

It is clear that, for Athanasius, the divinity of Jesus must not come under question. Rather, according to Athanasius, the divinity of Jesus is not in question by ones who call themselves “Christian.” Athanasius makes an extensive argument against the reasoning of the *Thalia* by Arius, which he deems heretical and guided by Satan. He concludes that Jesus Christ, being the very Word of God, is of the same essence as God, unoriginated and eternal as God.

Athanasius clearly feels the need to articulate a form of Christian belief that can unify the various churches and communities in the early Christian empire. Following the Nicene Council, communities existed within the larger catholic church which followed the teachings of various leaders. These communities tended to be identified by the names of their leaders, for example those who followed Arius were called Arians. Because these communities existed in and were thereby subject to several distinct contexts, there existed extensive diversity within the Christian empire of Constantine.

Athanasius insists on a Christology formulated by the Nicene Council that has at its core a fully divine Jesus who is of the same “essence” as God the Creator.<sup>1</sup> He begins his discourse by insisting that those who say there was a time before Christ was, namely the Arians, are heretical and follow human teaching, not Christ. In fact, according the Athanasius, these ones must not even be called Christians, lest they destroy the “unity” that exists within the church.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Athanasius claims apostolic succession to support his claims over and above those of Arius and any others who “invent” their own heresy. “For though we have a succession of teachers and

---

<sup>1</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I, Chapter 3, Section 9

<sup>2</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I, Chapter 1, Section 2

become their disciples, yet, because we are taught by them the things of Christ, we both are, and are called, Christians all the same.”<sup>3</sup>

Athanasius draws heavily on Logos theology to formulate his arguments that Jesus Christ is the very Word and Son of God, and argues against the Arian idea that the Son participates in the Word and Wisdom of God as one external to that Word. The danger in this claim, for Athanasius, is that if Christ is separate from the Word of God and thereby a creation of God’s Wisdom and Word, then there might be other creations equal to the Son. Namely, this argument places the Son alongside the rest of God’s Creation.<sup>4</sup> This view also leaves the door open for adoptionistic interpretations of Christ’s divinity in which he is born fully human and made divine at God’s choosing. “With such words hath the irreligious spoken; maintaining that the Son is distinct by Himself, and in no respect partaker of the Father.”<sup>5</sup>

The idea that Christ is both God and a creature of God is most offensive to Athanasius. Athanasius goes so far to say that Arian statements are works of the devil.<sup>6</sup> Athanasius considers Christ to be the Revelation of God and sights several passages from scripture in which, he claims, Christ is referred to explicitly as the “Power” of God, “Everlasting God,” the “brightness of the Lord” and the “Light” of God.<sup>7</sup> Christ is therefore not to be equated with those things created by God, but rather with the manifestations of God—a subtle distinction. If then, Christ is the Revelation of God, then Christ must exist at all times with God.<sup>8</sup> Here, Athanasius pulls from several passages of scripture that originated long before the manifestation of God in Christ on earth. It might be said, plainly, that Athanasius is proof-texting scripture to support his claims.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Section 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Section 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Section 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Section 10.

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I, Chapter 4, Section 12

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Section 13

Athanasius introduces the term “beget” in his discourse, drawing on the work of the Nicene Council. This is simply a distinction between the work by which God “begets” Christ differently than God creates all other beings and humans procreate other humans.

For never was the essence of the Father imperfect, that what is proper to it should be added afterwards, nor as man from man, has the Son been begotten, so as to be later than His Father’s existence, but He is God’s offspring, and as being proper Son of God, who is ever, He exists eternally. For, whereas it is proper to men to beget in time, from the imperfection of their nature, God’s offspring is eternal, for His nature is perfect.<sup>9</sup>

A relevant portion of Athanasius’ work for scholars and religious workers today, I believe, is his conception of the True. “Only the Father a Father because the Only Father, only the Son a Son because the Only Son.”<sup>10</sup> Specifically this point bears down on inter-faith dialogue and relationships between Christians and persons of other faiths who claim other deities and/or other Revelations of God than Christ. Athanasius goes on to say, “Men are not really fathers and really sons, but shadows of the True.”<sup>11</sup> In a sense, we recognize all religion, and thereby all human conceptions of the Divine, to be mere shadows of the actual essence or nature of God. I don’t think Athanasius would approve or appreciate this interpretation of his work, but the realization that God’s Revelation is always a matter of human interpretation through the lens of our finitude requires that persons be humble in our dealings with each other. This advice, if followed by Athanasius, might have changed the whole scope of Christian belief and practice.

---

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I, Chapter 5, Section 14

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I, Chapter 6, Heading

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.