem that this may have been the common understanding precisely because the accusation levelled against the post-Nicene doctrine was not the early Arian charge of Ditheism but Sabellianism.⁴⁶ Such an accusation can only be mounted if this understanding of *homoousion* is maintained. Why so? If one were an Origenist bishop or theologian, which many were, or an Arian sympathizer and so conceived, as was the tradition, the Father embodying or constituting the whole of the Godhead, and then were confronted with Nicea's declaration that the Son is *homoousion* with the Father, it could very easily be alleged that what had been decreed was not simply that the Son is God as the Father is God, but that the Son is the Father since the Father alone defines and constitutes the one nature of God. This is specifically what the subsequent debate over the appropriateness of *homoousion* or *homoiousion* (of like substance/being) centred upon, for *homoiousion* was offered as a correction to Nicea so as to ensure the proper distinction between the Father and the Son.

However, while it is impossible to know how each individual Council father or multiple groupings of them interpreted *homoousion*, it is evident from the Creed as a whole that what it wished to affirm is both the distinction and unity within the divine nature. It is obvious that the Council recognized that the Father and the Son were distinct subjects, not in any concise philosophical sense, but merely in that they were different 'whos', and so possessed distinct identities. Thus, in declaring that the Son was *homoousios* with the Father, the Council was affirming not that they were two distinct entities (two gods), nor that they were one and the same 'who' (Sabellianism), but that they were one and the same being or entity – one and the same God. What Nicea had done, and it will fall to Athanasius to defend, clarify and interpret this proper understanding, is radically to reconceive the whole Christian understanding of God. No longer does the Father alone embody or constitute the one nature of God, but rather, since God is the Father, the one nature of God, what the one God is, is the Father begetting the Son. The Father begetting the Son is eternally, and so immutably and unalterably, constitutive of what the one God is. This not only undercuts Arius' seemingly impossible conundrum that God cannot be one and the

44 See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 233–7 and C.G. Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 191–266.

45 See *Epistola Eusebii*.

The reason why Eusebius 'grudgingly' endorsed Nicea was that he was himself quite sympathetic to Arius' position.

46 This accusation was spawned, or at least exacerbated, by such Sabellian defenders of Nicea as Marcellus of Ancyra. See Robertson, *Whoever Has Seen Me Has Seen the Father*, Chapter 2.

Son be God simultaneously, for now the one God is specifically the Father begetting the Son, but it also, and most importantly, is finally in full conformity with the scriptural proclamation – there is one God and the one God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (whom we will address later). The Nicene doctrine of the *homoousion* is one of the most important breakthroughs and one of the most significant insights in the whole history of Christian doctrine. How many of the fathers themselves realized its significance can not be answered, but, as we will shortly see, Athanasius, in the course of his long, ardent and passionate defence, did.

The Creed proceeds to affirm that the Son who is from the substance of the Father and thus who is one in being with the Father is the one ‘through whom’ the Father created ‘all things’. Again, this is significant for it defines that the Son is not a creature who becomes the intermediate creator of all else, but that the Father, who is God, immediately creates by none other than his Son, who is equally God. Thus the act of creation both distinguishes the Son as God, since he acts conjointly with the Father, and that, as God, he too, conjointly with the Father, is immediately related to the whole of creation. While there is an infinite ontological distinction between God as the Father and the Son and all else, there is not an infinite ontological chasm between God as the Father and the Son and all else.

The Son, who is God in the same sense that the Father is God, is also the one ‘who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.’ While the Council did not elaborate fully on the soteriological significance of the Son’s divinity, it did place it squarely within a soteriological context, for it is this same divine Son who became man and accomplished the work of salvation. As we will see, this becomes central to Athanasius’ defence of the Son’s divinity for he could only save us as man if he were truly divine.⁴⁷

Lastly, having merely made a nod to belief in the Holy Spirit, though giving him a distinct article along with the Father and the Son, and thereby implicitly attesting to the Spirit’s divinity, the fathers conclude with a series of anathemas all of which are framed in the negative. The majority of these deny the validity of Arius’ patented trademark axioms, and their purpose is not merely to condemn what was considered erroneous, but also to intensify the clarity of what was positively affirmed in the creed itself. Thus, to ensure that it is understood that the Son is eternally from the Father and not a creature, the Council condemns the notions that ‘there was when he was not’, or ‘before being born he was not’. Also, to enhance the notion that the Son is God in the same sense in which the Father is God, the Council denied that the Son ‘came into existence out of nothing’ and that he was ‘a different hypostasis or substance’,

47 The fact that Nicea states that the Son who is fully God is the same Son who becomes incarnate, suffers and dies is crucial to Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology and his understanding of the communication of idioms, that is, that it is precisely the divine Son who is born, suffers and dies as man. See Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Nestorium*, 2.3. Also see R.L. Wilken, ‘Tradition, Exegesis, and Christological Controversies’, *Church History* 34 (1965): 123–45; and T.G. Weinandy, ‘Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation’, in *The Theology of Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, eds. T.G. Weinandy and D.A. Keating (London, 2003) pp. 23–54.

from the Father. Such assertions would demand that he was 'created'. The fact that the fathers included the word 'hypostasis' along with 'substance' would cause some confusion and misunderstanding in that it was Origen's term for distinguishing the distinct identities of the Father and the Son. Moreover, Athanasius, as we will see, appears to possess no concept or word that encompasses or defines the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a common manner; this would further augment the later accusations that the Council had succumbed to Sabellianism, for now there is no shared word to distinguish conceptually the Father and the Son.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the mind of the Council was to endorse ardently the full divinity of the Son and his union with the Father, and any notion that would undermine such an understanding was to be avoided. Finally, to combat Arius' notion that the Son is a creature, the Council condemned the notion that the Son was subject 'to alteration and change'.

Athanasius' Defence and Interpretation of Nicea

While Athanasius' opposition to Arius and the Arian cause, following the Council of Nicea, varied over the course of the decades of political chaos and of shifting theological tides, the main thrust of his theological stance and arguments remained fundamentally resolute. Throughout, Athanasius knew, and so did his opponents know, what he was about, in season and out of season. Nonetheless, at certain junctures various arguments attain greater clarity and come to be expressed with more nuance, and particular issues and concepts take on more prominence, most specifically the significance and interpretation of *homoousion* in the context of the later *homoiousion* debate. We will attempt to note such developments, but our primary concern here is to examine and so come to grasp how Athanasius conceived and articulated the distinction and the unity between the Father and the Son. While throughout his pro-Nicene corpus, there is a consistency and logic, Athanasius, like most patristic authors, is not entirely, and sometimes hardly, systematic in his various presentations. As a good Thomist, I will attempt to bring some order to Athanasius' teaching, the hope being that, while somewhat artificial, some coherent presentation will be not only

48 Towards the end of the chaotic post-Nicene debates a Council was held in Alexandria in 362 under the patronage of Athanasius. There the question of the use and meaning of *hypostasis* in relationship to *ousia* was discussed. It was decided that what was ultimately important was the meaning of the words and not the words themselves. To say that there were 'three *hypostases*' was accepted as long as this meant that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were unambiguously distinct in their own identities (*contra* Sabellianism) and did not mean that they were three distinct beings, the Son and the Holy Spirit being creatures (*contra* Arianism). Moreover, it agreed that 'one hypostasis' was equally legitimate if this, again, did not carry with it Sabellian implications. Nonetheless, all participating members agreed 'together that the faith confessed by the Fathers at Nicea is better than the said phrases, and that for the future they would prefer to be content to use its language' (*Tomus Ad Antiochenos*, 6; see also 5 and 11). This will be more fully discussed in Chapter Six. The distinction and clarity of language and concepts (*hypostasis* and *ousia*) becomes fully clarified and established with the Cappadocians.

beneficial to the reader, but advantageous to the furthering of Athanasius' thought as well.⁴⁹

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that the biblical nature of Athanasius' response to the Arian crisis is evident from the onset.⁵⁰ Athanasius is well aware of the philosophical issues involved; yet these will be addressed primarily from within a biblical context. It is to the Bible primarily that he turns to oppose the Arian position and to defend and expound what he considers the orthodox faith, and thus much of his argumentation focuses and converges on the right reading and proper exegesis of biblical passages and concepts.⁵¹ With this in mind we now proceed to Athanasius' teaching.

Athanasius is thoroughly biblical in his response to Arianism and in his defence of Nicea. The whole of his *Contra Arianos*, for example, is structured around the disputed scriptural passages, and so these become the chief organizing principle of his work. In this light, as with Nicea and in keeping with what he wrote in *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius centres his argument on the biblical notion of 'the Father' and its inherent implications. Unlike Arius, Athanasius emphatically affirms that the Father was eternally the Father; thus fatherhood radically defines the nature of the one God. Moreover, if the one God is eternally the Father, then the one God is eternally the Father of the Son, for the Father would not himself be eternally the Father if he were not eternally Father of the Son. Thus one finds Athanasius

49 Besides the standard works on early Christian doctrine, see also the following for studies of Athanasius' understanding of the Father and the Son. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, pp. 85–163; E.P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden, 1968); E.P. Meijering, 'Athanasius on the Father as the Origin of the Son', in *God Being History: Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 89–102; Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 136–83; G.L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London, 1968), pp. 67–93; T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 192–232; T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London, 1975), pp. 215–66; T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 110–45; T.F. Torrance, 'The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St. Athanasius', *Anglican Theological Review* 71 (1989): 395–405; and P. Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 145–222.

50 Hanson states that 'the main and paramount source of his doctrine is the Bible' (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 422). However, he also makes the tendentious statement that, 'during this crucial period of the history of Christian doctrine,' those 'expounders of the text of the Bible are incompetent and ill-prepared to expound it' (p. 848). For a more positive assessment of Athanasius' use of Scripture, see T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 229–88. See also T.E. Pollard, 'The Exegesis of Scripture and the Arian Controversy', *Bulletin of John Rylands University Library Manchester* 41 (1959): 414–29 and C. Kannengiesser, 'The Bible in Arian Crisis' in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. and trans. by P.M. Blowers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 217–28..

51 Ayres makes the important point that for all the fourth century Fathers 'the language of Scripture is taken as the primary and most trustworthy language for Christians developing their account of the world, and the importation of philosophical themes and technical language is conceived not as a necessary *transposition* of ideas, but as an *elucidation* of the text of Scripture' (*Nicaea and its Legacy*, p. 277). See also *ibid.*, pp. 3 and 38.

repeatedly making such statements as the following. ‘Since Father is always, so is his Word’ for ‘how can he speak truth concerning the Father, who denies the Son.’⁵² Unlike men, who become fathers in time, ‘God, in that he always is, is always Father of the Son’.⁵³ Because the Son is inseparable from the Father ‘never was there when he was not (οὐκ ἦν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), but he was always; and being the Father’s Image and Radiance, he has the Father’s eternity’.⁵⁴ Ultimately, for Athanasius, the Arians are ignorant for ‘neither is the Father, *qua* Father, separated from the Son, – for the name speaks of the relationship, – nor is the Son expatriated from the Father. For the title Father denotes the common bond.’⁵⁵ The simple truth that Athanasius is emphatically confirming is that ‘when we call God Father, at once with the Father we signify the Son’s existence’.⁵⁶

Thus, while Athanasius grants that ‘Unoriginate’ is an excellent concept in that it authentically contrasts God’s eternal self-existing being to that of the originate and dependent being of creatures, yet that is equally the difficulty. ‘As the word “Unoriginate” is specified relative to things originate, so the word “Father” is indicative of the Son ... [And therefore] he who calls God Father, thereby conceives and contemplates the Son ...’⁵⁷ Moreover, to claim that the Son is ‘originate’ not only dishonours him, but also ‘dishonours the Father’, for to deny that the Son is inherently divine is to deny that the Father is inherently divine, for now ‘fatherhood’ is merely a descriptive attribute predicated of him solely in relationship to what is created and not the essential defining characteristic that intrinsically identifies who God is. ‘Therefore it is more pious and truthful to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him solely from his works and call him Unoriginate ... [For] the title Father has its significance and bearing only from the Son.’⁵⁸

In this context Athanasius notes that Christian prayer and worship testifies to the primacy of calling God Father and so the primacy of the Son as well. While ‘Unoriginate’ is non-scriptural and from the Greeks, ‘who know not the Son’, it is the Son himself who taught Christians to pray not to ‘God Unoriginate’ but to ‘Our Father’.

52 *Contra Arianos*, 2.56 and 1.8. See also 1.11.

53 *De Decretis*, 12. See also *Contra Arianos*, 1.21 and 2.41.

54 *Contra Arianos*, 3. 28. See also 2.57.

55 *De Sententia Dionysii*, 17.

56 *Contra Arianos*, 3.6.

Because Athanasius holds that the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and thus that the Son is equally eternal, he was very distrustful and suspicious within the later debates and ‘Arian’ Councils about referring to the Son existing ‘before all ages’ or ‘begotten before all ages from the Father’. In the light of Arius’ teaching that the Son was first created by the Father and then the Son created all else, each abiding in their own unique time frame, to profess the above could still mean, and very likely did, that the Son was not eternal, but merely existed before all the other created ages. See *De Synodis*, 17–32. .

57 *Contra Arianos*, 1.33.

Athanasius notes here that if God is named primarily by his works and so known principally as Unoriginated, then the Christian knowledge of God is no better than that of the Greeks. Christians possess a fuller and truer knowledge of God precisely because they know him as Father through the Son.

58 *Contra Arianos*, 1.34. Athanasius makes the same point in *De Decretis*, 31.

Moreover, he commanded that we baptize ‘not into the name of the Unoriginate and Originate, nor into the name of the Uncreated and the Created, but into the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for with such an initiation we too are truly made sons; and using the name of the Father, we acknowledge from that name the Word in the Father’.⁵⁹

There follows then, for Athanasius, an extremely important implication – the Father must then be eternally perfect as Father, and thus the Son, as the Father’s Word and Wisdom, must eternally co-exist with the Father as radiance must by necessity accompany light and as water must by necessity spring forth from a fountain.⁶⁰ If the Son is not then truly and perfectly divine as the Father, the Father would not be truly and perfectly the Father. Only if the Father eternally is the Father of the Son is the Father perfectly the eternal Father.

For the *ousia* of the Father was never imperfect, that what is proper to it should be added later; nor has the Son been begotten as man from man, so as to be later than his Father’s existence. But he is God’s offspring, and as being proper Son of God – who always is – he exists eternally. For whereas it is proper to men, on account of the imperfection of their nature, to beget in time, God’s offspring is eternal, for his nature is ever perfect.⁶¹

In the light of the inherent eternal divine bond between the Father and the Son, as the relationally of their names signify, Athanasius, again in consort with Nicea, clearly distinguishes between ‘begetting’ and ‘making’ and in so doing further clarifies God as Unoriginate and creatures as originate.⁶² There can only be one being who is Unoriginate, that is, God; yet if the Arians insist that the Son must therefore be a creature, ‘then they must constantly be told that the Son as well as the Father must in this sense be called unoriginate.’ However, if by ‘unoriginate’ is meant ‘unbegotten’,

⁵⁹ *De Decretis*, 31. Athanasius’ point here is of contemporary relevance. Those who propose, for the sake of gender equality, that Christians speak of God as the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier are again, like Arius, attributing to God descriptive names that bear solely upon his relationship with the created order and not names that substantially define him as he is in himself. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in contrast, substantially define God’s very nature and being even apart from any relationship to the created order. While the Father created us, the Son redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, they did so precisely so that we could be united to them as they are, and thus Christians are baptised ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ and not merely in the name of attributes that pertain solely to the salvific economy.

⁶⁰ See *Contra Arianos*, 1.11–12, 19, 25 and 2.34–36, 40. Also *De Decretis* 12.

⁶¹ *Contra Arianos*, 1.14.

The point Athanasius is making is again important for contemporary theology. Some contemporary theologians propose that Jesus is son only in the sense that he is the myth, metaphor or symbol of God and so reveals, as son, the Father. However, as Athanasius would remind them, if the Son is not ontologically God, then God is not ontologically Father. Or to phrase it somewhat differently, if Jesus, as son, is merely son in an epistemological sense, that is, as the one who points to God as Father, then there is actually no Father to point to, for the Father is ontologically Father only if the Son is ontologically God. Jesus, as Son, actually reveals the Father because both he and the Father are ontologically God as Father and Son.

⁶² See *Contra Arianos*, 2.4–5.

then 'in this sense there is only one, namely the Father'.⁶³ For Athanasius, the Father and Son, in so far as they are the one God, are both Unoriginated, but only the Father is Unbegotten, while the Son is eternally, and so unoriginately, begotten of the Father. Only creatures, unlike the begotten Son, are originated. Moreover, as human beings are not said to beget a house or a ship, but other human beings, so the Father is not said to beget the world, but to beget a Son, and as houses and ships are of a different nature to the human maker and as human beings are of the same nature as human begetters, so creation is of a different nature to the Father as Creator and the Son is of the same nature as the Father as Begetter. However, unlike human or creaturely begetting where what is begotten comes to exist as a distinct entity separate from the begetters, the Son, in being begotten of the Father, does not come to exist 'externally' from the Father, that is, as a distinct entity from the Father.⁶⁴ At this juncture we must examine how Athanasius conceives the divine 'begetting'.

Founded upon the scriptural and theological principles that 'Father' presupposes a 'Son' and vice-versa, and therefore that the Son is begotten of the Father and not made, Athanasius emphasizes that the Son is begotten 'from the *ousia* of the Father'.⁶⁵ In *Contra Arianos*, with almost cadenced regularity, Athanasius accentuates that, while creatures are made and thus they differ in kind, that is, differ in *ousia* from the Father, the Son, as Word and Wisdom, is not external to the Father in that he, unlike creatures, does not differ in kind or *ousia* from him, but 'is ever the proper offspring of the Father's *ousia*'.⁶⁶ Therefore, the Son is 'not foreign but proper to the Father's *ousia*'.⁶⁷ Even when he is defending the Nicene *homoousion*, his basis for doing so is the Council's prior claim that the Son is 'from the *ousia* of the Father'. Athanasius notes that the Council did not state that the Son was 'from the Father' because everything is ultimately from the Father, including creatures. Rather, 'on this account did the Holy Council declare expressly that he was of the *ousia* of the Father, that we might believe the Word to be other than the nature of things originate, being alone truly from God.'⁶⁸ The heart of 'begetting' then, for Athanasius, is the notion that the Son is from and so shares equally in the Father's *ousia*.

In almost all of these passages the appended phrase 'proper offspring', or something similar, immediately precedes 'from the *ousia* of the Father'. Here Athanasius is again highlighting the fact that the Son is not a creature and so an 'improper' offspring in that he differs in *ousia* from the Father, but rather that the Son, as 'proper offspring', shares the Father's very nature or *ousia* and so he is 'true God' (ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεός).⁶⁹

63 *Contra Arianos*, 1.31. See also 1.32., *De Synodis*, 46 and *De Decretis*, 28–30.

64 See *De Decretis*, 13.

See P. Christou, 'Uncreated and Created, Unbegotten and Begotten in the Theology of Athanasius of Alexandria', *Augustinianum* 13 (1973): 399–409.

65 This is Athanasius' normal manner for expressing the full divinity of the Son and his oneness with the Father until he takes up the defence of Nicea's employment of the term *homoousion*, at which point its meaning will be founded upon, interpreted within, and used to re-enforce the truth that the Son is from the *ousia* of the Father.

66 *Contra Arianos*, 1.29. See also 2.22, 24, 57, 82; 3.16–17 and 63.

67 *Contra Arianos*, 2.32.

68 *De Decretis*, 19. See also *De Synodis*, 35–36.

69 *Contra Arianos*, 3.19.

‘Proper offspring’ accentuates, for Athanasius, that the ‘begetting’ terminates in the Son being of the Father’s very own *ousia*. Since the Son is from the *ousia* of the Father, that *ousia* is proper to him as offspring, ‘for it is all one to say that God is wholly participated’ and therefore he ‘has the real and true identity of nature with the Father’.⁷⁰

This identity is why Athanasius emphatically insists that, in contradistinction to the Arians who claim that the Son came to be by the will of the Father and therefore was originated and so a creature, the Son as offspring ‘is not subject to will, but is proper to the *ousia*.’⁷¹ Athanasius is here defending both the divine ontological status of the ‘begetting’ and, therefore, the divine ontological status of the Father and the Son. If the Son came forth by the will of the Father, then fatherhood would not define the very nature of God as God eternally is, rather fatherhood would be attributed to God only in so far as he decided to create a son. Athanasius clearly states that ‘in saying “God” and naming “Father”, we name nothing as if about him, but signify his *ousia* itself’.⁷² God as Father is Father only if that is what he eternally is, but to be the Father eternally he must, by his very ontological nature as a Father, beget the Son. For Athanasius, if God is good by nature and not something that he becomes, then ‘much more is he, and more truly, Father of the Son by nature and not by will’.⁷³

Athanasius, consequently, asserts the participatory nature of the ‘begetting’ which terminates in the coinherence of the Father and Son, that is, that the Son is fully in the Father and the Father is fully in the Son. As the term ‘Father’ necessitates ‘Son’ as light necessitates radiance and a fountain necessitates water, so these same metaphors demonstrate that the Father and the Son share the same nature and so actually coinhere.

For the Son is in the Father ... because the whole being of the Son is proper to the Father’s *ousia*, as radiance from light and a stream from a fountain; so that whosoever sees the Son, sees what is proper to the Father and knows that the Son’s being, as from the Father, is the Father and is therefore in the Father. For the Father is in the Son, since the Son is what is from the Father and proper to him, as there is in the radiance the sun, and in the word the thought, and in the stream the fountain: for whoso thus contemplates the Son, contemplates what is proper to the Father’s *ousia*, and knows that the Father is in the Son.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ *Contra Arianos*, 3.22 and 1.16. See Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, pp. 102–9; A. Louth, ‘The use of the term ἰδιος in Alexandrian Theology from Alexander to Cyril’, *Studia Patristica* 19 (1989): 198–202; Pettersen, *Athanasius*, pp. 145–6.

⁷¹ *Contra Arianos*, 1.29. See also 1.20.

⁷² *De Decretis*, 22.

⁷³ *Contra Arianos*, 3.62. See also 3.59 and 61. What Athanasius says should not be misunderstood. Since the Father is by nature ontologically Father, he must by nature ontologically beget a Son who is equally ontologically God. However, the point that Athanasius misses is that since the Father is eternally ontologically the Father by nature, he eternally ontologically wills to beget a Son, because he eternally ontologically wills to be who he is – the Father of the Son.

⁷⁴ *Contra Arianos*, 3.3. See also 2.35 and 3.59. Unlike today, when all material comparisons with God are seen to be suspect or misleading, if not even erroneous, Athanasius is not only fearless in employing them, but perceives them as central to his arguments. This is especially true of the simile of the Son being the radiance of the Father, which he employs

Because of this coinherence, the Father and the Son manifest ‘the identity of Godhead and the unity of *ousia*’.⁷⁵ Seeing that the Son is coexistent with the Father, he ‘is the fullness of his Godhead’.⁷⁶ Or similarly: ‘The fullness of the Father’s Godhead is the being of the Son, and the Son is the whole God.’⁷⁷ The Son possesses, therefore, a ‘natural unity with the Father’ for they are ‘one in propriety and peculiarity of nature, and in the identity of the one Godhead’.⁷⁸ Even without employing the concept of *homoousion*, Athanasius finds no difficulty in asserting that the Father and the Son are the one God. ‘The Word of God is one, being the only Son proper and genuine from his *ousia*, and having indivisibly with his Father the oneness of Godhead.’⁷⁹ Because the Son is different in kind from originated creatures, ‘he is proper to the Father’s *ousia* and one in nature with it’.⁸⁰ Moreover, Athanasius asserts that, since the Son reigns with the Father, ‘the Godhead of the Father is the same as the Son’s’, and therefore ‘whoso beholds the Son, beholds the Father; thus there is one God’.⁸¹ Equally, because the Son is proper to the Father’s *ousia*, Christians believe ‘in one God’ and this is witnessed again within Christian worship. ‘He who worships and

constantly throughout his writings. He does so for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is biblical in origin. Exodus speaks of ‘the glory of the Lord’ (Ex. 24:16). The book of Wisdom states that ‘Wisdom is radiant and unfading’ (Ws. 6:12), ‘for she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness’ (Ws. 7:26). Moreover, the Letter to the Hebrews states that the Son ‘reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature’ (Heb. 1:3). Jesus is also transfigured in light (see Mk. 9:2–8 and parallels). This biblical data allowed Athanasius to argue that the Son, as the radiance of the Father, was from the Father, eternal with the Father, of the same *ousia* as the Father, thus one with the Father, and, therefore, the perfect image of the Father. It also allowed him to maintain the distinction between the Son and the Father since the Son was ‘the radiance’ of the Father’s glory and so the Father is the source of the Son’s radiance. Secondly, this in turn, allowed him to interpret the Nicene proclamation that the Son, being from the *ousia* of the Father, was ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’. The Son was ‘the Light’ from the Father, who is Light and so he is ‘God from God’ and therefore ‘true God from true God’, again maintaining both the ontological oneness of the Father and the Son as well as their distinct identities.

It is not possible to list all of the references to Athanasius’ use of the simile of the Son being the radiance of God, but see *De Decretis*, 12, 23–24, *De Sententia Dionysii*, 15, 22, 52, and *Contra Arianos*, 1.27–28, 2.33–36, 41 and 3.6, 9.

Athanasius employs, though not nearly as often, ‘the stream from the fountain’ in a similar manner. See *De Decretis*, 12, *De Sententia Dionysii*, 19, 24, *Contra Arianos*, 1.27.

For Athanasius’ understanding of how scripture should be interpreted and the use of similes see *Contra Arianos*, 3.18.

75 *Contra Arianos*, 3.4. See also 3.6, 20.

76 *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 16.

77 *Contra Arianos*, 3.6.

78 *Contra Arianos*, 3.20 and 3.4.

79 *Contra Arianos*, 2.41.

80 *Contra Arianos*, 1.58.

What is striking here is that Athanasius can speak of ‘one nature’ without employing the term *homoousion*.

81 *Contra Arianos*, 1.61.

honours the Son, in the Son worships and honours the Father; for the Godhead is one.⁸²

Not surprisingly, since ‘the Godhead of the Son is the Father’s’ and so ‘the Godhead is one’, Athanasius concludes that ‘the same things are said of the Son, which are said of the Father, except his being said to be Father’.⁸³ On at least three occasions Athanasius confirms this by marshalling an array of scripture passages which manifest that the Father and Son share the same attributes. Athanasius states that the Son is not only God, but also ‘Almighty’, ‘Lord’, ‘Light’, ‘Forgiver of sins’, for ultimately, being God as the Father is God, the Son possesses all that is the Father’s.⁸⁴ Beautifully and simply put – ‘The Son is the Father’s All.’⁸⁵

In all of the above a very subtle but important point could escape notice. In professing, in accordance with Nicea, that the Son, as begotten, is from the *ousia* of the Father, Athanasius is emphasizing not merely the term ‘*ousia*’ and so asserting that the Son *is God*, but equally the phrase ‘of the Father’, and so accentuating that

82 *Contra Arianos*, 3.6. See also 2.23.

83 *Contra Arianos*, 3.4.

In *De Synodis* Athanasius similarly states: ‘In a word, all that you find said of the Father, so much will you find said of the Son, except his being Father’ (49).

84 *Contra Arianos*, 3.4. Athanasius argues in a similar fashion concerning the titles ‘Lord’, ‘King’ and ‘the Giver’ of the Spirit in *Contra Arianos*, 2.17–18. See also *De Synodis*, 49 and *In Illud Omnia*. 4. The last is a short commentary on Luke 10:22 (Matthew 11:27) probably written before 342.

For Athanasius, the Son is, then, ‘the perfect image’ of the Father because he is from the *ousia* of the Father, sharing in the one Godhead, and thus possesses all of the divine attributes of the Father. As ‘the perfect image’ of the Father, the Son must be unalterable in all his divine perfections as is the Father. ‘Image’, when applied to the Son, thus denotes ontological exactness in that the Son as Son is the divine ontological image of the Father as Father. For Athanasius, if the Son were not ontologically the unalterable divine perfect image of the Father, then Jesus’ words that ‘He who sees me sees the Father’ (Jn. 14:9) would not be true. For, if the Son were not ontologically the exact image of the Father, then he would not be ontologically the divine Son and then the Father would not be ontologically the Father. The Son is the perfect image of the Father because the Father is perfectly Father. This is a radically different notion from that of the Arians, who would hold that, since the Son is the image of the Father, he possesses merely a likeness or similarity to the Father, similar to the manner in which human beings are like God. As a result of this view, the Son is a creature even though he is an image of the Father. Of course, for Arius, God is not eternally ontologically ‘Father’ but only becomes so in creating a son who, as a creature, is like him, and thus neither ‘Father’ or ‘Son’ identify and so define the being of God as such, but are merely descriptive or illustrative predicates attributed to them. See *Contra Arianos*, 1.21, 35–36, 2.35, 3.10–11, *De Decretis*, 17 and *De Synodis*, 38.

Robertson has an excellent treatment of this in his *Whoever Has Seen Me Has Seen the Father*, Chapter 3.

85 *Contra Arianos*, 3.67. See also 2.18. Because the Son shares in the all the Father’s attributes, Athanasius, in refutation of the Arians, argues that, Jesus’ words, spoken as the divine Word and so perfect image, are exact in that no one knows the Father but the Son (see Mth. 11:27) for ‘the Word is different from all things originate, in that he alone knows and alone sees the Father (see Jn. 6:46)’. Thus, the Son knows the Father perfectly and, equally then, is omniscient.

the Son *is Son* and the Father *is Father*. The Son is not ‘from the *ousia* of God’ as if there were some generic divine ‘*ousia*’ that both the Father and the Son together shared. Rather, the very *ousia* of the Father denotes that what the Father is, his *ousia*, is to be Father. This is precisely why the Son is Son, for he is from the Father’s *ousia* and being from that *ousia* he is by necessity the Son. Also, this is why he is the perfect image. Being begotten of the Father as the Father is, the Son is the perfect image of the Father as the Father is. This harks back to Athanasius’ insistence that the Father is eternally perfect as Father. The Father, in his very *ousia*, is eternally perfect as Father and therefore, to be eternally perfect as Father, the Son must eternally be ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’ and so be eternally the perfect Son, thus constituting the Father as Father. Eternally being ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’ is what, for Athanasius, makes the Father eternally the perfect Father and makes the Son the eternally perfect Son.

Defending and Interpreting the *Homoousion*

It is at this juncture that we can examine how Athanasius defends and interprets the Nicene *homoousion*.⁸⁶ It is often noted that prior to 350, in his three discourses against the Arians, Athanasius only once employs the term *homoousios*. There he states that the Son ‘is very God, existing *homoousios* with the very Father’.⁸⁷ There is at least one instance, as noted above, where it would have seemed natural for him to employ the term, but instead he states that the Son ‘is proper to the Father’s *ousia* and one in nature with it (τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας ἰδιοῦ καὶ ὁμοφυῆς)’.⁸⁸ The question arises as to why the concept of *homoousion* did not play a more significant role within Athanasius’ initial defence and interpretation of the Nicene proclamation. Tentatively, there could be three related reasons for this.

Firstly, as the above examination abundantly demonstrated, Athanasius’ primary arguments rested upon the biblical notions of ‘Father’ and ‘Son’. To his mind the oneness of the Godhead is principally and foundationally established in the proper perception that God is ontologically the Father and thus the Son is ontologically God, and thus the one God is the Father begetting the Son. Secondly, this demanded that the Son be the proper offspring of the Father and therefore he is from and so shares fully in the Father’s *ousia* as the begotten Son. Athanasius probably felt that he did not need to have recourse to the concept of *homoousion* because he believed that the biblical basis of his arguments were more than adequate in themselves. Thirdly, since his teaching is so biblically based, Athanasius, in the light of the Nicene debate over utilizing such a term, may have been reticent himself to exploit a non-scriptural concept to bolster his cause.

It was the later assertions against the use of *homoousios* that compelled Athanasius to defend it and so properly interpret it. Four charges were laid against it: 1. it was non-biblical; 2. it was condemned at the Council of Antioch in 268; 3. it demanded that there be two gods (the exact opposite); 4. it articulated a form of Sabellianism.

⁸⁶ See L. Ayres excellent article, ‘Athanasius’ Initial Defence of the term Ὁμοούσιος: Rereading the *De Decretis*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12/3 (2004): 337–59.

⁸⁷ *Contra Arianos*, 1.9.

⁸⁸ *Contra Arianos*, 1.58.

What becomes evident, as we will see, is that Athanasius became acutely aware within the ensuing debate that the *homoousion* was absolutely essential for sustaining the Nicene declaration and for confirming his own biblically founded arguments in its defence and interpretation.

As to the charge that the *homoousion* is non-scriptural, Athanasius accuses the Arians of being hypocritically inconsistent since they themselves invented and employed all sorts of non-biblical words and phrases, such as, 'Ungenerate' and 'there was a time when he was not'; 'Whereas the definition of the Council against them, if accurately examined, will be found to be altogether a representation of the truth.'⁸⁹ In fact, Athanasius asserts, it was precisely because the Arians were devilishly 'whispering' to and 'winking' at one another during the Council's proceedings upon hearing such words and phrases as 'always', 'like' and 'in him', knowing that they could give meaning to these to suit their own devious theological purpose, that the Fathers of Nicea were 'compelled on their part to collect the sense of the Scriptures, and to re-say and re-write what they had said before, more distinctly still, namely, that the Son is "*homoousios*" with the Father'.⁹⁰ So, for Athanasius, if the Arians employ non-scriptural words improperly, he and the Council are more than justified to employ a non-scriptural word in order to interpret scripture properly. Thus, 'even if [Nicea's] expressions are not in so many words in the Scriptures, yet ... they contain the sense of the Scriptures, and expressing it, they convey it to those who have their hearing unimpaired for religious doctrine'.⁹¹

In discussing the other three accusations, Athanasius proceeds to define the proper understanding of Nicea's *homoousion* and in so doing exposes the fallacies of the various allegations. With regards to the Council of Antioch condemning the use of *homoousios*, Athanasius first notes that it is unbecoming to pit one Council against another, 'for all are fathers'.⁹² Therefore, 'if the fathers of the two Councils made different mention of the *homoousion*, we ought not in any respect to differ from them, but to investigate their meaning, and this will fully show us the agreement of both of the Councils'.⁹³ In condemning Paul of Samosata the Council of Antioch understood the *homoousion* in a material sense because Paul himself said that if one did declare that the Son was *homoousios* with the Father this would divide the Godhead, as if it were material, into separate natures or entities. One would then profess a plurality of deities. Thus, the fathers at Antioch, wanting to guard against such an understanding, 'said with good reason, that Christ was not *homoousios*'. However, this was not the meaning given to the concept at the Council of Nicea. There the Council fathers rightly understood that the *homoousion*, when properly applied to God, and therefore in an immaterial manner, accurately perceived that the Son was of the Father's *ousia* and therefore was 'not of different nature, as we are, and separate from the Father, but that, as being from him, he exists as Son indivisible, as radiance is with respect

89 *De Decretis*, 18.

90 *De Decretis*, 20. See also *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 5–6.

For the Arian misuse of Scripture see *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 1–4.

91 *De Decretis*, 21. See also *De Sententia Dionysii*, 18 and *De Synodis*, 39.

92 *De Synodis* 43.

93 *De Synodis*, 45.

to light'.⁹⁴ For Athanasius, then, *homoousios*, in accordance with Nicea, must now be interpreted as expressing both the fullness of the Son's divinity as well as his oneness with the Father precisely because he is of the same *ousia* or being as the Father.

Moreover, as the above shows, since the *homoousion* must be understood in an immaterial manner when applied to God, this would refute the third Arian accusation of two Gods as well. From the onset of the debate Arius and his sympathizers denied that 'the Son is the proper offspring of the Father's *ousia*, on the ground that this must imply parts and divisions'. Already in *Contra Arianos* Athanasius considered this a grievous error, for to do so is 'to have material thoughts about what is immaterial'.⁹⁵ The Father's deity is not some material 'stuff' out of which the Son emanates and so becomes severed from him.⁹⁶ Because the Son is of the very *ousia* of the Father, 'the begetting' does not 'imply affection or division of God's *ousia*' for it is from within that very *ousia* of the Father, from what the Father actually is as Father, that the Son is begotten.⁹⁷ Alteration and mutation are incompatible with God, 'for he is not composed of parts, but being impassible and simple, he is impassibly and indivisibly the Father of the Son'.⁹⁸ Later, in his defence of the Nicene *homoousion*, Athanasius similarly argued that even as the human word is not begotten by passion or partition, so the Son is 'the Father's Word, from which may be understood the impassible and impartitive nature of the Father'.⁹⁹ Thus when we hear the term *homoousios*, we should not think in a material manner and 'imagine partitions and divisions of the Godhead, but, as having our thoughts directed to things immaterial, let us preserve undivided the oneness of nature'.¹⁰⁰

This is at the heart of Athanasius' entire conception of God. The 'begetting' is not by way of movement or alteration as if God changed from being simply God to being Father of the Son, and so was altered and mutated. Rather what the one God unalterably and eternally is, is the Father begetting the Son. The very 'begetting' of the Son by the Father defines the reality or being of the one God. Again, as radiance from the sun does not sever the sun's *ousia* by way of division, so 'we understand in like manner that the Son is begotten not from without but from the Father'.¹⁰¹ For Athanasius, the very nature of the Father demands that he be unalterably the Father of the Son.¹⁰²

Athanasius grasped and so properly defended and interpreted Nicea's historic and momentous insight with regards to '*homoousion*', and in so doing vigorously fostered and advanced a radically reconceived understanding of the Christian God. The Father, as God, does not alone or singularly constitute the whole of the Godhead, as was the almost universal conception prior to the Council. Rather, since what the one God is, is being the Father, the one God must then be the Father begetting the Son otherwise,

94 *De Synodis*, 45.

95 *Contra Arianos*, 1.15. See also 3.1; *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 16 and *De Synodis*, 51.

96 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.21.

97 *Contra Arianos*, 1.16.

98 *Contra Arianos*, 1.28.

99 *De Decretis*, 11. See also *De Synodis*, 41.

100 *De Decretis*, 24.

101 *Contra Arianos*, 2.33.

102 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.22 and *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 8.

God would not be the Father. However, for Athanasius, both the Father and the Son are the one God, the Son being of the same *ousia*/being as the Father.¹⁰³

What then does one make of the suspicion of Sabellianism? It is well known that, while early on Athanasius spoke of three *hypostases*, as the controversy intensified he no longer did so, more than likely out of deference to Nicea's condemnation.¹⁰⁴ Even though he does not utilize a common word or concept, such as *hypostasis*, for defining the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a term which would become common with the Cappadocians, Athanasius does indicate that their own distinct biblical designations

103 Prestige states that Nicea proclaimed that 'the word God connotes precisely the same truth when you speak of God the Father as it does when you speak of God the Son. ... But Athanasius went farther. It must imply, he perceived, not only the same truth about God, but also the same actual God, the same being' (*Fathers and Heretics*, p.89).

See also Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 124.

While the Cappadocians will clarify and so properly distinguish the concepts of hypostasis and *ousia* and so argue that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three hypostases 'in' one *ousia*, I am not entirely convinced that they fully appreciated, as did Athanasius, Nicea's declaration that the one God is the Father begetting the Son. Rather, when they came to explain in what manner the persons of the Trinity were the one God, they tended to do so in an Origenist fashion. They continued to consider the Father as solely constituting the Godhead and the Son and the Holy Spirit coming forth from him. This is why, it seems to me, Basil the Great was sympathetic to the homoiousion. Thus the Son proceeds out from the Father and the Spirit proceeds out from the Father through the Son in a linear manner. Many Eastern theologians, past and present, continue to conceive of the Trinity in this manner, having never fully recognized the momentous and radical reconception of the Trinity that took place at Nicea. For an example of a contemporary Eastern theologian, see J.D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London, 1985) and 'The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution', in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. C. Schwöbel (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 44–60. For a critique of Zizioulas, see T.G. Weinandy, 'Zizioulas: The Trinity and Ecumenism', *New Blackfriars* 83 (2002): 407–15.

R. Cross would appear to agree, on the whole, with my assessment. He argues that there are two manners in which the Fathers understood the Nicene *homoousios*. The first is what he calls the 'generic' understanding which conceives the one divine substance as 'identically the same in all three persons or hypostases'. The second is that of the 'derivation' model, where the Father solely possesses the one divine substance and the Son and the Holy Spirit are derived from him. He places Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and the early Basil of Caesarea in the latter and Gregory of Nyssa and the West in the former. He argues that the generic view of the *homoousios* is the only proper way to conceive the Trinity. On this point I would agree. See his 'On Generic and Derivation Views of God's Trinitarian Substance', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56/4 (2003): 464–80. However, (though I am not happy with the term 'generic') I have argued that this is precisely the position Athanasius himself takes. While the Son is begotten of the Father, yet, for Athanasius, the one being/substance (*ousia*) of God is the Father begetting the Son. This is his great insight into the Nicene proclamation, which, both of us agree, the Cappadocians, for the most part, fail to appreciate. Nonetheless, Ayres argues that such a criticism of the Cappadocians is unfounded. See his *Nicaea and its Legacy*, pp. 236–8, 292–3.

104 See *In Illud Omnia*, 6. Athanasius notes that Nicea had condemned the use of *hypostasis* in *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 9.

establish and confirm that they are each unique with their own unambiguous, discrete and non-interchangeable subjective identities.

For Athanasius, ‘the Father is ever Father and never could become Son, so the Son is ever Son and never could become Father’.¹⁰⁵ While Jesus states that he and the Father are one and that the Father is in him and he is in the Father (see Jn 10:30) and in so doing reveals their ‘unity of *ousia*’, yet they are not ‘one thing twice named, so that the same becomes at one time Father, at another his own Son, for Sabellius, holding this, was judged a heretic. But they are two, because the Father is Father and is not also Son, and the Son is Son and not also Father – but the nature is one.’¹⁰⁶ For Athanasius, the very fact that the Jesus designated himself and the Father as one demonstrates that who it is who is one is both the distinct Father and the distinct Son. Defending, then, the propriety of employing the term *homoousios* against the charge that it is inherently Sabellian, Athanasius is adamant that the term itself guarantees the distinction between the Father and the Son, for it establishes that there are *two* who are *homoousioi* with one another in that it is two who share the same *ousia*. As he states:

Neither do we hold a Son-Father, as do the Sabellians, calling him *monoousion* but not *homoousion*, and thus destroying the existence of the Son ... For neither is the Father the Son, nor the Son the Father. For the Father is the Father of the Son, and the Son, Son of the Father.¹⁰⁷

For Athanasius, the Father and the Son are not identical as to who they are, in that they do not possess one and the same substantial identity as a single subject (*monoousion*). Rather, the Father and the Son, as distinct subjects, are identical as to what they are (*homoousion*), that is, they are both the one God.¹⁰⁸

During the course of the controversy some promoted, often with good intentions, the term *homoiousios*, like-in-substance, in order to ensure the proper distinction between the Father and the Son. For example, Basil of Ancyra proposed the *homoiousion* so as to distinguish the Father and the Son, but he also wanted to speak of being ‘from the *ousia*’ in order to ensure that *homoiousion* did not mean merely similar to God as is a human being, but actually divine.¹⁰⁹ Athanasius applauded this noble effort, but noted that the *homoiousion* ‘does not necessarily convey “of the *ousia*.” On the contrary, to say “*homoousios*” is to signify the meaning of both terms, “*homoiousios*” and “of the *ousia*”’.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, what was at stake here for Athanasius was that the *homoiousion* provided an excellent opportunity for an Arian interpretation, because it does not actually specify whether or not the Son is truly ontologically God. The Arians would have been all too eager to confess that the Son was of like nature to the Father, and this to the utmost bounds, but they would still insist that this unbounded

105 *Contra Arianos*, 1.22.

106 *Contra Arianos*, 3.4. See also *De Sententia Dionysii*, 5 and 25.

107 *Expositio Fidei*, 2.

108 See *De Decretis*, 23.

109 See J.N. Steenson, ‘Basil of Ancyra on the Meaning of *Homoousios*’, in *Arianism*, ed. R.C. Gregg, pp. 269–79.

110 *De Synodis*, 41.

likeness was that of a creature. Athanasius realized that only the *homoousion* ensured that the Son was defined as ontologically God as the Father is God. In other words, the Son is God absolutely and without qualification just as the Father is.¹¹¹

What Athanasius came to grasp in the course of the *homoiousion* debates was not only that ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’ provided the hermeneutical key for properly conceiving the Nicene *homoousion* but also that the *homoousion* reinforced the proper interpretation of ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’. Ultimately, it guaranteed that to be ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’ meant that the Father and the Son were identically the same *ousia* and thus both equally the one God.

[Because the Son is] the genuine offspring of the Father’s *ousia*, it would follow that he is inseparable from the Father, being connatural (ὁμοφυῆ), because he is begotten from him. And this being the case, for good reason should he be called *homoousios* ... [For] the Son, being an offspring from the *ousia*, is one by *ousia* – himself and the Father that begat him.¹¹²

Preserving the Mystery

It may appear that, in the midst of all this subtle definition of words and exhaustive clarification of concepts, the mystery of the Christian God as Father and Son has itself vanished. Yet, exactly the opposite is the case. To the mind of Athanasius it was the Arians who dissolved the Christian mystery in the acid of rationalism. What Nicea had done and what Athanasius strove passionately to do was to articulate faithfully and accurately what the Christian mystery of God as the Father and the Son is. While it is possible to know unmistakably and to express distinctly what the mystery is, it is impossible to fully comprehend that mystery.¹¹³ For Athanasius, God in himself is ineffable and thus the begetting of the Son from the Father is ineffable. The Arians, confronted by the perplexity of God being the Father of the Son, came to disbelieve. However, ‘it is better to be silent in perplexity and believe, than to disbelieve on account of the perplexity’. In the midst of such perplexity one’s sure recourse is to ponder, in faith, the truths of Scripture, for it ‘is able to afford one some relief’.¹¹⁴

I hope that the above is a clear and accurate exposition of Athanasius’ thought both as a response to the Arian crisis and as an interpretation of the Council of Nicea. Moreover, it is hoped that the above examination adequately represents the biblical breadth and theological depth of his learning and insight. Athanasius may have been an astute and shrewd politician, but he was even more a devoted scholarly expositor

111 See *De Synodis*, 53–54 and Letter 56 (*Ad Jovian*). Ayres rightly speaks of a common ‘pro-Nicene’ theology concerning the Trinity in the midst of differing theological conceptions and language. See *Nicaea and its Legacy*, pp. 278–301 and 430–35. What Ayres does not sufficiently value is that this common ‘pro-Nicene’ theology is founded upon a pro-Nicene faith. See also M.R. Barnes, ‘The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon’, in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, eds. L. Ayres and G. Jones, pp. 47–67.

112 *De Synodis*. 48.

113 See T.G. Weinandy, ‘Doing Christian Systematic Theology: Faith, Problems, and Mysteries’, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 5/1 (2002): 120–38.

114 *Contra Arianos*, 2.36.

of the Gospel. However, before this chapter comes to a close, it is necessary to pick up, once again, the theme of soteriology, for it may appear that the above has little to do with practical human life, or that Athanasius was merely splitting theological hairs for pure intellectual enjoyment and the love of a robust scuffle.

Creation: The Fruitfulness of the Father of the Son

Here we want to consider only one soteriological theme. In the following chapter we will examine the Incarnation, the redemptive work of the Son as man, and the effects these have upon those who believe. This will take us to the final chapter where we will examine the soteriological concerns involving the Trinity as a whole and specifically of the Holy Spirit as truly divine.

The central soteriological issue in Athanasius' *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* was creation. Athanasius continues to stress within his anti-Arian and pro-Nicene writing that it is only because the Son is truly divine that the Father creates through him so that creation always possesses an intimate and immediate relationship with the Father through the Son. Employing Irenaeus' famous analogy, Athanasius states that the Son is 'the hand' through which the Father brings into being all that is.¹¹⁵ This is again the theological basis upon which Athanasius founds the Father's love for humankind and the Son's innate responsibility, in the light of sin, for humankind's subsequent redemption. 'It is fitting that redemption should take place through none other than him who is Lord by nature, lest, though created by the Son, we should name another Lord.'¹¹⁶ Thus, unlike Arianism, there is no need for an intermediate cosmological third party that bridges the ontological gap between the Father and creation, for the Son, through whom the Father creates, unites in an unmediated manner, in that he, too, is God, the whole of creation to the Father.

Moreover, in response to the Arian claim that the Son is a creature, Athanasius innovatively asks a very insightful and new question. How can God be 'Creator' if he is not first 'Father'? 'If the divine essence is not fruitful in itself but barren, as they hold, as a light that does not lighten or a dry fountain', how is it that it can give being and life to others?¹¹⁷ For Athanasius, only if God is eternally the fruitful Father who, by the very nature of who he is, eternally begets his Son, is it possible for the Father, by his will, to create through his Son. 'If then that which comes first, which is according

115 *Contra Arianos*, 2.31. See also 2.21–28. Athanasius, insightfully, notes that if, as Arius holds, creatures are unable to bear God as their Creator and so God created the Son, who in turn, created everything else, it is likewise impossible for the Son to bear direct creation from the Father since he too is a creature. There would need to be an intermediate Creator between himself and God, and then another mediator between that mediator and God, and on it goes. Thus Athanasius shows the *reductio ad absurdum* of Arius' position. See *Contra Arianos*, 2.24–26 and *De Decretis*, 8.

Anatolios rightly discerns the influence of Irenaeus upon the thought of Athanasius. See *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, index under 'Irenaeus' and his 'The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 463–76.

116 *Contra Arianos*, 2.14.

117 *Contra Arianos*, 2.2.

to nature, did not exist, as they would have it in their folly, how could that which is second come to be, which is according to will? For the Word is first, and then the creation.¹¹⁸ However, since the Father has created, this manifests that he is inherently fruitful by nature and so he is first of all Father of the Son. 'If he, by willing them to be, frames things that are external to him and before were not, and thus becomes their maker, much more will he first be Father of an offspring from his proper essence.'¹¹⁹ If creation is the foundation of all soteriology, then, for Athanasius, its requisite is found only within the fruitful creativity of the Father begetting the Son.

This is a marvellous insight. If God was simply a singular existing being – a monad, something after the manner of Aristotle's 'self-thinking thought', then God could never conceive of anything other than himself. Being simply One, it would be metaphysically impossible for him to conceive of two, or of three, or of an infinite multitude, for One is all there is. Actually, God would not even conceive of himself as One because 'One' itself implies a further numerical sequence of others. We only know what 'one' means because we equally know what 'two' means, without 'two', 'one' not only has no meaning, it is also, literally, inconceivable. God would just be and nothing more could be conceived, imagined, or said.¹²⁰ As Athanasius rightly perceives, only if God is, by his very nature, the Father begetting the Son, could that God conceive of bringing into existence other beings that are not God.¹²¹

We must now proceed to the heart of Athanasius' soteriology – the Incarnation and redemptive work of the Father's Son.

118 *Contra Arianos*, 2.2. Widdicombe rightly states: 'For Athanasius, the fatherhood of God is the ground of reality' (*The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, p. 187). See also *ibid.*, p. 258–60 and Pettersen, *Athanasius*, p. 164.

119 *Contra Gentes*, 2.2.

120 While Athanasius would not have considered this, this is at the heart of the issue of the One and the Many. If God is simply One, there could never be a many. However, if the One God himself is the oneness of the Father and the Son (the many), then there could be a 'Many' distinct from God which would be united to this one God of Father and Son through the persistent divine act of creation and conservation.

121 Similar to Athanasius, Aquinas argues that God's outward action in creation reveals that there must be an inward action, that of generating the Son. See his *Summa Theologiae*, I, 27, 1.

Again, this has contemporary relevance. Islam believes that God is the Creator, but, having denied the divinity of the Son, it possesses no theological grounds for so doing. The notion of Creator is merely one of those Judeo/Christian remnants that it has rightly, but illogically, retained. Moreover, while the deists of the Enlightenment and those who still persist in its wake, want to deny the full divinity of the Son while maintaining the notion of creation, they do so only because they, as does Islam, have, now groundlessly, retained the remnants of the Christian God as Creator. This is why some more consistent philosophers and theologians, such as within Process Thought, have rightly jettisoned the notion that God is Creator.

Chapter 5

Athanasius: The Redemptive Life of the Incarnate Son

The previous chapter focused on Athanasius' defence and interpretation of the Son's divinity as professed by the Council of Nicea. As will become abundantly evident in this chapter, Athanasius' passionate defence and zealous championing of this cause was not for any esoteric reasons. It may not have been entirely evident within the previous chapter, since the vast majority of his pro-Nicene/anti-Arian arguments concentrated on the Son's divinity; yet, these arguments converged upon and were tightly woven within, Athanasius' fundamental concern: it was truly the divine Son of the Father who became man and as man lived a human life, ultimately dying on the cross and rising bodily from the dead. Athanasius wanted to get the Son's divine relationship to the Father right in order to get the Incarnation right; and he wanted to get the Incarnation right because he wanted to ensure that the human salvific deeds were done by none other than the divine Son. If it was not the Son who became man and as man achieved humankind's salvation, then salvation would not have been, in the least, secured. Incarnational soteriology, founded upon the Son being God as the Father is God, lay at the heart, for Athanasius, of the Arian crisis, and this is the subject of this chapter.

Three Incarnational Truths

While Athanasius would probably not have conceived the Incarnation in the following manner, and he would certainly not have expressed it in the way that follows, his thought does concern three truths that must simultaneously be rightly conceived and suitably articulated for a proper understanding of the Incarnation. I want to state them now since they will help us map out logically Athanasius' Christology as well as allow us to judge whether or not he holds an accurate understanding of the Incarnation.

Firstly, it must be *truly the Son of God* who is man. Here the emphasis is on the authentic divinity of the Son. Jesus must truly be the divine Son of God. Secondly, it must be *truly man* that the Son of God is. Here it is the full and authentic humanity that is essential for a proper understanding of the Incarnation. There is no value in upholding the divinity of the Son if that Son is not actually man. Likewise, there is no value in upholding Jesus' complete humanity, if this man, Jesus, is not actually the Son of God. Thirdly, the Son of God must *truly be* man. Here the concern is

that the Son of God in ‘becoming’ man must actually terminate in the truth that he ontologically *is* man. Man is what the Son of God is. No moral or adoptionistic union between the divine Son and the genuine humanity will suffice, for then the Son will not actually exist as a man. Thus at the conclusion of one’s conception of the Incarnation one must be able to articulate clearly that it is *truly* the Son of God who *truly is truly* man.

Obviously, if there is one truth that Athanasius does hold, it is the first – the Son is truly God as the Father is God. However, it is truths two and three that are not as easy to discern. We will find Athanasius struggling to conceive and articulate correctly the incarnational notion of ‘become’ such that it terminates in a suitable understanding of the incarnational ‘is’. What is even more problematic is whether or not Athanasius upholds and professes the full and authentic humanity of Jesus. As we will find, he has been frequently accused of not doing so because, it is asserted, he worked from within a ‘Logos/sarx’ framework; as a result, he either does not allow for or does not allocate any significance to the human soul of Christ. Within his Christology, Athanasius, for all practical purposes, would then conceive the Incarnation as the ontological union of the Son/Logos and the flesh/body without a soul, and this would give to his Christology, at best, an Apollinarian skew. I hope to demonstrate that Athanasius actually does uphold all three incarnational truths, though at times he does labour to find the appropriate concepts and words, and that he does so specifically for soteriological reasons.

The following, by way of introduction, exemplifies and summarizes almost all that Athanasius will insist upon throughout his exposition of the Incarnation and redemption:

For man, if joined to (συναφθεῖς) a creature, was not deified (ἐθεοποιήθη), unless the Son were truly God; nor was man brought into the Father’s presence unless he had been his natural (φύσει) and true Word who had put on the body. And as we would not have been delivered from sin and the curse, unless it had been human flesh by nature that the Word put on (for there should be nothing common to us with what is foreign), so also the man would not have been deified unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to him. Therefore the union (ἡ συναφή) was of this kind, that he might unite what is man by nature to him who is of the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure. Therefore let those who deny that the Son is from the Father by nature (ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς φύσει) and proper to his *ousia*, deny also that he took true human flesh from the ever-virgin Mary; for in neither case would it have been of profit to us men, whether the Word were not true and naturally Son of God, or the flesh not true which he assumed.¹

What we find here is what we will find throughout – Athanasius asserting the three incarnational truths for the sake of humankind’s salvation. Firstly, we could not come into the Father’s presence and truly know him if the Son were not himself God and not a creature; moreover, we could not be deified. The Son’s full divinity is crucial for Athanasius’ soteriological Christology. Only if the Son is truly divine can he divinize human beings for he is ‘the deifying and enlightening power of the Father,

1 *Contra Arianos*, 2.70. See also 2.69.

in which all things are deified and quickened' and human beings only 'partake of the Father because the Word is the Father's own'.² Secondly, only if it were our own genuine tangible flesh, and not something foreign to us, that the Son of God took on, could we be truly deified. Thirdly, in order for the divine Son to deify our humanity, the coming together – the incarnational 'becoming' – must be such as actually to unite 'what is man by nature to him who is of the nature of the Godhead'. The divine Son must actually come to exist as man. Athanasius will expand and develop various aspects and spin-offs of this foundational understanding throughout his presentation of the Incarnation and the redemption that flows from it.³

Defining the Incarnational 'Becoming': What it is not.

Given that Athanasius professes the full divinity of the Son, we must examine how he conceives the incarnational notion of 'become'. In attempting to define what it means to say that 'the Word became flesh', he is very clear in two ways on what 'become' does not mean.

Firstly, 'become' does not mean that the Son of God came to dwell within an already existing man. Commenting on John 1:14 that 'the Word became flesh', Athanasius emphasizes its distinctiveness:

He became man, and did not come into man (ἄνθρωπος δὲ γέγονε καὶ οὐκ εἰς ἄνθρωπον ἦλθε); for this is necessary to know, lest these irreligious men fall into this notion also, and beguile any into thinking that, as in former times the Word was used to come into each of the saints, so now he sojourned in a man (εἰς ἄνθρωπον ἐπεδήμησεν), hallowing him also, and manifesting himself as he had in others ... Of old he came to the saints individually, and hallowed those who rightly received him; but neither was it said that when they were begotten that he had become man, nor, when they suffered that he himself suffered.⁴

2 *De Synodis*, 51

3 For studies of Athanasius' Christology, besides the standard works on early Christian doctrines, see Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, Part 1, pp. 215–31; J.B. Berchem, 'L'Incarnation dans le plan divin d'après saint Athanase', *Échos d'Orient* 33 (1934): 316–30; L. Bouyer, *L'Incarnation et l'Église-Corps du Christ dans la théologie de saint Athanase* (Paris, 1943); G.D. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives* (Rollinsford, 2005) (this is a collection of many of Dragas' previously published articles); C. Kannengiesser, 'Athanasius of Alexandria and the Foundation of Traditional Christology', *Theological Studies* 34 (1973): 103–13; A. Pettersen, *Athanasius*, pp. 109–35; A. Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bristol, 1990); T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, pp. 232–44; D. Staniloae, 'La Doctrine de Saint Athanase sur le Salut', in *Politique et Théologie chez Athanase d'Alexandrie*, ed. C. Kannengiesser (Paris, 1978), pp. 277–93; P. Tolbert, 'St. Athanasius: Father of Orthodoxy or Stoic Philosopher?', *Coptic Church Review* 15/3 (1994): 63–72; T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 146–90; V. Twomey, 'The Nature of Christ's Humanity: A Study in Athanasius', *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 8 (1989): 227–41.

4 *Contra Arianos*, 3.30–31. For similar passages see also *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, 7 and *Ad Adelphum*, 11.

For Athanasius, if Jesus were merely another prophet in whom the Word of God dwelt, the people of his day would not have found him extraordinary and wondered where he was from, by what authority he spoke, and by what power he acted. It is specifically due to the Word 'becoming man' that Jesus' contemporaries either responded in awe or in scandalous outrage. 'Becoming' then, for Athanasius, is more than a form of 'adoptionism', such as in Paul of Samosata, whereby the Son/Word comes to dwell in the already individually existing man, Jesus. Also, the union between the divinity and the humanity has to be more than merely 'moral', that is, more than a union of 'inspiration' such as found between God and the inspired prophets or saints, and even more than a union of 'love' such as found among spouses or friends.

While Athanasius rejects the notion of 'become' as meaning 'come into', what he does mean is implied in how he describes the effects of the 'becoming'. When God indwelt in the saint, it was never said that 'he had become man', thus, for Athanasius, 'being man' must be the terminus of the 'becoming'. This is confirmed in the fact that when the saints suffered God was not said to have suffered, but now, having become man, 'it is said that he himself suffered'. For Athanasius, it is precisely the direct predication of human attributes, such as suffering, to the Son that attests to the Son actually becoming man and so existing as a man. Athanasius here wants to accentuate the ontological nature of the incarnational 'becoming' so as to assure that the Son actually does exist as man, whereby what ontologically pertains to man, such as suffering, ontologically pertains to him. More will be said concerning this when we come to discuss Athanasius' understanding of the Communication of Idioms, that is, the predicating of divine and human attributes to one and the same Son. Moreover, it should be noted, for it, too, will be important at a later juncture, that Athanasius explicitly states here that it is 'the custom of Scripture to call man by the name of "flesh,"' citing Joel 2:28 and Daniel 14:5 as examples.⁵ This would appear, at least somewhat, to counter the charge that Athanasius was solely working from within a Logos/sarx framework.

Secondly, having argued that 'become' does not mean 'come into', Athanasius is confronted by an even more problematic understanding, especially in the light of the Arian charge, that since the Word became flesh, he cannot be God because God cannot change, which is implied in the very concept of 'become'.⁶ In response to this issue Athanasius is very clear that the Son of God does not change in becoming man, but he is also equally struggling to say what precisely 'become' then positively means. The incarnational 'becoming' must be an ontological 'becoming' if the Son is to exist as man, but it cannot be an ontological 'becoming' whereby the Son of God 'changes into' man.

C. Kannengiesser has argued that *Contra Arianos* 3 was not written by Athanasius. See his 'Athanasius' so-called *Third Oration against the Arians*, *Studia Patristica* 26 (1991): 375–88. He has since verbally rejected this view.

5 *Contra Arianos*, 3.30. In *Ad Epictetum*, 8, Athanasius similarly writes: 'For to say "the Word became flesh" is equivalent to saying "the Word became man"', again referencing Joel 2:28.

6 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.36.

Athanasius insists throughout his writings, against the Arian assumption, that ‘become’ does not mean ‘change into’. By way of prolegomenon, Athanasius states that the term ‘become’ does not imply that the Son/Logos came to be in the sense of being created. Rather, ‘being the “Word,” he “became flesh,” and “become” we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated (γενθη/) and created (κτισθη/).’⁷ Thus ‘to become’ pertains to ‘descent to mankind and High priesthood’.⁸ So Athanasius employs, as an analogical prefigurement, Aaron’s donning his high-priestly robe. While he becomes the High Priest on assuming his priestly dress, he still remains unchangeably who he is as Aaron. Similarly does the Son:

He did not become other than himself on taking flesh, but, being the same [as before], he was robed in it (ἐκολύπητο αὐτῆ); and the expressions ‘He became’ and ‘He was made’ must not be understood as if the Word, as being the Word, were made, but that the Word, being Fashioner of all, afterwards was made High Priest by putting on a body which was originate and made, and such as can make offering for us. On this account he is said to be made.⁹

It should be noted, in passing, that the Son was robed in flesh precisely for High Priestly purposes, that is, that he might offer a suitable sacrifice for our salvation. The analogy is that as Aaron robes himself in his priestly dress so, likewise, the Son robes himself in his priestly flesh, thus allowing both to remain unchanged as to who they are; nonetheless, the very sense of the analogy also seems to imply that as Aaron does not actually become his priestly robe so neither does the Son actually become his priestly flesh. The analogy itself is an expression of a moral union whereby the Son adopts the appearance of a man. However, this could hardly be what Athanasius wants the reader to conclude since, in arguing against ‘becoming’ meaning ‘come into’, he was adamant that the Son did actually become man so that one could truly describe human suffering as his own.

What Athanasius is doing here is attempting to give ontological depth to the incarnational ‘becoming’ without implying that such an understanding carries with it the implication that the Son of God as God changes in becoming man. Athanasius wants to say: ‘Yes, the Son of God did actually become a man, but that does not mean he is changed into a man.’ In order to avoid ‘becoming’ meaning ‘change into’ Athanasius consistently staples an analogy on to the phrase ‘become man’ that he hopes will dispel that interpretation. Thus, he will speak of the Son ‘taking on flesh’, ‘putting on flesh’, ‘entering into flesh’ and even dwelling ‘in the flesh as in a temple’ all of which, on their own, could be interpreted in an adoptionist manner expressing a moral union; but Athanasius almost invariably adds ‘and became man’ to ensure that the ‘taking on’, and so on possesses the ontological meaning of actually ‘becoming man’ without concurrently involving change.¹⁰ Thus, in his letter to Epictetus, bishop of Corinth, Athanasius insists that ‘he [the Son] has become

7 *Contra Arianos*, 1.60. See also 1.53–59.

8 *Contra Arianos*, 2.7.

9 *Contra Arianos*, 2.8. See also 2.6.

10 See for example, *Contra Arianos*, 2.8 and 47, 3.29, 31–32 and 34, and *Ad Adelpium*, 7.

flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because he assumed living flesh on our behalf, and has become man'.¹¹ Even when speaking of the flesh as the Son's temple, Athanasius asserts their inseparability, and so their ontological unity. 'Therefore he that dishonours the temple dishonours the Lord in the temple; and he that separates the Word from the body sets at nought the grace given by him.'¹²

But why did Athanasius insist that 'becoming' must not mean 'change into'? Given our contemporary theological climate, it could easily be thought that Athanasius has unconsciously and uncritically employed inappropriate divine attributes from Greek philosophical thought. However, there are two significant theologically relevant, interrelated reasons for why he refused to allow 'become' to mean 'change into'. Firstly, since the Son of God is perfectly divine, he cannot change, for to change would demand that he either became better or worse, both of which would mean that he was not truly God. Secondly, Athanasius grasped that the Son of God must remain unchangeable in becoming man not only in accordance with his divine status, but also for the sake of the Incarnation. If the Son of God changed in becoming man, then it would no longer be truly the perfect Son of God who now existed as man but a lesser form of himself. And, worse still, if the Son of God changed into man, then it would no longer be the Son of God who existed as man. What would then exist would simply be a man who once was, but no longer is, God. Thus, the incarnational 'becoming' cannot be conceived as similar to the caterpillar changing into the butterfly whereby the caterpillar ceases to be in the metamorphosing into a butterfly.

To avoid this erroneous notion of 'become' Athanasius employs such striking incarnational titles as: 'God in flesh (θεός ἐν σαρκί)',¹³ 'God bearing flesh'.¹⁴ These designations are not to be interpreted as if the Son of God merely dwelt 'in flesh' or that he bore flesh as something apart from him as a human being bears a heavy load, but to state strikingly that the flesh that he bears is truly his in that he is man and so he and his flesh form one ontological reality and that reality is 'God-in-flesh' or 'God-as-man'. Moreover, in becoming man, the Son of God remains truly unchangeably divine and so now, as incarnate, he is still truly God. Thus the one ontological reality of Jesus is again, though now with reverse emphasis, 'God-in-flesh' or 'God-as-man'. These phrases highlight the threefold incarnational truth: that it is truly the unchanged God, in the fullness of his divine being, who truly is truly man. For Athanasius, the Son, who is as unalterably perfect as the Father, 'being and remaining the same' took upon himself 'alterable flesh' (τὴν τρεπτὴν σάρκα λαβών).¹⁵

For Athanasius the incarnational 'becoming' means neither 'come into' nor 'change into'. Well, what then does 'become' mean for Athanasius? While somewhat hidden, it lies within the very denials. Athanasius is ultimately saying the following: 'The Son of God actually does become man and does not merely come into man, but

11 *Ad Epictetum*, 8. See also 2.

12 *Ad Adelphium*, 8.

13 *Contra Arianos*, 2.10.

14 *Contra Arianos*, 3.51.

15 *Contra Arianos*, 1.51.

by saying that he “actually becomes” man, I do not mean that he “changes into” man, for the one who is man remains the Son of God.’ For Athanasius the incarnational ‘becoming’ is defined by the terminal incarnational ‘is’. Because the Son of God ‘is’ man, the ‘becoming’ must express and assure both that he remains the unalterable God so that it is truly God who is man and that the humanity remains unalterably human so that it is truly man that the Son of God is. While Athanasius does not express it in this manner, the incarnational notion of ‘become’ means ‘come to exist’ or ‘come to be’. That such is Athanasius’ understanding becomes evident from his use and understanding of the Communication of Idioms, for it is there that such a notion of ‘become’ has been evident, though unarticulated, from the beginning of its use.¹⁶

Defining the Incarnational ‘Becoming’: The Communication of Idioms

The Arians, in insisting that the Son must be a creature, amassed an arsenal of scripture passages which depicted the Son as either a creature, or as the Father being the one true God, or the Son as inferior to God. While Proverbs 8:22 (‘The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old’) was the most celebrated and fiercely contested, yet there were many others: Acts 2:36 (‘God had made him Lord and Christ’), Romans 8:29 (‘the first-born of many brethren’), Colossians 1:15 (‘the first-born of all creation’), Hebrews 3:2 (‘who was faithful to him who made him’), John 17:3 (‘this is life eternal, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent’), John 14:28 (‘the Father is greater than I’). Lastly, and equally important, were the multitude of passages that attributed ignorance, weakness, suffering or growth to the Son. While Athanasius addressed all of these passages, employing at times different exegetical strategies, one fundamental exegetical method that he relentlessly exploited, especially for the last group, was to insist that such attributes as ignorance, suffering, weakness, and development were predicated of the Son not in so far as he was divine but insofar as he had become man and thus existed as a man.¹⁷ Having forgotten this incarnational principle, the Arians are similar to the Jews. ‘For the Jews said; “How, being man,

¹⁶ Ignatius of Antioch (d. circa AD 107) was one of the first to employ the Communication of Idioms and he did so precisely to highlight the reality of the Incarnation. The one who is impassible as God is the same one who is passible as man. See, for example, his *Ad Eph.* 7.2. See T.G. Weinandy, ‘The Apostolic Christology of Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon’, in *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*, eds. A. Gregory and C. Tuckett (Oxford, 2005), pp. 71–84.

¹⁷ So wedded was Athanasius to this christological hermeneutic that he consistently interpreted Proverbs 8:22 in a similar fashion. In an entirely unconvincing manner Athanasius argues that the ‘created me’ does not refer to the Son’s ‘divinity’ but to the Incarnation. The Father ‘created’ the Son as man. See *Contra Arianos*, 2.18–82, *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 17, *Expositio Fidei*, 3, and *De Decretis*, 13–14.

See A. Meredith, ‘Proverbs, VIII, 22: Chez Origène, Athanase, Basile et Grégoire de Nysse’, in *Politique et Théologie chez Athanase d’Alexandrie*, ed. C. Kannengiesser (Paris, 1974), pp. 349–57.

can he be God?" And the Arians, "If he were very God from God, how could he become man?" ... Thus both parties deny the eternity and Godhead of the Word in consequence of those human attributes which the Saviour took on him by reason of that flesh which he bore.¹⁸

Nonetheless, for Athanasius, 'all these texts have the same force and meaning, a religious one, demonstrative of the divinity of the Word, even those of them which speak humanly concerning him, as having become the Son of man'.¹⁹ All such passages must be interpreted in the light of 'the Word's visitation in the flesh' and thus in accordance with 'the economy which he then sustained' for it is within this 'human economy' that they speak, not of the Son's divinity, but 'according to his manhood'.²⁰ For Athanasius, the heart of the issue is that the Arians were 'ignorant' of the 'scope of faith which we Christians hold, and using it as a rule, apply ourselves ... to reading the inspired word'.²¹

Now the scope and character of Scripture, as we have often said, is this: it contains a double account of the Saviour, that he is ever God and is the Son, the Father's Word and Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards he took flesh for us of the Virgin, Mary the Bearer of God (qeoto/koj), and was made man. This scope is to be found throughout the God-inspired Scripture.²²

At the onset then, it is essential to grasp that there is, for Athanasius, only one person (one 'who') who is the subject of both divine and human attributes. This is all a part of the narrative history of the economy of salvation; that is, the one who eternally existed as God has now come to exist as man and thus what can be said of him significantly changes.²³ While the Son existed eternally outside of time, he is now able, 'being made man', to speak and act as one within time.²⁴

Indeed, one [being] is signified from both, for 'the Word was made flesh'. But the expressions employed regarding his Godhead, and those regarding his becoming man, are to be interpreted with discrimination and suitably to the particular context. He that writes of the human attributes of the Word knows also what concerns his Godhead, and he who exegetes concerning his Godhead is not ignorant of what belongs to his coming in the flesh (τὰ ἴδια τῆς ἐνσάρκου παρουσίας αὐτοῦ).²⁵

18 *Contra Arianos*, 3.27.

See also *Festal Letter*, 10.9.

19 *Contra Arianos*, 2.1.

20 *Contra Arianos*, 1.59 and 2.12. See also 2.75.

21 *Contra Arianos*, 3.28.

22 *Contra Arianos*, 3.29.

Athanasius uses a similar argument against Sabellius. The communication of idioms demonstrates that it is the Son who became man and so suffers, and so on, and not the Father. See *De Sententia Dionysii*, 26.

23 For an excellent exposition of Athanasius' narrative account of the economy of salvation see his commentary on Luke 10:22 (Matthew 11:27), *In Illud Omnia*, 2.

24 *Apologia de Fuga*, 14.

25 *De Sententia Dionysii*, 9.

It is because of this understanding that one can perceive why Athanasius conceives the incarnational ‘becoming’ neither as ‘coming into’ man nor as ‘changing into man’ for in both instances it would not be the Son who is truly the subject of all the human actions or experiences. ‘Become’, then, means ‘to come to exist as man’ for only such an understanding allows, sanctions and confirms, in accordance with ‘the Gospels’, that what pertains to being authentically human, ontologically belongs to the Son.²⁶ In becoming man, the Son can rightly be called ‘our brother’ and thus ‘all those terms [servant, bridegroom, brother, and so on] happen to be proper to the constitution of man; such as these do not designate the *ousia* of the Word, but that he has become man (ἄνθρωπος):’²⁷ It is precisely because the Word has actually become man and was given the human name, Jesus, that all that pertains to a genuine human life rightly can said to be his.

And as we said that he suffered in the flesh, hungered in the flesh, and was fatigued in the flesh, so may he also reasonably be said to have advanced in the flesh; for neither did the advance, such as we have described it, take place with the Word external to the flesh, for in him was the flesh which advanced.²⁸

Also, when Jesus faced death and was troubled, weeping in agony, this state, too, was predicated not of the Word in so far as he was God, but in so far as ‘in the flesh which was thus affected was the Word’.²⁹ The Son said ‘I am troubled’ ‘not at all prior to the flesh; but once the “Word became flesh,” and has become man, then is it written that he said this, that is [he said it] humanly.’³⁰ Athanasius is absolutely clear that, the one who worked miracles and taught that ‘he and the Father are one’ and so manifested his divinity, so too ‘he who did the works is the same as he who also showed that his body was passible by his permitting it to weep and hunger, to make clear the properties of the body. By such means he made it known that God, being

26 *Contra Arianos*, 3.26. Anatolios interprets Athanasius’ understanding of the Incarnation as a ‘model of predication’ (*Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, p. 142). See also, pp. 141–50. While his use of the term ‘model’ is ambiguous in that it implies there could be other ‘models’ by which one could conceive the Incarnation, Anatolios is correct that Athanasius does predicate divine and human attributes to one and the same Son. What he fails to emphasize sufficiently is that this predication is ontologically founded upon the fact that the Son does actually exist as man and thus all human attributes can ontologically be predicated of him.

27 *Contra Arianos*, 2.11. See 2.12–13.

28 *Contra Arianos*, 3.53. J.C. McCoy, because he believes that the Alexandrians were too heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thought, criticizes Athanasius and Cyril for upholding the impassibility of God and thus that the Son suffers only as man. See his ‘Philosophical Influences on the Doctrine of the Incarnation in Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria’, *Encounter* 38 (1977): 362–91. He argues for a process view of God which would allow God within his divinity to suffer. For an excellent critique of this common erroneous criticism of the Fathers see P. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford, 2004) and T.G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 83–112.

29 *Contra Arianos*, 3.55. See 3.54.

30 *Contra Arianos*, 3.54–55.

impassible, had taken passible flesh.³¹ Moreover, all of this has, for Athanasius, momentous salvific significance. Because the Word had taken mortal flesh from Mary it is by necessity that:

Suffering and weeping and toiling, these things which are proper to the flesh (ἴδια τῆς σαρκός), are ascribed to him together with the body (μετὰ τοῦ σώματος). If then he wept and was troubled, it was not the Word, as being the Word (ἢ λόγος ἐστίν), who wept and was troubled, but it was proper to the flesh (τῆς σαρκός ἴδιον). If he also pleaded that ‘the cup might pass away’, it was not the Godhead that was in terror, but this passion (πάθος) too was proper to the manhood (τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος). And the words ‘Why hast thou forsaken me?’ are his, according to the explanation offered above, though he suffered nothing, for the Word was impassible. This is nonetheless declared by the evangelists, since the Lord became man and these things are done and said as from a man, that he might himself lighten these sufferings of the flesh, and free it from them.³²

I have attempted to demonstrate that Athanasius conceives the incarnational ‘becoming’ as meaning ‘coming to exist’ and that this is primarily and fundamentally witnessed in how he unwaveringly predicates all human attributes, human actions and human experiences, to one sole subject – the Son/Word. Such could not be the case if that Son did not ontologically come to exist and so be man. However, it is within this very context that a significant issue arises. While he speaks of the Son’s human ‘toil’, ‘hunger’, ‘fatigue’, ‘weeping’, ‘terror’, ‘abandonment’ and ‘suffering’, the reader might have noticed how often, in the above, Athanasius refers to ‘the flesh’. Does Athanasius, then, understand the humanity of the Son to be full and complete – body and soul – or merely that of his taking on the body alone? Is there veiled, and so implied, within the Son’s actions and experiences ‘in the flesh’ a human soul, or does ‘in the flesh’ simply connote ‘in the human body’? For many theologians, the latter is the case. If such be so, he may uphold the first and third of the necessary incarnational truths, but Athanasius does not uphold the second, which stated that ‘it is truly man that Son of God is’, and thus he conceives and articulates a faulty, if not erroneous, understanding of the Incarnation. To this question we now turn.

31 *Contra Arianos*, 3.55. See also 2.62. For the use of ‘the same’ see also 3.57.

32 *Contra Arianos*, 3.56. See also 2.16 and 3.26. This quotation illustrates Athanasius’ use of three important words which denote three distinct but related concepts – σαρκός, σώματος, and ἀνθρωπότητος. ‘Flesh’ denotes, as in Scripture, the weakness of one’s humanity, that is, that it can be troubled, fears, suffers, and so on. These are part and parcel of ‘bodily’ existence. Moreover, this ‘bodily’ and so ‘fleshly’ existence is what it means to possess a complete and authentic ‘manhood’. Thus, for Athanasius, the Son of God did not possess merely ‘flesh’ in the sense of a ‘body’ without a soul, but a genuine human nature, body and soul, with all that such a human nature entails, including its emotional human frailties. This will become abundantly clear in the following section. For a good study of Athanasius use of these various terms, see G.D. Dragas, ‘Inhominatio (Ἐνανθρώπησις) or He became man (Ἐγένετο Ἄνθρωπος): A Neglected Aspect of Athanasius’ Christology’, in *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives*, pp. 1–23. Also published in *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 281–94.

The Incarnation and the Soul of Christ³³

To read the literature one would think that the single and most decisive issue concerning Athanasius' Christology is that of whether or not he affirmed that Christ possessed a human soul.³⁴ Any other aspect of his Christology appears, at best, to be secondary and even inconsequential. While some have admirably defended Athanasius, yet the common perceived consensus is that his understanding of the Incarnation makes no provision for a soul, or, if it does allow for a soul (especially after the Synod of Alexandria in 362), that soul has no soteriological significance. The soul is merely acknowledged, along with the body, as a constitutive factor within Christ's human composition.³⁵

It was pointed out earlier that Athanasius acknowledges, in accordance with scriptural usage, that 'flesh' designates the whole man. As was also seen above, Athanasius often uses such phrases as: 'The Word took flesh and became man'.³⁶ Moreover, I would argue that he also sees within his understanding of 'flesh' all those human weaknesses and frailties that pertain to 'the flesh', as is done within scripture itself. Thus, he so employs that term precisely to underscore, almost as if wanting to antagonize the Arians and thus to accentuate the falsity of their denial, the authentic realism and genuine exactness of the divine Son's human actions

33 This section is an altered and expanded version of a communication that I presented at the International Patristics Conference in August 2003 and published as 'Athanasius: The Incarnation and the Soul of Christ', in M. J. Edwards, F. M. Young and P. Parvis (eds), *Studia Patristica* XLI (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 265-269

34 For an historical study of the early debates concerning the human soul of Christ, see M. Wiles, 'The Nature of the Early Debate about Christ's Human Soul', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 16 (1965): 139-51.

35 It is not possible to provide here a complete bibliography pertaining to this issue. G.D. Dragas notes that F.C. Baur raised it for the first time (*Die christliche Lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes*, 1841). However, it was K. Hoss (*Studien über das Schriftum und die Theologie des Athanasius auf Grund*, Freiburg I. B., 1899) and A. Stülcken (*Athanasiana,, Literar-und dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Leipzig, 1899) who popularized the issue within patristic Christology. See Dragas, 'St. Athanasius' *Contra Apollinarem*', Athens, *Church and Theology*, vol. VI, 1985, p. 289). Some of those who have been critical of Athanasius are: A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 308-28; R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 446-58 and 645-51; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 284-89; M. Richard, 'Saint Athanase et la psychologie du Christ selon les ariens', *Mélanges de Science Religieuse*, 4 (1947): pp. 7-49. Besides Dragas (pp. 289-399) some others who have defended Athanasius are: K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, pp. 70-3, 78-84, 140-55, 201-02, 226 ns. 116 & 121; A. Louth, 'Athanasius' Understanding of the Humanity of Christ', *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 309-18; A. Pettersen, *Athanasius*, pp. 130-32; T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, pp. 232-44; G.C. Stead, 'The Scriptures and the Soul of Christ in Athanasius', *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982): 233-50; T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, pp. 224-31.

36 It is interesting that Athanasius interprets Jesus' image of the vine and branches as demonstrating that he and all human beings possess the same 'essence'. See *De Sententia Dionysii*, 10.

and experiences in likeness to other human beings. At the heart of this realism lies Athanasius' soteriological concern – only if the Son lives a truly human life, even to suffering and death, is the whole of humankind saved.

All scholars agree that Athanasius never denied that Christ possessed a soul. Nonetheless, Athanasius is sternly reprimanded for not employing it when it would appear to have been the most obvious christological explanation to exploit. In contrast to the absence of a soul within Arian Christology, Athanasius, by arguing that Christ did possess a human soul, could then have emphasized that all of the human attributes would have primarily resided within it so as to protect, and so more easily to have endorsed, the full divinity of the Word. However, in so censuring Athanasius, his critics neglect his deeper and more fundamental incarnational and soteriological concerns. While the human attributes such as ignorance, fear, and suffering do reside in a human intellect or soul, of which Athanasius, I believe, was well aware, his strategy was not to protect the divinity by using the soul as a shield or buffer against all that pertains to being authentically human. For Athanasius, if the soul became the exclusive centre and so subject of the human experiences, then the divinity of the Logos may be preserved, but the truth of the Incarnation would be abandoned. Athanasius was not about to become a Nestorian before Nestorius!³⁷

As was delineated above, Athanasius' primary concern was to establish the proper incarnational principle for interpreting the manner in which the human attributes are predicated of Christ. For Athanasius, this hermeneutical tool lay within the appropriate understanding of the *skopos* of the Gospels or the economy. The story that is being told is the story of the one and the same Son, who existed eternally as God and now had actually come to be man. While Athanasius ardently defended the full divinity of the Son, he refused to allow such a defence to undermine the integrity of the Incarnation, for it is to this purpose that the divinity must be upheld, so that it is truly the same divine Son who actually exists as an authentic man. Thus, as the *skopos* or the economy demands, the Son who is God must be the same Son who is man.

It is only right then, thought Athanasius, for the Son 'in putting on human flesh, to put it on whole with the passions (παθῶν) proper to it'.³⁸ It should not be left unnoticed that Athanasius insisted that the Son assumed the whole of what it means to be human and thus the *pathe*, those passible affections proper to it – passible affections that bear not merely upon the body as such but upon the whole of the humanity, body and soul. It is obvious, then, that when Athanasius speaks of the Son's 'hunger', 'fatigue', 'terror', 'fear', 'abandonment', and so on, he is not conceiving of them as if they were merely physical in the sense of being solely of the body apart from a human soul or intellect. He was not oblivious to the fact that such human emotions and feelings, by their very nature, contain intellectual and emotional elements. The body may physically shake, but the actual fear resides

37 Some critics seem to want Athanasius to espouse a Nestorian position, thus giving the impression that they themselves tend toward Nestorianism. See Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 314–15, Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 449–52, and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 287.

38 *Contra Arianos*, 3.32.

in the person's heart and mind. It is the self-conscious person who feels physical pain and experiences depressing abandonment. Such emotions, feelings, passions cannot properly be predicated of a body simply as 'a body'. What was critical, for Athanasius, was that these truly human experiences be predicated of the divine Son for they were part and parcel of his enacting humankind's salvation. This is why he almost monotonously proceeded to interpret the various Gospel passages that the Arians believed demonstrated the Word's createdness in the manner in which he did. Since the Son did actually become man, then those passages pertain not to his divine existence but to his human existence and so they proclaim the Son's human efficacious deeds and salvific experiences. As Athanasius states: 'When the flesh suffered the Word was not external to it; ... and when he did his Father's works divinely, the flesh was not external to him, but in the body itself did the Lord do them'.³⁹ My above argument is clearly seen within Athanasius' discussion of Christ's ignorance, for 'ignorance' definitively illustrates whether or not Christ possessed a human soul.

The Arians accusingly asked why, if the Son is truly divine, was it that Jesus asked questions, such as where Lazarus was buried, and admitted ignorance of the last day? While the Word as God is omniscient, and so had no need to ask questions, nor was he then ignorant of the last day, yet, in accordance with the *skopos* of the economy, and thus in keeping with the incarnational principle, Athanasius insisted that this very same Word did actually exist as man, and so as is only proper, was genuinely ignorant as man.⁴⁰

The Word as man was ignorant of [the last day], for ignorance is proper to man (ἀνθρώπου ἴδιον), and especially ignorance of these things. Moreover, this is proper to the Saviour's love of man, for since he was made man he was not ashamed, on account of the flesh which is ignorant, to say 'I know not', so that he may show that while knowing as God, he is ignorant according to the flesh (εἰδώς ὡς θεός, ἄγνωεῖ σαρκικώς).⁴¹

This is the incarnational paradigm that Athanasius employed throughout his interpretation of those scriptural passages that the Arians proffered as confirmation of the Word's non-divinity. He notes that ignorance is proper to man and since, in humility, the Son became man, then he is not ashamed to be ignorant. Equally obvious is that Athanasius here presumes, so much so that he need not even mention it, that Christ had a human soul with a human intellect for only someone with a human intellect can be humanly ignorant. A human body alone, separated from a human

39 *Contra Arianos*, 3.32.

40 See *Contra Arianos*, 3.37–38. See A. Pettersen, 'The Questioning Jesus in Athanasius' *Contra Arianos* 3', in *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, ed. R.C. Gregg, pp. 243–55.

On a related issue, see also A. Pettersen, 'The Courage of Christ in the Theology of Athanasius', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 363–77.

Hanson, again, misrepresents and so misinterprets Athanasius claiming that he does not allow authentic human fear in Christ. See his 'The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God', p. 455.

41 *Contra Arianos*, 3.43.

intellect, is not humanly ignorant. The real matter at hand for Athanasius was not then the issue of Christ's soul or human intellect, both of which he took for granted, but the proper incarnational understanding of how divine and human attributes are predicated of one and the same Son. The proper employment of this hermeneutical principle, for Athanasius, did not merely illustrate but actually authenticated the truth of the Incarnation. Thus, the reason the soul or intellect is not mentioned is precisely because Athanasius' primary incarnational concern was to confirm that what is truly human, in this case genuine human ignorance, was rightly predicated of the Son of God, for it was he who existed as man. The incarnate Son, for Athanasius, is the principal subject of the human ignorance.

Critics have faulted Athanasius' interpretation on three further points. Firstly, Athanasius insisted that it was the Son who was the subject of the ignorance and yet he, as God and is omniscient, demands that the ignorance was merely feigned. Such a criticism entirely misses Athanasius' incarnational concern. The ignorance is not feigned in the slightest since Athanasius' entire focus was to ensure that, since the Son had actually become man, then all that pertains to being man, including ignorance, was properly his own. It was an authentic, and not a bogus, human life that the Son lived.

Secondly, it is pointed out that Athanasius describes Jesus' death as the Son being separated 'from his body'.⁴² Since human death is the separation of the soul from the body, Athanasius must, therefore, conceive the Son as taking the place of the human soul, and thus death for him is his separation from his body. In response, it needs to be pointed out that Athanasius was well aware that death is the separation of the soul from the body, for he notes in discussing Jesus' raising of Lazarus, that while he was ignorant of where Lazarus was buried, yet he also knew that he would 'recall Lazarus' soul'.⁴³ Again, what most concerns Athanasius is not the exact definition of death but that it was the divine Son who actually died. Death may be the separation of the soul from the body, but the one who experienced that separation had to be, for Athanasius, the Son, and so it was he who experienced the separation from his body.

Thirdly, the critics avow that, since Athanasius stressed that it was the Son who was the true subject of all human attributes, this betokens a Logos/Sarx rather than a Logos/Anthropos Christology. This is the heart of their misconception of Athanasius' Christology. Such critics fail to grasp Athanasius' true incarnational concern that it must be the Son who actually lived a human life. The criticism itself bears no relationship to his actual Christology, rather it is the mere imposing of a flawed and erroneous template by which to falsely interpret his Christology. Actually, the whole issue and the ultimate censure of Athanasius' Christology for not subscribing to a human soul would never have arisen if these misconceived and artificial templates had not been capriciously imposed upon the whole of patristic Christology.

In the light of the discussion on the soul, it is no longer surprising that Athanasius endorses the Council of Alexandria in 362 for it was a position that he himself long held.

⁴² *Contra Arianos*, 3.57.

⁴³ *Contra Arianos*, 3.38 and 46.

For they [the Fathers of the Council] confessed also that the Saviour had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that his body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word himself a salvation of body only, but of soul as well.⁴⁴

Also, Athanasius writes to Epictetus insisting that the Son actually assumed a whole man for ‘the salvation of the whole man was brought about ... [And salvation does not] extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul’.⁴⁵ In both passages Athanasius is anticipating the dictum of Gregory of Nazianzus that ‘What is not assumed is not healed’,⁴⁶ and thus the Son of God, in becoming man, must have assumed both a body and a soul.⁴⁷

Before proceeding to the final section of this chapter where we will examine more closely the soteriological significance, one further point must be made concerning the relationship between Son of God and his humanity. Athanasius argued not only that the human affections and passions must be predicated of the Son, but also that the Son’s ‘divine’ deeds must equally be done as man. As incarnate the Son did not do divine deeds in a man, but he performed divine deeds as a man for that is the manner in which the Son existed. Not only was ‘the flesh’ not external to the Word when he suffered, but it was also not external to him when ‘he did divinely his Father’s works, but in the body itself did the Lord do them’. Thus, in healing Peter’s mother-in-law, ‘he stretched forth his hand humanly, but he stopped the illness divinely’.⁴⁸ The same is the case in Jesus’ healing the blind man through the use of his spittle and in using his human voice to call Lazarus from the tomb.⁴⁹ While the Son of God is doing something only God has the power to do, he is not performing divine deeds in a divine manner, but he is doing divine deeds in a human manner because he is doing them as the incarnate Son. This, again, has important soteriological overtones in that the work of salvation is done by the Son of God, for only God can effect humankind’s salvation, but the manner in which that divine salvation is effected is as man. For Athanasius, salvation is a divine work done humanly.

It is in this sense also that Athanasius’ understanding of the Son using his humanity as an instrument must be understood. It is not an instrument external to him, such as a human being uses a pencil to write or a hammer to pound nails. Rather, the humanity of the Son is an instrument in that it is integral to the manner and mode of his very being and so acting as man.⁵⁰

44 *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, 7.

45 *Ad Epictetum*, 7.

46 See *Ep.* 101.7

47 On this issue of ‘the soul’ I am disagreeing with what I myself have previously written (*Does God Change?*, p. 24) and in so doing equally disagreeing with Kelly’s (*Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 284–89) and Grillmeier’s (*Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1, pp. 308–28) critical assessment of Athanasius’ position on the human soul.

48 *Contra Arianos*, 3.32.

49 Besides the previous note, see also *De Sententia Dionysii*, 9, *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, 7, *Ad Adelphium*, 3 and letter 61.3 to John and Antiochus.

50 Grillmeier misinterprets Athanasius, believing that for him the body is something that the Son directly manipulates as an instrument apart from who he is. See his *Christ in*

When we see him doing or saying anything divinely, through the instrument of his own body (δι' ὀργάνου τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος), we may know that being God he so works; and also, if we see him speaking or suffering humanly, we may not be ignorant that bearing flesh he became man, and hence so acts and speaks. For if we recognize what is proper to each, we see and understand that both these things and those are done by one (ἐξ ἑνὸς πραττόμενα).⁵¹

For Athanasius, it is the 'one' incarnate Son who is the sole actor in all the deeds he performs, whether he eats bread or multiplies the loaves, for all actions are done in a human manner as that is the manner in which he now exists.⁵²

Salvation: Becoming Deified in Christ

As was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter and has become more evident throughout, we will now see just how central to Athanasius' soteriology are the three incarnational truths – that it is truly the divine Son of God who is man, that it is truly man that the Son of God is, and that the Son of God truly is man.⁵³ Throughout his defence of Nicea and his assault on Arianism these truths are marshalled so as to articulate and so insure a proper understanding of salvation; the absence of any one of them would nullify Jesus' salvific work. We find this well illustrated, when Athanasius movingly proclaims the marvellous exchange that takes place between the incarnate Son and those who believe:

For he [the Son] suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in him. He descended that he might raise us up, he went down to corruption, that corruption might put on immortality, he became weak for us, that we might rise with power, he descended to death, that he might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead. Finally, he became man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us.⁵⁴

While Athanasius' incarnational soteriology is sprinkled throughout his writings, I will attempt to bring some logical order to his thought. This order takes the form of a prolegomenon, five major points, and a three point conclusion.

the Christian Tradition, vol. 1, pp. 317–18. For an excellent refutation of Grillmeier, see K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, pp. 70–2 and his “‘The Body as Instrument’”: A Reevaluation of Athanasius' Logos/Sarx Christology’, *Coptic Church Review* 18 (1997): 78–84.

51 *Contra Arianos*, 3.35. See also 3.31.

52 Such an understanding of the Incarnation refutes any notion that Athanasius underplays or disregards the humanity of Christ. For the importance of Christ's humanity within the soteriology of Athanasius, see K. Anatolios, ‘The Soteriological Significance of Christ's Humanity in St. Athanasius’, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 40 (1996): 265–86. Moreover, it makes mockery of Hanson's own derision that Athanasius espouses ‘a “space-suit Christology”’ where the Son's ‘relation to his body is no closer than that of an astronaut to his space-suit’ (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 448).

53 See again as quoted at the beginning of this chapter *Contra Arianos*, 2.70.

54 *Festal Letter*, 10.8.

The first thing to note, by way of prolegomenon, is that Athanasius, almost in Irenaean fashion, sees the salvific incarnation of the Son of God as something predestined by the Father before the foundation of the world. Commenting on Ephesians 1:3–5, Athanasius observes that human beings were chosen, before they were created, to be adopted by the Father through Christ. Thus, ‘the Lord himself was founded “before the world,” inasmuch as he had a purpose, for our sakes, to take on him through the flesh all the inheritance of judgment that lay against us, and we henceforth were made sons in him’.⁵⁵ For Athanasius, as the wise architect not only prepares all of his materials prior to undertaking his building project, but also lays aside ample supplies for future needed repair, so the Father not only created us through his Word, but also, even before creation: ‘prior to us is the repair of our salvation founded in Christ, that in him we might be newly-created’.⁵⁶ Athanasius thus does not see the Incarnation as something unforeseen but now necessary in the light of sin. Rather, the Father foresaw the need and so centrally placed, from the onset of creation, his incarnate Son within the divine economy as the means of humankind’s salvation.

With this in mind Athanasius perceives that the salvific work of the Incarnate Son must first progress within his own humanity and only then, after he himself has been made perfect and so deified, are human beings, by being joined to him, able to progress themselves in the process of deification.⁵⁷ This is what the Gospel of Luke (2:52) is referring to when it speaks of Jesus ‘advancing’. While the Son became man, he only, as man, gradually became more progressively deified and so manifested his divinity, the culmination of which was his conquering sin and death on the cross and his rising fully deified as a glorious man. ‘The manhood advanced in wisdom, transcending (ὑπερανὰβῆινον) by degrees human nature, being deified, and becoming and appearing to all as the organ of wisdom for the operation and the shining forth of the Godhead.’⁵⁸ That Athanasius understands the work of salvation first redounding to the Son’s humanity and then to the whole of humankind can be seen in a number of ways.

As we saw already in his *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius recognizes that the Son did not take upon himself some untainted generic humanity, but rather he assumed the fallen humanity of the race of Adam. As all were dying in Adam so now in Christ ‘we are all reviving’.⁵⁹ The Son came to dwell in flesh that ‘sin might perfectly be expelled from the flesh’.⁶⁰ This is because the Father sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and within that flesh condemned the sin that lies therein.⁶¹ Thus, in accordance with Philippians, the Son took on “our body of humiliation,” and took a

55 *Contra Arianos*, 2.76. In this same passage, Athanasius also states that before the world ‘there had been prepared for us in Christ the hope of life and salvation’.

56 *Contra Arianos*, 2.77.

57 See J.B. Berchem, ‘Le Christ Sanctificateur d’après Saint Athanase’, *Angelicum* 15 (1938): 515–58 and C.R. Strange, ‘Athanasius on Divinization’, *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 342–6.

58 *Contra Arianos*, 3.53.

59 *Contra Arianos*, 1.59.

60 *Contra Arianos*, 2.56.

61 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.60.

servant's form, putting on that flesh which was enslaved to sin'.⁶² 'For as by receiving our infirmities, he is said to be infirm himself – though not himself infirm, for he is the power of God – and he became sin and a curse for us, though not having sinned himself, but because he bore our sins and our curse.'⁶³

For Athanasius, the Son became man to undergo death and to rise again so that he could destroy the works of the devil, but he could only do this if he became one like ourselves. 'Therefore the perfect Word of God puts around himself an imperfect body, and is said to be "created for the works"; that paying the debt in our stead, he might in himself perfect what was wanting in man.'⁶⁴ For Athanasius, then, the Son of God took on our sin-scarred humanity in order to make it holy. The Son became 'man that he might deify us in himself ... and [so make us] "partakers of the divine nature," as blessed Peter wrote, ... God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh'.⁶⁵ Simply put: 'The Word was made man in order to sanctify the flesh.'⁶⁶

There were important moments in Jesus' life where he progressed in holiness, for example, in his baptism. As God, the Son eternally possessed the fullness of holiness and was baptised that we might come to share in his holiness; however, his own humanity had to be first sanctified so that we might come to share in that sanctification.⁶⁷ 'When he is baptised, we it is who in him are baptised ... for he sanctifies himself that we might be sanctified in him.'⁶⁸

Jesus, as the 'first born', must first experience the fruit of redemption and only then can humankind participate in it.

His flesh was saved and liberated before all others, as being the Word's body; henceforth we, becoming incorporated with it, are saved after that pattern ... He was the first to rise, as man, raising his body for our sakes. Henceforth, since he has risen, we, too, from him and through him rise in due course from the dead.⁶⁹

Thus, the Son became man precisely that humankind might be 'perfected in him and restored, as it was made at the beginning – with yet greater grace. For, on rising from the dead we shall no longer fear death, but in Christ shall reign forever in the heavens.'⁷⁰ As Jesus took on incorruptibility in his resurrection, so 'it is clear that the resurrection of all of us will take place; and since his body remained without corruption, there can be no doubt regarding our incorruption'.⁷¹

62 *Contra Arianos*, 1.43.

63 *Contra Arianos*, 2.55. Athanasius states that 'the Word came down, and being incorruptible, put on a corruptible body for the salvation of all' (*Festal Letter*, 6.4).

64 *Contra Arianos*, 2.66.

65 *Ad Adelphium*, 4. See A.L. Kolp, 'Partakers of the Divine Nature: The Use of II Peter 1:4 by Athanasius', *Studia Patristica* 17 (1979): 1018–23.

66 *Contra Arianos*, 2.10.

67 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.46–7.

68 *Contra Arianos*, 1.48.

69 *Contra Arianos*, 2.61. See also 64.

70 *Contra Arianos*, 2.67.

71 *Festal Letter*, 11.14. See also *Contra Arianos*, 3.58.

Athanasius equally understands Jesus' resurrection, again following Philippians, as his perfecting 'exaltation'. The Son is exalted not as God, 'but the exaltation is of the manhood', for he humbled himself in assuming humankind's humanity even unto death on the cross.⁷² The Son's humanity was raised up and exalted because it was not external to him, but his own.⁷³ For Athanasius, the exaltation of the Son's humanity was none other than that it was fully deified and so made perfect.⁷⁴ Moreover, since all Christians die in him, so now they share in his exaltation. 'He himself should be exalted, for he is the highest, but that he may become righteousness for us, and we may be exalted in him.'⁷⁵ As the Second Adam then, the exalted and so deified incarnate Son becomes the paradigm in whom all human beings can come to share in his perfected risen humanity.⁷⁶ Where the 'first man' brought death to humankind's humanity, the Son 'quickened it with the blood of his own body'.⁷⁷

In a similar fashion, Athanasius perceives that, in being exalted and so perfectly hallowed, the incarnate Son becomes 'Lord', 'in order to hallow all by the Spirit'.⁷⁸ In being made fully holy in the Spirit, Athanasius argues that we can rightly be called 'gods', not in the sense that we are equal to the Son by nature, but because we have become beneficiaries of his grace.⁷⁹ Human beings are, therefore, 'sons and gods' because they 'were adopted and deified through the Word'.⁸⁰ Since the Son is himself God who became man, humankind can be deified by being united to his glorious humanity, 'for because of our relationship to his body, we too have become God's temple, and in consequence are made God's sons'.⁸¹

For Athanasius, the perfecting and so hallowing of Jesus through his glorious exaltation as a risen man is summed up in his notion of deification. Moreover, as Jesus is deified so those who are united to him are perfected and so hallowed by being united to him and so deified as well. Deification is not then the changing of our human nature into something other than it is, that is, into another kind of being. Rather, deification for Athanasius is the making of humankind into what it was meant to be from the very beginning, that is, the perfect image of the Word who is the perfect image of the Father. Moreover, this deification is only effected by being taken into the very divine life of the Trinity. Thus, as the Son is the Son of the Father because he is begotten of the Father and so is ontologically one with the Father, so Christians imitate this divine oneness by being taken up into it. Commenting on Jesus' prayer, that Christians would be one with him as he is with the Father (see Jn. 17:21), Athanasius perceives that it is through being united to Jesus' 'body' that we become one body with him and so are united to the Father himself.⁸² This 'uniting'

72 *Contra Arianos*, 1.41.

73 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.45.

74 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.42 and 45.

75 *Contra Arianos*, 1.41.

76 See *Contra Arianos*, 1.44.

77 *Contra Arianos*, 2.65.

78 *Contra Arianos*, 2.14. See also 18.

79 See *Contra Arianos*, 3.19.

80 *Contra Arianos*, 1.39. See also 38.

81 *Contra Arianos*, 1.43.

82 See *Contra Arianos*, 3.22.

is the work of the Holy Spirit. ‘The Son is in the Father, as his proper Word and Radiance; but we, apart from the Spirit, are strange and distant from God, yet by the participation of the Spirit we are knit into the Godhead.’⁸³ Thus the goal of creation is now achieved, that is, human beings have communion with the Father through his eternal Word.

For since the Word is in the Father, and the Spirit is given from the Word, he wills that we should receive the Spirit, that when we receive it, thus having the Spirit of the Word which is in the Father, we too may be found, on account of the Spirit, to become one in the Word, and through him in the Father.⁸⁴

Divinization then, for Athanasius, is the sharing fully in the life of the Trinity and it is this sharing in the divine life that thoroughly transforms the believer into the adopted likeness of the Son.

Three points need to be emphasized in concluding our discussion of Athanasius’ soteriology – two positive and one negative. Firstly, to be divinized human beings must come into communion with the risen divinized humanity of the Son. Only through this union with Christ’s risen humanity are believers transformed into his likeness and so share in his own divine life, which is communion with the Father. Secondly, what is noticeable here is that Athanasius, unlike in his previous writings, gives due recognition to the Holy Spirit as the bond by which Christians are united to the Word’s risen humanity, being transformed into his likeness through this union, and so coming into communion with the Father as his children. Thirdly, while Athanasius does speak of Jesus’ death on the cross as salvific – the taking on of humankind’s punishment and debt as well as destroying the power of Satan and reconciling us to the Father; yet, he does not develop the causal connection between these. He obviously believes that the cross effects these salvific ends, yet he does not elaborate on how the cross exactly does so. Athanasius is much more keen, and so his soteriology is much more developed, on the salvific effects than it is on the cause of these effects – humankind’s divinization in all its various facets.

Conclusion

We have now come full circle with Athanasius’ soteriological thought. The Father, having eternally begotten his Son, is the source of all life through his Son. Human beings are created in the likeness of the Son through whom they were created and through whom they possess union with the Father. In the aftermath of sin that same Son recreated them in his own divine image by becoming one like them. He takes on his own image in order to renew it through his death and resurrection. Having become the exalted risen Lord, the Son, through the Holy Spirit, unites human beings to himself, and so transforms them into his perfect likeness, thus elevating them to communion with the Father. This culminates in their full divinization by taking on,

⁸³ *Contra Arianos*, 3.24.

⁸⁴ *Contra Arianos*, 3.25. For a further passage on the work of the Holy Spirit in humankind’s deification, see also *De Decretis*, 14.

in the resurrection, the incarnate Son's own incorruptible nature. For Athanasius, this is the marvellous story, the economy of humankind's salvation – a plan conceived by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and terminated, within the lives of human beings, in the Holy Spirit.

We have examined Athanasius' understanding of the relationship between the Father and Son and his soteriological Christology. In the following chapter we will look more closely at his Trinitarian thought as it is expressed in his teaching on the Holy Spirit. Here too we will find that soteriology is at the heart of what Athanasius has to say.

Chapter 6

The Trinity and the Holy Spirit

In Chapter Four we examined Athanasius' anti-Arian defence and interpretation of the Nicene Creed's proclamation of the Son's full divinity in relationship to the Father. Within these writings Athanasius, especially in his earlier expositions, does not present any sustained arguments on behalf of the Trinity as such. However, as we will see, what he does say is significant. Later, when the question of the status of the Holy Spirit began to emerge, Athanasius articulated his understanding of the Trinity more fully. In this chapter we will first investigate his initial perception of the Trinity, and then his more mature account, specifically in relation to his arguments on behalf of the divinity of the Holy Spirit as contained within his *Letters to Serapion*.¹

Athanasius' Trinitarian Doxology

Within the heat of the Arian crisis Athanasius primarily speaks of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit within a doxological context. For example we find such statements as 'To the God and Father (τῷ Θεῷ καὶ Πατρὶ) is due the glory, honour and worship, with his co-existent Son and Word, together with the All-holy and Life-giving Spirit, now and to the endless ages of ages. Amen.'²

Or again, Athanasius serves not a creature but the God who 'created all things through thy Word, the only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom to thee the Father, together with the same Word, in the Holy Spirit, be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.'³

This doxological setting is extremely important for Athanasius for it attests to, and so is, the foundation for the distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as well as their equality as the one God.⁴

1 For others studies of Athanasius' understanding of the Holy Spirit, see T.C. Campbell, 'The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Athanasius', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 408–40; Hanson, *In the Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 748–60; C. Kannengiesser, 'Athanasius of Alexandria and the Holy Spirit between Nicea I and Constantinople I', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 48 (1981): 166–80; and Pettersen, *Athanasius*, pp. 183–9.

2 *De Decretis*, 32.

3 *Historia Arianorum*, 80. See also *Apologia de Fuga*, 27.

4 While we will see throughout this chapter that Athanasius argues for the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, in keeping with the Scriptures he never simply calls the Holy Spirit 'God'. This is also true of Basil the Great in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, and even within the Creed of Constantinople I (381) which states: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the

For the Triad, all-praised, revered and worshipped, is one and indivisible and without degrees. It is united without confusion, just as the Monad also is distinguished without separation. For the fact of those venerable living creatures offering together threefold praises, saying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’, demonstrates that the three subsistences (ὑποστάσεις) are perfect, just as in saying ‘Lord’ they declare the one essence (ἡ μία οὐσία).⁵

Athanasius is normally content to allow the proper scriptural titles – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – to designate the distinct identity of the three, yet here, in this early commentary on Luke 10:22, he is not afraid to use the collective term *hypostasis* to refer to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is in contrast to his later reluctance to use the term in deference to the anathemas of the Council of Nicea.⁶ Nonetheless, towards the end of the Arian controversy, at the Council of Alexandria in 362, in the light of the *homoiousion* bishops’ fear of latent Sabellianism within the Nicene proclamation, Athanasius is once more willing to allow the use of the term as long as it does not mean that the three *hypostases* are three separate beings, the Father being alone truly God. This is, obviously, of immense importance not only for clarifying Trinitarian concepts and language, but also for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties who shared the same faith. Both sides agreed that they were, ultimately, upholding the same doctrine.

Well, thereupon they who had been blamed for saying that there were three Substances agreed with others [who said that there was one Substance], while those who had spoken of one Essence, also confessed the doctrine of the former as interpreted by them [that the Father, the Son and the Spirit, while all equally the one God, were distinct *hypostases*, that is, three distinct subjects with their own distinct identities].⁷

This developmental history of Athanasius’ discernment of and sensitivity to the term *hypostasis* also demonstrates that he, contrary to the doubts of some of his contemporary opponents and contrary to the judgement of some scholars today, never espoused a Sabellian position.⁸ Throughout his academic life, whether he utilized the term *hypostasis* or was reluctant to do so, Athanasius consistently acknowledged, by his rigorous and exacting employment of the names themselves, that the terms ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ were what had been scripturally revealed and so more than adequate to designate and so convey their unique and irreducible identities.

In contrast to Athanasius, the Arians held that God was first ‘a Monad’ and only later became a Triad through God creating the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus the Triad was not ‘everlasting’.⁹ ‘But this is not so; perish the thought; the Triad is not originated, but there is an eternal and single Godhead in a Triad, and there is one

giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.’

5 In *Illud Omnia*, 6.

6 See *Expositio Fidei*, 2.

7 *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, 5–6

8 See, for example, Hanson, *In the Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 429.

9 *Contra Arianos*, 1.17. Athanasius is obviously employing the term ‘Monad’ in a different sense than in the previous quote. There he was emphasizing the unity of the Father,

glory of the Holy Triad.¹⁰ The Arians presume to divide the Triad ‘into different natures’ and in so doing make the Son and Holy Spirit creatures. However, it is the Triad itself that is ‘the Creator and Framer’. The Arians have become like the Greeks who ‘introduce an originated Triad and so level it with things originated’.

[However,] the faith of the Christians acknowledges the blessed Triad as unalterable and perfect and ever what it was, neither adding to it what is more, nor imputing to it any loss ... and therefore it dissociates it from things generated, and guards as indivisible and worships the unity of the Godhead (τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς θεότητος) itself.¹¹ Christian worship thus affords Athanasius a fourfold affirmation. Firstly, the mere act of worship attests that all who are worshiped are truly divine; otherwise such worship would be idolatrous. Secondly, since all those who are worshiped are truly divine, it must be so from all eternity and, therefore, all are unoriginately perfect and unchangeable. Thirdly, the triadic nature of the worship affirms that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit eternally possess distinct and so non-interchangeable identities as their discrete names imply. Fourthly, the very act by which they are worshiped together, while possessing their distinct identities, itself equally affirms that they are all unvaryingly the one God. Thus, this doxological affirmation contains within itself the divine and eternal unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as well as their distinct identities.

It is not surprising then that, within the context of this doxological worship, Athanasius upholds from the onset the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. As the term ‘Father’ implies the Son and the term ‘Son’ implies the Father for their very names ‘carries that relationship with it’, so the Holy Spirit cannot be ‘parted either from him that sent him, or from him that conveyed him’. Athanasius agrees with Dionysius that ‘we extend the Monad indivisibly into the Triad, and conversely gather together the Triad without diminution into the Monad’.¹² As the Council of Nicea did not separate the Father from the Son but rather wrote that they were ‘*homoousios*’, so they did not ‘make the Holy Spirit alien from the Father and the Son, but rather glorified him together with the Father and the Son, the one faith of the Holy Triad, because there is in the Holy Triad also one Godhead’.¹³ Thus, while ‘the Ario-maniacs’ assert that the Son is “external” to the Father and that, like all creatures, “the Spirit is from nothing,” it is “more religious ...to entertain a belief in the one Godhead in a Triad”.¹⁴

The Trinity and Baptism

For Athanasius this triadic doxology is not merely a theological idiom, but also being an expression of worship that has soteriological significance. In professing such a

the Son and the Holy Spirit; while here he is refuting the claim that God existed singularly apart from and prior to the creation of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

10 *Contra Arianos*, 1.18.

11 *Contra Arianos*, 1.18.

12 *De Sententia Dionysii*, 17.

13 *Letter 56* (to Jovian), 4.

14 *Contra Arianos*, 3.15.

triadic doxology one is giving voice to the truth that one lives in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This communion first arises from within the sacrament of Baptism for one is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Prior to his becoming man 'the Word dispensed to the saints the Spirit as his own; so also when made man, he sanctified all by the Spirit and said to his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit"'. Moreover, then, 'when he is baptized, it is we who are baptized in him ... He sanctifies himself, that we might be sanctified in him.'¹⁵ As the Father's true Word and Wisdom the Son as God is not in need of grace. Rather, as the radiance of the Father, it is through the Son that the Father bestows all grace. Nonetheless, as the Father bestows his Spirit upon his Son as incarnate at his baptism, so on whom the Son baptizes he 'consecrated in the Holy Spirit'.¹⁶ This is why it is so essential for Athanasius that the Son and the Holy Spirit be truly God and one with the Father. The Arians baptize in the name of 'Creator and creature, and into Maker and work,' and 'in consequence the water they administer is unprofitable, since it is deficient in piety, so that he who is sprinkled by them is rather polluted by irreligion than redeemed'.¹⁷

It is important to note here that Athanasius' theology of baptism is not simply the expression that one is baptized into the divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit since all three are the one God. It also expresses a sequence of distinct individual divine actions that form the one rite of Baptism and so the one collaborative act of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father, in begetting his Son, has bestowed within him the full divine life of the Holy Spirit. It is this bestowal that empowers the Son as man, in turn, to bestow the divine life of the Spirit upon those he himself baptizes in the name of the Father. Baptism then culminates in the action of the divine Holy Spirit, who consecrates and so sanctifies the believer such that he or she is subsumed within the divine life of the Father and the Son. Thus baptism becomes a hermeneutical principle for discerning the inner life the Triad, especially the position of the Holy Spirit.

In commenting on 1 John 4:13 that believers come to abide in God because he has given his Spirit, Athanasius articulates both his understanding of grace and the inner relationships between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christians are not in the Father as the Son is in the Father:

For the Son does not merely partake of the Spirit, that therefore he too may be in the Father; nor does he receive the Spirit, but rather he supplies it himself to all; and the Spirit does not unite the Word to the Father, but rather the Spirit receives from the Word ... and by the participation of the Spirit we are knit into the Godhead; so that our being in the Father is not ours, but is the Spirit's which is in us and abides in us ... [Thus] the Son is in the Father in one way, and we become in him in another way, and that neither we shall ever be as he, nor is the Word as we ... For he ... gives the Spirit, and whatever the Spirit has, he has from the Word ... For since the Word is in the Father, and the Spirit is given

¹⁵ *Contra Arianos*, 1.48.

¹⁶ *Contra Arianos*, 2.41. Athanasius also perceives that the Son, being truly God, is the fountain from which comes the living water of the Holy Spirit upon all who believe. See Letter 44.

¹⁷ *Contra Arianos*, 1.42 and 1.43.

from the Word, he wills that we should receive the Spirit, that, when we receive it, thus having the Spirit of the Word which is in the Father, we too may be found on account of the Spirit to become one in the Word, and through him in the Father ... For what the Word has by nature, as I said, in the Father, that he wishes to be given to us through the Spirit irrevocably ... And so we are sons and gods because of the Word in us, so we shall be in the Son and in the Father, and we shall be accounted to have become one in Son and in Father, because that Spirit is in us, which is in the Word which is in the Father.¹⁸

In this complex and lengthy passage Athanasius is attempting to articulate two interrelated points. Firstly, he wants to differentiate between how human beings are sons and therefore gods, and how the Son is the Son and is therefore God. Unlike the Son, human beings come to share in and so abide within God because the Son, who is the source of the Spirit, bestows that Spirit upon human beings and in so doing the Spirit unites them to the Son and in whom they are then united to the Father. Christians are 'made true sons through him [the Son] by adoption and grace, as partaking of his Spirit'.¹⁹ For Athanasius there is here a chain of unity: Christians are united to the Father because the Spirit, who is in them, is in the Son who is in the Father. Athanasius thus conceives the relationships between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a soteriological fashion for it is these very relationships that not only reveal who they are in themselves, but also determines what they distinctively do conjointly within the economy of salvation so as to embrace believers within the communion of their own divine life.

Secondly, within the above passage, Athanasius is also arguing for the full divinity of the Son in that the Son does not merely, like creatures, participate in the Spirit and so becomes united to the Father. Rather, the Spirit actually receives from the Word because the Word, as God, possesses all that Father is. Thus, Athanasius is saying that the Spirit only is the truly divine Spirit because the Son, as God, has given to the Spirit all that the Father has given to him, that is, his divinity. What is fascinating here is that Athanasius is stressing not that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, though he does uphold this as well, but rather that the Spirit is from the Son, for the Son has given to the Spirit what he himself has received from the Father. Therefore, the Spirit shares in the one divine nature through the Son, but not in the sense that the Son does not have an active role in the Spirit being divine, rather the Spirit comes to be the Spirit only because the Son bestows upon him the divinity that he himself has received from the Father. While Athanasius does not explicitly state the Augustinian *filioque*, his argument bears a striking resemblance to the one Augustine himself will employ and will be followed by Aquinas, that is, that all that the Spirit possesses from the Father comes through the Son's bestowal and so the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.²⁰ This issue of how Athanasius

18 *Contra Arianos*, 3.24 and 25.

19 *Contra Arianos*, 3.19. See also *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 1.

20 See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.25–27 and *In Evang. Joh. Tractate* 99.8–9. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.36.2 ad 1.

For various views on whether or not Athanasius teaches the '*filioque*' see Campbell, 'The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Athanasius', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 437–8.

conceives the Spirit's relationship to the Son will continue to arise in the course of this chapter.

With the emergent debate over the status of the Holy Spirit, Athanasius will move beyond his doxological and baptismal understanding of the Trinity and develop further his perception of the Trinity and particularly the place of the Holy Spirit within it. So we now turn to his *Letters to Serapion*.

The Trinity and the Holy Spirit

Around 360, during Athanasius' third exile, Bishop Serapion of Thmuis, his friend and supporter, wrote to him asking for help in refuting a group of Christians, who, while professing that the Son was truly God, denied such divine status to the Holy Spirit.²¹ They were known as the Tropicists because of their figurative interpretation of Scripture. They appear to have been influenced by Aetius and Eunomius, who claimed that the Son was 'unlike' (*anomoios*) the Father, for they professed that the Spirit was 'unlike' the Father and the Son. The basis for such a claim was that Scripture never explicitly states that the Holy Spirit is God and, moreover, some scripture passages appear to refer to him as a creature. For example, Amos 4:13 (Septuagint) speaks of God creating spirit, and 1 Tim 5:21 enumerates God and Jesus Christ and 'the elect angels', and thus they concluded that Spirit was a ministering angel (see also Hebrews 1:14). Moreover, they argued that if the Spirit were truly divine, then he would be a second Son and so brother of the Son, or if he proceeded from the Son then he would be a Grandson. Since both alternatives are ludicrous, the Holy Spirit must be a creature. Athanasius, in his four letters to Serapion, wants not only to refute their false interpretation of Scripture and their theology which issues from it, but also to present a positive scriptural understanding, founded upon right faith, that testifies to the Holy Spirit's true divine status.²²

Athanasius begins his discussion by noting that as 'the Arians, in denying the Son, deny also the Father; so also these men, in speaking evil of the Holy Spirit, speak evil of the Son'.²³ The question that immediately arises is: Why is such the case? It is obvious that if one denies the divinity of the Son, one denies the divinity of the Father for the Father can only be God the Father if the Son is God the Son. The implication, again as seen above, is that the divinity of the Holy Spirit is predicated and so is, in some manner, dependent upon the divinity of the Son for Son gives

This issue will be discussed further when we examine Athanasius' *Letters to Serapion*.

21 See *Ad Serapionem*, 1.1.

22 While Athanasius' first letter to Serapion is the longest and most significant (and the one that we will primarily focus upon), he subsequently wrote three more, though what are now termed letters two and three actually compose a single whole. What is now termed letter two, as a prolegomenon to what is now termed letter three, is a defence of the Son's divinity.

While I have criticized Athanasius for his slowness in taking up the topic of the Holy Spirit within his earlier theological works, it is interesting that he is the first to write, in a sustained and coherent manner, a 'treatise' on the Holy Spirit.

23 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.1. The translation is taken from 'The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit', translated by C.R.B. Shapland (London, 1951).

all that is his to the Holy Spirit similar to the Father giving to him all that is his. To deny the divinity of the Holy Spirit would then be to deny the divinity of the Son. For Athanasius, ‘the Spirit of the Son’ cannot ‘be a creature’, for, as ‘the Word and the Father’ are one and so both divine, so ‘the Holy Spirit’ shares ‘the same oneness with the Son as the Son with Father’ and so must be divine as well. One cannot mix different natures within the Godhead of the Triad for such would destroy it. If God is a Triad, ‘as indeed he is! – then how do they class the Spirit who belongs to the Triad with creatures which come after the Triad?’ Again, if ‘they would think correctly of the Word, they would think soundly of the Spirit also, who proceeds from the Father, and, belonging to the Word, is from him given to the disciples and all who believe in him.’ For Athanasius, those who deny the divine status of the Spirit and in so doing deny the divinity of the Son, ultimately ‘have not the Father’ for he too then would not be God.²⁴ It is precisely because the Holy Spirit is one with the Father as coming from him and so belongs to the Son who is one with the Father that he must be equally God as they are God.

Having provided an initial defence of the Holy Spirit’s divinity founded upon his position within the divine Triad, Athanasius proceeds to address the contested scripture passages. He notes that nowhere in Scripture is the Holy Spirit simply called ‘spirit’ but rather he is always referred to in relation to other significant qualifiers, such as, ‘of God’, ‘of the Father’, or ‘of the Son’. Moreover, when referring to the Holy Spirit, the article ‘the’ is consistently employed. Thus references to ‘spirit’ refer not to the divine uncreated Holy Spirit but to the created human spirit.²⁵ Equally the Holy Spirit is not one who is renewed but, since he is the Spirit of God and of Christ, he is the one who renews the human spirit, ‘then it is blasphemy for you to say that the Spirit is a creature, in whom the Father, through the Word, perfects and renews all things’.²⁶ Nor then, for Athanasius, can the Holy Spirit be an angel, for again Scripture never makes such a claim. Rather, the Son sends the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father in whom all are baptized, and it was this same Spirit who anointed Moses and led the Israelites through the desert into the promised land.²⁷ Athanasius appeals again in conclusion to the unity of the Triad.

24 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.2.

Athanasius, following Jn. 15:26, never uses *exporeuesthae* in relationship to the Son.

25 See *Ad Serapionem*, 1.4. Athanasius proceeds to confirm his argument by listing Old Testament passages that illustrate his point, for example, Gen. 1:2 and 6:3, Num. 11:29, Judg. 3:10, 11:29, 12:24–25, 15:14, Ps. 51:11, 143:10, Is. 30:1, 61:1 and 63:9–10, Ez. 11:24, Micah 2:7, Joel 2:28 and Zech. 1:6 and 7:12. The New Testament also abundantly confirms his argument: Jn. 14:26, 15:24, and 20:22, Matt. 10:20, 12:25 and 28:19, Acts 1:4, 2:1–5, 20:28 and 21:11, 1 Pt. 1:9–11, 1 Jn. 4:13, 1 Cor. 2:10–12, 3:16, 6:11 and 12:11, Gal. 3:11 and 4:6–7, Eph. 4:3 and 4:30, Phil. 1:18–20, and 3:3, 1 Thes. 4:8, and Heb. 9:8, 10:23, and 9:13–14. See *Ad Serapionem*, 1.6–8.

26 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.9.

27 See *Ad Serapionem*, 1.11–13.

For the holy and blessed Triad is indivisible and one in itself. When mention is made of the Father, there is included also his Word, and the Spirit who is in the Son. If the Son is named, the Father is in the Son, and the Spirit is not outside the Word.²⁸

The pattern of Athanasius' arguments is threefold. Firstly, he contests those passages that look to confirm the created nature of the Holy Spirit and, secondly, simultaneously marshals those passages which assert the Spirit's divinity. Thirdly, these affirmative passages invariably are found within the context of the Spirit's unity with the Father and the Son and so this Triadic unity exhibits, for Athanasius, the Spirit's divinity for the Father and the Son are themselves God.

If the Holy Spirit is not a creature such as an angel and so divine, does this not demand that he be another Son and so a brother to the Son? But if such be the case, how can the Son be the only begotten? Or, if the Spirit is of the Son does not this make the Father his grandfather? While such questions appear to demonstrate the absurdity of claiming the Spirit's divinity, they equally are at the heart of Trinitarian theology and demand an intelligible answer from those who profess that the Spirit is indeed God. However, for Athanasius, those who ask such questions are 'busy-bodies desiring to "search the deep things of God"'. Such queries are 'impious ... for it is not fitting to ask such questions about the Godhead. For God is not as man, that we should dare to ask human questions about him.'²⁹ The only proper response is 'to be silent on these matters and disregard these people'.³⁰ Athanasius' appeal to 'mystery' here is hardly satisfactory, and it is in answer to these questions that will differentiate Eastern Trinitarian thought from that of the West. Nonetheless, Athanasius does resort, as he habitually does within all of his theology, to the formulae and conventions of Scripture in that the Father is called Father, the Son is called Son and the Holy Spirit is neither called another Son nor a Grandson. While the Spirit here is only designated in terms of what he is not, yet Athanasius concludes that 'the Spirit of the Father is called Spirit of the Son' and, as such, is distinguished from them. He again asserts that 'the whole Triad is one God'.³¹ To desire any more than this is once more to demand more than human knowledge can obtain, for 'here the cherubim spread the covering of their wings'.³² While Athanasius is reluctant to go any further in defining the unique subjectivity or singular identity of the Holy Spirit than by specifying that the Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and is called the Spirit of the Son', he is again, it appears to me, on the threshold of perceiving that the unique identity of the Spirit resides precisely in his 'proceeding' relationship from the Father and from the Son. As Athanasius himself states: we must 'acknowledge

28 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.14. It should be noted that Athanasius employs here an argument with regards to the Spirit's divinity that is parallel to one he used in defending the Son's divinity, that is, being 'in' and not 'outside'. The Son is in the Father and not outside the Father and so is God. Similarly, the Spirit is in the Son and not outside the Son and so is God. As we will see in the following, Athanasius exploits this argument on numerous occasions.

29 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.15.

30 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.16.

31 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.16–17. See also 1.19 and 4.4.

32 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.17.

what is written and join the Son to the Father, and not divide the Spirit from the Son'.³³

Athanasius reverts back to his constant insistence that the formula and images of Scripture must be normative. In so doing he once more employs his favourite similes. 'The Father is called fountain and light.' Thus the Son 'is called river' and 'radiance'. The Son is in the Spirit 'by whom we are enlightened'. Moreover, it is from the river of the Son that we 'drink of the Spirit' and so 'drink of Christ'. Equally the Son is the Wisdom of the Father and so in 'receiving the Spirit of Wisdom' we partake of the wisdom of the Son. Likewise, we abide in the Father and the Son and they in us because the Son 'has given us of his Spirit'. Similarly, as the Father has raised Christ from the dead by the power of the Spirit, so we, too, will rise from the dead through his Spirit that dwells in us. All of these illustrations, which manifest the distinctive actions of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, likewise testify that 'as the Son is in the Spirit, as in his own image, so also the Father is in the Son'.³⁴

What must be grasped here is Athanasius' perception that believers are conformed into the likeness of the Son, partaking of his radiance, life, power and image, because the Spirit himself is the image of the Son who is the image of the Father, and so believers come to share in all that the Son possesses from the Father. It is, for Athanasius, by being the divine image of the Son, who is the divine image of the Father, that the divinity of the Holy Spirit is absolutely guaranteed, for 'the Spirit bears the same relation to the Son as the Son to the Father'.³⁵ The implication again is that the relation between the Son and the Father is that of the Father begetting the Son and so the Son is his image. Likewise, the relationship between the Spirit to the Son is that of the Son being actively engaged in the Spirit being the Spirit who thus becomes the Son's image. Because of this dynamic inter-relationship within the Triad, Athanasius can conclude that:

As the Son, who is in the Father and the Father in him, is not a creature (κτίσμα) but pertains to the essence of the Father ... so also it is not lawful to rank with the creatures the Spirit who is in the Son, and the Son in him, nor to divide him from the Word and reduce the Triad to imperfection.³⁶

The dynamic relationship between the Father and the Son demands that the Son is one in being with the Father because the Father is in the Son since the Son reflects the Father's perfect image, and the Son is in the Father because it is the Father's

33 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.17.

34 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.19.

35 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.21. In his third Letter to Serapion Athanasius expands on this notion. Athanasius employs John 16:15 and 15:26 as the basis of his argument:

From our knowledge of the Son we may be able to have a true knowledge of the Spirit. For we shall find that the Spirit has to the Son the same proper relationship as we have known the Son to have to the Father ... so we shall find that through the Son all things are in the Spirit also ... so the Holy Spirit, which is said to belong to the Son, belongs to the Father (*Ad Serapionem*, 3.2. See also 4. 2).

36 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.21.

perfect image that he reflects. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is one in being with the Son because the Son is in the Spirit since the Spirit reflects the Son's perfect image, and the Spirit is in the Son since it is Son's perfect image that the Spirit reflects. Thus, all three are one and the same God, one and the same being.³⁷

Moreover, what is also important in the above is not only that Athanasius is reinforcing his perception that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are intimately one in the manner of their work within the economy, but also that it is actually these actions and not mere words that reveal their distinctive divine identity.

For divine Scripture, by way of relieving the impossibility of explaining and apprehending these matters in words, has given us illustrations of this kind [light, fountain, power]; that it may be lawful ... to speak without danger, and to think legitimately, and to believe that there is one sanctification (ἓνα εἶναι τὸν ἁγιασμόν) which is derived from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (τὸν ἐκ Πατρὸς δι' Υἱοῦ ἐν Πνεύματι ἁγίῳ γινόμενον).³⁸

Thus far, I have assessed positively, for the most part, Athanasius' articulation of the Holy Spirit's divinity and his relationship to the Father and the Son. However, I do have one major reservation. Obviously, the heart of Athanasius' defence resides in the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Son and so his relationship to the Father. While Athanasius does, in accordance with John 15:26, perceive that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, yet that 'proceeding' is by way of the Son who is instrumental in the Holy Spirit being the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is in the Son and the Son is in the Spirit and so as the Son makes present, within the economy of salvation, the Spirit, so the Spirit, in turn, makes present the Son. It is through this operating in tandem, this solidarity of action, between the Son and the Spirit that the work and the consequences of salvation are achieved within the economy and in the lives of believers. All of this I would hold to be true and proper.

However, what Athanasius has done in order to achieve this oneness of being and operation between the Son and the Holy Spirit, so as ensure the divinity of the Holy Spirit, is to model the Spirit's relationship to the Son after the Son's relationship to the Father. Thus, as the Son is the Father's 'image' because he is 'begotten' of the Father as Son, so the Spirit is the Son's 'image' because he is ... It is precisely here that this sentence must stop and the problem arises. The argument of this sentence, as it is structured, can have no ending. Athanasius does not have an ending, and, therefore, he does not employ a verb that can express how the Spirit comes forth from the Son so as to be the Son's image. One cannot say 'because the Spirit is begotten of the Son'. If one were to say that, then the Holy Spirit would indeed be the Son of the Son and so the Grandson of the Father. The problem lies in designating the Spirit as 'the image of the Son'. Athanasius is correct in saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and that the Son is also instrumental in establishing the divine being and identity of the Holy Spirit. However, the relationship to the Son is not that of being

³⁷ See *Contra Arianos*, 3.3–6.

³⁸ *Ad Serapionem*, 1.20.

the Son's image because the Spirit does not proceed from him by way of begetting.³⁹ The core of what Athanasius rightly wants to establish is that the Holy Spirit, because he is from the Father as well as from the Son, equally shares in their one divine nature, and so is *homoousion* with them. He believes that by resorting to the concept of 'image' facilitates his doing so. However, while the Holy Spirit's divine nature and divine subjectivity/identity are predicated upon his existential relationship both to the Father and to the Son, that singular identity as a divine subject demands a unique existential relationship that differs from the Father's and the Son's existential relationship. Thus, the Holy Spirit's unique divine identity is not by way of a chain of 'images' – the Son being the image of the Father and the Spirit being the image of the Son, but rather by way of uniquely proceeding from the Father and/through the Son so as to share their same one divine nature. This, it seems to me, is what Athanasius is ultimately wanting to uphold, but he erroneously employs the concept of 'image' in order to do so.⁴⁰ Of course what 'uniquely proceeding' does mean is the issue that has divided the east and the west for centuries.⁴¹

39 Aquinas recognizes this same problem with calling the Spirit 'the image of the Son'. See *Summa Theologiae*, I.35.2.

Part of the problem is that Athanasius, as noted above and will be further noted below, uses the Father/Son relationship as the paradigm between that of the Son and the Spirit. Thus, he can rightly employ similar arguments that he used to establish the divinity of the Son with regards to the divinity of the Holy Spirit. However, not all such arguments are applicable, such as the Spirit being the image of the Son, since the Spirit's relationship to the Son must differ in some essential manner from the Son's relationship to the Father since the Spirit is not a Son of the Son.

40 As we will see shortly, Athanasius himself seems to confirm my interpretation of him.

41 The eastern tradition, principally following the Cappadocians and not the Alexandrians (Athanasius and Cyril), speaks of the Spirit proceeding solely from the Father through the Son. However, they do not address the issue of what effect this 'proceeding through the Son' has on the Spirit. If eastern theologians did address this issue, I am confident that they would inevitably arrive at something like the *filioque*. The western tradition, following Augustine and Aquinas, does define more precisely the 'proceeding' of the Spirit by professing that the Spirit proceeds from the Father as the Father's paternal love for the Son and then proceeds from the Son as the Son's filial love for the Father. What neither tradition addresses is, if the Spirit proceeds 'through the Son' (the east) or proceeds 'from the Father and the Son' (the west), what effect does this have upon the Son? I have argued that within both traditions the Spirit's proceeding either 'through the Son' or 'and from the Son' must not only be constitutive of who the Spirit is but also who the Son is. The Son, in union with the Father, is not only determinative of who the Spirit is, but also the Holy Spirit, in union with the Father, is determinative of who the Son is. While the Father is the ultimate source of the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet they too are formative of one another. For a more complete assessment both of the east and of the west, as well as my attempt to break through the *filioque* impasse, see T.G. Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh, 1995).

Ten Scriptural and Soteriological Proofs for the Spirit's Divinity

Returning now to Athanasius' affirmation of the Spirit's divinity, he, at this juncture in his first *Letter to Serapion*, begins a series of scriptural arguments, ten in all, as to why the Holy Spirit is God. All of them, as one might expect from the above, pertain to the Holy Spirit's intimate relationship to the Father and to the Son and so his oneness of being with them. Moreover, all of Athanasius' arguments are of soteriological significance in that only if the Holy Spirit is truly God is he empowered to enact the salvific effects scripturally attributed to him.⁴²

1. The first argument is founded upon 1 Corinthians 2:11–12:

For if, as no one knows the things of man save the spirit of man that is in him, so no one knows the things of God save the Spirit of God; would it not be evil speech to call the Spirit who is in God a creature, him who searches even the deep things of God?⁴³

As the spirit of a human being is within him, being part of his very being, and comprehending his deepest thoughts, so too, the Spirit, if he is to comprehend the inner thoughts of God, must too, for Athanasius, be one in being with him and so equally divine. It is this divine Spirit, who dwells in believers, who reveals the salvific truth of the Father's Word.

2. The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of holiness and renewal.⁴⁴ It is creatures who are sanctified in the Spirit and so renewed in him. Since it is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and renews all creatures and is not sanctified or renewed himself, 'how can he be from among all things or pertain to those who partake of him?' As all is created through the Son, thus establishing that he is not one of the creatures, so the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies all creatures, thus establishes himself to be not one of them as well.⁴⁵ Moreover, it is the sanctification and renewal of the Spirit that is the salvific fruit of the Son's redemptive work.
3. The Holy Spirit is called the 'quickening Spirit' for it is by the Spirit that the Father raised Jesus from the dead, and it is that same Spirit that now dwells within believers who will raise their mortal bodies to life.⁴⁶ Again, Athanasius asks a rhetorical question: 'He that does not partake of life, but who is himself partaken of and quickens the creatures, what kinship can he have with originated things?'⁴⁷ Only in so far as the Holy Spirit shares fully in the incorruptible divine life of the Father and the Son can he dispense that incorruptible life to those who believe.
4. The Spirit is 'called unction and seal'. However, 'if the Spirit is the unction and seal with which the Word anoints and seals all things, what likeness or property could the unction and seal have to the things that are anointed and sealed?' Because it is the Word who anoints and seals in the Holy Spirit, that seal of the Spirit possesses 'the form of Christ who seals' and so believers become 'sharers in the divine nature'

42 I will be examining specifically only the series in his first letter. Nonetheless, he has a similar series, though not as complete, in his third letter, which I will note as appropriate.

43 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.22.

44 Athanasius employs Rom. 1:4, 1 Cor. 6:11, Titus 3:4–7, Ps. 104:30, and Heb. 6:4.

45 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.23. See also 1.22.

46 Besides Rom. 8:11, Athanasius also employs Jn. 4:14 and 7:39.

47 *Ad Serapionem*, 1. 23.

because they partake ‘of the Word in the Spirit’.⁴⁸ Again, Athanasius perceives that believers are divinized because the divine Spirit enables them to share in the divinity of the Word by uniting them to him.

5. Athanasius returns to a point that he briefly referred to already; through the Spirit believers ‘become partakers of God’. Christians are temples of the God because the Spirit of God dwells within them. Moreover, the unction and seal that is within Christians belongs not to a creature, ‘but to the nature of the Son who, through the Spirit who is in him, joins us to the Father’. The Spirit, abiding within believers, joins them to the very nature of the Word for the Spirit abides in the Word, and so abiding in the Word through the Spirit, Christians abide in the Father himself. Because of this salvific effect, one would be ‘mad to say that the Spirit has a created nature and not the nature of God’ for ‘the Father, through the Word, in the Holy Spirit, creates and renews all things’.⁴⁹
6. It is evident that Athanasius, in the above, argues for the Spirit’s full divinity by elucidating the manner in which the Scriptures testify to the collaboration of the Son and the Spirit in work of salvation within Christians. In order to strengthen this unity, and so the divinity of the Spirit, Athanasius once again reverts to his claim that the Spirit is ‘the image of the Son ... For as the image is, so also must be that who is its image’.⁵⁰ Notice here though that, while he does clearly assert that the Spirit is the image of the Son, the point he wants to ensure in so doing is that the Spirit is divine as the Son is divine. This is clearly affirmed in what follows. Again, ‘if the Son, because he is of the Father, is proper to his essence, it must be that the Spirit, who is said to be from God, is in essence proper to the Son’.⁵¹ It is because the Spirit is of the proper essence of the Son that he is ‘the image’ of the Son, and not because he images the Son in a manner similar to the way the Son images the Father. ‘Image’ pertains to his being God, a partaker of the divine ‘*ousia*’, and not to his distinct subjective divine identity as Spirit, his *hypostasis*. While I do not think he has clearly and consciously worked it out, Athanasius ultimately wants to assert the full divinity of the Spirit in calling him ‘the image of the Son’. In other words, the Spirit is the ‘image of the Son’ because he shares in the very same divine nature as the Son and not because the Spirit’s subjective identity or personhood is in the image of the Son.

Moreover, what is also imperative to grasp is that Athanasius is not only arguing that the Spirit is God because he is from God, but also, as I have been stressing throughout, that the Spirit partakes of the one divine nature because it is bestowed upon him by the Son – he is proper to the Son’s essence. What is ultimately important for Athanasius is that the Spirit is of the same nature as the Son and he only employs

48 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.23. Athanasius quotes Is. 61:1, Eph. 1:13, 2 Cor. 2:15, Gal. 4:19, and 2 Pt. 1:4.

In his third *Letter to Serapion* Athanasius articulates a similar argument, but what is fascinating is that he refers to the Spirit not as the breath of the Father, but rather ‘this unction is the breath of the Son’ (3.3). See also 4.3.

49 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.24. See also 3.3 and 5.

Athanasius refers to 1 Cor. 3:16–17, 1 Jn. 4:13, 2 Pt. 1:4, Ps. 104:29–30 and Titus 3:5.

50 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.24. See also 4.3.

51 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.25. It must be noted here that Athanasius once again marshals an argument on behalf of the Spirit’s divinity that is parallel to one that he used to establish the Son’s divinity, that is, that the Son is ‘proper’ to the Father and so of his essence. Equally, the Spirit is ‘proper’ to the Son and so is of his essence.

the concept of the Spirit as ‘the image’ of the Son, though erroneously, to serve this end. The following strengthens this understanding:

And so, as the Lord is Son, the Spirit is called Spirit of Sonship (Πνεῦμα υἰοθεσίας). Again, as the Son is wisdom and truth, the Spirit is described as Spirit of wisdom and truth. Again the Son is the power of God and the Lord of glory, and the Spirit is called Spirit of power and glory.⁵²

The Word being begotten of the Father is his Son, who is also Wisdom, Truth, Power and Glory. Similarly, for Athanasius, the Spirit is the Wisdom, Truth, Power and Glory of the Son and so is the Spirit of Sonship because it is the Son who confers what he has received from the Father upon the Spirit and so constitutes his divinity. The Spirit is the Spirit of Sonship, not in the sense that he is the image of the Son as another Son, but because he partakes of the Son’s full divine life with all its divine attributes, and he does so precisely and uniquely as the Spirit. The Son is Wisdom, Truth, Power and Glory, while the Spirit is the Spirit of Wisdom, Truth, Power and Glory.

Equally implied throughout, is that as the Father’s Wisdom, Truth, Glory and Power the Son does the work of the Father and so makes the Father present, so as the Son’s Wisdom, Truth, Glory and Power the Spirit does the work of the Son and so makes the Son present. In making the Son present the Spirit also makes the Father present.

7. Athanasius now proceeds to allocate to the Spirit attributes that he equally attributed to the Son when defending his divinity, that is, that ‘the Holy Spirit is incapable of change or alteration’. While the scripture passages he employs to sustain this claim are rather strained, yet the conclusion he wants to draw is evident from the outset: ‘The Holy Spirit, being in God, must be incapable of change, variation, and corruption’.⁵³
8. In a similar manner Athanasius argues that, as God is everywhere, so ‘the Spirit of the Lord fills the universe’. While creatures, including angels, are ‘circumscribed’, the Spirit, like the Word, is present with and ‘fills all things’.⁵⁴
9. Athanasius now returns to a point he has made in relation to previous arguments on behalf the Spirit’s divinity, that is, that ‘the Holy Spirit is partaken of and does not partake’. Angels and creature are able to fall away from God, but the Holy Spirit is ‘always the same’ and he is the one, being proper to the Word, who enables creatures to partake of what is of God and so is not a creature.⁵⁵
10. Lastly, ‘the Holy Spirit is one, but the creatures are many’. There are myriads of angels and creatures are many and diverse, ‘but if the Holy Spirit is one ... what likeness can there be between the Spirit and things originate?’ Athanasius harks back to his old standby: ‘Because the Spirit is one, and, still more, because he is proper to the Word who is one, he is proper to God who is one, and one in essence with him.’⁵⁶ Obviously, what is significant here is that Athanasius marshals the term *homoousios* to enhance

52 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.25. See also 4.4.

53 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.26. Athanasius employs Wis. 1:5, 1 Pt. 3:4, Wis. 12:1, 1 Cor. 2:11, and Jms. 1:17.

54 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.26. See also 3.4. Athanasius quotes Ps. 139:7 and Wis. 12:1.

55 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.27. Athanasius refers to Heb. 6:4–5.

56 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.27. See also 3.3.

the Spirit's oneness with the Father and the Son, and he can do so because as the Son is proper to the Father and thus *homoousios* to the Father so the Spirit is proper to the Word and so also *homoousios* with the Father.⁵⁷ The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all one and the same God, 'the Holy Triad'.⁵⁸

The Tradition's Witness to the Spirit's Divinity

Having put forth a multiplicity of soteriological scriptural proofs on behalf of the Spirit's divinity, Athanasius next calls upon 'the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached and the Fathers kept'.⁵⁹ Athanasius proceeds to summarize exactly what that faith is and in so doing presents one of his most complete expositions of the Trinity:

There is, then, a Triad, holy and complete, confessed to be in Father, Son and Holy Spirit (ἐν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῶ καὶ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι θεολογουμένη), having nothing foreign or external mixed with it, not composed of one that creates and one that is originated, but all creative and constructive (ὅλη τοῦ κτίζειν καὶ δημιουργεῖν οὐσα); and it is consistent in itself (ὁμοία δὲ ἑαυτῇ) and indivisible in nature, and its activity (ἐνέργεια) is one. For the Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit; thus the unity of the holy Triad (ἡ ἐνότης τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος) is preserved.⁶⁰

Athanasius is clearly distinguishing here the distinct identities of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and yet simultaneously espousing their unity of being, for while they act as the one God, it is the Father who acts through the distinct activities of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁶¹

57 The only other instance where Athanasius states that the Spirit is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son is in *Ad Serapionem*, 3.1:

If therefore the Son, because of his proper relationship with the Father and because he is a proper offspring of his essence, is not a creature, but is one in essence with the Father: the Holy Spirit likewise, because of his proper relationship with the Son ... cannot be a creature ...

Again, we see that it is because the Spirit is proper to the Son that he is *homoousion* with the Father and the Son. Being 'proper to' the Son means that his divinity is dependent upon the Son as the Son's divinity is dependent upon the Father because he is 'proper to' the Father.

It is interesting to note as well that, while Basil the Great in his *On the Holy Spirit* does not say that the Spirit is *homoousion* with the Father and the Son, Athanasius is not hesitant to do so. I would surmise that this may be another instance where Athanasius grasps more clearly the significance of the Nicene *homoousion* than does Basil. Gregory of Nazianzus, however, is impatient with such reluctance and adamantly asserts that the Spirit is God and so *homoousios* with the Father and the Son. See his *Or.* 31.10.

58 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.27.

59 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.28. See also 1.29 and 30.

60 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.28.

61 Athanasius' understanding is similar to Augustine's notion that the persons of the Trinity always act as one. See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.10. Likewise, Athanasius and Augustine would also conclude that the persons equally possess the divine attributes as the

This unity is once more exemplified in the rite of baptism. If one is baptized in the Father alone, or in the Son alone, or the Father and the Son, without the Holy Spirit, that person is not united to God. 'Justly so. For as baptism, which is given in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is one; and as there is one faith in the Triad; so also the holy Triad'. Moreover, while the gifts given by the Spirit are diverse, they 'are bestowed from the Father through the Son'.⁶² Commenting on 2 Corinthians 13:13 Athanasius also concludes that Christians possess no communion with the Father and the Son except through the Holy Spirit. 'For it is when we partake of him that we have the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Spirit himself.'⁶³ All of these instances demonstrate that 'the activity of the Triad is one'.⁶⁴

Athanasius concludes his first *Letter to Serapion* by stating that both the teaching of the Scripture and that 'of the saints' bear witness to the faith of the one 'Catholic Church' – the Holy Spirit is indeed divine, and that 'I have delivered the tradition, without inventing anything extraneous to it. What I learned, that have I inscribed'.⁶⁵ 'True worshipers, therefore, worship the Father, but in Spirit and Truth, confessing the Son and in him the Spirit. For the Spirit is inseparable from the Son, as the Son is inseparable from the Father'.⁶⁶

To deny the divinity of the Holy Spirit is ultimately then to blaspheme him and so commit, as Jesus warned, the unforgivable sin.

Conclusion

In earlier chapters I criticized Athanasius for giving so little attention to the Holy Spirit. There is some excuse for this since he was so focused on defending the divinity of the Son throughout almost the entirety of his life.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, as this chapter hopefully demonstrates, Athanasius more than made up for the absence of the Holy Spirit in anti-Arian writings. When the issue of the Spirit's being divine became problematic, Athanasius stepped into the fray with a more than an adequate

one God. 'Its holiness must be one, and its eternity must be one, and its immutable nature' (*Ad Serapionem*, 1.30). For Augustine, see *De Trinitate*, 8.1.

62 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.30. See also 3.5 and 4.5.

63 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.30. See also 3.6. Similar again to Augustine, Athanasius sees the Holy Spirit as 'the gift' of the Father and the Son. See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.15.

64 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.31. See also 3.7.

65 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.32 and 33. Athanasius holds that the Council of Nicea itself professes the divinity of the Holy Spirit when it stated, as it did for the Father and the Son, that: "And we believe in the Holy Ghost", in order that by confessing perfectly and fully the faith in the Holy Trinity they might make known the exact form of the faith of Christ, and the teaching of the Catholic Church' (*Ad Afros*, 11).

66 *Ad Serapionem*, 1.33. See also 4.6.

67 The absence of the Holy Spirit within his early works, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, may be further proof that these works were indeed anti-Arian in that they focused on the divinity of the Son in relation to the Father and on the soteriological significance of their relationship.

defence. Moreover, in articulating the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, he voiced as well a robust theological understanding of the Trinity as a whole.

The heart of Athanasius' theology of the Trinity is the biblical proclamation that there is one God and that the one God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This profession of faith demanded, for Athanasius, that he unite not only the Father and the Son in the one Godhead, but also the Holy Spirit. As the eternal Father must be eternally Father of the Son, and thus the Son eternally Son of the Father, so the Holy Spirit must be eternally the Spirit of the Father and the Son. As the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father so, for Athanasius, the Son is in the Spirit and the Spirit is in the Son and so in the Father as well. It is this bonding of being and action between the Son and the Holy Spirit that is the hallmark of Athanasius' theology of the Holy Spirit, and it is founded upon the bond of being and action between the Father and the Son. In this mutual ontological interrelationship among the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Athanasius has provided the theological basis for the future notion of their *perichoresis* – their mutual interpenetration and co-inherence.

Moreover, throughout his defence and affirmation of the Spirit's divinity, primarily because he was guided almost entirely by Scripture, Athanasius set forth an understanding of the Spirit, and thus of the Father and the Son as well, that is wholly soteriological. Again, as Athanasius had argued strenuously for the Son's divinity in order to ensure humankind's salvation, so that same motivation is present throughout his affirmation of the Spirit's divinity. If the Spirit is not God, then he cannot sanctify and vivify and so cannot transform human beings into the likeness of the Son and so make them children of the Father. Divinization, the coming to dwell and to abide within the life of the Trinity, is possible only if the divine Holy Spirit is the initial source and ceaseless vitality of that communion of Trinitarian life, a life that finds its summit and completion when the indwelling Spirit raises up human beings' mortal bodies, as he did Jesus', so as to share in the incorruptible and immortal life of the eternal Father. Then, as Athanasius would agree, the pure, full and everlasting triadic doxology will begin – praise, glory and honour to the Father, in the Son, and through the Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

Chapter 7

Being Conformed into the Likeness of Christ

We have stressed throughout this study that soteriology stands at the heart of Athanasius' theology. Christian soteriology is founded upon the premise that the Father created, through his Son, human beings in the image and likeness of his Son so that they might know him and share in a life of communion with him in that same Son through the divine life of the Holy Spirit. Sin, in deforming humankind – de-creating human beings – rendered it impossible for humankind to know God and so enter into a communion of love with him. Athanasius' entire defence of the full divinity of the Son was based upon the principle that only if the Son of God were truly divine could humankind's salvation be ensured. The one in whose image humankind was created must be the same one in whom humankind is recreated. Moreover, Athanasius' understanding of the Incarnation was predicated upon the truth that the divine Son actually became man and so died as man upon the cross to reconcile humankind to the Father, and rose from the dead to obtain incorruptible divine life for them. The Holy Spirit must also be truly God for only if he were such could he perform the divine actions required – recreating human persons in the divine image of the Son and so making them 'divine' sons and daughters of the Father. Thus Athanasius' perception and articulation of the Trinity is wholly soteriological. From creation to the eschaton, the persons of the Trinity, each in their own distinctive manner, ensure the salvation of human beings. If God were not a trinity of persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – then there would not have been the creation, reconciliation, or deification of humankind.

As we come to the end of our study of the theology of St. Athanasius there is one last topic that briefly needs to be touched upon, and that is the question of how he perceives the appropriation of this salvific work of Christ. How does Athanasius understand the manner in which human beings, through Christ, obtain the divinizing life of the Spirit and so come into a loving and everlasting communion with the Father? In the course of this study we have touched upon some aspects of this appropriation, especially when discussing Athanasius' understanding of Baptism. Here we want to examine two sets of Athanasius' writings that bear upon this issue and which we have so far, for the most part, left to the side – his letters, especially his *Festal Letters*, and his *Life of Antony*. The *Festal Letters*, being pastoral in nature, offer us a window into Athanasius' understanding of the Christian life and how one is to appropriate and live it out in one's daily life. Likewise in a couple of letters Athanasius touches upon the vocations of marriage, celibacy and the life of the bishop. The *Life of Antony* provides us, in one person, an illustration of the 'perfect Christian', a person who has taken on the perfect image of Christ and so, through

the work of the Holy Spirit, has come into full communion with the Father. In this conclusion we will examine, from a soteriological perspective, Athanasius' letters, particularly his *Festal Letters*, and then the *Life of Antony*.

The Festal Letters

Athanasius wrote his *Festal Letters* to the church in Alexandria of which he was the Patriarch. He did so in order to announce the great fast of Lent and the date upon which Easter was to be celebrated that year.¹ Even when in exile, Athanasius continued to write to his congregation, saddened that he could not celebrate the Passover with them in person, yet still united to them in the Spirit and the one true faith. 'For although place separates us, yet the Lord the giver of the feast, and who is himself our feast, who is also the bestower of the Spirit, brings us together in mind, in harmony, and in the bond of peace.'²

While Athanasius never wrote extensively on the nature of the church, it is here, in the midst of Athanasius' absence from his congregation, that we discern one important aspect of his understanding of the church. The church may be divided in local churches and dioceses, yet there is one church united in the one true faith and the common life of the Holy Spirit, and it is only within this church that one appropriates, in faith, its saving truth and life. For Athanasius, to be separated from this church through a false understanding of faith is to be separated from its saving communion of life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. 'For [it is] the marvel of his [Jesus'] loving kindness, that he should gather together in the same place those who are at a distance; and make those who appear to be far off in the body, to be near together in the unity of spirit.'³

Christ our Passover

The sacredness of the forty day fast was founded, for Athanasius, upon the great feast of the Lord's Passover, which encompassed celebrating the salvific events from Jesus' passion and death to his resurrection. He frequently exhorts the Alexandrians to remember that during these days 'our Passover, Christ, is sacrificed', and thus he 'is himself the feast'.⁴ Christ is the Passover, for he passed from death to life, and so he himself is the feast in that Christians pass from death to life in union with him. The Alexandrians must recall that 'the Word [came] that he might seek and find that which was lost'.⁵ The Arians deny the Son's eternity and essential divinity with the

1 After much controversy the Council of Nicea, following the Alexandrian tradition, determined that the date upon which Easter was to be celebrated would be the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, ed. by E.A. Livingstone (Oxford, 1997), 'Paschal Controversies'.

2 *Festal Letter*, 10.2. See also 3.3 and 13.1.

3 *Festal Letter*, 5.2. See also 10.11.

4 *Festal Letter*, 14.1 and 5. See also 10.2 and 10, 13.7, 19.1, and 42.

5 *Festal Letter*, 2.3.

Father 'because of his coming down' but 'this [coming down] is the grace of the Lord, and these [salvific acts] are the Lord's means of restoration for the children of men'.⁶ Thus the Alexandrians are to celebrate the marvellous work of redemption along with 'everything that has breath' and with the angels who keep the 'festival in heaven'.⁷

For he suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in him. He descended that he might raise us up, he took on him the trial of being born, that we might love him who is unbegotten. He went down to corruption, that corruption might put on immortality, he became weak for us, that we might rise with power, he descended to death, that he might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead. Finally, he became man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us.⁸

As the above exemplifies, Athanasius understands Christ's work of redemption as an exchange and transformation. Suffering conquers suffering and brings forth freedom, descent gives way to ascent, corruption to incorruption, weakness to power and death to life. By appropriating the life of Christ the Christian participates in this exchange and so is transformed into his likeness.⁹

Because of these salvific events the Alexandrians are to heed 'the priestly trumpets of our Saviour' and remember that he does not simply call 'us to a feast, but to the great feast', that is, the eternal banquet of heaven.¹⁰ Actually, by joyfully celebrating the feast in this life, the Alexandrians 'receive an earnest of that heavenly feast'.¹¹

The Christian Response

What then should be the Christian response to such great mysteries? For Athanasius the response is manifold and all of its aspects contribute to a life of holiness, that is, by taking on the image of Christ, for Christians 'fashion themselves according to the Gospel [and] will be partakers of Christ'.¹² Thus Christians must 'never loiter in the path of virtue', rather they must leave all sin behind and 'run to the general and common assembly of the feast'.¹³ There is nothing more fitting for this feast than a 'turning from wickedness and a pure conversion, and prayer offered without ceasing to God, with thanksgiving'.¹⁴

Thanksgiving is, for Athanasius, the initial and even primary response to the work of redemption. It must imbue the whole of the forty days and the celebration of the feast itself, for in thanksgiving one acknowledges the great gift that the Father has freely bestowed upon his people in Christ as well as a means of more ardently

6 *Festal Letter*, 10.9 and 8.

7 *Festal Letter*, 6.10 and 12.

8 *Festal Letter*, 10.8. See a similar passage in 14.4.

9 See *Festal Letters*, 5.3, 6.4 and 9, 7.1, 20.1, and 43.

10 *Festal Letter*, 1.3.

11 *Festal Letter*, 6.1.

12 *Festal Letter*, 2.5.

13 *Festal Letter*, 11.2 and 11.

14 *Festal Letter*, 19.8.

laying hold of it in the gratitude of faith. Even though it is a time of tribulation and the heretics fight against the Alexandrians, yet they are to 'celebrate with thanksgiving the holy feast which now draws near'.¹⁵ Actually, at no time should a man 'freely praise God more than when he has passed through afflictions'.¹⁶ The feast does not consist of 'pleasant intercourse at meals nor splendour of clothing, nor days of leisure, but in the acknowledgement of God, and the offering of thanksgiving and of praise of him'.¹⁷ When the Alexandrians give thanks at the feast, they are not only remembering the great past work of redemption, but they are also 'looking forward to celebrate the eternal joy in heaven'.¹⁸ What is evident is that giving thanks, for Athanasius, even in the midst of suffering, provokes praise of God for his mighty deeds and so engenders joy in one's heart. However, this joyful gratitude of praise must be nurtured on 'prolonged prayer to God', for it is only in prayer that one comes close to the Saviour.¹⁹

If thanksgiving is to be the mark of preparing for and celebrating Jesus' Passover, then the time of Passover must be a period of deeper conversion. For Athanasius, the forty day fast in preparation for the feast contributes to this ever present endeavour to turn away from wickedness. The Alexandrians are to hallow the fast by growing in holiness and are not to pollute the fast by offending or injuring the brethren. 'It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul', for then one's soul 'is bent to virtue' and so it will be nourished, not on food, but 'by righteousness, by temperance, by meekness, [and] by fortitude'.²⁰ Through fasting, the old man will be put off and the new man will be put on, and one will come to love God and neighbour, for one will not drink the wine of this life but 'the new wine, even the Holy Spirit' and in so doing one will 'properly keep the feast'.²¹ Fasting then, for Athanasius, has a twofold purpose. By curbing the sinful passions through fasting one is able to cast off sin, but in so doing one equally puts on the garment of virtue. The Alexandrians must not only be hearers of the word but also doers of the word.²² The goal of the forty day fast is to grow in love. 'Let us remember the poor, and not forget kindness to strangers; above all, let us love God with all of our soul, and might, and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves.'²³ Fasting allows one both to celebrate properly the true meaning of the feast and even actually to participate in the reality of the feast, that is, to die with Christ to sin and rise with him to newness

15 *Festal Letter*, 3.5.

16 *Festal Letter*, 10.2.

17 *Festal Letter*, 7.3.

18 *Festal Letter*, 19.8.

19 *Festal Letter*, 3.2. See also 3.1 and 6. One can obtain further insight into Athanasius' understanding on prayer by reading his letter to Marcellinus where he treats the Psalms. An English translation can be found in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, translation by R.C. Gregg (New York, 1980).

20 *Festal Letter*, 1.5. See 1.4, 4.2, 5.4, 7.3, 12.1,

21 *Festal Letter*, 1.9.

22 See *Festal Letter*, 2.2.

23 *Festal Letter*, 1.11.

Athanasius frequently tells the Alexandrians to be at peace with one another and to 'salute one another with a holy kiss' (see, for example, 1.8, 2.8, 3.6, and 4.6).

of life. Fasting, for Athanasius, is a foundational exercise by which one appropriates the salvific work of Christ into one's own life.

The saints, and they who practice virtue, 'mortify their members which are upon earth, fornication, uncleanness, passions, evil concupiscence' [Col. 3:5]; and, as the result of this, are pure and without spot, confiding in the promise of the Saviour, who said, 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God' [Matt. 5:8].²⁴

If the self-imposed hardship of fasting promotes holiness of life, the Alexandrians must also realize that all suffering that comes upon them is to conform them into the image of Christ crucified and so portends their future glory with him.

Oh! my dearly beloved, if we shall gain comfort from afflictions, if rest from labours, if health from sickness, if from death immortality, it is not right to be distressed by the temporal ills that lay hold on mankind. It does not become us to be agitated because of the trials which befall us. It is not right to fear if the gang that contended with Christ should conspire against godliness; but we should the more consider such matters as the probation and exercise of a virtuous life. For how shall patience be looked for, if there is be not previously labours and sorrows? Or how can fortitude be tested with no assault from enemies? Or how shall magnanimity be exhibited, unless after contumely and injustice? Or how can long-suffering be proved, unless there has first been the calumny of the Antichrist? And finally, how can a man behold virtue with his eyes, unless the iniquity of the very wicked has previously appeared? Thus even our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ comes before us, when he would show men how to suffer.²⁵

Despite the persecution and trials that Athanasius and the Alexandrians are experiencing at the hands of the Arians, they must 'make a joyful noise with the saints, and let no one of us fail of his duty in these things.'²⁶ Athanasius realizes that the glory of the resurrection is achieved only through the glory of the cross, and thus that the resurrection is the heavenly icon of the earthly cross.

It is truly a subject of joy, that we can see the signs of victory against death, even our own incorruptibility, through the body of the Lord. For since he rose gloriously, it is clear that the resurrection of all of us will take place; and since his body remained without corruption, there can be no doubt regarding our incorruption.²⁷

This growth in holiness that is marked by conversion and expressed in praise, thanksgiving, prayer, fasting and suffering for the sake of the Gospel is founded, for Athanasius, upon faith. 'He therefore who is in a state of wickedness, undoubtedly also wanders from the faith; and he who falls from godliness, falls from the true faith.' This is precisely what the Arians have done. Their blasphemous denial of the incarnate Son's divinity sprang from and manifests their ungodly lives. However, 'as when brother is helped by brother, they become a wall to each other; so faith and godliness, being of like growth, hang together, and he who is practiced in the

24 *Festal Letter*, 7.3.

25 *Festal Letter*, 10.7

26 *Festal Letter*, 11.12.

27 *Festal Letter*, 11.14.

one, of necessity is strengthened by the other'.²⁸ This godly life of faith is founded upon the truth of Scripture which has been rightly interpreted and passed on by the faithful saints who have gone before. 'For there is no fellowship whatever between the words of the saints and the fancies of human invention; for the saints are the ministers of the truth.'²⁹

For Athanasius, the whole of the Christian life is illustrated in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. As the father transformed his sinful son into a full member of his household, so likewise will the heavenly Father do to all men and women who return to him in repentance and faith.

For this is the work of the Father's loving-kindness and goodness, that not only should he make him alive from the dead, but that he should render his grace illustrious through the Spirit. Therefore, instead of corruption, he clothes him with an incorruptible garment; instead of hunger, he kills the fatted calf; instead of journeys, [the Father] watched for his return, providing shoes for his feet; and, what is most wonderful, placed a divine signet-ring upon his hand; whilst by all these things he begat him afresh in the image of the glory of Christ. These are the gracious gifts of the Father, by which the Lord honours and nourishes those who abide with him, and also those who return to him and repent ... We too shall be counted worthy of these things, if at all times we cleave to our Saviour, and if we are pure, not only in these six days of Easter, but consider the whole course of our life as a feast, and continue near and do not go far off.³⁰

The Eucharist – Shadows Become Reality

As Athanasius' interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son implies, what has been revealed by Jesus has become a reality – the Father makes humankind true heirs and sons in Christ. This is especially so with regard to the revelation contained within the Old Testament. For Athanasius, the shadows and types there have now become realities in Christ and his work of redemption.

The Jews were nourished on the divine word and the lamb of sacrifice, but the first was only fragmentary and the second was only a type or figure. 'We have passed beyond that time of shadow' for now the Word has become flesh and 'that true lamb was slain, even our Lord Jesus Christ'. The Passover lamb of old prefigured humankind's purification, but now human beings are truly 'purified by his (Jesus') precious blood'.³¹ The Jews celebrated the Passover, 'but we, my beloved, the shadow having received its fulfilment, and the types being accomplished, should no longer consider the feast typical'. The Alexandrians 'no longer eat the flesh of a lamb, but his own (Jesus)', saying, "Take, eat and drink; this is my body, and my blood". When we are thus nourished by these things, we also, my beloved, shall truly keep the feast

28 *Festal Letter*, 11.9. See also 11.10.

29 *Festal Letter*, 2.7. For Athanasius, it is only through faith in true doctrine that one maintains holy fellowship with the saints and, of course, this true doctrine is professed in accordance with Nicea. See *Festal Letter*, 45 and his Letter 56, *To Jovian*.

30 *Festal Letter*, 7.10.

31 *Festal Letter*, 1.9. See also 1.7–9.

of Passover.³² For Athanasius, to participate in the sacred liturgy of the Passover is to appropriate the fullness of salvation. While the blood of the lamb protected the Israelites from the angel of death, 'we, eating of the Word of the Father, and having the lintels of our hearts sealed with the blood of the New Testament, acknowledge the grace given us from the Saviour ... For no more does death reign; but instead of death henceforth is life.' In eating the body of Christ and in drinking his blood, the Alexandrians have 'put on our Lord Jesus'.³³ The Alexandrians eat 'the food of life, and constantly thirsting we delight our souls at all times, as from a fountain, in his precious blood', and so they are 'to draw near to the divine lamb, and touch heavenly food'.³⁴ While 'sin has her own special bread' which nourishes death, Christians consume 'the bread of Wisdom' which nourishes eternal life.³⁵ The Eucharistic celebration then for Athanasius is the culmination of appropriating the salvation wrought by the incarnate Son of God; for here one participates in the true Passover sacrifice and is nourished on the life-giving lamb – the flesh and blood of the risen Lord Jesus. The Eucharistic Feast is 'the divine and incorruptible banquet', which produces 'incorruptible joy'.³⁶ By celebrating the Passover Christians participate in and anticipate 'that great heavenly supper' which 'is sufficient for every creature'.³⁷

The basic ingredients for living the Christian life and appropriating the salvation wrought in Christ are faith, prayer, thanksgiving, turning from sin in repentance and fasting, and suffering for the sake of the Gospel, all of which culminate in the celebration of the Eucharist. But how are these to be lived out in the lives of specific individuals with specific vocations? Athanasius briefly comments on the Christian life of married couples and of bishops. We will now succinctly comment on these and then examine in a little more detail the life of Antony, who, as a monk, exemplifies the Christian life in all its perfection.

The Vocations of Marriage, Celibacy, and Episcopacy

In his letter to Amun, probably a Nitrian monk, Athanasius states that 'all things made by God are beautiful and pure, for the Word of God has made nothing useless or impure'. The devil attempts to deceive those striving for holiness by claiming, 'under the show of purity', that sexuality is evil. Those monks who scrupulously think that involuntary 'secretions of the belly' are immoral fail to grasp that 'we experience this, like other things, by a necessity of nature'. Moreover, sexuality is in itself good for it is part of God's good creation. Thus marriage is good, and 'he is blessed who, being freely yoked in his youth, naturally begets children'. Nonetheless,

32 *Festal Letter*, 4.4. While Athanasius, in keeping with the nature and purpose of the *Festal Letters*, speaks frequently of the Eucharist, he only makes several allusions to baptism, primarily as living water through which one receives the Holy Spirit. See for example 7.7, 20.1, and 44.

33 *Festal Letter*, 4.3.

34 *Festal Letter*, 5.1 and 5.

35 *Festal Letter*, 7.5.

36 *Festal Letter*, 28.

37 *Festal Letter*, 42.

Athanasius holds that celibacy is more greatly blessed. Holy married couples may bring forth fruit, 'namely thirtyfold', yet the monk, in becoming perfect, 'grows the perfect fruit, namely a hundredfold'.³⁸

Athanasius is presenting here the ideal monk, for he knows, as we will see shortly, that some monks are far from holy and even betray their vocation through sin. In such situations a holy married couple lives a far more virtuous life, one which bears much more fruit than that of a sinful monk.

Athanasius wrote to the monk Dracontius, who refused to accept his election as a bishop and had even taken flight. He did so, according to Athanasius, on the misguided belief that the life of a monk is holier than that of a bishop. However, Athanasius insinuates, without much subtlety, that the real reason is his cowardly fear of facing the trials and tribulations that a bishop must endure, especially at the present time when the church is fraught with turmoil. 'Beloved Dracontius, you have caused us grief instead of joy, groaning instead of consolation. For we expected to have you with us as a consolation; and now we behold you in flight'.³⁹

Dracontius must divest himself of his selfish attitude. 'While before your election you lived to yourself, after it, you live for your flock.'⁴⁰ The laity expects Dracontius to 'bring them food, namely instruction from the Scriptures'.⁴¹ What can Dracontius await at the time of Lord's judgment when he has been feeding himself and the flock goes hungry? He must 'take thought of the church, lest many of the little ones be injured on your account'.⁴² If he fears the times, then his 'mind is not manly', for he is called 'to serve not the time, but the Lord'.⁴³ Moreover, he despises the Lord in his refusal to become a bishop for the Lord himself has established, through the apostles, this sacred order. Neither must Dracontius bow to the wishes of his fellow monks, but rather he must imitate Paul and the monks who have preceded him into the episcopacy.

For how many have they turned away from the idols? How many have they caused to cease from their familiarity with demons by their warning? How many servants have they brought to the Lord, so as to cause those who saw such wonders to marvel at the sight? Or is it not a great wonder to make a damsel live as a virgin, and a young man live in continence, and any idolater come to know Christ?⁴⁴

Equally, it is false to think that the office of bishop is an occasion of sin, and to think that monks are holier than bishops is the height of naiveté.

For we know both bishops who fast, and monks who eat. We know bishops who drink no wine, as well as monks who do. We know bishops who work wonders, as well as monks

38 All of the above quotations are taken from Athanasius' Letter 48, *To Amun*.

39 Letter 49.2, *To Dracontius*.

40 Letter 49.2.

41 Letter 49.2.

42 Letter 49.3.

43 Letter 49.3.

44 Letter 49.7.

who do not. Many of the bishops have not even married, while monks have been fathers of children.⁴⁵

Lastly, if Dracontius refuses to take up the responsibility of being a bishop, who will keep the feast with the flock, and who ‘will in your absence preach to them the Easter sermon’, and who will ordain for them presbyters?⁴⁶ Dracontius must be obedient to ‘the ordinance of the church’ and take thought of the sheep.⁴⁷

While this is a personal letter to a good but frightened and timid monk, we perceive within it further aspects of Athanasius’ soteriological understanding of the church as well as how a bishop, by the nature of his office, not only helps others appropriate salvation, but also himself grows in holiness. It is the bishop who must take up the cause of the Gospel with all of its trials and afflictions for without the bishop the flock is left unprotected against temptations to sin and the wiles of heresy. The bishop, through his preaching, makes known the salvific truths of faith and, in celebrating the Eucharist, nourishes the flock on the bread of Christ. Without the bishop the church of the apostles flounders and the whole purpose of the church as the home of salvation comes to naught. Moreover, while the monk may strive to live a holy life, the bishop, in the very act of being the bishop, with all his various responsibilities, grows in holiness. In ensuring that his flock becomes holy the bishop himself becomes holy.

Antony, the Perfect Image of Christ

If Athanasius, in his *Festal Letters*, provides some of the foundational principles for appropriating the salvation of Christ and so living a holy life, it is in his *Life of Antony* that he offers a perfect living illustration. Antony, through the power of the Spirit, conformed himself into the likeness of Christ.

Athanasius portrays Antony as an exceptional youth, yet it was only on the death of his parents that his inclination to follow Christ came to maturity. While still 18 or 20 and caring for his sister, he went to a church and ‘then it happened that the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”’.⁴⁸ In response Antony sold all that he had and gave it to the poor, though keeping some possessions for his sister. Yet, unsatisfied, he placed his sister under the guardianship of some virgins and began ‘patiently training himself’.⁴⁹ Paying close attention to the Scripture, he worked with his hands lest he be idle and to provide for his sustenance. ‘He prayed constantly, since he learned that it is necessary to pray

45 Letter 49.9.

46 Letter 49.10.

47 Letter 49.10.

48 *Vita Antonii*, 2.

49 The translation is taken from *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus. Vita Antonii*, 3.

unceasingly in private.⁵⁰ He took note of other men who lived a zealous Christian life.

He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one's freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And he paid attention to one while he lived a watchful life, or one who pursued studies, as also he admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. The gentleness of one and the long-suffering of yet another he watched closely. He marked, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all. And having been filled in this manner, he returned to his own place of discipline, from that time gathering the attributes of each to himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best in them all.⁵¹

In this initial description of Antony's life we find Athanasius putting into place the foundation stones of holiness – listening to the word of the Lord in Scripture, constant prayer, turning away from sin and acquiring virtue through fasting and discipline, and the growth in love of neighbour and the Lord. What is fascinating though is that Athanasius highlights how Antony learned from others. One cannot grow in holiness without the help and example of others, and Antony himself will become the paradigm *par excellence*.

Athanasius stresses that Antony's appropriation of the image of Christ was not without struggle. It is precisely because monks grow in the holiness of Christ that the demons hate them and assault them, even though they are powerless.

They are afraid of the ascetics on several accounts – for their fasting, the vigils, the prayers, the meekness and gentleness, the contempt for money, the lack of vanity, the humility, the love of the poor, the almsgiving, the freedom from wrath, and most of all for their devotion to Christ.⁵²

Thus the devil badgered Antony with all sorts of temptations – the lure of the world with its possessions and glory and the rigor and hardship of obtaining virtue. 'But the enemy saw his own weakness in the face of Antony's resolve ... Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, it is not I, but the grace of God, which is in me.'⁵³ Even in the midst of demonic blows Antony did not retreat from his regimen of prayer and discipline. 'Here I am – Antony! I do not run from your blows, for even if you give me more, nothing can separate me from the love of Christ.'⁵⁴ Nonetheless, when the Lord appeared to Antony in a beam of light dispelling the demons, he complained as to why the Lord had not come sooner. In response Antony heard a voice: 'I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper

50 *Vita Antonii*, 3.

51 *Vita Antonii*, 4.

52 *Vita Antonii*, 30.

53 *Vita Antonii*, 5.

54 *Vita Antonii*, 9.

forever, and I will make you famous everywhere.⁵⁵ Athanasius tells us that this took place when Antony was about 35.

‘Nearly twenty years he spent in this manner pursuing the ascetic life by himself, not venturing out and only occasionally being seen by anyone.’⁵⁶ Yet, he attracted others who desired to pursue the ascetic life and those who wanted to see and converse with such a holy man. They forced open the door to where he was living and Antony came forth. What surprised them was that he was neither fat from lack of exercise nor emaciated from fasting, ‘but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal’.⁵⁷ Yet during those years Antony had acquired the perfection of Christ.

His state was one of purity, for it was not constrained by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection. Moreover, when he saw the crowd, he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so many people. He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature. Through him the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others were purged of demons, and to Antony he gave the grace of speech. Thus he consoled many who mourned, and others hostile to each other he reconciled in friendship, urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ.⁵⁸

In Athanasius’ narration we find a new man recreated in Christ, the new Adam. As Adam was meant to be – knowing and loving God and neighbour, living rationally with all his emotions and knowledge attuned to truth – so Antony had now become. In Antony, Athanasius had found a person in whom the salvific work of Christ had found perfection. Moreover, as the old Adam had founded, in a lush garden, a city of sin and death, so Antony now founded, in a barren desert, a new city of holiness and life – ‘a city of monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens’.⁵⁹

As Athanasius had noted in his *Festal Letters*, upright faith and godliness go together. Thus it is not surprising that Antony leaves his abode in the desert to come once more to Alexandria to denounce the Arians. ‘He taught the people that the Son of God is not a creature, and that he did not come into existence from nonbeing, but rather that he is eternal Word and Wisdom from the essence of the Father.’⁶⁰ Antony’s confirmation of the Nicene faith affirmed, for Athanasius, that it accurately expressed the truth of salvation for Antony himself was a living confirmation of its saving power. The martyrs and holy virgins equally bear witness to the truth of the faith.

While Antony died of old age, yet for Athanasius he retained the vigour of youth. His eyes remained undimmed and sound:

55 *Vita Antonii*, 10.

56 *Vita Antonii*, 14.

57 *Vita Antonii*, 14.

58 *Vita Antonii*, 14.

59 *Vita Antonii*, 14.

60 *Vita Antonii*, 69.

He lost none of his teeth – they simply had been worn to the gums because of the old man’s great age. He retained health in his feet and hand, and generally he seemed brighter and of more energetic strength than those who make use of baths and a variety of foods and clothing.⁶¹

If such was the case, one might wonder what caused Antony’s death. The theological point that Athanasius is making is that, having become a new man in Christ, Antony possessed not the physical signs of sin and death but the physical signs of the new life of the Holy Spirit. He had already taken on the marks of his own resurrection for he had become, even in this life, the perfect image of the risen Christ.

61 *Vita Antonii*, 93.

Conclusion

Athanasius' Contemporary Significance

We have come to the end of our study of Athanasius' theology. Some readers may have perceived various ways in which Athanasius' theology bears upon present day theology. Still others may have seen little or no contemporary relevance to Athanasius' thought other than learning about early theological controversies and the ecclesial attempts to address them. By way of conclusion, I want to discuss the relevance of Athanasius to some contemporary issues that go beyond this study, and then highlight a number of points I made earlier about Athanasius' contemporary significance.

The questions that Athanasius addressed involve a number of issues with which contemporary theology continues to grapple. They include the following: How does one use biblical evidence in addressing modern doctrinal issues? How does one ensure that the Christian notion of the one God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is adequately maintained? How does one allow the Son's divinity and humanity to shine forth without losing either their distinct integrity or their unity? Does Athanasius contribute anything to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian theologian? These are the issues and questions that I will address here.

Scripture and Doctrine

I stated at the onset of this study that Athanasius was not only thoroughly versed in the Bible, but that he was also a thoroughly biblical theologian. Some readers, especially contemporary biblical scholars, may take issue with such an assessment. They might argue that Athanasius possessed a naïve view of scripture in that he appears to take little account of the historical background to various books of the Bible, nor their various literary genres, especially those within the Old Testament. He merely plucks assorted passages willy-nilly from throughout the Bible solely to advance his theological agenda. Moreover, he seems unaware that there may be various theologies within the Bible, especially among the Gospels and Letters of the New Testament. Thus, he shows no appreciation of what today is termed the Historical Critical Method. How can Athanasius' employment of the Bible then be taken seriously, especially if he is merely mining it to support doctrinal causes that many scholars today would argue fall outside the biblical purview, such as the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity or the two-nature conception of Jesus? The Bible does not conceive or articulate its theology in such a manner and to attempt to find a biblical basis for such understandings may be, at best, dubious.

It is granted that Athanasius did not possess the scholarly tools available to contemporary biblical practitioners, however, it might be argued that some of

these tools are sometimes wielded with little finesse. This is especially so in the hands of scholars who evince few, if any, signs of biblical faith or ply them from within a preconceived philosophical ideology that is inimical to biblical revelation. In this context we can discern that Athanasius did possess a number of scholarly virtues relevant to biblical interpretation, and they may very well be the ones most indispensable for a contemporary revival of biblical theology.

Firstly, Athanasius, as witnessed especially in his early two-volume work, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, assumed, in faith, that, while divine revelation was narrated in various ways and at various times within the many books of the Bible, there was only one continuous historical economy of salvation, that is, that it was the same Father who acted throughout the ages through his Son by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹ Moreover, Athanasius believed that this whole historical narrative culminated in the Incarnation of the Son and his redemptive work. Thus, for Athanasius, while Old Testament revelation may have had particular meanings and interpretations at various times prior to the advent of Christ, yet Old Testament revelation had now acquired its ultimate meaning only in the light of Christ. For example, the exodus and God's feeding the Israelites manna in the desert find their fulfilment in Christ's freeing humankind from sin and death and now feeding them on the true heavenly bread – his risen body and blood. The New Testament proclamation of Christ, for Athanasius, as well as for the Fathers who preceded him, particularly Origen, became the hermeneutical key for unlocking all of the ancient theological treasures of the Old Testament in the rich variety of its literary forms.

To the detriment of contemporary Old Testament interpretation, emphasis is often placed solely upon the political, social, economic and cultural settings of the various books and the theological interpretation and significance is then limited to a particular historical milieu. Such an academic undertaking undermines the seamless progressive evolution of God's revelatory acts, and so destabilizes their future prophetic revelatory significance. What is missing and what is sorely needed today is what Athanasius gloried in – rereading the whole of the Old Testament having discovered its surprise ending, Jesus Christ. Athanasius realized that, as a Christian theologian, he was not only able to perceive the ultimate significance of Old Testament revelation, but also, in so doing, to grasp even more deeply the novelty, import and meaning of the New Testament proclamation.

Secondly, Athanasius held as axiomatic the premise that the Bible was first and foremost the church's book and as such it was the church who authentically and authoritatively interpreted it. Moreover, biblical interpretation had a history and that history of interpretation was lodged deep within the history of the church, beginning with the apostolic preaching and the canonical books that came to embody such teaching. Today we speak of the fourth century church as the early church, but for Athanasius it was already an old church endowed with centuries of tradition, a living tradition that included not only liturgical and ecclesial practises, but also a manner of interpreting scripture which itself had fostered a doctrinal tradition that was equally integral to the Christian Gospel. For Athanasius, it was impossible to treat

1 For references to this point, see Chapter Two, fn. 1.

the Bible as if it were ensconced within some ahistorical vacuum allowing one to interpret it devoid of the concerns, issues and controversies of the past or the present. It is precisely this history of concerns, issues and controversies that gave rise to an ecclesial history of biblical interpretation. This is why the whole doctrinal struggle prior to, during and especially after the Council of Nicea was not fought primarily on the playing field of various competing philosophies but on the battlements of biblical interpretation.

Athanasius opposed Arius, and those who later held similar positions, precisely because he was convinced that they interpreted scripture apart from the ecclesial tradition. Theirs was a private and personal, and so idiosyncratic, interpretation of scripture that had estranged itself from the ecclesial interpretation. The church may not have adequately conceived or articulated how it could uphold both the oneness of God and the full divinity of the Son, but such an understanding was founded, for Athanasius, an ecclesial understanding of scripture. The Arians, having divorced themselves from such an understanding, denied not doctrines that bore no relationship to the Bible but truths found within the New Testament itself. This is why Athanasius, especially within his *Contra Arianos* and his letters *Ad Serapionem*, meticulously examined all of the relevant and controversial biblical passages, on occasion not entirely convincingly, so as to ensure their proper interpretation from within the ecclesial tradition. In Athanasius' mind the controversies in which he was engaged throughout his life were controversies over the proper understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

Here resides another lesson of contemporary significance. Biblical interpretation must not reside simply within the boundaries of an academy that is permitted to isolate itself from the ecclesial community and its living interpretative tradition. Christian scripture scholars are called, by the nature of their vocation, to aid the church and its members to comprehend more deeply the significance and relevance of biblical truth, but they can do so only as believing members themselves, residing within a living ecclesial biblical and doctrinal tradition. They are to bring new light, clarity and nuance to that living ecclesial interpretative tradition, to that Christian faith, and not, under the guise of scholarship, to undercut or negate essential truths of the church's biblical faith.

Thirdly, Athanasius provides a further important example that is relevant for today – the fundamentally intrinsic and definitively indispensable relationship between the biblical proclamation and doctrine. Today we would say that Athanasius was embroiled in 'doctrinal controversies' – the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. While these are doctrines of the church and now, in some instances, defined dogmas, yet Athanasius, as I have argued, believed that they are found within the Bible itself. There is no disconnection, for Athanasius, between the *homoousion* of Nicea and the proclamation of the one God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit within the New Testament. Both asserted one and the same mystery. As Athanasius himself argued, the *homoousion* of Nicea simply ensures that the New Testament be interpreted properly.

A significant number of scholars today do perceive a disconnection between scripture and doctrine. Some argue that scripture does provide the source for later doctrinal development, but the actual doctrines themselves are not contained within

scripture. Thus, the apostolic church only believed in principle and not in fact what later would develop. Thus, for example, the New Testament does provide the basis for the later doctrine of the Trinity but the actual doctrine of the Trinity does not itself reside in the New Testament and so the apostolic church would not have professed it as such. Others would go further and argue that there is no intrinsic and necessary relationship between the scriptural proclamation and later defined doctrines. The doctrine of the Trinity is merely an arbitrary interpretation imposed upon the New Testament due to the philosophical, political and cultural proclivities of that historical moment.

Athanasius would not only reject the latter proposal, he would even discard the former. Athanasius knew well enough that the term *homoousios* would never have entered the minds of the evangelists or Paul as they professed their belief in the one God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but he rightly recognized that the proper understanding of the *homoousion* was lodged within the New Testament from the outset. The *homoousion* may be a word foreign to the New Testament, but it was, ultimately, not a concept foreign to the New Testament, for the New Testament proclamation did not simply give rise to it but actually contained its meaning. What Athanasius intuitively recognized is a lesson that is yet to be learned not only among most contemporary biblical scholars but even among many systematicians. Scripture itself contains later doctrines. The doctrines are already and always there within Scripture, and they, over the course of years and centuries, through theological study, liturgical practise and, pre-eminently, controversies in which biblical truths are denied, are more clearly conceived, more fittingly defended and more unmistakably articulated.

Athanasius teaches us one last lesson, implied in all of the above, that is, scripture is in itself doctrinal and the doctrines perceived within scripture allow the church and its members to deepen their knowledge of and love for scripture. Scripture, for Athanasius, is the heart of doctrine, and doctrine, in turn, is the life blood of scripture.

The Mystery of Trinity, the *Homoousion* and Ecumenism, and the authority of Biblical Language

Here I want briefly to emphasize the three points mentioned in the above heading, all of which I have already noted in the body of the text.

Firstly, Athanasius' approach to defending the Son's divine status was not an attempt to dissolve the mystery of the Trinity into comprehensible clarity. Arius' solution, he believed, did just that, and in so doing Arius denied an essential tenet of the Christian faith. To make the Son the supreme creature may have rendered the nature of the one God comprehensible, yet it equally rendered the biblical proclamation redundant – the divine equality of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Athanasius, in defending and explicating the *homoousion*, retained the Christian mystery in a manner that was consonant with the biblical evidence. The one God of the Bible was the Father begetting the Son. The 'begetting' was not something apart from the one nature of God, but, since God was the Father, the one

God was necessarily the Father begetting the Son. This 'Athanasian' insight must not be lost today, but must be appreciated for what it truly is: the most perceptive theological insight into the mystery of the Trinity within the whole of Trinitarian thought. It is the basis for all subsequent Trinitarian insights. For example, the terms 'Father' and 'Son' are intrinsically relational, as seen within the Cappadocians, Augustine and Aquinas.

Secondly, I want once again to address the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son in the light of the *homoousion*. What the Cappadocians, and the subsequent eastern tradition, did not fully grasp and sufficiently appreciate was that to name the Holy Spirit was to name not only the Father but also the Son, for the Spirit was necessarily constituted within their relationship and so related to both. One can name the Father and the Son only if one equally perceives that the Holy Spirit is their mutual relational paternal and filial love, that is, the Holy Spirit conforms the Father to be the loving Father of the Son and conforms the Son to be the loving Son of the Father. Nicea's proclamation and Athanasius' defence and articulation of the *homoousion* necessitates that the one God is the Father begetting the Son in the love of the Spirit and the Son loving the Father in the same Spirit in whom he is lovingly begotten. To put it rather bluntly, to deny the *filioque* is ultimately to subvert the *homoousion*, for such a denial allows no relational, and so no unifying, interplay between the Son and the Holy Spirit as together they come forth from the Father. This is why Athanasius insisted that the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Son was the same as the Son's relationship to the Father (and so that the Spirit is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son), though he conceived and articulated this relationship, as I noted, in an inappropriate manner. This leads me to the delicate issue of ecumenical relations between the east and the west. Historically, it seems to me, the east has often distanced itself from significant Fathers within their own tradition, namely, the Alexandrians. The reason is that Athanasius' and Cyril's understanding of the proceeding of the Holy Spirit is just too neighbourly to Augustine's *filioque* and to the subsequent western tradition. One would hope that eastern theologians would fearlessly and objectively examine Athanasius' and Cyril's exposition of the Spirit's relation to the Father and the Son. Athanasius and Cyril might then become the 'common tradition' from which a possible mutual understanding between the east and the west could arise.

Thirdly, I want to address the normative priority of biblical language with regards to the Trinity. Athanasius has never been thought of as a precursor to Wittgenstein or to the British analytic tradition. Nonetheless, Athanasius is very concerned about words and their use, and the linguistic context from which their meaning derives. For Athanasius, the theological significance of biblical words principally derives from their being employed within texts inspired by the Holy Spirit, and their true meaning can only be ascertained from within that context. Athanasius, therefore, gives ultimate normative priority to the biblical words of 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit'. While Arius seized upon God's ungenerateness and made it the hermeneutical focus for discerning the created ontological status of the Son, Athanasius insisted, as we saw, that biblical language and concepts trumped all philosophical considerations. For Athanasius, if God is biblically conceived of as the Father, then he who is biblically named 'the Son' must equally be God as the Father is God.

Athanasius' insistence on the normative theological priority of biblical terms and their inherent biblical meaning is of the utmost importance today, especially in light of some Christian feminists' theologies. Thus God cannot be designated 'Mother' as if such a name had equal validity to that of 'Father'. Nor is it legitimate to designate God as Creator, as Saviour and as Sanctifier. While such designations do proclaim truth, that truth is relevant only from within the economy. It does not designate who God is in himself apart from the economy and so does not found why the Father is the Creator, or why the Son is Saviour, or why the Holy Spirit is Sanctifier. To baptize one in 'the name of the Creator, the Saviour, and the Sanctifier' does not baptize one into the Trinity as the Trinity is. First and foremost God is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and, if one is to be incorporated into the Trinity as the Trinity is, then one must be baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Bible may not accommodate our present day ideologies, but then, it did not accommodate the ideologies of Athanasius' own day. Again, it is the Bible that must be normative for our day as it was for Athanasius'.

Athanasius: The Incarnation and the Communication of Idioms

For Athanasius, it was the historical Jesus, the biblical Jesus, who founded his Christology. What had been perceived by all who then saw, heard and touched Jesus was one reality. There was just one 'being' speaking and acting. It was obvious then, as it was for Athanasius later and is for us now, that this one 'being' or 'reality' was a man. But for Jesus' contemporaries, Athanasius and us, the question is: Who is this man? It is the identity, the 'who', of this man that is queried. Athanasius was convinced that, founded upon the biblical narrative itself, 'who this man is' is none other than the eternal Son of God; he who was and is *homoousios* with the Father. As one being, entity or reality, Jesus is the Son of God incarnate.

What brought Athanasius to this biblical conclusion was not an assortment of philosophical concepts, such as 'nature' and 'person', but the communication of idioms. As an authentic man, Jesus revealed that he was the eternal Son of God and, thus, both divine and human attributes must be predicated of him. For Athanasius, the communication of idioms was the hermeneutical key for properly interpreting the words and events within the historical life of Jesus. It was one and the same Son of God who ate and drank as man, who performed miracles as man, and who suffered and died as man.

Athanasius' Christology was not merely the precursor of Cyril's, Ephesus' and Chalcedon's Christology, it also became the basis for all subsequent Christology. Today, as I noted, this Christological tradition is often rejected as inherently Monophysite in that the divine Son, as the one sole subject, predominates, and so undermines the ontological symmetry between the divinity and the humanity. Yet, Athanasius' Christology and that of the subsequent tradition is precisely the foundation and guarantee of such an ontological symmetry. Jesus is both ontologically God and ontologically man only because he who *is* both is the Son of God. If the identity of Jesus, who he is, is not the Son of God, then not only *is* Jesus not God, but equally the Son of God *is* not the man Jesus. It is this Athanasian insight that not only upholds

the traditional Christological doctrine, but also provides the authentic mechanism for properly understanding the New Testament narrative, in that what gives salvific meaning to all that Jesus says, does and undergoes is that it was humanly said, done and undergone by the Son of God.

Athanasius: The Bishop and the Church

As we saw in Chapter One, Athanasius is criticized for not being 'a team player'. He was too uncompromising. He refused to seek middle ground. Thus, he was often at odds with civil and ecclesial authorities. Yet Athanasius, it must not be forgotten, had many friends as well – among his fellow bishops (east and west), among the monks of Egypt, and, most of all, among his loyal flock in Alexandria, the *fideles* of the *sensus fidelium*. Why did Athanasius have such friends? For the very same reasons that he had his enemies! People loved him because he would not compromise the truth of the Gospel in an attempt to found a false peace and an illusory fellowship based upon falsehood. They admired his forthrightness, courage and untiring labour in defending and articulating the mysteries of the faith.

But such virtues did not arise merely from within Athanasius' tenacious personality but from the grace of the Holy Spirit that bore upon it. Everything that Athanasius said, did and wrote flowed from his deep awareness that he, as a theologian and as a bishop, was a member of the church. His relationship to the church was so much a part of his *persona* that it permeated his whole life. The church was the environment in which he ate, slept, argued, preached, wrote and prayed. His life within the church was the source of his uncompromising convictions about the truths of the faith, whether they were the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit or the Incarnation. It was his life within the church that, in the midst of so much turmoil, provided him with the assurance that the church, if not he himself, would ultimately triumph.

Athanasius was then an ecclesial bishop and an ecclesial theologian. He was an ecclesial bishop in that he put himself totally at the service of the Gospel and of the church that embodied that Gospel. He was an ecclesial theologian in that he knew that the faith he was defending and articulating was not his own personal invention, but rather the faith of the universal church of which he was a mere servant. Thus, Athanasius remains an exemplar today of what it truly means to be a bishop and a theologian.

In closing, I hope Athanasius' theological significance is now evident. He was a man who fought the good fight of faith *for* the faith, and won. Faithful Christians of all the ages owe him a great debt of gratitude for, because of Athanasius, the glory of the Trinity shines forth in splendour and the wonder of the Incarnation elicits joy and praise. Moreover, Athanasius gives assurance that the Holy Spirit brings divine life to all those who believe in the name of the Lord Jesus, an everlasting and loving communion with the Father.

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