

**Analyse the primary characteristics of Athanasius's Christology.
To what extent, if at all, is it dependent on faith in the Triune God?**

In his work *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* ('On the Incarnation of the Word'),¹ Athanasius develops his understanding of the person and status of Jesus Christ. As A.E. McGrath discusses, Athanasius (c.293-373 CE) was seeking to respond to the theology of Arius, who argued that Jesus Christ was not divinely begotten but was instead 'first among the creatures', a created being who, as *Logos*, acted as an agent of creation.² It is not clear whether *De Incarnatione* was written before or after the Council of Nicaea (325 CE),³ but it was the purpose of the Council to define 'the boundaries of acceptable belief',⁴ which included resolving competing understandings of the nature of Jesus Christ, and the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. As a result of its debates, in which Athanasius was a key contributor, the Council produced a creedal statement, in which the agreed doctrine of the Church was established.

There are a number of characteristics to Athanasius' Christology which can be identified in *De Incarnatione*: the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Word of God, through whom 'all things came into being' (John 1:3); that the created universe exists within the Word of God; that the purpose of the incarnation was for the salvation of humanity; the necessity of Jesus' public death and a differentiation between the death of the human body of Jesus and the eternal existence of the Word; and, that Jesus Christ will return in majesty and judgement. These will now be explored, with consideration given to how these characteristics are argued and how they differ from or agree with prevailing ideas.

The basis for Athanasius' Christology appears to be drawn largely from the Gospel according to John, with particular reference made to the Prologue (Jn 1:1-18), specifically:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...' (Jn 1:1-3), and:

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' (Jn 1:14).

¹ A generally-accepted translation of the title of Athanasius' work, see, for example: C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p.67.

² A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th edn. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp.217-220.

³ T.G. WEINANDY and D.A. KEATING (2017) *Athanasius and His Legacy: Trinitarian-Incarnational Soteriology and Its Reception*. [Online], p.16.

⁴ L. AYRES *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.85-86.

The foundation to Athanasian Christology therefore lies in the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the divine *Logos*, the Word of God. In order for the Word to have been used by the Father to effect creation, the Word must have existed before the point of creation and, indeed, if God is unchanging, God must always have been 'Father' which means that the 'Son' (referred to by Athanasius in *De Incarnatione* principally as the Word) must have always existed and therefore cannot have been created.⁵ This is an important refutation of Arius' notion of Jesus Christ as a human creature and not a divine being. With the Word being the one through whom all things were created, Athanasius claims that it is only 'fitting' that this same Word should be the one who would come into the world to redeem it (p.137).

This leads to the second principal characteristic of Athanasius' Christology. The purpose of the incarnation of Christ was for the salvation of humanity. In order to restore in humankind the image and likeness of God with which they were created (Gen. 1:26-27), it was necessary for the Word, as the image of the Father (being of one substance according to Athanasius' concept of *homoousios*),⁶ to come to humankind himself (p.167). The Word therefore assumed a human body, using it as 'an instrument' (p.245);⁷ because the Word was 'dwelling' in the body, this specific, sanctified body could not be corrupted (p.185), but Jesus would use his body to die as a sacrifice to end the corruption of death (p.159). This also speaks to the 'Christus Victor' theology evident in John: that Jesus was not only a willing victim in his Passion and death, but a participating victor using the death of his mortal body to defeat the power of sin and death through his resurrection.⁸ Indeed, Athanasius affirms that 'death has been destroyed and that the cross of the Lord is the victory over it' (p.207). Athanasius further argues for the necessity of Jesus' public death, in order that his death and resurrection could be witnessed by many so that they might come to believe in him (p.191); and for the specific means through which this was accomplished – the death of one who is cursed, that is, hanged on a tree (Deut. 21:23) in order to fulfil Scripture, with Jesus being raised up from the ground on the cross in order to draw all people to himself (Jn 12:32) (p.198). In this way, the Word could not only 'rid us of death' but also renew humanity in our recognition of him (p.173).

An important distinction drawn by Athanasius, however, is that the Word himself did not die on the cross, but rather it was the body which the Word had used that died (p.185). This is because, according to Athanasius, the universe lives within the Word, and is contained and sustained by him (p.175).⁹ As the Word exists and

⁵ The pre-existent *Logos*, and the doctrine under consideration at the time of Nicaea, is discussed by Gerald O'Collins, see: G. O'COLLINS *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.248-249.

⁶ R. DEL COLLE 'The Triune God' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.128.

⁷ John Kelly notes the significance of Athanasius' explanation of Jesus' body being the body of the Word, created through Mary and not that of 'a holy man' entered by the Word; see J.N.D. Kelly *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th edn. (London: Continuum, 1977), pp.284-285.

⁸ 'Christus Victor' as a principal motif in John's Gospel is discussed by Paul Rainbow, see: P.A. RAINBOW *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), pp.213-214.

⁹ This develops an idea from *Contra Gentes*, see: ATHANASIUS 'Contra Gentes' in R.W. Thomson (ed. and trans.) *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.121.

lives throughout his creation, and was 'not bound to the body' (p.175) it was not possible for the Word to die, but the Word was able to reanimate the body as 'everything lived and was sustained by him' (p.177).

A further characteristic of Athanasian Christology is his confidence that Jesus Christ will return in majesty and judgement, no longer in the form of a human but 'in his own greatness' (pp.273-275) quoting Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: '...you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.' (Matt. 26:64).

Together, these characteristics reveal a high Christology which is very much in line with that of John the Evangelist. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, is eternal, of one substance with God the Father, and contains, sustains and controls the entirety of creation. The death of Jesus' body was not the death of the Word itself, but a necessary, intentional sacrifice to atone for sin and restore humanity into the image of God.

The question under consideration in this textual analysis is the extent to which this Christology depends upon a Trinitarian understanding of God: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Certainly, the Nicæan Creed, which begins, 'We believe in God...' ends with the statement: 'And in the Holy Spirit'. This reveals a less developed pneumatology, but does appear to accept that the Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Godhead, in line with Paul's doxological allusion in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 13:13). Indeed, Athanasius includes a similar reference in the concluding paragraph of *De Incarnatione*: '...to the Father with the Son himself in the holy spirit, be honour and power, and glory for ever and ever' (p.277).

This doxology is, however, the solitary reference to the Holy Spirit in *De Incarnatione*. According to Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating, Athanasius would be one of the first to expand upon the Nicæan Creed with a biblically-justified argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ As Ralph Del Colle observes, Athanasius makes this argument in *Contra Arianos*, claiming the divinity of the Holy Spirit as necessary for the created order to 'participate in the divine nature'.¹¹ Indeed, Athanasius is credited with extending his principle of *homoousios* to include the Holy Spirit.¹² The text under consideration here however, *De Incarnatione*, makes no such references to the Holy Spirit; indeed, Athanasius refers to the Word as 'the Son and Power and Wisdom of God' (p.181). In respect of the physical incarnation, this is described as 'an ineffable generation in the flesh' through his virgin mother: no mention is made of the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit (as described in Lk 1:35) but seems to be attributed to the action of the Word himself (p.225). The Holy Spirit is typically described as the 'action' of God in the world,¹³ yet here Athanasius describes how the Son of God 'is alive and active' and works and effects the salvation of all' (p.211). Since a Trinitarian understanding of the nature

¹⁰ T.G. WEINANDY and D.A. KEATING (2017) *Athanasius and His Legacy: Trinitarian-Incarnational Soteriology and Its Reception*. [Online], p.16.

¹¹ R. DEL COLLE 'The Triune God' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.129-130.

¹² J.N.D. KELLY *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th edn. (London: Continuum, 1977), pp.255-256.

¹³ As discussed by Colin Gunton, see: C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, pp.75-76.

of God would recognise Father, Son and Holy Spirit as co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial members of the Godhead,¹⁴ this focus on the Word and omission of the Holy Spirit would suggest instead a 'binitarian' doctrine (that is, a two-person understanding of God as Father and Son).

Although Athanasius has written extensively about his understanding of the Trinity in other works, and his Christology forms a central tenet of this, such understanding is not revealed in *De Incarnatione* with its sole focus on the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the relationship between the Father and the Son. It is perhaps easier to see how Athanasius' trinitarian understanding depends upon his Christology than the other way around. It can therefore be demonstrated that Athanasius' Christology, as presented in *De Incarnatione*, does not depend on faith in a Triune God.

Word count: 1,533 words, excluding footnotes.

¹⁴ The Trinity of a co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial God, in the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is a concept prevalent in Church doctrine, prayers and hymnody; an example of this is to be found in the 'Creed of Saint Athanasius', see: The Church of England *Book of Common Prayer*. 1662 edn. with amendments. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.27-30.

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