

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

Athanasius' christology appears to depend very much on faith in a triune God. The persons of God the Father and the Son are understood to be the same substance, differing only in their economy. His treatment of the person of the Holy Spirit, whilst limited to only a single explicit mention in the final paragraph, is nevertheless suggested at various points. Athanasius is clear in his assertion that There is one God Who Created all things and brought them out of non-existence into being¹. The aspect of God that appears to us is manifested in the person of the Son. In our creation and redemption, it is the Word of God who acts.

While much of *On the Incarnation* deals naturally enough with the incarnation, the opening chapters concentrate attention on God the Father. The Father is characterised as 'Fountainhead,'² the creator: 'the designer and maker of all,'³ and the 'mind behind the universe.'⁴ He is 'of all goodness.'⁵ However, precisely in what sense he is the maker is not explored. Athanasius takes an apophatic approach. The Father is necessarily hidden and unknowable. Humankind cannot know their maker 'owing to the limitation of their nature.'⁶ We may, Athanasius writes, perceive God through the works of creation, through the law that he handed down and through the prophets that he sent. However, our clearest recognition of him comes through our apprehension of him

¹ St Athanasius, *On The Incarnation* (Createspace, 2007). ch.3

² Athanasius. ch.3

³ Athanasius. ch.2

⁴ Athanasius. ch.3

⁵ Athanasius. ch.3

⁶ Athanasius. ch.11

through Christ, the Son, who is the image of the Father. The distance between the Father and humanity is mediated by the Son and through the Son, the Father's love is revealed. Almost everything that we understand of God appears, then, comes through Christ. There is no suggestion that the Son is higher than the Father (that would be absurd), or that he is an absent Father. However, both the Father and the Holy Spirit do appear to be eclipsed by the Son, at least in the way he appears to humans (at least in the way Athanasius pens it).

This is not a theology which seeks to delineate the three persons. Rather, it sets out to remove the divisions and establish the one triune God. The relationship between the Father and the Son is framed in these terms in Chapter Three. However, the motivation for this view is established on the first page. In his opening words to Macarius, Athanasius refers to his previous work, *Contra Gentes*. What is most pertinent about that work, at least in his summary, is idolatry. Later, in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius notes that Jesus was worshipped in his lifetime,⁷ that everywhere 'man worships Christ alone,⁸ and that they worship 'him as God.'⁹ There is a strong prohibition against worshipping that which is not God (Ex. 20:3-5, 23:13, 34:14, Ps. 97:7, Is.42:8 & 48:11 and elsewhere), and yet people worship Christ. This would level at Christians the charge of idolatry, which Athanasius had leveled at the heathen in *Contra Gentes*. The only way that worshipping Christ would not be idolatrous would be if Christ were, not just the Word of God or the Son of God but, indeed, God himself.

⁷ Athanasius. ch.37.

⁸ Athanasius. ch.45

⁹ Athanasius. ch.46

There is no explicit mention of consubstantiality in the text. The word later came to replace the original phrasing of 'true image' in the Nicean Creed in order to guard against any ambiguity¹⁰. However, we may detect the tensions that gave rise to the later controversy. Athanasius is clear in his use of the term, 'the very image of God.'¹¹ This Image is differentiated from humans who are merely made in God's image. Humans (and angels) are only made after the image of God. They are not the Image of God himself, as Christ is. Similarly, one gets a sense that the term 'Word of God' is used by Athanasius in a more descriptive way, not in the titular sense in which we often unthinkingly use it: 'God made the universe to exist through His word'¹². The Word of the Father, then, is so closely attached to the father as to be one. The word is as an action, or perhaps more properly a speech act. Humans make a sharp distinction between actor and action, speaker and speech. But for God who is incorporeal and immaterial, there can be no such physical distinction. The Logos is in no way 'the second God'¹³ of some early Christian apologists, but is rooted in the being of the triune God. However, Athanasius' christology marks a crucial difference in the economy of the Father and the Son. God's essential unknowability is mediated through the Son; God acts through the Son and through him we know God. 'God made the universe to exist through His word.'¹⁴ There is, therefore, a strong equivalence between the action of creation and the action of redemption. The act of renewal and the act of creation are

¹⁰ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The Way To Nicea* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976).

¹¹ Athanasius. ch.13

¹² Athanasius. ch.3

¹³ Greene 2004 pg.32

¹⁴ Athanasius. ch.3

achieved through the same source: the Word of God. 'The Word of the Father is Himself divine¹⁵.' He is 'the Son, the Wisdom and the Power of God.'¹⁶

This being the case, Athanasius moves onto the question of the Incarnation of the Word. The twinning of creation and redemption through the is a recurring motif. The Word called humans into being through divine love, grace and mercy, in God's image. They were created 'to abide in incorruption,'¹⁷ but turning from God, they became corrupt, bringing sin and death into the world. This presented a God with a dilemma. Having determined that death should follow that first transgression, he would not 'go back on his word'¹⁸. But neither would it be reasonable to destroy his creation; it had been imbued with divine qualities. Repentance might appear to be a solution. However, repentance does not 'recall men from what is according to their nature'¹⁹. Our nature had become corrupt through sin. Only God can save and break the power of sin. Thus, it was necessary for the Word of God himself to bring 'the corruptible to incorruption.'²⁰ Athanasius, here, aligns this action with the act of creation; the Word of the Father being 'able to recreate all.'²¹ It was for this reason, he became Man: still fully God but also fully man, able to die. In this way he could surrender this body to death as a sacrifice 'free from every stain,'²² creating a union between humanity, which had turned away, and God who redeemed them. Athanasius likens this to a kingdom that has been established which by its presence confers protection upon its subjects. Christ is like a

¹⁵ Athanasius.ch.1

¹⁶ Athanasius. ch.19

¹⁷ Athanasius. ch.4

¹⁸ Athanasius. ch.6

¹⁹ Athanasius. ch.7

²⁰ Athanasius. ch.7

²¹ Athanasius. ch.7

²² Athanasius. ch.9

king, who imposes a spiritual rule upon the earth. His incarnation, then, is both a re-creation and reclamation, a payment of a debt but also a drawing-in of humankind. In this way, we are 'clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection.'²³

Athanasius gives a second reason for the incarnation. The task of bringing the corrupt to a state of incorruption through the Word of God becoming man might, it may be supposed, have been accomplished within the first few hours of the Nativity. If God becoming human and dying to atone for the sins of humans was all that was needed, this could very well have been achieved quietly. The life of Christ: his teaching and healing, and nature of his passion: his trial and suffering, must, itself, have meaning. He has a prophetic role to fulfil, revealing God to humankind. Owing to the limitations of mankind, Athanasius says, we cannot have knowledge of our creator, who is 'Incorporeal and Uncreated.'²⁴ God, he reasons, wants us to know him and through the incarnation has given us 'a share in his own image'²⁵ so that we can 'perceive the Image Absolute.'²⁶ This image can be seen and known in 'the works of the creation'²⁷. God wanting us to know is evidenced in his handing down of his law and also in his sending of his prophets, which forms a 'sacred school of knowledge of God.'²⁸ However, this knowledge was hidden in the world and humankind persisted in sin. So, the Wisdom of God came in his own person²⁹ so that the souls of humankind could be 'reborn in the Image of God',³⁰ and to teach so that all people in the world could 'regain knowledge of

²³ Athanasius. ch.25

²⁴ Athanasius. ch.11

²⁵ Athanasius. ch.11

²⁶ Athanasius. ch.11

²⁷ Athanasius. ch.12

²⁸ Athanasius. ch.12

²⁹ Athanasius. ch.12

³⁰ Athanasius. ch.12

the Father.³¹ God, in human form, could physically engage in a world that ‘had fallen to the level of sensible things,³² and redirect its mind to the love of God.

Certainly, the Trinity is a central part of Athanasius’ Christology. The Father is unknowable but he acts through his Word. We know the Father through the Son. The Word of God, the Wisdom of God is God’s ambassador. He created the world and redeemed humankind, dying to pay the penalty for our transgression. Father and Son both divine, both worthy of being worshipped, both one God. The text is steeped in Trinitarian thinking. There is, however, little mention of the Holy Spirit’s place in the Trinity. In fact, the term appears once, in the doxology of the final line. Without this simple formula, it could hardly be argued that Athanasius’ christology is dependent upon faith in a triune God, so its inclusion is not without significance. It would also be unfair to say that the Holy Spirit is eclipsed from Athanasius’ consideration. Certainly, in his observation that warring peoples cease their strife when they learn the teachings of Christ³³, and that idols do not have the power to transcend cultural boundaries in the way the Christianity does³⁴, he alludes to the Holy Spirit. So too, with his characterisation of a great king entering a large city, where his presence creates order beyond³⁵ there is an implicit recognition of the Holy Spirit. However, it is fair to conclude that the divinity of Christ, being the contentious issue of the day, would naturally be the entire focus of the work.

³¹ Athanasius. ch.12

³² Athanasius. ch.15

³³ Athanasius. ch.52

³⁴ Athanasius. ch.46

³⁵ Athanasius. ch.9

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