

# **Module HPRS7021: The Doctrine of the Trinity**

## **Assignment One: Textual Analysis 1**

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“At one and the same time – this is the wonder – as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, in §17 of his apologetic treatise, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, Athanasius succinctly states one of the central facets of his Christology: Christ, the incarnate Word is both fully human and fully divine and in constant union with God his Father. Central to Athanasius’ thought in this early work is the dual nature of Christ and it will here be argued that behind his presentation of the incarnation lies an understanding of God which is at least binary, and certainly points in the direction of the doctrine of the Trinity.

## **I. Creation, the Fall, and the ‘Divine Dilemma’**

For Athanasius, an understanding of Christology and the incarnation is inseparable from his doctrine of creation and it is here that he begins. Central to his argument is his insistence on God’s act of creation *ex nihilo* through his Word. Accordingly, humanity and all of creation are ontologically completely separated from the God who created from nothing. However, just as God is infinitely transcendent, so also is he “good – or rather, of all goodness He is Fountainhead”<sup>2</sup> and, as a consequence of his goodness, he is also near to creation: “it equally belongs to God’s nature, as good and loving, to bridge the difference between uncreated and created natures in such a way that God becomes present to and active in creation.”<sup>3</sup> Anatolios sees in Athanasius an emphasis on both the transcendence and immanence of God which he connects to his trinitarian beliefs.<sup>4</sup> This will be discussed further below.

After creation, came the tragedy of sin in which humanity lost both the knowledge of God and existence, and were “now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-

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<sup>1</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, §17. Online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.html> [accessed 01/02/2021]. All subsequent paragraph references refer to this text.

<sup>2</sup> §3

<sup>3</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), 42.

<sup>4</sup> See Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 39-48.

existence again.”<sup>5</sup> What was God to do? Just as it would have been “unthinkable that God should go back upon his Word and that man, having transgressed, should not die”<sup>6</sup>, so too would it be equally unfitting and unworthy of God to “leave man to be carried off by corruption.”<sup>7</sup> However, this divine dilemma consisted not only in an ontological problem, but also an epistemological one. God, in his goodness, had made it possible for humanity to know him. Being made in his image, they would be able to “perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father.”<sup>8</sup> This too was ruined by sin and the turning away of men from God. What was God to do? “What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him?”<sup>9</sup>

The only solution to both elements of this divine dilemma was, of course, the incarnation of the Word of God. In keeping with the centrality of the doctrine of creation to his thought, Athanasius sees Christ’s work in the incarnation as a continuation of his work in creation: “the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.”<sup>10</sup>

## **II. God’s Solution in the Incarnation and Christ’s Dual Nature**

Why was it though, that the only fitting solution to the divine dilemma lay in the incarnation? And why was it so important that Christ be understood as both fully divine and fully human?<sup>11</sup>

Taking first the ontological problem, just as it was the Word of God through whom everything was created in the beginning, so too was it only through the Word of God that

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<sup>5</sup> §4

<sup>6</sup> §6

<sup>7</sup> §6

<sup>8</sup> §11

<sup>9</sup> §13

<sup>10</sup> §1

<sup>11</sup> Much has been made of Athanasius’ supposed Logos-Sarx Christology. There is no space to discuss this here other than to point to the work of Anatolios and others who recognise that Athanasius is simply less concerned with the relationship between Christ’s two natures than he is with the relationship between God and the world embodied in Christ. See for example, Khaled Anatolios, “The Body as an Instrument: A Reevaluation of Athanasius’ Logos-Sarx Christology,” *Coptic Church Review* 18 (1997): 78-84.

recreation was possible.<sup>12</sup> However, in order to deal fully with the problem of death and corruption, the Word had to take a human body, as “being immortal and the Father’s Son...[he] could not die.”<sup>13</sup> In surrendering his human body to death as an offering to the Father, he abolished the law of death and, in his resurrection, made it possible for humanity to share once again in incorruption.<sup>14</sup>

Athanasius then turns to the epistemological problem. Once again, only the divine Word, the very Image of God, was able to renew God’s image in humanity:

“Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.”<sup>15</sup>

However, in order to restore humanity’s knowledge of God, it was necessary that the Word come in a human body. Creation had proved insufficient and therefore the Word, the very Image of God, took “a body like the rest; and through His actions done in that body...He teaches those who would not learn by other means to know Himself, the Word of God, and through Him the Father.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it was only in the incarnation, in the divine Word of God taking on human flesh, that God found a fitting solution to the problem of sin, death, corruption and the loss of the knowledge of God. Here we see that Athanasius’ Christology and his insistence on Christ’s dual nature is inherently soteriological.

### **III. Athanasius’ Trinitarian Thought in *De Incarnatione***

What then does all this mean for the doctrine of the Trinity? Athanasius’ presentation of the incarnation and insistence on the dual nature of Christ certainly has implications for an understanding of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. As we have

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<sup>12</sup> §7

<sup>13</sup> §9

<sup>14</sup> §8-9

<sup>15</sup> §13

<sup>16</sup> §14

seen, Athanasius clearly insists on the divinity of the Son. However, it is also clear that he sees a distinction between Father and Son. Ayres notes that here Athanasius “possesses no clear language for articulating the distinction as yet...[and] gives the impression of using whatever is to hand to emphasize closeness of relationship but not yet of having a precise way of describing that relationship.”<sup>17</sup> Weinandy points to his use of terms such as ‘Word of God’ and ‘God the Word of the Father’ which indicate that he sees the Word both as God but also distinct in some way from the Father: “While the Word is truly God, he is not the Father, for he is *of* the Father”.<sup>18</sup> Ayres’ point that Athanasius does not yet have clear language to articulate the relationship stands. And yet, Athanasius clearly sees the Word of God both as truly God and yet distinct in some way from the Father. This understanding of the relationship between Father and Son and God’s involvement in creation to the extent of the incarnation is dependent on faith in a God who is at least binary. It would certainly allow for a trinitarian understanding of God, but it is not clear that it is dependent on it.

In terms of a trinitarian understanding of God in Athanasius, it is perhaps most striking that throughout this whole work, the Spirit receives only one mention, in the closing doxology. Anatolios, who sees a trinitarian understanding of God behind much of Athanasius’ thought in this work, admits that it is only “by way of giving Athanasius the benefit of the doubt, that we speak of a Trinitarian, rather than binarian, teaching”.<sup>19</sup> As noted above, he makes much of Athanasius’ insistence on God as both transcendent and immanent and sees behind this a trinitarian understanding of God. But he admits that the emphasis in this work is on the “co-inherence of the Word and the Father” rather than the Spirit.<sup>20</sup> This is presented “from the perspective of the “economic” Trinity” in relation to creation and salvation: of primary significance for Athanasius is the relationship between creation and humanity on one hand, and God - both the Word of the Father and the Father of the Word - on the other.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 46.

<sup>19</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

Weinandy suggests two possible reasons for the omission of the Spirit. It could be that Athanasius has simply not yet given sufficient thought to the place of the Spirit in the Trinity and in the work of salvation. On the other hand, Athanasius is clear from the outset that his purpose in writing is an apologetic one, and the issue at hand concerns only the Father and Son – their divinity, relationship, and part in the economy of salvation.<sup>22</sup> Given the way the Spirit is included in the closing doxology, it seems that this is a likely explanation. Thus, while Athanasius does not here articulate a full doctrine of the Trinity, he clearly understands the relationship between Father and Son in a way that points toward a trinitarian understanding of God. It seems reasonable to give Athanasius the benefit of the doubt, as Anatolios does. He had a specific purpose in writing for which direct discussion of the Spirit and the Trinity was not relevant. His belief in the Triune God allowed Athanasius to argue as he did, but belief in that God as *specifically* Triune is not made explicit.

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<sup>22</sup> Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 48.

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