

ΜΙΑ ΟΥΣΙΑ ΤΡΕΙΣ ΥΠΟΣΤΑΣΕΙΣ  
**St Athanasius and the  
Doctrine of the Holy Trinity**

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There is an eternal and one Godhead in a Triad, and there is one Glory of the Holy Triad.... For if the doctrine of God is now perfect in a Triad, and this is the true and only Religion, and this is the good and truth, it must have been always so....<sup>1</sup>

For there is but one form of Godhead, which is also in the Word; and one God, the Father, existing by Himself according as He is above all, and appearing in the Son according as He pervades all things, and in the Spirit according as in Him He acts in all things through the Word. For thus we confess God to be one through the Triad, and we say that it is much more religious than the Godhead of the heretics with its many kinds and many parts, to entertain a belief of the One Godhead in a Triad.<sup>2</sup>

These words properly sum up the very essence of the Christian conception of God as one and triune, a conception which is based not on natural or rational theology but the concrete self-disclosure of God in the enfleshed Word, who in the miracle of the incarnation has become for us the very

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<sup>1</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.18. All references are cited from Archibald Robertson, ed., *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd Series, vol. 4. (Massachusetts: Henrickers Publishers, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.15.

image of the invisible God. These words were written by Athanasius, the great defender of Christian orthodoxy against the Arian heresy, whose understanding of God as "a monad" (μονάς), unoriginated and "utterly one" (ἄναρχος μονώτατος), led to the conclusions that Christ is but a creature and the Triad is temporal, not eternal. Fundamentally, for Arius and his disciples, "[n]o understanding of the Logos as divine could be permitted in anyway to compromise this arithmetical oneness of God who 'alone' created his 'only' Son. Originally and fundamentally, then, 'God was alone'."<sup>3</sup> It was this stark monotheism, which has its source from the Platonic conceptuality of the absolute, with its uncompromising view of divine transcendence, that Athanasius challenged. This essay, which is primarily an analytical study of Athanasius' teaching regarding the Unity and Triunity of God, also attempts to examine the methodology of the great theologian, and his understanding and use of theological language.<sup>4</sup> It will become clear that although Athanasius stands in the tradition of the great Alexandrian school, his own theological orientation and approach approximates much closer to the biblical-theological schema of Irenaeus, which testifies to a profound faithfulness to Scriptures, than the philosophical-speculative schema customarily associated with Alexandrian theology.

## I

"No sooner do I consider the One than I am enlightened by the radiance of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One." This well-known statement, from the pen of Gregory Nazianzen,<sup>5</sup> accurately captures Athanasius' own understanding of the Christian conception of and speech about God, namely, that there can be no consideration of the oneness of God apart from his threeness, and no consideration of his triunity apart from his unity — that the God revealed in Jesus Christ must always be conceived of in his indivisible wholeness. As we now consider Athanasius' understanding of the oneness and transcendence of God, we do well to remember this, so that focus

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<sup>3</sup> Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 194.

<sup>4</sup> In this study I am profoundly indebted to the seminal contributions of Professor Thomas F. Torrance on Athanasius in particular, and the doctrine of the Trinity in general.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orationes*, 40.41.

on the oneness does not result in the neglect of this important truth. That Athanasius holds to the concept of God as absolute Being, and indeed, as Being beyond all being and all conceptions of being, is well attested to by many passages in his writings.<sup>6</sup> Athanasius is however never content to speak about God in purely abstract and philosophical terms, preferring instead to use the biblical description of God. This is seen supremely in Athanasius' understanding of God as Father: "Fatherhood is central for Athanasius' understanding of God.... Fatherhood is that without which God is not; it is a given; God *is* Father 'now and ever'."<sup>7</sup> This, Athanasius asserts, is the proper way to address God, so that for Athanasius, Father = Godhead, the one supreme being, all sufficient, the uncreated creator of the world, the ἀρχή and αἴτιος of all being. This way of understanding and addressing the Godhead is more appropriate and true than to simply call him the "Unoriginate" One as the Arians do: "...it is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works only and call him Unoriginate. For the latter title, as I have said, does nothing more than signify all his works... but the title Father has its significance and its bearing only from the Son."<sup>8</sup> This clearly demonstrates that for Athanasius, theological knowledge has as its source the self-disclosure of God in the incarnate Word and not a general, philosophical conception of deity, in this context Platonic, upon which the Arians have depended. Following Philo, Athanasius maintains that human knowledge of God is impossible without revelation, thereby exceeding Plato's dictum that the discovery of the creator of the universe is a difficult task.

The ontic relation between the Father and the Son has profound noetic implications: knowledge of the Father is possible primarily through the Son since the latter is consubstantial with the former, and God can only be known through God.<sup>9</sup> Thus Athanasius could write: "And beholding the Son, we see the Father; for the thought and comprehension of the Son, is knowledge concerning the Father, because he is the

<sup>6</sup> See *Contra Gentes*, 2, 40.

<sup>7</sup> See Alwyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 164.

<sup>8</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.34.

<sup>9</sup> This is seen in the historical development of the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, as Basil Studer has shown in his *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993). (An authorised English translation of his 1985 work, *Gott und unsere Erlösung im Glauben der Alten Kirche*, published by Verlag Düsseldorf).

proper Offspring from his essence."<sup>10</sup> To know the Father, one must know the Son. Since the Son and the Father are one, to know the former is also to know the internal relations of the Being of the eternal God. Knowledge of the Son is made possible because of his "*incarnate parousia*:" "[i]f then, as we have stated and are shewing, what is the Offspring of the Father's essence be the Son, we cannot hesitate, rather we must be certain, that the same is the Wisdom and Word of the Father, in and through whom he creates and makes all things; and his Brightness too, in whom he enlightens all things, and is revealed to whom He will; and His Expression and Image also, in whom he is contemplated and known, wherefore 'He and His Father are one,' and whoso looketh on him, looketh on the Father; and the Christ, in whom all things are redeemed, and the new creation wrought afresh."<sup>11</sup> But Athanasius' christocentric epistemology does not result in a narrow christomonism in which other avenues of the knowledge of God are categorically denied, for the Alexandrian bishop does speak of the possibility of knowing God through creation and in the deep recesses of the soul of man. In this way, the theological epistemology of Athanasius is formulated within the matrix of the relationship between God and the world, incarnation and creation, and a biblical theological anthropology which takes seriously the *Imago Dei*. This does not mean that there can be found in the thought of Athanasius a "natural theology" in the style of Thomas Aquinas. As Andrew Louth has convincingly shown, Athanasius is not interested in natural theology for its own sake.<sup>12</sup> The epistemology found in his *Contra Gentes* must be understood alongside that found in *De Incarnatione Verbi*, for the former serves as the foreground for the latter where Athanasius argues quite clearly and unequivocally that the knowledge of God is made possible by the *Logos*.

Like all the other Greek Fathers, Athanasius used *ousia* to speak about the being of God, but he does so in a way which allows for the concrete revelation of God in salvation history as it is testified in both the Old and New Testaments to govern its use and not the received philosophical parlance. This matter is discussed by Christopher Stead in his *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* (1985). Stead

<sup>10</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.16. See also *De Synodis*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.16.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Louth, "Reason and Revelation in Saint Athanasius," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, 4 (1970): 385-98.

took issue with G.L. Prestige who argued in *God in Patristic Thought* (1952) and *Fathers and Heretics* (1958) that when the Church Fathers use οὐσία and πρώτη οὐσία, the Aristotelian sense of a "single concrete reality" is meant or implied. Thus both *ousia* and *hypostasis*

...indicated, to take the inevitable physical metaphor, the particular slab of material stuff which constitutes a given object; and neither term is used in a generic sense. In the case of an ordinary object of experience, such as, for instance the Matterhorn, the stuff or substance of which it is made is simply synonymous with the object itself. The certain weight of rock and glacier, with ascertainable height and shape and volume, is the Matterhorn; and nothing which is Matterhorn is anything else than Matterhorn. Complications arose in theology because, if Christianity is true, the same stuff or substance of deity in the concrete has three distinct presentations — not just three mutually defective aspects presented from separate points of view, in the sense that the Matterhorn has a northern face and an eastern face and an Italian face, but three complete presentations of the whole and identical object, namely God, which is nevertheless objectively distinct from one another.<sup>13</sup>

Stead rightly concludes that the difficulty faced by Prestige is due to the fact that he has simply read too much into Athanasius' use of the term, especially the very vague expression παντότης τῆς οὐσίας. Athanasius, Stead concludes, is hardly influenced by academic logic, his matrix being rather the Bible and the biblical and traditional metaphors. To be sure, these metaphors are drawn from the physical universe, and Athanasius is well aware of the limits of all metaphors in theology and therefore the limits of all human speech about God. Therefore he uses these metaphors with careful qualifications which he spells out clearly in his writing, so that they do not violate the biblical understanding of God. Because Athanasius uses these metaphors in this non academic way, writing as he does *currente calamo*, Stead argues, rightly, that "[i]f we insist that every phrase shall pass such a test — if we try to interpret Athanasius in the same spirit as he interpreted the Bible! — we shall encounter loosely-constructed arguments, and what looks like logical blunders." Thus he concludes: "It is a mistake to exploit these in a rationalising spirit; it is equally a mistake to assume that they are 'debating-points' consciously adopted *ad homines*. Athanasius can and does explain when he is using this method; where he does not do so, we are not entitled to assume it merely to save his credit."<sup>14</sup> Thus, in his use of *ousia* to speak of the being of God,

<sup>13</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 168.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 410.

Athanasius has in mind not only impassibility and indivisibility, but also self-differentiation, which must be emphasised when speaking of the distinction and relation of the Father and the Son. It is true that Athanasius sometimes compares the Father and the Son as two individuals as the use of words like ὁμοιος, ὁ αὐτός and ὁμοούσιος in their minimalist senses suggests, but as Stead is again right to stress, "[Athanasius'] dominant image is, of course, not that of two men simply, but specifically of Father and Son, with reference to the act of generation; and the Son's generation involves no passion, no change or division, and no separation; it is not a temporal act, but proceeds eternally."<sup>15</sup> "The relationship which Athanasius posits between Father and Son cannot be expressed in terms of a logic which was only constructed to deal with ordinary individual objects, the classes into which they fall, and the essential and accidental resemblances between them."<sup>16</sup> Torrance concurs with this judgement when he argues that Athanasius, while working from within what he calls "an Origenist reversal of the Aristotelian-Stoic relation of the human reason to God," sought to faithfully express and articulate the Hebraic-Christian conception of God. He writes,

In speaking of the being or οὐσία of God, Athanasius used the term in its simplest sense as that which is and subsists by itself, but allowed that to be changed and transformed by the nature of God. Thus the οὐσία of God as Athanasius understands it is both *being and presence*, presence in being, and *being and activity*, activity in being, the transcendent Being of God the Creator who is actively, creatively present in all that he has made, upholding it by the Word of his power and by his Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

It must be noted that Prestige also understood how Athanasius must and has commandeered the *ousia* and *hypostasis* to theology's use, and saw their distinction as that between subject and object rather than between general and particular.

When the stumbling block had been cleared away by Athanasius, the formula of three hypostaseis and one ousia (substance) was generally accepted. Ousia also means 'object', but with a difference. While hypostasis lays stress on concrete independence, ousia lays it on intrinsic constitution. Hypostasis means 'a reality *ad alios*', ousia 'a reality in *se*'; the one denotes God as manifest, the other connotes God's being. Athanasius taught that in God one and the same identical 'substance' or object, without any division, substitution or differentiation of content,

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<sup>15</sup> Stead, *Substance and Illusion*, 410.

<sup>16</sup> Stead, *Substance and Illusion*, 411.

<sup>17</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 218.

is permanently presented in three distinct object forms. It is one in content and consciousness, but three to contact and apprehension. Humanly speaking this is a paradox. But it has the justification that any human thought about the infinite must of necessity be paradoxical. It does not pretend to be the formula by which God invariably lives, but it does provide a concept by which he can be presented to human understanding, according to its capacity to receive a measure of genuine enlightenment.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, when Athanasius uses *ousia* to describe the being of God, he works not with the static and metaphysical sense of being of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as ὄν/οὐσία, which are variously translated into Latin as *essentia* and *substantia*, but as a living being — a speaking and personal being, who although transcends the created order, is nonetheless profoundly involved in the world, speaking to us personally in his Word, and actively revealing himself through his saving activity. Again this is based on the solid testimony of scripture, particularly in Exodus, where Yahweh identified himself as "I am who I am" (Ex. 3.14). This "I am" signifies the very name of God, and, for Athanasius, the name of God *is* the very being of God himself: "... when we hear it said, 'I am that I am,' and 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' and 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord,' and, 'Thus saith the Lord Almighty' we understand nothing else than the very simple, and blessed, and incomprehensible essence itself of him that is, (for though we be unable to master what he is, yet hearing 'Father', and 'God' and 'Almighty', we understand nothing else to be meant than the very essence of Him that is)."<sup>19</sup> The God who is the great "I am" is a personal God whose own involvement with the history of Israel demonstrates that he is indeed the covenant making God who takes the initiative in election and redemption, who with outstretched arm and wonderful acts rescued the Israelites from bondage to the Egyptians and led them to a land flowing with milk and honey, a land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and who pledges to be their God just as he has chosen them to be his people (Ex 6.6-8). Thus although Athanasius uses the Greek form of the LXX, he pursued not the Greek and Aristotelian understanding, but rather the Hebraic understanding of the Ἐγώ εἰμι of God, namely, that the being of God is personal, relational and dynamic, a Being-for-Others.

<sup>18</sup> Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, xxix.

<sup>19</sup> *De Synodis*, 34.

This fellowship that God has with his people points profoundly to the very essence of the divine *ousia*: the being of God, understood as Being-for-others, must also be seen as Communion — the three persons in the divine Triad, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in their fellowship with one another, are the one Triune God. That is to say, if the Being of God is understood as living, dynamic, communion-constituting and fellowship-creating Being, and if it is "communion-constituting Being toward us it is surely to be understood also as ever-living, ever-dynamic *Communion* (κοινωνία) in the Godhead."<sup>20</sup> To be sure this does not mean that there are three Gods: the three persons (ὑποστάσεις) do not compromise the *indivisible* oneness of God, being *homoousios* with one another. This brings us to yet another qualification to the use of *ousia* for the being of God, namely, that it must be understood as denoting not only the transcendence of God over against the created world, but also that which is true about God as he is in himself, that is, as that which is eternally inherent in his being the Triune God, in his inner triadic relations as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now if *ousia* points to the internal reality of God, denoting being in its "inward reference," *hypostasis* points to objective otherness in the being of God (not independent subsistence), denoting being in its "outward reference,"<sup>21</sup> so that although the *indivisible* oneness of God is maintained, this oneness must be understood as *not undifferentiated* since it comprises a "Triunity of relations internal to the Godhead."<sup>22</sup> It is to the distinction of the three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we now turn.

## II

The use of the term *hypostasis* to denote the differentiation between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead is introduced by Athanasius with considerable hesitation and qualification except when it refers to the simplest sense of "the very being of God." In this case *hypostasis* would be synonymous with *ousia*. Used in this way, the Son is said to be of one *hypostasis* with the Father: "And concerning the everlasting co-existence of the Word with the Father, and that he is not

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<sup>20</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 124.

<sup>21</sup> See Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 125.



of another *hypostasis* but proper to the Father's, as the Bishops in the Council said..."<sup>23</sup> This was the way in which the Nicene fathers understood and used the word as they rejected the Arians' understanding of *hypostasis* as signifying subsistences which are foreign and alien to one another. This led to the Arian conclusion that the Son was a creature whose *hypostasis* was alien to that of God. This simple straightforward way of understanding the word became more complex when in the late 350s and early 360s two groups emerged each using the word differently. The first group spoke of God as being "three *hypostaseis*" that is, three individual realities, although *homoiousioi* with one another. The second group portrayed God as "one *hypostasis*," that is, one *ousia*, and Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *homoousios* with one another.<sup>24</sup> Athanasius, however, was not so concerned with terminological rigidness as he was with proper theology. Thus he used *hypostasis* in a fairly flexible way, retaining both senses, but employing them in a way that would best signify or describe the object in question. Athanasius' main concern is that if one speaks of the three *hypostaseis* in God one does not fall into Aristotelian polymorphism where the three *hypostaseis* are understood as separate and independent, in which case there would be three *ousiai* and therefore three Gods. Athanasius was therefore prepared to use *hypostasis* to describe the three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But similarly he was willing to emphasize the Nicene identification of *hypostasis* with *ousia* against Sabellianism in which the objective "hypostatic reality of the Son and the Spirit" is called into question.<sup>25</sup>

With this background in mind we shall now turn to Athanasius' understanding of God as Father. We have already seen how central the concept of Fatherhood is to Athanasius' understanding of God, and how for him Father = Godhead. At this stage of the discussion, it is important to note that for Athanasius the Fatherhood of God relates primarily to the inner relation in the divine being and only secondarily to the created world. That is to say, God is eternally Father in relation to his eternal Son, and not only contingently Father, related only to the contingent world which was created in time. This was the fundamental error in the theology of the Arians: they have reduced the Fatherhood of God to the contingent and incidental first by their emphasis on the creatureliness

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<sup>23</sup> *De Decretis*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 247.

of the Son and then by using that term only as signifying the relationship between God and the creation. Defending the eternity of the Son and therefore also the eternity of the Fatherhood of God Athanasius wrote:

At his suggestion then ye have maintained and ye think, that 'there was once when the Son was not'; this is the first cloke of your views of doctrine which has to be stripped off. Say then what was once when the Son was not, O slanderous and irreligious men? If ye say the Father, your blasphemy is but greater; for it is impious to say that he was 'once', or to signify him by the word 'once'. For he is ever, and is now, as the Son is, so is he, and is himself he that is, and Father of the Son.<sup>26</sup>

It is from this pattern of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the eternal Godhead that our understanding of fatherhood is derived and not the reverse. "For God does not make man his pattern; but rather we men, for that God is properly, and alone truly, Father of his Son, are also called fathers of our own children; for of him 'is every fatherhood in heaven and earth named'."<sup>27</sup> Another way in which Athanasius emphasises the truth that the first Person of the Trinity is primarily Father of the Son the second Person of the Trinity by pointing out that our sonship is to be understood in a derivative sense: we are sons through adoption, while the Second Person of the Trinity is Son because he shares the very *ousia* of the Father.

But if he wills that we should call his own Father our Father, we must not on that account measure ourselves with the Son according to nature, for it is because of the Son that the Father is so called by us; for since the Word bore our body and came to be in us, therefore by reason of the Word in us, is God called our Father. For the Spirit of the Word in us names through us his own Father as ours, which is the Apostle's meaning when he says, 'God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father'.<sup>28</sup>

It is because of this that Athanasius insists on the difference between "unoriginate" and "unbegotten." The Arians did not discern the distinction between the two and often used them interchangeably as synonyms. Thus, the Arians reasoned, there cannot be two unoriginates. The Son, scripture tells us, is the only begotten One. This, the Arians take to mean that the Son was part of the originate, created world. Although

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<sup>26</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.11.

<sup>27</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.26.

<sup>28</sup> *De Decretis*, 32.

Athanasius too would insist that there cannot be two unoriginate, he makes a clear distinction between "originate" and "begotten." For him,

To say that God is in this sense Unoriginate, does not shew that the Son is a thing originated, it being evident from the above proofs that the Word is as such as he is who begat him. Therefore if God be unoriginate, his Image is not originated, but an Offspring, which is his Word and his Wisdom. For what likeness has the originated to the unoriginate? (One must not weary of using repetition;) for if they will have it that the one is like the other, so that he who sees the one beholds the other, they are like to say that the Unoriginate is the image of the creatures; the end of which is confusion of the whole subject, an equalling of things originated with the Unoriginate, and the denial of the Unoriginate by measuring him with the works; and all to reduce the Son into their number.<sup>29</sup>

Turning now to the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, we find in Athanasius a wealth of materials which were written at different stages of his life in his long battle against the Arian heresy. The Son, Athanasius stoutly argues, is *enousios Logos*, being internal to the Being of God. As such he is uncreated, co-eternal and co-essential with the Father. Taking the statement in John 10:30, "I and my Father are one," to refer to this truth, Athanasius argues that by adding that he is in the Father and the Father in him the Son demonstrates that he is identical with the Godhead and one in essence with the Father. They are, to be sure, differentiated from one another, since the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father, but they are one in nature and "all that is the Father's is the Son's." Thus Athanasius could conclude that the Son "and the Father are one in propriety and peculiarity of nature, and in the identity of the one Godhead..."<sup>30</sup> Athanasius uses the analogy of light to explain the unity of nature between the Son and the Father. "For the radiance also is light, not second to the sun, nor a different light, nor from participation of it, but a whole and proper offspring of it."<sup>31</sup> In this way, Athanasius affirms the Nicene theology that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father and that everything that is said about the Father can be said about the Son except that the latter is Father. Another way in which Athanasius puts across this truth is to say that there is only one *form* of Godhead, which is also in the *Logos*. "Form" here is used synonymously with "nature."<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on the Son being

<sup>29</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.31.

<sup>30</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.4.

<sup>31</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.4.

<sup>32</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 142.

of the same essence and form as the Father is made in yet another way: by showing the distinction between "creation" and "generation." The essential difference between the two can be explained thus: while creation takes place in time by the free act of God's will to bring into being something which is outside of the being of God, and which remains contingent and dependent on God, "generation" takes place timelessly in the being of God.<sup>33</sup> The question that must be addressed at this juncture is whether the Son is begotten of the Father by the latter's act of will. For Athanasius this question cannot be answered in the affirmative for two reasons. Firstly, to answer the question in the affirmative would be almost equivalent to admitting that the Son is a creature. For "by will" suggests "coming into being." This would suggest that there was a time when the *Logos* was not — "For 'By will' is to place times before the Son."<sup>34</sup> Secondly, to say that the Son *is* "by the will of the Father" would make God compound and multiple. In other words it would compromise the simplicity of God. This, however, does not mean that the Son *is* by necessity. Necessity is an unseemly category to describe God. Pettersen explains:

For necessity is an improper and unseemly category for God, that which is necessitated being is not 'at the Father's pleasure'. He did not begin to be good but rather is naturally so in accordance with his will and pleasure. In short, what God is is his delight and pleasure. His being and his act are one. This natural goodness, which is naturally envious of no one's full existence, is akin to the Father's natural paternity. God did not decide to be the Son's Father but is so, naturally and in accordance with his will and good pleasure.<sup>35</sup>

Athanasius' Christology was therefore fundamentally different from that of the Arians. The Arians' understanding of God as *monad*, that he is "One God, alone ingenerate, alone Everlasting, alone Unbegun, alone True, alone having Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign; Judge, Governor, and Providence of all, unalterable and unchangable, just and good" means that God cannot share his being with another. Thus for them the Son is "not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate with the Father, nor has he his being together with the Father, as some so speak of relations, introducing two ingenerate beginnings, but God is before all things as being Monad and Beginning

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<sup>33</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 220-1. See also *Contra Arianos*, II.1, 22, 24, 29, 35; *De Decretis*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 171.

<sup>35</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 172.

of all."<sup>36</sup> The Son must be a creature, a κτίσμα or ποίημα, who was created<sup>37</sup> out of nothing by the Father. This implies that the Son had a beginning: although the Arians argue that the Son, as the most splendid of God's creatures, is born outside of time, there was still a time when he did not exist.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore as a creature the Son cannot have any communion with the Father, being finite he belongs to a totally different order of existence. Being finite the Son is even liable to change and sin. Epistemologically therefore the Son cannot be seen to be the true medium for the knowledge of God. This has caused Athanasius to accuse the Arians of atheism, for their notion of the *Logos* and of the unbridgable gap between God and the created order would mean that God is in the end unknowable. Rejecting the Son as the eternal Word and Wisdom of God, the Arians are actually saying that "God was once wordless and wisdomless"<sup>39</sup> and this not only means that "the Arians were thrown back upon themselves, obsessed with their own self-understanding and humanly thought-up ideas, but implied a doctrine of God as ultimately irrational or deprived of his own *Logos* (ἄλογον)."<sup>40</sup> From a philosophical perspective, Athanasius was also refuting the dualism which is found in Hellenistic philosophy, Gnosticism and Origenism. To be sure his concept of the *Logos* is in opposition with the impersonal λόγος σπερματικός of the Apologists and therefore also to Stoicism from which this concept was borrowed.<sup>41</sup> Also at this front Athanasius, in an effort to recover the concept of God which is true to the revelation, rejects the Platonic notion of the God who is beyond knowledge and being, insisting that the God of the scriptures has not taken his "stand upon his invisible nature... and [left] himself utterly unknown to man"

<sup>36</sup> *De Synodis*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> The term γεννᾶν was taken by the Arians as the figurative sense of "make" (ποιεῖν). See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Charles and Adam Black, 1968), 227.

<sup>38</sup> *De Synodis*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *De Synodis*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 225.

<sup>41</sup> "But by Word I mean, not that which is involved and inherent in all things created, which some are wont to call the seminal principle, which is without soul and has no power of reason or thought, but only works by external art, according to the skill of him that applies it,— nor such a word as belongs to rational beings and which consists of syllables, and has the air as its vehicle of expression,— but I mean the living and powerful Word of the good God, the God of the Universe, the very Word which is God, Who while different from things that are made, and from all Creation, is the one own Word of the good Father, Who by his own providence ordered and illumines this Universe." *Contra Gentes*, 10.

but has revealed himself through the creation<sup>42</sup> and finally through the Word.<sup>43</sup>

It is for this reason that the doctrine of the incarnation of the Word is so important for Athanasius, for it is in this miraculous event that the God-world relation is to be conceived. Athanasius stresses that in the Incarnation God did not merely come in a man but as man. That is to say, in the Incarnation, the divine *Logos*, who is from eternity consubstantial with the Father, takes upon himself a physical and material body, and becomes a human being in all his wholeness and integrity, while still remaining as God.<sup>44</sup> Thus all forms of docetism and adoptionism are avoided. Disputing with the Arians in his letter to Epictetus, the Bishop of Corinth Athanasius writes: "... how did men called Christians venture even to doubt whether the Lord, who proceeded from Mary, while Son of God by Essence and Nature, is of the seed of David according to the flesh... how can they wish to be called Christians who say that the Word has descended upon a holy man as upon one of the prophets, and has not himself become man, taking the body from Mary...."<sup>45</sup> To those who argue that this is improper for God, Athanasius was careful to make the distinction between condescension and impropriety. The Incarnation would indeed be an affront to the Hellenists and Gnostics, but not for those who understand that God and his *Logos* created the material world. Although God and the world are distinct in that they do not share the same nature, the two are not antithetical. Therefore it is not improper or unfitting for God to assume a mortal body. In fact it is through this assumption that the created order is then raised to God. As Pettersen has eloquently expressed it: "The Incarnation is then not *to alogon*, 'that contrary to reason,' as the Hellenists maintained, but *to eulogon*, 'that according to reason' where *to eulogon* is defined in relation to *ho Logos*, God's good Logos or Reason; the renewing Incarnation is seemly as it accords with the very nature of the subject, the divine Creator Logos."<sup>46</sup> Thus Athanasius is here presenting what might be called the inner logic of the Incarnation.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Contra Gentes*, 35, 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Contra Arianom*, I.16.

<sup>44</sup> *Contra Arianos*, I.22, III.4, 30; *De Decretis*, 23; *Ad Epictetum*, 8; *Ad Serapionem*, II.7-9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ad Epictetum*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 112. See also *De Incarnatione*, 6, 41, 42, 44.

<sup>47</sup> See T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 146-90, and Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 109-35.

We turn now to Athanasius' understanding of third Person of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Athanasius' understanding of the Spirit corresponds fully with his understanding of the Son and so can be traced back to *Contra Arianos* where he establishes the epistemic relationship between the Son and the Father since the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. In the homoousial relationship of the Son with the Father, Athanasius could argue that knowledge of the Father is through the knowledge of the Son. In the same way, the Spirit, in his homoousial relationship with the Father and the Son is known through the Son so that a "person who believes in the Father knows the Son in the Father, and he knows the Spirit only from his knowing the Son, believing together in the Son and in the Holy Spirit."<sup>48</sup> As mentioned earlier, this is based on the ontic relation between the Spirit and the Word, and therefore the place of the Spirit in the Triune Godhead: "The Spirit is not outside the Word, but, being in the Word, is in God through him."<sup>49</sup> "The Spirit is to the Son, in order and nature, as the Son is to the Father; therefore if anyone calls the Spirit a creature, he must needs say the same of the Son."<sup>50</sup> But Athanasius goes further to say that there is a similarity of the mission and the activity of the Spirit and the Son. The Son who is sent by the Father in turn sends the Spirit. The Son comes in the name of the Father to glorify him, while the Spirit comes in the name of the Son. There is therefore not only oneness of nature, but also oneness of mission. Thus there can be found in Athanasius a way of conceiving the relationship of the three *hypostaseis* in the Godhead: the Spirit is to the Son in the way that the Son is to the Father. The Spirit/Son relationship is analogous to the Son/Father relationship. The Spirit is *homoousios*, however, not only with the Son but also with the Father: the homoousial relationship of the Spirit with the Son implies the homoousial relationship of the Spirit with the Father. Campbell explains: "If we find that the Spirit has to the Son the same proper relationship as the Son has to the Father, then the Son's sharing in the being of the Father, his oneness in being with him, will be paralleled by the oneness in being of the Spirit with the Son. This in turn means the oneness in being of the Spirit with the Godhead of the

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<sup>48</sup> Theodore Campbell, "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Athanasius," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27, 4 (1974): 417.

<sup>49</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, III.5. Quoted by Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 231-32.

<sup>50</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, I.20. Quoted in Henry Bettenson, ed., *The Early Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956; Eleventh Impression, 1991), 296.

Father, an explication of the inner dynamic of the one affirmation that implicitly contains the subsequent affirmations."<sup>51</sup>

It is for this reason that Athanasius could link the Pneumatichians with the Arians. The Pneumatichians, or 'fighters against the Spirit'; lead by Eustathius of Sebaste, held that the Spirit was neither God nor creature. This heresy was associated with Macedonius, who, before his deposition on account of his agreement with the Arian Eudoxius, was Bishop of Constantinople. In his letters to Serapion, however, Athanasius attacked the Tropicici, a group of "insufficiently converted" Arians not directly associated with the Macedonians who appeared on the scene only later. The Tropicici, while holding on to the *homoousion* of the Son, asserts that the Spirit is a creature, albeit of an angelic nature. Athanasius connected this heresy with the Arians because if the Arians, in rejecting the divinity of the Son also reject the divinity of the Spirit, the new heresy, by rejecting the divinity of the Spirit must also reject the divinity of the Son. Furthermore the doctrine of the Tropicici has serious soteriological implications for Athanasius. For by insisting that the Spirit is a creature, the Tropicici has divided the indivisible Godhead, and consequently also divided baptism from life, since believers are baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So Athanasius argues:

he who takes anything away from the Triad and is baptized in the name of the Father alone, or in the name of the Son alone, or in the name of the Father and Son without the Spirit, receives nothing but remains wanting and imperfect, both himself and he who is supposed to initiate him. For the rite of initiation is in the Triad. So, he who divides the Son from the Father, or who reduces the Spirit to the level of creatures, has neither the Son nor the Father, but is without God.<sup>52</sup>

Athanasius argues for the divinity of the Spirit also by showing that the Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is the unoriginated creator of the universe. Commenting on Psalm 103, Athanasius argues that the Spirit is co-creator with the Father and Son: "The Father creates all things *through* the Word, *in* the Spirit; for where the Word is, there is the Spirit also; and things created through the Word have their being from the Spirit by means of the Word."<sup>53</sup> The Spirit is therefore above the creation, being uncreated and therefore of the same essence as the

<sup>51</sup> Campbell, "Athanasius," 418.

<sup>52</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, I.30. Quoted by Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 189.

<sup>53</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, III.4.



Father, immutable and incapable of variation and corruption. This militates against the claim made by the Macedonians that the Spirit is an angel.

That the Spirit is above creation, distinct in nature from things originated, and proper to the Godhead, can be seen from the following considerations also. The Holy Spirit is incapable of change and alteration. For... if "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God which is in him" (1 Cor 2:11) and as James said, in God "there is no variation nor shadow that is cast by turning" (Jas 1:17) — the Holy Spirit, being in God must be incapable of change, variation and corruption. But the nature of things originated and of things created is capable of change, inasmuch as it is outside the being of God and came into existence from that which is not.<sup>54</sup>

The question regarding the relationship between the Spirit and the Father is not fully addressed by Athanasius although what is very clear is that there can be no confusion of the Son with the Spirit. Neither is it legitimate to say that the Spirit is the second Son or the grandson of God. The Triad consists of the "Father who cannot be called grandfather, Son who cannot be called father, and Holy Spirit who is named by no other name than this. Of this faith it is not permissible to interchange terms, the Father is always Father, and the Son always the Son, and the Spirit is called always Holy Spirit."<sup>55</sup> But if the Son is said to be begotten of the Father, what then should be the proper way to describe the relation between the Father and the Spirit if the latter is not to replicate the former. The procession of the Spirit is another difficult question for Athanasius. To be sure, Athanasius, as argued earlier uses language in a non rigid and non technical way. Swete's thesis that the *filioque* is already found substantially in Athanasius' understanding of the relationship between the Son and the Spirit<sup>56</sup> has been disputed by modern scholars<sup>57</sup> who argue that because Athanasius' use of language is fluid and because he did not systematically develop his understanding of the procession of the Spirit, Swete's thesis cannot be fully substantiated.

<sup>54</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, I:22. "It will be clear that [the Holy Spirit] is not a creature, nor does he belong in being to the angels, for they are changeable, but he is the image of the Word and pertains to the Father." *Ad Serapionem*, I:26. Quoted by Michael Haykin, "'The Spirit of God': The Exegesis of 1 Cor 2:10-12 by Origen and Athanasius," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, 4 (1982): 524-5. Also see *Ad Afro*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ad Serapionem*, IV:6. Quoted by Campbell, "Athanasius," 431.

<sup>56</sup> H.B. Swete, *On the History of the Doctrine of the Procession of the Holy Spirit* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1872). Cited by Campbell, "Athanasius," 437.

<sup>57</sup> See Campbell, "Athanasius," 437 and Pettersen, *Athanasius*. 186ff.

The evidence seems to favour the judgement of Shapland that it is quite fruitless to press the issue and that Athanasius was for the most part content to leave his successors and others to formulate the correlation between the Son's and the Spirit's derivation from the Father.<sup>58</sup>

### III

In the two preceding sections I have tried to show how Athanasius understood the unity and trinity of God, and how, through the qualified use of terms like *ousia*, *hypostasis* and *homoousios*, he has tried to bring to expression his conception of the Triune God in a way that is faithful both to the biblical testimony and the tradition. The focus of this section is to elucidate Athanasius' understanding of the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity of the Godhead, that is to say, the co-inherence or *perichoresis* (Latin: *circumincessio*) of the members in the Triad: the mutual interpenetration of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one another, subsisting and operating in each other, without the loss of relational distinction. The concept of co-inherence, although expounded and developed more fully by the Cappadocians in an effort to defend themselves against the charge of tritheism due to the misunderstanding on the part of their accusers of their use of *hypostasis*, can actually be traced all the way back to Athanasius. It may be argued that the concept of co-inherence is the refining of the concept of *homoousios* as it is applied to the three Persons of the Trinity. The concern was to show how the three *hypostaseis* shared the same *ousia*, if the *ousia* is not to be understood as a generic term. The concept of co-inherence therefore is to further qualify the homoousial relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit by showing that in this relationship the three *hypostaseis* while remaining distinct from one another perfectly and fully indwells each other so that there is an intercommunication of the distinctive properties, a *communicatio idiomatum*, of the three *hypostaseis*. Thus when Jesus said "I am in my Father and my Father is in me," he provides us with a further insight into the eternal relations between the Son and the Father, and so also between the Father, Son and the Spirit.

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<sup>58</sup> C.R.S. Shapland, "Introduction" to his translation of the *Letters of St. Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951). Cited by Campbell, "The Doctrine of Holy Spirit," 437.

For the Son is in the Father, as it is allowed us to know, because the whole Being of the Son is proper to the Father's essence, as radiance from light and stream from fountain; so that whoso sees the Son, sees what is proper to the Father, and knows that the Son's Being, because from the Father, is therefore in the Father. For the Father is in the Son, since the Son is what is from the Father and proper to him, as in radiance the sun, and in the word and thought, and in the stream and fountain: for whoso thus contemplates the Son, contemplates what is proper to the Father's Essence, and knows that the Father is in the Son.<sup>59</sup>

The concept of co-inherence not only helps to clarify the homoousial relationship of the three *hypostaseis* of the Godhead thereby pointing to the unity of God, it also affirms the full integrity and equality of each of them and the real distinction of the three *enhypostatic* Persons. So Athanasius could argue that this doctrine cannot be understood to imply that each *hypostasis* requires the other to be perfect. Speaking specifically about the perichoretic relationship of the Father and the Son, Athanasius maintains: "For when it is said 'I in the Father and the Father in Me,' they are not therefore, as these (the Arians) suppose, discharged into each other, filling one the other, as in the case of empty vessels, so that the Son fills the emptiness of the Father and the Father that of the Son, and each of them by himself is not complete and perfect..."<sup>60</sup> For Athanasius, the Father is "full and perfect" and the Son is the "fullness of Godhead."<sup>61</sup> The distinction between the three is to be found in the Athanasian axiom that the incommunicable properties of the Father, Son and Spirit which distinguishes them are excluded in this perichoretic relationship so that one may say, with regard to the Father and Son relationship, that everything which belongs to the Father belongs to the Son and everything that belongs to the Son belongs to the Father, and whatever we say of the Father can be said about the Son and the Spirit except "Father." The Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father; but the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. The perichoretic relation of the different *hypostaseis* to each other does not cancel out their distinction from one another.

There are several fundamental ontological implications of this important concept. The first is that since the three Persons of the Trinity mutually indwell one another, each of the Divine Persons is properly to

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<sup>59</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.3.

<sup>60</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.1.

<sup>61</sup> *Contra Arianos*, III.1.

be considered as the whole God, the Godhead being complete in each of them. But since God is one and always indivisible, as we have already seen in our consideration of the significance of *ousia*, then we must say that God is known only in this onto-relation of the three *hypostaseis* as one Godhead, that is, as a Triune Whole. Thus, as Torrance describes it, "Due to their perichoretic onto-relations with one another in which they have their Being in one another, the Father is not truly known apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit; and the Son is not truly known apart from the Father and the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is not truly known apart from the Father and the Son. The Holy Trinity is revealed and is known only as an indivisible Whole, in Trinity and Unity and Unity and Trinity."<sup>62</sup>

The second important ontological significance is that there can be no subordination of the Son to the Father and the Spirit to the Son. In this way Athanasius radically rejects the subordinationism of his predecessor Origen whose understanding of God as beyond being itself, and whose incorporation of Platonic ideas have resulted in the doctrine of the subordination of the *Logos* and Spirit to the Father. God, according to Origen, does not participate in anything because he is absolute being and archetype. Rather he is participated in. This led to the notion that the *Logos* and the Spirit are subordinates of the Father: although the *Logos* and the Spirit are eternal with him they are not ingenerate (ἀγέννητος). To be sure, Origen would argue that the Son is ὁμοούσιος with the Father, but for him the Son possesses the essential nature of the Godhead only by participation and thus derivatively. As Lonergan observes "Indeed, Origen understood the phrase, 'The Father is greater than I' as having universal application: the Son and the Holy Spirit are incomparably more excellent than all things, but between them and the Father, in turn, there is at least a great a gap, if not a greater one."<sup>63</sup> Athanasius' concept of the co-inherence of the Persons of the Trinity which emphasises the indivisible wholeness of each Person in the Godhead so that each Person is whole of a whole, removes this ontological subordination that is found in Origen and in Origenist theologies which ensued.<sup>64</sup> Perichoresis also prevents the notion of "before" and "after"

<sup>62</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 174.

<sup>63</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea* (London: DLT, 1964), 62.

<sup>64</sup> The most prominent is Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, and pupil of Origen, who in his polemic against the Sabellians wrote that "the Son of God is a creature and something made, not his own by nature, but alien in essence from the Father.... Being a creature, he did not exist before

since God is from eternity Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, one indivisible Godhead who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This understanding of the onto-relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not based on abstract thought or theological speculation, but rather on the economic manifestation of the Triune God in salvation history. That is to say, this ontological concept of the Triune God is based on the concrete acts of God in history. From the activity of the Triad in human history it is then inferred that the real objective onto-relation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is eternal Communion in which there is mutual indwelling. For the Act of God and the Being of God cannot be separated. God's activity is inherent in his being, ἐνούσιος ἐνέργεια.<sup>65</sup> What this means is that in this perichoretic relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is not only Triune in Being but also Triune in Activity, and since the Being and the Activity cannot be separated, God is Being-in-Activity and Activity-in-Being. The co-inherence of the divine Persons also means that co-inherence of the divine activities, what Torrance calls the "perichoretic coactivity of the Holy Trinity."<sup>66</sup> It is thus that we must conceive of the creative and redemptive act of God — the Father, Son and Holy Spirit operate together in fellowship. Therefore although it must be made clear that this in no wise removes the distinction of the individual *hypostases*, the entire Godhead is involved in the individual distinctive operations of each of the divine Persons. In other words, although the work of redemption and atonement are inconceivable apart from the coactivity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in God's eternal purpose it was God the Son, not God the Father, or God the Holy Spirit, who became incarnate "for us men and for our salvation." This brings us back to the statement made earlier that *ousia* denotes God's being in its inward reference, while *hypostasis* denotes God's being in the outward reference, pointing to the objective otherness of the divine Persons. The co-activity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, just like their co-essentiality does not remove the differentiation between the three Persons, but emphasises that in and through the specific operations of each of them, the entire Godhead is at work to bring about the redemption of the world.

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he came into being." Quoted by Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1: 192. See also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 132ff.

<sup>65</sup> See *Contra Arianos*, II.2, 28; III.65; IV.1ff.

<sup>66</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 198.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines Athanasius' concept of the Unity and Trinity of God, taking into consideration his understanding and use of theological language and also his theological methodology. It argues that although Athanasius belongs to the Alexandrian tradition, his own theological orientation and approach demonstrates a greater affinity to the biblical-theological schema of Irenaeus rather than the philosophical-theological schema which is customarily associated with the Alexandrian school. This is seen most clearly in his use of philosophical terms which are commandeered for theology's use and in his construction of his concept of God. This essay examines Athanasius' understanding of *ousia* and *hypostasis* as they are employed by theology to properly describe the God who has made himself known through his Son, and who is witnessed in Scripture. This God is unity in trinity and trinity in unity, Being in Action and Action in Being, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## 撮 要

本文旨在透過分析亞他那修對 *ousia* 及 *hypostasis* 兩詞的運用及理解，探究亞氏的三一論。作者認為，亞氏雖廁身於亞歷山太學派，但其神學進路卻非亞歷山太的哲學—神學式，卻較接近愛任紐的聖經—神學進路。