

NOTES

ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE FOUNDATION OF TRADITIONAL CHRISTOLOGY

About 150 years ago the prestigious personality of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373, was suddenly given much popularity with the publication of Johann Adam Möhler's *Athanasius der Grosse und die Kirche seiner Zeit* (1827) and J. H. Newman's *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1883). Independently and in different contexts these two authors worked out a somewhat romantic typology. They denounced the sclerosis of theology and the deficiencies of the Church characteristic of their times and suggested that the nineteenth century was renewing certain errors committed by the Arians in the fourth century. Therefore, they were presenting Athanasius as the invincible promoter of theological truth and the savior of the institutional Church. But after the wave of *Dogmengeschichte* manuals to the end of the last century, with Dorner, Baur, Harnack, and Loofs, all of whom attributed to Athanasius a decisive role in the history of Christian doctrine, the twentieth century down to our own day has known but one first-rate Athanasian scholar. That is Eduard Schwartz, the historian of Göttingen, also well known for his monumental edition of *Acta conciliorum*. But Schwartz was above all interested in Athanasius as a politician and did not spare him criticisms inspired by his own particularly bellicose spirit. One of Schwartz's students, H. G. Opitz, published some remarkable preparatory works for a critical edition of Athanasius' works before the Second World War, and he succeeded in bringing out the first fascicles of this edition. But Nazism and the war interrupted this enterprise; it has not been resumed and completed, despite the efforts of Wilhelm Schneemelcher of Bonn. A treatise of Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, has occasioned much textual-critical literature in the last fifty years or so because of the difficult problem of a double recension. An edition of this treatise was published in 1971 by R. W. Thomson in the *Oxford Early Christian Texts*. I judge it a provisional edition for two reasons: (1) my own edition of this text is due to appear early in 1973; (2) the author of this Oxford edition is a scholar in the Armenian language and does not pretend to be a specialist in the text of Athanasius.

It is not surprising if the actual output of work on Athanasius appears meager. Despite an impressive development of patristic studies and a sufficiently abundant publication of patristic writings in the last fifty years, theologians on the whole have not exhibited a very lively interest in these studies. Because of the problems raised by historical criticism

in the past half century or more, the primary task of research has centered on determining the sense of the New Testament or of the Bible as a whole. But the crisis of civilization which affects our ecclesiastical institutions today invites us to a similar effort to determine the content and sense of the Christian tradition as a whole. From this point of view a critical reflection on the origin and function of this tradition takes on a new importance for us.

We see easily enough in what traditional Christology consists. But we know also that we look at this Christology from the outside, from the perspective of a mental attitude, hermeneutical need, and faith-understanding which have become foreign to the tradition on which this Christology depends. We have not yet fully replaced the traditional structure of the Christological dogma with a different tradition, but we know that this is now being done and that it must be done if we wish to take seriously the fact of our being believers. That is what enables us to have a quite genuine and timely interest in the origin of Christology's traditional dogma.

Möhlér and Newman were living in a denominational Christianity whose very divisions appeared traditional. Their return to the past of the Church did not alienate them much from their own milieu. They foresaw the future of the churches as a realization of certain institutions typical of the early Church. It appears to me that a return to such an early Church would produce an alienation from our own present-day life, all the more felt the more we realize the extent to which the theological structures about which we are concerned have remained fundamentally the same to our day. The institutions typical of the early Church are precisely those that we can no longer accept, such as its idea of divine revelation, its principle of authority founded on this idea of revelation, its understanding of man with his reason, his moral conscience, and his social organization. So many things that were obvious to the early Church are justified by an interpretation of the Bible whose principles are unacceptable to us. For us, therefore, the question is not at all that of Möhlér or Newman: How does understanding of the early Church show us who we are and what we ought to do in our present-day churches? It would rather be: How does knowledge of the early Church help us to know why we need new theological and ecclesiological structures? In other words: Why should we not continue to do what has been done till now in the name of that early Church? That is why we wish to know precisely what was being done in that early Church. It is a question no longer of typology but of new hermeneutics, which questions the Christian tradition across all the clearly highlighted differences in order to prepare for a future which ought not to result solely from this tradition.

It might appear paradoxical to introduce Athanasius in this context. The fierce defender of Nicene orthodoxy illustrated rather a dogmatic immobility. But this precise facet is of little importance to us. Besides, I do not believe that in speaking thus of him we have said everything about him. My one purpose is to analyze the original contributions which made Athanasius the greatest leader of the Church in his times, specifically his contribution in the domain of Christology. I note also this singular fact, which has become unusual in the Church of modern times: a leader of the Church playing a creative role in Christology.

However, this role should not be exaggerated. Athanasius did not invent a Christology. Before him there had been the Semitic meditation of the Judeo-Christians, with their representation of a Christ sometimes apocalyptic, sometimes angelic, often confused with the Holy Spirit. Others like Justin in Rome, Tertullian in Africa, Clement in Alexandria, and above all Origen had tried their hand at it. Among the older contemporaries of Athanasius mention can be made of Eusebius of Caesarea, who summarized the Christological tradition of the Apologists in rigorizing their subordinationism and placed Origen's ingenious but sometimes equivocal formulas at the reach of everybody—perhaps of too many.

Athanasius came to know of this tradition little by little and doubtless never in a methodical manner. In his panegyric on Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus had already remarked that Athanasius cannot be called a great "scholar" educated in the famous universities as he himself had been. I believe that Athanasius, born in 295, was first trained by some monks under whom he took shelter during the anti-Christian persecutions which raged in the region of Alexandria till 313. Next he must have attended the school of Bishop Alexander, his predecessor and his "father" as he calls him. But this is only a supposition. As a student, then as a deacon, Athanasius knew intimately the theological teachings of Alexander which provoked the protestations and the schism of Arius in the heart of the Christian community of Alexandria. Elected bishop in 328 to succeed Alexander, whom he had helped as secretary in the great Synod of Nicaea (May 325), Athanasius composed all his works in theology and unleashed the force of his personality in the time between Nicaea and the eruption of the first properly Christological crisis in the modern sense, the one provoked by Bishop Apollinaris of Laodicea, a friend dangerously faithful to Athanasius. Therefore, if I speak of a relation between Athanasius and "the foundation of traditional Christology," by "foundation" I understand primarily the great controversy over the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ which lasted through the fourth century. It was a controversy led by the bishops and their theologians in a political background created by the interests of each

Christian metropolitan in the boundaries of the Roman Empire. It was also complicated by the growing nationalism under a religious guise in Egypt and in the whole of the Roman Orient. Such a controversy must have resulted in political decisions inspired by the imperial government. What we call the "ecumenical councils," in particular Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, are of special interest here. The traditional Christology transmitted in its canonical formulation down to our own times is the fruit of the politics of Constantine, of Princesses Arcadia and Macrina, of Empress Pulcheria of Spanish blood and her docile husband Marcion. These women of the imperial court exerted a formidable impact on the fixing of the official Christian dogma. These nonreligious and political factors operative in the origin of traditional Christology remain inseparable from the theological venture and from the mystical convictions of the intellectual bishops of this epoch. In any case, it was not the sublime and lofty reflections of Origen, nor the dialectic of a Gregory of Nyssa, nor the popular piety of the faithful masses of those times which created by themselves the canonical structure of Christology transmitted for a millennium and a half in both East and West. For that a supreme decision on the political plane was necessary. What, then, was the particular role of Athanasius in relation to this decision embodied in the first three ecumenical councils of the imperial Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries?

I see the role of Athanasius in the formation of a traditional and canonical Christology on three levels:

1) Athanasius introduces into the perception of the mystery of faith concerning the person of Christ *an original concept of man*, altogether consonant with the spontaneous anthropology of his contemporaries but rethought by him with reference to Christology. This first characteristic initiative of Athanasius precedes the others chronologically as well as ontologically. In the chronological order it is in fact a part of Athanasius' first known writing, his Christological treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, which explicates more precisely the new anthropology on which his theological framework is based. Ontologically it is clearly always a definite idea of man which enables Christians to explain the Christ of their faith.

2) On the second level of his doctrinal work, Athanasius develops his Christological originality in terms of *a new manner of interpreting Scripture*. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, writers have been so obsessed by the political and denominational aspect of Athanasius' work that they have completely overlooked another characteristic, his frequent recourse to the Bible. Though writers constantly repeat that Athanasius was a man of the Bible, no one has ever tried to study him seriously under this aspect. I emphasize this because it is im-

portant for our contemporary critical interest in early Christology that the initiative of Athanasius in this domain would never have taken on lasting historical significance if it had not benefited from his very original method of having recourse to the Bible as a theologian.

3) On the third level, which presupposes the first two, Athanasius was the first bishop and theologian of the early Church who attempted to *organize all Christian doctrine concerning the incarnation of God*. This contribution of systematic order directly influenced the *Great Catechism* of Gregory of Nyssa; it influenced Ambrose of Milan and Cyril of Alexandria. This third aspect of Athanasius' theology has never caught the attention of the critics, for the simple reason that no one has ever tried to discover the logical plan of the three discourses *Against the Arians*, where the Christocentrism of his theology appears most clearly. I will return to each of these three levels to examine the sense and scope of Athanasian Christology.

A fourth level would perhaps be that of political expediency, at least in the framework of the ecclesiastical politics of the great metropolis of Alexandria against that of Antioch or of Constantinople, in a setting in which Cyril of Alexandria would become a redoubtable champion two generations after Athanasius, to the extent of imposing on us the dogmatic definition of Ephesus solely to affirm the supremacy of the Alexandrian Church as a "great power." But let us leave aside this fourth level. It is more agreeable to work with the other three. And let us see exactly what Athanasius did on the first of these three levels, where he introduced the anthropology of his times into his Christological contribution.

AN ORIGINAL CONCEPT OF MAN

Let us start with the citation of a passage, perhaps a little too long, from the second chapter of the treatise *Contra gentes*, which constitutes with *De incarnatione Verbi* the first theological work of Athanasius. I have tried to prove elsewhere, above all in the case of *De incarnatione Verbi*, that this work was composed by Athanasius not when he was just eighteen or twenty-two years old, as was thought since Bernard de Montfaucon, the renowned Maurist (1655–1741), but between 335 and 337, when Athanasius was about forty years old and already a bishop for about seven years, at the time when he was exiled by the personal efforts of Constantine, the first of his numerous exiles, the one he spent in the far west of the Roman Empire, at Trier, the northern capital of Gaul. Here is the passage (tr. Thomson, p. 7):

For God, the creator of the universe and king of all, who is beyond all being and human thought, since he is good and bountiful, has made mankind in his own image through his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ; and he also made man

perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to him, giving him also a conception and knowledge of his own eternity, so that as long as he kept this likeness he might never abandon his concept of God or leave the company of saints, but retaining the grace of him who bestowed it on him and also the special power given him by the Father's Word, he might rejoice and converse with God, living an idyllic and truly blessed and immortal life. For having no obstacle to the knowledge of the divine, he continuously contemplates by his purity the image of the Father, God the Word, in whose image he was made, and is filled with admiration when he grasps his providence towards the universe. He is superior to sensual things and all bodily impressions, and by the power of his mind clings to the divine and intelligible realities in heaven.

We find in this passage all the elements we need to answer our question about the anthropology of Athanasius:

1) First, there is the ideal state of Adam, the Creator's work still intact. He is a contemplative, an ascetic, who is unconscious of his own self, spontaneously turned away from his body and from the sensible world, and ecstatically turned towards the divine Logos, the Image of the Father. This Adam idealized in Platonic terms was not unknown to the Alexandrian tradition. One could show how this text echoes Philo, Clement, and Origen and through them Neoplatonism or the other more ancient currents of Greek mysticism. It is of capital importance for the interpretation of Athanasius to discover that this ideal Adam is found right in the beginning of the theological development both in *Contra gentes* and *De incarnatione*, but from then on disappears altogether from the Athanasian scene. Although Athanasius recapitulates a long tradition of this Platonized Adam now Christianized, he disassociates himself at once from such a concept.

2) In fact, a point which has not been very much discussed until now is that the ideal Adam of Athanasius has no soul (*psychē*) as long as he remains immersed in the contemplation of the divine Logos. In the whole of chapter 2 and also in chapter 3 in the same context Athanasius speaks only of "(Adam's) mind fixed on God" (*ton noun eschēkenai pros ton theon*), of the "power of his mind" (*tē dynamei tou nou*), the "power which they had received from the beginning" (*tēs ecks archēs autōn para theou dynamēōs*). He does not speak of the soul of Adam and Eve, or rather, according to his favorite expression, of the soul of the original "men" (*hoi anthrōpoi*) except from the moment when "they turned their mind from intelligible reality" (*tōn men noētōn apestēsan heautōn ton noun*) and when in consequence "they imprisoned their souls in the pleasures of the body" (*synekleisan heautōn tēn psychēn*).

3) This is because for Athanasius it is not the soul that is "in the image" (*kat' eikona*) of the divine Word, but the *mind*, the *nous*, the superior pole and the principal director of the human soul. Precisely for this reason we do not find in Athanasius the famous distinction current since Origen between *kat' eikona* and *kath' homoiōsin* drawn from the words of the Creator in Gn 1:26: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Origen attributed the *kat' eikona* to the *psychē* but reserved the *homoiōsis* to the final stage of the spiritual progress of the soul, where it finds again its quality of *nous* which it had possessed before its entrance into the terrestrial and corporeal existence. Nothing of that sort is found in Athanasius, and he is the only one in the whole Origenist tradition who did not make such a distinction. Another originality of Athanasius in this regard is that he never calls the human *nous* an *eikōn* of God or of the divine Logos, as Philo, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen had done before him, and Eusebius repeated in his times. The only *eikōn tou theou* known to Athanasius is the *logos tou theou*, and the human *nous* will always be defined by him in its created quality as *kat' eikona*.

These precisions of vocabulary are not just bits of curiosity for the erudite; they lead us directly into the heart of Athanasius' theological anthropology. For him, the myth of Adam as the model of Christian perfection belongs to the past. Origen had developed an admirable doctrine of the progress of the soul which made man pass from the state of *eikōn tou diabolou* to that of *eikōn tou Christou* until he reached the eschatological *homoiōsis tou theou* where he finds himself completely spiritualized and in the ecstasy of total union with the divine *logos*. In this grandiose perspective the incarnation of God does not appear to have been a decisive and central event. Gregory of Nyssa will take up this same perspective but will explicate more fully the irreplaceable role of the Word incarnate; for Gregory knew the Athanasian Christology well. In fact, Athanasius had frankly reacted against the intellectualism of the Origenian gnosis. With a taste for clarity and systematic precision which would characterize the entire Greek theology of the fourth century, and above all the great Cappadocians, Athanasius had at first reserved the quality of the divine *kat' eikona* only to the human *nous*. Later he had the divine *eikōn* itself, in the act of becoming incarnate in a human body, assume all the original functions of the *nous* of Adam. The result is that the salvation of men henceforth takes place not through purification and spiritualization according to Origen's model, but through their personal encounter with the *eikōn* of God who has become a man. This man makes use of his body as an instrument (*organon*) to show that he is also the temple

of the Logos of God. The Logos shines everywhere, by vivifying and instructing all other men who are attracted by this being who has become similar to them. Thus men become capable of union with God again by the mediation of the incarnate Logos as they had been in the beginning by the mediation of their *nous* in ecstasy in the Logos. Henceforth Christ takes the place of that which was the Logos nonincarnate for Adam. But because Christ is the Logos in the body, there is no longer a question of mimicking the angels as the Platonized Adam had done without great success or, as according to Origen, the "perfect" Christians had tried to do. It is a question of man realizing all his personal perfection even now in body, in social life, in the community of the Church, and in the present experience of faith. Thus a spiritualistic anthropology rethought in an original manner led Athanasius to center his existence in faith on the divine reality of the incarnate Logos. He would never change this position in his later writings distributed over the more than thirty remaining years of his life.

A NEW METHOD OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

I now wish to examine the originality of Athanasius on the second level of his Christological contribution. He is the inventor of what one can call the "dogmatic exegesis" which became one of the principal forms of biblical interpretation throughout the great controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. On the level of his anthropology Athanasius had respected all the essential elements of his tradition, marked by the genius of Origen. But with these elements he composed a new concept of man and his salvation, expressed in Christian terms. His insistence on the corporeal condition makes one think of a definite influence from Irenaeus of Lyons. Still, fundamentally he remains an Origenist in his teachings on the nature and significance of the Bible. But he presents the spiritual experience of Antony the Hermit in his *Vita Antonii* in such an original manner that the reading of Scripture seen according to the principles of Origen leads him to a result which is no longer Origenian. This leads him to prefer the actual moment of faith, in the immediate and corporeal condition, to all other possible forms of gnosis. We are reminded of his anthropology. On the level of the theory of interpretation this Athanasius, who would never be an anti-Origenian as other bishops of Alexandria had been before him, completely stops using the allegorism characteristic of Origen. He preserves a moderate typology in his exegesis, but he always remains at the antipodes of the allegorizing Origenism of a Didymus the Blind, on whom however he confers an eminent teaching position in his own Alexandrian church.

Whereas in the order of practical experience he took as a model Antony, the father of monasticism, in the order of intellectual experience Athanasius imagines an approach to Scripture which none has ever practiced before him. He constructs the train of his arguments directly from the scriptural texts which he intends to defend against the Arians. More than Origen, he maintains a balance between the arguments which are purely dialectical and those supported by the biblical quotations. His first *Treatise against the Arians* centers on the divinity of the Son. His second work *Contra Arianos* is devoted to the missions of the Son. His third treatise develops the question more directly linked with the dogma of the Son's incarnation. It shows again how this concept has become central in the Athanasian vision of Christianity. We could analyze the theological vocabulary of Athanasius and observe that it remains always inspired by the Bible. Astonishingly, the great defender of Nicaea uses the technical word of the Synod, the famous *homoousios*, only once or twice in all his writings. He prefers to keep to expressions and images which are more biblical, in this in agreement with his adversaries, the most tenacious among the Arians. One could also examine what texts of the Bible Athanasius prefers, or how he has taken the trouble to balance his recourse to the Gospel of John with the letters of Paul, how he develops the arguments drawn from the Old Testament in making them agree with the quotations from the New. But his essential and too little recognized originality in Christology will always be that he developed his exposition on the basis of a new interpretive technique geared to the needs of the controversy with the Arians and to the genius of his epoch. Nobody doubts that in this regard he has even been somewhat influenced by the very exegesis of the Arians. But I would now like to end with a few remarks on the third level, where in my opinion the special contribution of Athanasius to traditional Christology lies.

THE ATHANASIAN CHRISTOCENTRISM

Doubtlessly the questions posed to Athanasius the theologian and leader concerning the formulation of the dogma of the Incarnation changed between 328 and 373. To a keen observer his theological language offers some interesting contrasts. Thus, the titles which he gives to God the Father or the Son remain the same; his notions of anthropology do not change; his exegetical vocabulary has a remarkable stability. On the other hand, in his Christology, in several instances, he changed profoundly both his terminology and his approach to the problems. Some have insinuated that *De incarnatione* is not by Athanasius because it presents a Christological terminology different from

that of *Contra Arianos*. But this is altogether painful to the ears of one who has devoted many years of his life precisely to *De incarnatione*. And certainly this is to misunderstand Athanasius. For in the last great period of his life, in his sixties, therefore about twenty years after the composition of *Contra Arianos*, one sees him once again modifying his points of view and his formulations in Christology. This time it is because he finds himself confronted by a new kind of dispute whose arguments are closed to him now that he has become old, and which announces the crises of Apollinarism. Therefore, we should not be surprised if he again changes his Christological language in the same manner as he did the first time he undertook to refute the Arian theses.

It would be useful to show on the basis of which Arian documents and by what systematic analyses of these documents Athanasius composed his great *Treatises* against the Arians. In any case, the fundamental intuition of Athanasius over which no doubt could be entertained and which motivates his entire refutation of Arianism is essentially Christological. More than anything else, through all sorts of arguments whose weaknesses are sometimes evident and whose development may appear quite clumsy, Athanasius insists that the Arians are mistaken in their concept of theology, because they believe they are able to form a Christian idea of God by first developing in isolation the theory of the divinity of the Father and the Son, without taking into consideration right from the start the mystery of the incarnation of the Son. Although Athanasius changed his technical terminology several times, he remained faithful throughout his life to this fundamental intuition: that which is first in the exposition of the Christian faith is not God as such, nor the universe in its divine origin, but the historical event of salvation accomplished in Christ.

I would not like to anticipate in Athanasius a Karl Barth or a Pannenberg, but Athanasian Christocentrism remains an astonishing innovation in the context of the ancient theological tradition of Alexandria. This is because the fundamental intuition of Athanasian theology was directed against Eusebius as well as against Origen himself, that is to say, against all religious cosmology posited before the exposition of faith, according to a pattern inherited from Gnostic theology and more generally according to classical Hellenism.

What does Athanasius say? In *Contra Arianos* 1 he first treats of the divinity of the Son according to the *Thaleia* of Arius whom he refutes; he does not cease to explain that it is useless to argue a priori about the divinity of the Son, as a mere supposition of reason, instead of enquiring into Scripture and seeing how it teaches us to discover the divinity of the Son starting from the concrete economy of salvation. In

Contra Arianos 2, where he exposes the doctrine of the missions of the Son, he centers the whole work on the exegesis of Prv 8:22: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his ways," a versicle which he applies in a well-known manner, as Manlio Simonetti has clearly pointed out, to the mystery of the incarnation of the Son. It is needless to multiply these examples. The lesson of Athanasius will never be forgotten. He was the first Christian writer to publish a treatise "On the Incarnation of the Word." Likewise in his singular way, which happens to be more intuitive than speculative and a generation before Gregory of Nyssa, he disassociates himself from the systematization of Christian theology received from Origen. This innovation, which shook the foundation of the traditional structures but respected the language and authority of the tradition, was in the last analysis more oriented toward the future than the disrespectful and flashy but basically very traditionalist argument of the Arians.

But who was the Christ of Athanasius? How did he formulate Christ's mystery in his so-called Christological contribution? Did Athanasius really miss the point by being the theologian of the human soul of Christ, as has been repeated time and again since the period of *Dogmengeschichte*? Was he a precursor of Apollinarism? Was he influenced by the very early theologians of the West, since he perhaps knew Latin and spent long years in exile in Gaul and certainly in Rome? Did his entire dogmatic work on Scripture really constitute a biblical Christology? There will be so many questions to be asked by those who would like to write books on Athanasius in 1973, the year of the sixteenth centenary of his death, which will be celebrated in Paris in September with an International Session of Athanasian Studies. I intended only to point out in what spirit and according to what type of initiative Athanasius set himself to be the defender of the "orthodox" faith, at first in his local church and then on the scale of the Empire. He restored Christology to what it is in the first place, a source of renewal for the Christian concept of man. It is for this reason that he elaborated a new idea of man and developed it in his Christology. He corroborated this innovation by an assiduous study of Scripture, and for his goal he discovered a new interpretation of the Bible. He was above all the man of a single battle: he refused a systematic Christology which he did not consider sufficiently inspired by Scripture. Was he right or wrong? In any case, he presents us with a serious challenge for our own innovations in Christology.