

# Concordia Theological Monthly



J U N E     •     1 9 5 9

# The Case of Athanasius Against Arius

By SAMUEL LAEUCHLI

EDITORIAL NOTE. This article was read at a meeting of The American Society of Church History, which was held at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., in April 1958.

EVERY age must restate the events of history because in every age these events appear in a specific focus. The contemporary theological discussion concerning ontological and existential knowledge, the essence of Biblical faith, and the meaning of language in Christian theology make the controversy of the fourth century a highly modern issue. Indeed, the 20th century has to state its Christological position afresh. It cannot simply repeat the fathers between Nicaea and Constantinople. Yet it can learn a great deal from these fathers by seeking to understand, *sine ira et studio*, the case of Athanasius versus Arius.

## I

### INVOLVEMENT IN SALVATION VERSUS A CHRISTIAN ONTOLOGY

Harry A. Wolfson says in his extensive study on *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a combination of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism.<sup>1</sup> He can even quote Gregory of Nazianzus in his support.<sup>2</sup> This theory is as old as the doctrine itself and is indeed justified in the sense that Christian theology through the new element of the incarnation can no longer be set forth merely in the framework of Jewish Yahweh theology. But it is also true that by its emphasis on the new focus of the Word which became flesh, Christianity does not degenerate into a polytheistic religion. The basis for this position cannot be deduced, however, by comparing the philosoph-

---

<sup>1</sup> Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), I, 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 362 f., with reference to Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio* 3 (P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*. . . . Series Graeca, XLV, col. 17—20). Cited subsequently as Migne, P. G.

ical tendencies of those times but only by a study of the real issue at stake between the great antipodes of Alexandria.

From the few extant yet sufficiently illuminating texts by the presbyter Arius it becomes obvious that his whole school, disharmonious as it may appear in view of the often contradicting positions during the following five decades, tried to safeguard Christian theology from certain dangerous implications which appeared to be inherent in the doctrine of salvation. The Arian creed presents the following fronts with unmistakable precision: against the Valentinian προβολή, against the Manichaean μέρος ὁμοούσιον τοῦ πατρὸς, against the Sabellian μονάς and υἱοπάτωρ, and finally against the λύχνον ἀπὸ λύχνου of Hierakas.<sup>3</sup> Against the monistic and pantheistic implications of these systems Arius develops his constructions from the assumption of an absolute monotheism (the term μόνον appears in an impressive augmentation of eight parallel adjectives: alone unborn, alone invisible, alone without beginning, alone true, etc.) and the principle of pure causality behind this monotheism: God is αἴτιος τῶν πάντων.<sup>4</sup> It is on the basis of this ontological principle of causality that his follower Aetius attacked the Nicæan view with great consistency.<sup>5</sup> He insisted that whatever is taught in Christian churches concerning incarnation, salvation, mediation, must fit into the structure of a world view which has as the peak of its pyramid the transcendental God.<sup>6</sup>

The Athanasian case against this monotheistic-causal principle

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Opitz, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Arianischen Streites* (Berlin, 1934/1935), III/1, *Urk.* 6, 3. Cited hereafter as Opitz, III/1, with the document given by number.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 1; see also *Urk.* 6, 4, where he calls God the "source of all." In *Urk.* 3, 1 a citation is brought from Eusebius of Caesarea, where he makes a sharp distinction between πρῶτον and δεύτερον. This monotheistic consequence brings Arianism in peculiar closeness to its worst enemy, Sabellianism, as Cardinal John Henry Newman already remarked, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London, 1888), pp. 15 ff. See also Henry M. Gwatkin, *The Arian Controversy* (London, 1903), p. 11. Philonian roots, instead of general philosophical monotheistic ideas, are stressed by Wolfson, *op. cit.*, I, 585.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Lietzmann, *Geschichte der Alten Kirche* (Berlin, 1938), III, 218, with reference to the thesis by Aetius in Epiphanius, *Haereses*, 76, 11—12.

On the relationship between Arianism and classical Greek philosophy see Henry C. Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York, 1905), I, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore the Arian creed safeguards itself against any possible dilution of this monotheism. Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 3.

proceeds from a radically different angle. This theology is not a statement about a being but a statement within a very definite relationship to this being. As the historians of the fourth century long ago pointed out, it is the issue of salvation that underlies the Athanasian viewpoint:<sup>7</sup> the Arian theology represented a deadly attack upon the heart of Christian life and thought, namely, redemption. What does this mean, however? It removes theology from the realm of an ontological philosophy in which God, man, world are explained by a harmonious natural structure and posits it in a living relationship of man to God. As a result it is no longer a metaphysical construction within a rational ontological frame, but it operates solely within the scope of faith. Athanasius is "inquiring of the Sun concerning its radiance,"<sup>8</sup> but he does this by seeing this Sun, "*inquiring concerning its radiance.*"<sup>9</sup> At this point he speaks as a Christian who is deeply involved, and this involvement makes him turn in horror from the philosophical constructions by Arius.

A. The terms which are used in the controversy show this in a preliminary way. In the first of the extant documents by Arius (to the bishop of Nicomedia, Eusebius), the presbyter of Alexandria introduces his own Christological concepts against what he understands to be the modalism of Alexander with the words "What do we say and think, and what have we taught and do teach?"<sup>10</sup> In his famous creed he reminds the pope of Alexandria of the faith "which we have learned" (μεμαθήκαμεν),<sup>11</sup> and he begins it with: οἶδαμεν ἕνα θεόν. The Athanasian terms are on a different level. He speaks about "confessing" (ὁμολογέω),<sup>12</sup> "receiving"

<sup>7</sup> For instance Adolph von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* (5th ed., Tübingen, 1914), II, 208; Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Erlangen, 1895/1898), par. 20, 4; J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia, 1943), I, 116; Dominic J. Unger in *Franciscan Studies No. VI* (St. Bonaventura, N. Y., 1946), pp. 171 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *Oratio contra Arianos*, I, 8, 80 f. (P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus. . . . Series Graeca*, XXVI, col. 25—28). Cited subsequently as *Or. c. Ar.*

<sup>9</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 7, 68 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 23, 24).

<sup>10</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 1, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Catena to Luke 10, 22," Nr. 4; see Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, editors, *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1892), IV, 89. Cited as *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV.

(παράλαμβάνω)<sup>13</sup> and its counterpart, “denying” (ἀρνέομαι),<sup>14</sup> and “blaspheming” (βλασφημέω),<sup>15</sup> the latter expression used in sometimes tiring frequency. All these terms represent an involvement of faith, the alternative of witness or blasphemy.

B. This alternative between witness and denial leads us to the next point. Athanasius is *totally* involved in this theological object which he describes. His whole existence is at stake, and therefore he cannot speak concerning this phenomenon in a detached philosophical-ontological manner but only from a total commitment of faith. “Because of our relation [or ties: συγγένεια] with His body we have become God’s temple.”<sup>16</sup> These words come from a man who has been transformed.<sup>17</sup> In this at least partially fulfilled<sup>18</sup> transformation, everything is endangered if — as Arius contends — this act of transformation is not one performed by God Himself but one merely effected by a creature. The violent opposition to the Arian concept of the κτίσμα<sup>19</sup> is the fight for the very core of this man’s existence, as he explains it in the famous passage of the work on the Nicæan creed: If the Mediator is drawn into the sphere of creatureliness, then a person would actually need another mediator.<sup>20</sup> If, on the other hand, we are made sons truly (ἀληθῶς),<sup>21</sup> by being incorporated into Jesus Christ, then indeed everything depends upon the divinity of the

<sup>13</sup> *Epist. ad Serapionem* I, 1, 72 (Migne, P. G., XXVI, col. 529, 530), and often.

<sup>14</sup> *In illud omnia*, 4 ff.; see *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 188.

<sup>15</sup> *Circular Epistle*, 6, *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 95 f.; *Or. c. Ar.* I, 4, 45 (Migne, P. G., XXVI, col. 19, 20).

<sup>16</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 43, 66 (Migne, P. G., XXVI, col. 99, 100).

<sup>17</sup> *De incarnatione Dei Verbi*, 5, 54 (Migne, P. G., XXVI, col. 991, 992).

<sup>18</sup> The conflict within the *homo sub gratia* does not appear in the early church until Augustine. Hans Jonas, *Augustin und das Paulinische Freiheitsproblem (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, Neue Folge, 27. Heft; Göttingen, 1930)*.

<sup>19</sup> Κτίσμα in the Arian creed (Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 2), in Arius (quoted by Alexander of Alexandria (Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 4b, 7) and Eusebius of Nicomedia (Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 1, 5)).

<sup>20</sup> *De decretis*, III, 8; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 155.

<sup>21</sup> *De decretis*, VII, 31; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 171 f.

One who, in the Irenaeian tradition, came to recapitulate man.<sup>22</sup> "If the Savior, then, is not God or Logos or Son, then you, as well as the Greeks and the present Jews, are permitted to say what you will."<sup>23</sup> The whole weight of the Athanasian case lies behind this affirmation, which is perfectly and easily rejectable on the basis of philosophical rationalism. It can be understood only as the confession of one who is so involved in what he confesses that his whole life stands and falls with it. "How can he speak the truth who denies the Son?" is the rhetorical question in the opening book of the anti-Arian orations.<sup>24</sup> Here Athanasius makes it clear that he cannot conceive of truth in an ontological sense but only as ἀλήθεια in the specific Christian context and not as the mathematical formula that two plus two equals four. It is neither the physical nor the rational deduction of an objective natural fact, but it is ἀλήθεια exclusively within the Christian faith, very much in the Johannine understanding of the word ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀλήθεια. This means that the Arian and the Athanasian theology represent two totally different ways of dealing with Christian doctrine. One tries to fit it into an ontological-causal scheme of monotheism, nature, and reason, and the other cannot think of any other approach to faith than faith itself.

C. This ontological issue becomes very apparent when Arius grapples with the problem of time in his creature-Christology. For him the real absurdity of the orthodox view was the Origenistic doctrine of the eternity of the Logos.<sup>25</sup> If the principle that one (and not several, as the Gnostics had taught) God created the all was to be maintained, then, he insisted, Origen had to be dismissed as wrong and the Second Person of the Trinity must be described by the negations which drove Athanasius and his flock into a frenzy: "There was a time when He was not" (ἦν ποτε ὅτε

<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haereses*, IV, 33 (Migne, *P. G.*, VII, col. 1072 ff.); III, 16, 6 (ibid., VII, col. 925 f.); etc.

<sup>23</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 10, 2 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 31, 32). If Christ had not become man, we would not have been redeemed by Him, I, 43, 71 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 101, 102); but if He had not been God, He could not have deified others, *De synodis*, 51, 60 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 783—786).

<sup>24</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 8, 85 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 27, 28).

<sup>25</sup> Origen, *Peri archon* IV, 4, 85 (Migne, *P. G.*, XI, col. 347, 348). He was repudiated by Arius, "Letter of Eusebius of Nicomedia," *Opitz* III/1, *Urk.* 1, 4.

οὐκ ἦν),<sup>26</sup> “before He was born, He was not,”<sup>27</sup> “God was not always Father.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, Arius was driven into formulating a creation before time began; the Son is “born timeless” (ἀχρόνως γεννηθείς) and “created before the aeons.”<sup>29</sup> This meant the introduction of a “cosmological speculation”<sup>30</sup> which took the heart out of the early Christian belief in Christ and which, at the same time, created a new absurdity instead of the one he tried to evade—a time before time, a double beginning of time, one with the creation of the first κτίσμα, and the second with the opening of “time.”

Athanasius disregards the Arian ontological concern in his attack upon this view. He declares the eternity of the Son as a matter of course. Eternity and perfection are parallel issues in the argument, and the eternity of the Son is absolutely necessary if He is to have perfection with the Father.<sup>31</sup> Proceeding from this presupposition, Athanasius asks the crucial question which seems to me to lie at the root of the whole issue: “Why then do you imagine times before the Son?”<sup>32</sup> Why do you need this? Is it not enough to have the eternity of mediation, of salvation? In other words, why does a Christian theology have to construct (the term φαντάζω in this context is quite significant to modern ears with the connotation of poetic or philosophic imaginations, phantasies) an ontological-cosmological frame if this eternity is present in Christian faith? Athanasius refers to this fact in this polemic in abundance. One could say that a man who could discard the time problem so easily was a bad thinker. One could also say, however, that this man understood that a Christian theology dare not construct a rational frame of reference for faith, but must present this faith

<sup>26</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 4<sup>b</sup>, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 1, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 4<sup>b</sup>, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Harnack, *Dogmeng.*, II, 222. Cf. also the excellent remark: “Die arianische Doktrin hätte das Christentum . . . in Kosmologie und Moral aufgelöst” (p. 223).

<sup>31</sup> The elaborate discussion of this in *Or. c. Ar.* I, 14, 51—63 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 39—42).

<sup>32</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 13, 48 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 39, 40).

*qua* faith. "Because of our ties with this body, we have become God's temple";<sup>33</sup> we "partake of the Son," which means, "we partake of God."<sup>34</sup>

One could object that we have introduced a modern theological element into the Nicæan conflict of which neither of the participants was even aware. Indeed, if we expect to find contemporary concerns for the relationship of revelation and ontology, we should be thoroughly disappointed. It is quite obvious that Athanasius used philosophical, even ontological, language to state his theological position, as his whole age did. The relationship between the Plotinian and the Christian triads is evident, and it is in Greek metaphysical terminology that the nonmetaphysical relationship of Christian faith is expressed.<sup>35</sup> And yet there are indications which point to the fact that Athanasius was fully aware of what he was doing. I think here primarily of the 31st chapter of his book on the Nicæan creed, in which he defends the Biblical terms "Father" and "Son" vs. the Greek terminology of his time. "It will be much more accurate to denote God from the Son and to call Him Father than to name Him and call Him ἀγέννητος." In this important paragraph Athanasius confronts Biblical and non-Biblical concepts of God and, while using non-Biblical language constantly in the attempt to overcome the Arian cosmology, asserts that it would be much more simple, Scriptural, and accurate to use the Biblical terms Father, Son. "Ἀγέννητος is a word of the Greeks, who do not know the Son, but 'Father' has been acknowledged and vouchsafed by our Lord." Here the whole issue between Biblical faith and philosophical speculation becomes apparent: the deep conflict between the sonship of Christ and the cosmological ontology into which this sonship was to be molded. The enormous difference between a rational speculative and a Biblical Christian

<sup>33</sup> See note 16 above. Cf. Seeberg's observation that in Athanasius his religious elements are totally prior to any logical consistency, *Lehrbuch*, par. 20, 4, c.

<sup>34</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 16, 73 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 45, 46).

<sup>35</sup> One could go even farther by calling the orthodox position a metaphysical system of some sort because metaphysical language is used. However, the question is not: Has metaphysical language been used? but: Is the primary concern one to maintain a concept of being? Or does the metaphysical language simply serve to explain the mystery of redemption?

theology becomes unmistakably clear when Athanasius goes on to say that when we pray we do not say, "O God Unbegotten," but we say, "Our Father which art in heaven!" And when Christ taught us to baptize, he did not tell us to baptize "into the name of the Unbegotten and the Begotten but in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>36</sup> Arius speaks about God in terms of Greek ontology: the Unborn, the Invisible, the Immortal, the Unchangeable;<sup>37</sup> Athanasius says, "Because of the Son the Father is thus called by us."<sup>38</sup>

In view of the above we can indeed understand why the Nicaean solution resulted neither in Jewish monotheism nor in pagan polytheism. Both had to be rejected; one because it denied the incarnation, the other because it denied the sovereignty of God. It will also be clear that this nonphilosophical answer to Arius was not in danger of falling into the Plotinian ontology, because it insisted on the total difference between God and the created world.<sup>39</sup> The resulting position cannot be interpreted as a syncretistic compromise but only as the expression of a faith which is involved in the act of God itself.

## II

### THE CONTROVERSY OF LANGUAGE

The last paragraph has already led us to the next group of issues. Throughout the vast writings of the bishop of Alexandria there is a constant linguistic debate. At first it sounds rather far-fetched and can also fatigue the reader before too long. But it is very

---

<sup>36</sup> See note 21 above; *Or. c. Ar.* I, 34, 66 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 81—84); *De synodis*, 51. "Greek interpretation does not bind us!" Rightly George P. Fisher remarks concerning this "generation" of the Son by the Father that the explanations by Athanasius are mostly negative, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York, 1896), p. 138. So are the statements of Chalcedon. Christian theology has often to be negative when trying to safeguard itself against metaphysical constructs.

<sup>37</sup> This is distinctly expressed in the powerful opening to the Arian creed: Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 6, 2. Even if Gwatkin is basically right that the Arian system is "heathen to the core," *The Arian Controversy*, p. 7, one has to give Arius considerably more credit than Gwatkin does in his *Studies on Arianism* (London, 1882), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> See note 21 above. This Son-Father relationship is interestingly discussed in Newman, pp. 158 ff.

<sup>39</sup> "Not as man is he (i. e., God)." *Or. c. Ar.* I, 27, 97 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 67, 68).

significant for the whole controversy. An extensive part of the Athanasian defense of the Nicaean Christian faith is an attempt to demonstrate the unity of the language on the part of the Catholics and the failure to comprehend the Nicaean language altogether on the part of the Arians. This is again a highly relevant issue today.

As can easily be seen, Arius makes extensive use of Biblical language, Scriptural expressions, and whole Biblical passages to sustain his position. The orations against the Arians present the crucial Biblical passages which were at issue and with which Athanasius had to grapple—sometimes with apparent difficulty. Phil. 2:9, 10; Ps. 46:7, 8; Heb. 1:4; 3:2; Acts 2:36; John 14:10; 17:3; 10:30; 17:11; Matt. 11:27,<sup>40</sup> etc., but also Luke 10:22,<sup>41</sup> are some of the key references advanced for the Arian position. Against these Athanasius throws almost all of the Christological statements in the Gospel of John, besides many other passages in the Old and the New Testament. If one were to write a study on the prooftexts employed, one would have to consider both groups, realizing that the Arian position is more difficult to document because of the loss of Arian texts. However, in Athanasius' camp a new factor appeared which is related to our first point and had its bearing upon the history of theology in relationship to Biblical texts. Athanasius not only analyzed the language of Scripture in theological terms, he also tried to understand this language as a whole and to define a term in its context. He furthermore understood the uniqueness of Scriptural language.

A. To begin with, Athanasius knew that even the devil can make use of the Scripture.<sup>42</sup> As was known from Biblical times, "the devil borrows Scripture language."<sup>43</sup> Therefore a mere literalistic approach could not be an easy way out of the impasse, since Arius had as many passages at his disposal as his opponent. But Athanasius realized an even graver problem: his opponents

<sup>40</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I—III, passim.

<sup>41</sup> E. g., the "Catena to Luke 10:22," *select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 87—90.

<sup>42</sup> "Epist. Encyclica to the Egyptian and Libyan Bishops," 8; see *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 227.

<sup>43</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 8, 78 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 25, 26).

could use precisely the same language that he used and yet mean something different!<sup>44</sup> Arius could write a creed using orthodox language.<sup>45</sup> What Athanasius was really doing in this semantic dilemma can be understood from his dealing with Prov. 8:22. The LXX translation of this passage reads: ὁ κύριος ἔκτισέ με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ.<sup>46</sup> Although this whole painful debate was (because of a different meaning in the Hebrew יָדָר) rather unnecessary, it reveals quite clearly the approach of Athanasius. Before he proceeds to deal with this difficult text, he furnishes what one might call prolegomena for the terminology in question. In the chapters preceding the actual exegesis of the text, he develops at length the meaning of "creature," "Son," "Word," in the Christian faith.<sup>47</sup> Athanasius was fully aware that the same word, for instance the same term for God, can be used in different meanings.<sup>48</sup> But more than this. The language of theology, or the language of the Bible which theology uses, can again only have meaning from within the sphere of faith. "How can he speak the truth concerning the Father, who denies the Son, who reveals Him?"<sup>49</sup> asks Athanasius. "To speak the truth" (ἀληθεύω) therefore has something to do with confessing the Son. Theology cannot be based on a method which quotes prooftexts at random; the Scriptural proof for its formulations must proceed from an understanding of the central Scriptural event, the incarnation of the Word. Because a single word can have different meanings, one must show the meaning of this term in the context before one explains a Scriptural text. And because the devil can borrow Scriptural proofs, one must first bring the Biblical terms into the context of the central Biblical theme; otherwise they can be mutilated and abused.

<sup>44</sup> See note 42 above.

<sup>45</sup> "Epist. Encyclica to the Egyptian and Libyan Bishops," 10; see *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 228.

<sup>46</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* II, 44, 22 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 239, 240); II, 80, 28 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 317, 318). Cf. Sheldon, *op. cit.*, I, 200, to this passage.

<sup>47</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* II, 18—43 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 183—240).

<sup>48</sup> *De synodis*, 36, 40 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 757, 758).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. note 43 above.

B. The next step, therefore, had to be, to bring the Scriptural passages into a relationship with one another. This may be regarded as the most important contribution of Athanasius in the realm of a Biblical theology. When Athanasius deals with a passage such as Phil. 2:9, 10, he first analyzes the meaning of "Son" in the total Biblical witness about Christ and then asks, What is this exaltation in other contexts, such as Eph. 4:10; John 1:14, and Acts 2:14? So he takes the terms "highly exalted," "gave," and explains "how these words are used."<sup>50</sup>

The Arians had quoted John 14:10 to show that the Word of Christ is not His own but the Father's and that the Father gave Him only the power to do the works.<sup>51</sup> Athanasius counters by first explaining the terms "True Father," "True Son," "Light Invisible,"<sup>52</sup> etc., and then bringing this text into the whole context of the Gospel of John (John 10:31; 1:1; 16:15; 17:10) and the larger framework of Biblical faith (Rev. 1:8; Luke 5:24; 1 Cor. 8:6).<sup>53</sup>

That Athanasius consistently applied this principle could be shown ad infinitum from the orations. For him one of the main defects of the Arians consisted in their tearing a text out of the whole and using it for some peripheric purposes. The "whole" for him, indeed, was the theme of his first work: *De incarnatione Verbi*. One might accuse Athanasius, of course, of using this method arbitrarily. One might also point to the great dangers which are hidden in this approach to the Biblical text. Nevertheless it makes an important contribution to the understanding of Biblical passages to demand that they be interpreted in their immediate context<sup>54</sup> as well as the total context of Scriptural faith. What Origen had begun, Athanasius, forced by the serious situation of defending his position, developed fully. If there is a literalistic approach to

<sup>50</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 44—45, 62 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 101—106).

<sup>51</sup> This is the clever exegesis by the Arian theologian Asterius: *Or. c. Ar.* III, 2, 66 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 323—326).

<sup>52</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 1, 54 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 321—324).

<sup>53</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 4—5 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 327—332).

<sup>54</sup> Acts 2:36, first in the context of the speech of Peter, *Or. c. Ar.* II, 11, 43; II, 12, 49 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 169—172).

Scripture in this Christological debate, it is Arius who represents it and not Athanasius.<sup>55</sup>

C. The Arian camp sought to invalidate this approach by the argument of analogy. "If they both were since the beginning, how can it be that the Father is Father and the Son is Son?" wrote Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>56</sup> Arius could become very sarcastic on this score, as can be seen from Athanasius' bitter words: "They turn to silly women, Did you have a son before bearing?"<sup>57</sup> The Arians contended if one adopted the term "Father" from Biblical language, one had to apply it in a way in which we use and understand it.<sup>58</sup> Therefore this very term "Father," if used in relation to a "Son," would obviously imply that the one existed prior to or earlier than the other.

Athanasius had to take his opponent to a different level. When we use the terms "Son" and "Father," he insisted, we do not employ them according to normal usage. "The Son is not Son through participation (μετουσίᾳ), but He is the own offspring (γέννημα) of the Father." And again: "The Son is not in the Father in the sense of 'In Him we live and move and have our being.'" Why not? Because the Son is Life, and Life does not live in Life, otherwise it would not be Life, but rather He gives life to all.<sup>59</sup> The relationship of Father to Son is therefore not a relationship of analogy, as if it could be understood from within our temporal and spatial a priori. You cannot take these words in a "bodily sense"<sup>60</sup> and in "material thoughts,"<sup>61</sup> and the real mistake was "to measure the Offspring of the Father by themselves."<sup>62</sup> What Gregory of Nazianzus was to develop

<sup>55</sup> Acts 2:36, second in the total frame of Scripture, *Or. c. Ar.* II, 12—14 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 169—178). For the difference between the Athanasian method and the Arian proof-text procedure see Sheldon, *op. cit.*, I, 206. Stülcken (*Athanasiana, Texte und Untersuchungen*, XIX, 4, 1899, p. 83) showed how Athanasius could without fear present two very different exegeses for the same text.

<sup>56</sup> Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 3, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 22, 44 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 57, 58).

<sup>58</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 22, 35 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 57, 58).

<sup>59</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 1, 66 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 323, 324).

<sup>60</sup> *De synodis*, 54, 82 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 789, 790).

<sup>61</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 15, 64 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 43, 44).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

systematically can be found throughout the Orations: that the terminology Father-Son is used only in relational but not ontological language, or to put it in Athanasius' own terms, that the difference is φύσει (which Harnack called the inner necessity)<sup>63</sup> but not θελήματι.<sup>64</sup>

The difference of the theological language from an analogous use of terms is demonstrated in a very penetrating passage concerning the fatherhood of God. In a statement pointing to Eph. 3:15 ("from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named") Athanasius declares that God "does not make man His pattern," but because only God is properly Father of His Son, "we men are also called fathers of our own children."<sup>65</sup> This demonstrates rather distinctly how much Athanasius was aware of using theological language in a form radically distinct from that of the contemporary writers.

This brings us back to the first issue. The opponents of Nicaea maintained they did not understand the terms<sup>66</sup> and that the orthodox language was an offense to them;<sup>67</sup> most of all, of course, the controversial adjective *homoousios*. In his late treatise *De synodis* Athanasius shows that he realizes that the Arians and the opposers of *homoousios* have to be distinguished and indicates that he is quite willing to discuss the issue with the latter.<sup>68</sup> However, when he hits back at the Arians, he tells them that it is not the word which offends them but the issue behind the term.<sup>69</sup> They may shout that they are not able to understand it; in reality "they reject the terms," reproaches Athanasius.<sup>70</sup> For him theological language is inseparable from the speaker's or writer's involvement in the act of incarnation. Therefore the objection of his enemies for him is, rightly or wrongly, simply a pretense for rejecting Christian faith at its core. "They do not understand how God is," he accuses them, because they measure God by them-

<sup>63</sup> *Dogmengeschichte*, II, 215.

<sup>64</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 24, 54 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 59—62).

<sup>65</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 23, 52 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 59, 60).

<sup>66</sup> *De synodis*, 40, 74 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 763, 764).

<sup>67</sup> *De synodis*, 34, 24 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 751—754).

<sup>68</sup> *De synodis*, 41, 82 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 764—768).

<sup>69</sup> See note 67 above.

<sup>70</sup> See note 66 above.

selves.<sup>71</sup> In the realm of the language therefore, as well as in the whole theological debate, Athanasius speaks as a Christian out of his involvement in the redemptive act of God. The defense of the language which he uses is the defense also of his nonontological faith, according to which he believes in the eternal Father and in the incarnate, also eternal, Son of this Father, who came to redeem the world.

### III

#### THEOLOGY AS THEOLATRY<sup>72</sup>

The involvement of theology in the object of its thinking, namely, the incarnate Son of God, must be understood from a third angle if one of the basic aspects is not to be missing. The theology of these fathers, continuing with Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>73</sup> and Augustine,<sup>74</sup> just to mention two, is not simply an epistemological act of discovering and analyzing truth but an act of praise, of adoration, and of glorification.

A. The terminology is quite enlightening to begin with. Some terms which are used throughout the work of Athanasius designate not simply an intellectual process: to name (καλέω),<sup>75</sup> to utter (φθέγγομαι),<sup>76</sup> to call him a Son (λέγω υἰόν).<sup>77</sup> When he says that "by seeing the Son we see the Father,"<sup>78</sup> another dimension has already entered the theological investigation: βλέπω, ὁράω. A similar dimension has come in when Athanasius exhorts to "ascend to the Father."<sup>79</sup> But it is more than this. Theology is connected with a God who is to be glorified, and therefore it

<sup>71</sup> See note 61 above.

<sup>72</sup> I have this term from Samuel Terrien's Rall Lectures 1958: "Fields of Force in Biblical Theology" (to be published) as an interesting translation for the προσκύνησις of the Greeks.

<sup>73</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations — On the Son*, passim, in E. R. Handy and C. C. Richardson, editors, *Christology of Later Church Fathers* (Vol. III of *Library of Christian Classics*; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 160—193.

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *De trinitate* I, 4 (P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus. . . . Series Latina* [1886] XLII, col. 824).

<sup>75</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* II, 38, 53 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 227, 228).

<sup>76</sup> *De synodis*, 39, 69 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 761, 762).

<sup>77</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 67, 90 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 463, 464).

<sup>78</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 16, 75 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 45, 46).

<sup>79</sup> *De synodis*, 51, 70 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 785, 786).

has to glorify God by what it is doing. Our primary concern is not with the nature but with the honor of God.<sup>80</sup> So Athanasius develops the whole theological controversy with the Johannine concept of glory (δοξάζω): He who honors the Son honors the Father.<sup>81</sup> The same passage equates "concern" and "honor" in speaking about God. This glorifying means to "adore" (προσκυνέω),<sup>82</sup> and this adoration of the Son and the Father is at the very center of the Nicæan argument. All the works of Athanasius end with a doxology which is not a mere formula for ending a book but the final end toward which the whole argument is driving: "because to God and the Father is due the glory, honor, and worship, with His coexistent Son and Word, together with the all-holy and life-giving Spirit, now and unto the endless aeons of aeons. Amen."<sup>83</sup> The word about God must become a word of praise about the glory of God.

B. From this conviction the Christological debate receives its impetus. Because the act of redemption and mediation is an act of God and not of a creature and involves a close connection of eternity and essence (οὐσία) between Father and Son, therefore this connection will express itself also in the adoration of both. Then the knowledge of the Son can never remain intellectual but as knowledge will also be "contemplation" (θεωρία). "The one who calls God 'Father' thereby knows and contemplates the Son."<sup>84</sup> It would be wrong to distinguish the two factors as if one depended exclusively upon the other as primary. Each conditions the other. Two passages reveal the reversible relationship between knowledge and praise. On the one hand, "the one who contemplates the Son, contemplates that which is proper to the *ousia* of the Father, *and knows* that the Father is in the Son."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *De decretis*, III, 9; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 155 f.

<sup>81</sup> John 5:23 in *Or. c. Ar.* I, 33, 62 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 79, 80); and often.

<sup>82</sup> *De decretis*, III, 11; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 157.

<sup>83</sup> *De decretis*, VII, 32; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 172. This connection between Christ and worship is not simply a "cultic" one, as the sarcastic remark by Shirley Jackson Case, *Highways of Christian Doctrine* (Chicago, 1936) p. 30 indicates: "The will of the cult — as always — had its way" in Nicæa.

<sup>84</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 33, 61 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 79, 80).

<sup>85</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 3, 80 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 327, 328).

Knowledge is the result, the consequent outflowing of the *theoria*. On the other hand, "he will contemplate the Son in the Father when that which is said about the Son is also said about the Father."<sup>86</sup> Here the relation is reversed: knowledge precedes contemplation. This shows the unity of the whole area which we tried to analyze here. Theology, as involved faith which uses a language that is inseparably connected with this involvement of faith, is all one: the total confrontation of the Christian with God. It would push the whole argument out of balance by creating an experiential, intellectual, or linguistic priority out of which the rest could be explained and deduced. "The faith of the Christians acknowledges . . . and worships the unity of the Godhead itself."<sup>87</sup> In this everything is included, is mutually conditioned, and finally leads, through knowledge and language, to the final praise which fulfills the faith of the Christians: "There is One Glory of the Holy Trinity."<sup>88</sup> The praise which has been the origin becomes also the final goal of the Christological debate.

C. Taking this into consideration, we can more readily understand why Athanasius considered the Arian position to be such an abominable one. It suggests the worship of creation instead of the worship which belongs to God alone. "They change honor into dishonor,"<sup>89</sup> he accuses. And indeed, according to his whole argument, no other outcome was possible. The assault against the Son on the part of the Arians really represents a blasphemy of the Father.<sup>90</sup> Their statements "do not glorify and honor the Lord."<sup>91</sup> The Arians also knew of the honor of God; the Arian creed opens with a praise to the Father, a Father "without beginning."<sup>92</sup> But the Arians introduce a clever distinction of honor<sup>93</sup> in accord with their distinction of birth before time and thereby

<sup>86</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* III, 5, 95 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 329—332).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* II, 23, 88 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 195, 196).

<sup>89</sup> "Apologia de fuga," 2, *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 255.

<sup>90</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 25, 64 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 61—64).

<sup>91</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 18, 92 (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 49—50).

<sup>92</sup> *De synodis*, 15, 11 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 705—708).

<sup>93</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria: *καὶ τὰξει καὶ τιμῇ δευτέρου*: Opitz, III/1, *Urk.* 3, 2.

break the whole chain which links the thought, language, and worship of the Christian faith. Does the Arian position honor the Father?<sup>94</sup> This, indeed, is the crucial question of Athanasius. It is quite obvious that the answer to this pertinent question for him is found in the question itself. The honor of the Father is already the honor of the Son.<sup>95</sup> As one link of the chain of faith is broken, the whole chain has become worthless.

There is an indication that Athanasius was even externally justified in accusing the Arians of blasphemy as the result of their dishonor of the Son. I am referring to the *Epistola encyclica* to the Egyptian and Libyan bishops. Here Athanasius reports the cruelties and atrocities which the Alexandrian counterbishop brought upon the Nicaean groups of his diocese. To be sure, a good many of these atrocities could have been committed by the Catholics as well, Athanasius included. The time has long passed when Athanasius could be regarded as the poor persecuted lamb, incapable of anything of which his enemies accused him. Nevertheless, it seems significant to me that of all places Gregory would invade the baptisteries,<sup>96</sup> that he would interfere with the Christ worship in the churches by beating the believers,<sup>97</sup> and above all, that this would be done precisely on the day of Easter.<sup>98</sup> These facts would indicate that more was involved in Alexandria than a struggle for the power of the episcopate or a sociological controversy between different national and cultural groups. This desecration of Easter Day underscores the point which Athanasius makes against the Arians: it could only happen because this chain of faith-language-praise which was an intricate part of the whole life of a Christian had been broken.

A similar phenomenon, although somewhat intangible because of the loss of the *Thalia*, would appear in what Athanasius calls the "tone" of the Arian language, the "mockery."<sup>99</sup> This is a very

<sup>94</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 30, 25 ff. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 73—76).

<sup>95</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 33, 62 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 79, 80).

<sup>96</sup> "Epist. Encyclica to the Egyptian and Libyan Bishops," 3; *Select Libr. of Nicene Fathers*, second series, IV, 224.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 4; pp. 224 f.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; pp. 225 f.

<sup>99</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* I, 9, 97 f. (Migne, *P. G.*, XXVI, col. 29, 30).

unjust accusation since Arius was certainly sincere about his faith. Arius therefore would not have understood the reproach of a wrong tone. What Athanasius finds missing, however, is the praise which alone sustains and closes the circle of a theology of incarnation. What was for Arius therefore simply theological analysis became blasphemy for Athanasius. If the "tone" is no longer a tone of praise, then it turns into a blasphemy of faith.

\* \* \*

The case of Athanasius against Arius is the case of Christian theology in any given situation—the refusal to let the faith of the incarnation and the redemption be pinned down in any metaphysical ontology,<sup>100</sup> because the language of this faith is first and always connected with the whole Christian existence, involved in redemption, and this involvement is carried by, and leads to, praise.

Evanston, Ill.

---

<sup>100</sup> Harnack saw this whole issue behind the Arian conflict with a sharp awareness when he spoke of the "Trennung von Natur und Offenbarung," *Dogmengeschichte*, II, 211.