

The Legacy of St. Athanasius Dr. George Dion. Dragas, Fall 2017

Athanasius as Evangelist, Part 1: *Against the Heathen / Contra Gentes* (c.328 AD)

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Introduction: How to Motivate People to Come to Jesus?

Who is Athanasius? And why is he important? Among those who know little else about church history, Athanasius is often appreciated as the defender of the doctrine of the Trinity and as the first Christian leader who identified the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we receive it today.¹ We must, therefore, take Athanasius seriously when everything in his writings shows that he would see the theory of penal substitutionary atonement as a very troubling error.

Among Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, Athanasius has long been celebrated as the foundational thinker for all Christian theology which followed him.² Athanasius had been mentored from his youth by Alexander, who was bishop of Alexandria, the first opponent of the heretic Arius, and one of the co-authors of the Nicene Creed of 325 AD. Athanasius had attended the Council of Nicaea as an assistant to his bishop, Alexander. When he published these two volumes, called *Against the Heathen / Contra Gentes* and *On the Incarnation / De Incarnatione*, Athanasius was, at the latest, thirty years of age. He probably published them in connection with his nomination to his mentor's former seat in 328 AD, or to be considered for it before 328.³ Athanasius, in these writings, implies that he represented the Christian tradition faithfully, from the time of Jesus and the apostles all the way down to his own training in Christian theology and leadership, in one of the most important centers of the Christian community. And represent it he did. During his career as bishop, he endured threats from Roman Emperors for defending the Nicene Creed against the Arian heresy, and suffered five forced exiles from his home. Athanasius wanted to represent the Christian church at large. He also wanted to be taken seriously as an intellectual Christian. Athanasius published these writings in Alexandria, Egypt, the intellectual center of the classical world in the early fourth century. The city was diverse, with sizable Greek, Jewish, and other communities alongside Egyptians. It also was home to the great Library of Alexandria, which had long been the center of learning in the ancient Mediterranean world.

In Athanasius' work of two volumes, which are evangelistic in nature, the great Christian theologian never uses the terms 'wrath' and 'anger.' Never does he assign those attributes, qualities, or sentiments to God. This is striking. To Protestant evangelical ears conditioned to hearing (among other theories) the Calvinist theory of penal substitutionary atonement, where God is full of 'wrath' and 'anger,' such a thing is hard to conceive. Yet Athanasius is more concerned to defend the sheer goodness of God in the face of human evil, and explain God's activity in Christ and by the Spirit as His provision to undo all human evil. His argument is consistently medical and ontological, that is, about our state of being, not legal, judicial, or forensic.

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Thirty Ninth Festal Letter* (367 AD)

² Athanasius is celebrated as one of the four greatest teachers of the Eastern Church, along with Basil of Caesarea (330 – 379 AD), Gregory of Nazianzus (330 – 390 AD), and John Chrysostom (347 – 407 AD). Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 21.6 delivers a tribute to Athanasius by saying that while the Alexandrian knew classical literature and philosophy, yet, 'From meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament, with a depth such as none else has applied even to one of them, he grew rich in contemplation, rich in splendor of life, combining them in wondrous sort by that golden bond which few can weave; using life as the guide of contemplation, contemplation as the seal of life.' See Catholic scholar Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007); the Greek Catholic scholar Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998); Orthodox scholars Georges Florovsky, 'St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation'; George Dion. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2005); Protestant scholars Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), chs.7 – 8 and *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011); cf. Matthew Baker and Todd Speidell (editors), *T.F. Torrance and Eastern Orthodoxy: Theology in Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), ch.4

³ Georges V. Florovsky, *Patrology – Patristics: The First Eight Centuries AD*, edited by George Dion. Dragas for Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (2016), volume I, chapter 2 holds to an earlier date of 317 – 319 AD but without substantiation. James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p.45 – 51 considers much historical data and estimates a date of 328 – 335 AD, specifically arguing against a date earlier than 318 AD because of Athanasius' apparent dependence on Eusebius.

Correspondingly, Athanasius seems to desire a response from his audience which does not map onto the emotional trajectory traced by penal substitutionary atonement – that of guilt, anxiety, and fear about one’s standing before God, a conception of hell as a Western prison system meting out divine retributive justice, followed by relief and gratitude that Jesus absorbed some discrete amount of punishment for God’s offended sense of retributive justice. Athanasius seems far more interested in provoking respect and admiration for this good and loving God, conviction about the tragedy of humanity’s damaged communion with God, and as well as longing and nostalgia for restored fellowship with God in and through Jesus.

To underscore my point, I glance at the conclusion of *De Incarnatione*, where Athanasius issues a surprising challenge to his non-Christian reader:

‘For just as, if a man wished to see the light of the sun, he would at any rate wipe and brighten his eye, purifying himself in some sort like what he desires, so that the eye, thus becoming light, may see the light of the sun; or as, if a man would see a city or country, he at any rate comes to the place to see it—thus he that would comprehend the mind of those who speak of God must needs begin by washing and cleansing his soul, by his manner of living, and approach the saints themselves by imitating their works; so that, associated with them in the conduct of a common life, he may understand also what has been revealed to them by God, and thenceforth, as closely knit to them, may escape the peril of the sinners and their fire at the day of judgment, and receive what is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven, which ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man’ [1 Corinthians 2:9], whatsoever things are prepared for them that live a virtuous life, and love the God and Father, in Christ Jesus our Lord: through Whom and with Whom be to the Father Himself, with the Son Himself, in the Holy Spirit, honour and might and glory for ever and ever. Amen.’⁴

Athanasius is making an evangelistic appeal. To any Protestant evangelical who stands in the tradition of being deeply skeptical of ‘works’ prior to ‘faith,’ and sometimes even ‘works’ in conjunction with ‘faith,’ Athanasius’ admonition triggers alarm bells. At the very least, many Protestant evangelicals might reason, a Christian relating to a non-Christian should follow an order of topics: evangelism with a ‘gospel presentation,’ conversion, discipleship, and then Christian ethics. Why does Athanasius introduce Christian ethics earlier, and foreground it as part of evangelism and conversion?

Seen in the context of what Athanasius says about the soul processing the knowledge of God, and even bearing the life of God, in some sense, to the body, this makes quite a bit of good sense. He is arguing that one’s experience of God and inclination to regard the Christian message is actually dependent on one’s willingness to change one’s posture and take a few steps of purification, at the very least to appreciate what Jesus himself went through. Especially in the context of idolatry and all the behaviors that Greco-Roman idolatry called for, it would not have been unreasonable to ask someone to take a few steps towards (say) sobriety and clear-headedness to think more clearly, or towards sexual restraint to observe the actual state of one’s relationships and one’s inner emotional life. To locate the same principle in more modern concerns, one does not understand dieting or exercising until one has a basic sense for how much self-discipline is involved. The same is true with appreciating Jesus: One does not appreciate what Jesus’ experience of uniting human nature to the Father was like until one starts trying it for one’s self. Certainly the history of the people of Israel can be read that way: God asked them to receive His commandments, which were not even ultimate but penultimate, and they still could not do that; yet this experience helped them appreciate their need for the promised Messiah and what that Messiah had to do on their behalf. Athanasius’ expectation is probably that once a person enters a place of deeper self-awareness, more desires will awaken or grow which will lead them to want more of the substance to which the Christian faith points. It is in that context that Athanasius speaks of ‘honour and might and glory’ which is now and will continue to be rendered ‘to the Father Himself, with the Son Himself, in the Holy Spirit.’ Athanasius will have an explanation for why a person has desires that awaken or grow like this. In the soul, and especially the soul of an unbeliever, the Holy Spirit never totally withdraws. Since the human person is a temple-person, the presence of the Spirit in the person’s soul is a light that refuses to go out.

What emotional responses is Athanasius hoping to stimulate in his readers? This is an important question because his pastoral voice corresponds to his theological insight. Admittedly, a socio-rhetorical appreciation of any figure of

⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 57.3

late antiquity is hard to pin down with full certainty. However, C.S. Lewis, in his introduction to Athanasius' *De Incarnatione*, shares that he was deeply impressed with both the theologian's mastery of classical Greek, and also the deliberate simplicity with which he handles complex theological topics.⁵ Too, James B. Ernest does a fine job with respect to how Athanasius handles Scripture.⁶ And we can benefit from some skillful attempts to help us appreciate Augustine and John Chrysostom – two Christian leaders who served as bishops in the generation after Athanasius – as preachers.⁷ Thus, while on the one hand, I acknowledge my cultural distance from Athanasius, on the other hand, when I read his two volume work, I sense other emotional and intellectual responses arising in me that I cannot help but think are intentional on the part of the Alexandrian bishop. This is what he wanted me to feel. Athanasius was a skilled, polished orator in a cultural context that extolled skilled, polished orators. So it behooves us to first understand his content, but also, second, to understand what emotional responses he was seeking in us, because the emotional responses he sought reflects back upon his understanding of the human and the divine-human relationship.

I believe that the emotional responses that Athanasius is hoping to cultivate in his readers correspond to the content of his discourse. First, he is trying to stimulate in his audience an emotional longing and nostalgia for what human beings lost in the fall. Athanasius wanted his readers to mourn the loss of the human soul's connection with God and the resulting moral, spiritual, and emotional malaise that set in. Here is a comparison of the emotional state of the soul under conditions of, first, contemplating God, and second, contemplating the pleasures of the body. Here is Athanasius' account of a person's emotional experience as one's soul contemplates God:

‘...he might rejoice and have fellowship with the Deity... He is awe-struck as he contemplates...’⁸

‘...taking pleasure in contemplating Him, and gaining renewal by its desire toward Him...’⁹

‘...in a freedom unembarrassed by shame, and as associating with the holy ones in that contemplation of things perceived by the mind which he enjoyed in the place where he was...’¹⁰

By contrast, here is the human soul as it turned self-ward to contemplate the pleasures of the body, along with the anxieties and fears thereof:

‘They entangled their soul with bodily pleasures, vexed and turbid with all kind of lusts, while they wholly forgot the power they originally had from God...’¹¹

‘Having formed a desire for each and sundry, they began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were even afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality. For not being willing to leave her lusts, she fears death and her separation from the body. But again, from lusting, and not meeting with gratification, she learned to commit murder and wrong.’¹²

It is worth noting that Athanasius' paradigm does *not* seem to reflect a Stoic detached approach to human emotions, although that can be a matter for further scholarly debate (which must also include, of course, what the apostolic writers believed about Stoic and other Greek philosophies).¹³ Athanasius seems more concerned to locate the proper cause and object of human joy, delight, and pleasure than to deny those emotions altogether. Furthermore,

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Introduction to Athanasius' On the Incarnation*

⁶ James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2004)

⁷ Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983); James M. Farrell, ‘The Rhetoric(s) of Augustine's Confessions,’ *Augustinian Studies* 39:2 (2008), p.265 – 291; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Malcolm Heath, ‘John Chrysostom, Rhetoric, and Galatians,’ *Biblical Interpretation* (12, 2004), p.369 – 400; Demetrios E. Tonias, *Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014)

⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 2.2

⁹ *Ibid* 2.3

¹⁰ *Ibid* 2.4

¹¹ *Ibid* 3.2

¹² *Ibid* 3.4

¹³ C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), ch.8 – 9 on how semantic similarities do not lead anywhere near conceptual agreement

Athanasius is also trying to engage a Jewish audience,¹⁴ not just Greek, as shown by his commentary on the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish story. This is strongly suggested by the fact that Athanasius quotes frequently from the *Wisdom of Solomon*, an extracanonical Jewish work that already *critiques* Hellenism, perhaps Epicureanism and Stoicism especially, in its own way.¹⁵ Athanasius apparently believes his portrait of the soul at an equilibrium of rest in God, and taking joy in God, compared to the disorder of the soul restless in sin, is inherently attractive, and broadly so.

This cultivation of emotional self-awareness and emotional health must be included as part of Athanasius' overall goal in writing. He is not only concerned about the moral and ethical quality of people's lives, although that certainly does concern him. He is quite interested in the quality of people's emotions and desires: joy, being awe-struck, pleasure, and experiencing a freedom unembarrassed by shame. He believes that desires can be shaped, oriented, and cultivated in a partnership between the human being and God. And being filled with right desire – that is, *orthopathy* – is a mark of developing right relationship with God. It is, in Athanasius' mind, as we shall continue to see, a mark of our participation in Christ because it is a participation in what the incarnate Word actually did in his lived experience as a human being.

Second, Athanasius seems to be aiming for an intellectual conviction that a good God can only be maintained in Christian faith.¹⁶ He does not take for granted that his readers believe in a good God, but he does assume they want to. He wants to draw out how a good God is possible given human evil. The longing of the human mind and heart for a good, trustworthy God is something to which Athanasius believes he can appeal.

Third, Athanasius wants his readers to come to admire God for His goodness and love. He does not want his readers to feel 'indebted' to God. So even though he produces very fine expositions of the death of Christ, he does so in a way that stresses *who* died on the cross, i.e. the Word of God, not how much physical or spiritual pain he endured, what Jesus' social conditions surrounding his death meant for him emotionally, and so on. And because Athanasius does not believe in a penal substitutionary account of Jesus' death, he is not trying to produce the corresponding emotions that belong to that theory: guilt, relief, gratitude for the sacrifice, indebtedness. He wants to help people appreciate the sheer goodness of God, and the atonement is a reflection of that goodness. But Athanasius is not trying to call forth an emotional response to the atonement per se, but rather God considered as God.

Fourth, Athanasius wants his readers to know and experience this God through His Word. In other writings, he will make clear that he also means, 'and His Spirit.' There is much more to knowing God than knowing rational content, but Athanasius' stress on the Word, and the Scriptures in a subordinate sense, as something to be mediated to the soul and through the soul to the body, make clear that he views 'the healing of creation'¹⁷ as the restoration of true contemplation of God: 'taking pleasure in contemplating Him, and gaining renewal by its desire toward Him.'¹⁸ Athanasius believes that we are to grow in our desire for God, admiration for God, joy that this good God can be known and communicated and shared, and longing to be the human being God intended. And if these emotions are developmental and not static, progressively filling us, then this confirms that we are indeed temples in whom Christ dwells by his Spirit. It is a mark of our participation in Jesus' own human response to his Father.

Contra Gentes: A Good God Who Is Healing the Creation

In his introduction to *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius directs Macarius his reader to view Jesus and his crucifixion not as a shameful defeat, but as 'the healing of creation.'¹⁹ And by 'creation,' Athanasius demonstrably means *all creation*, in such a way that involves all human beings without reservation, although human free choice will impact our experience of that healing. Christian faith, to Athanasius, does not set forward the question of 'how might God resolve a conflict of attributes between love/mercy and retributive justice/wrath' or 'how can sinners be justified before a holy God.' It solves the problem of human evil, both in its intellectual coherence and practical application. God in Christ solves *the problem of evil, especially human evil*, first by explaining why God's good creation *never required it in the first place* and then by explaining what a good God is doing to defeat evil and heal humanity, all the while not becoming evil Himself.

¹⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, 45.4; 46.1 – 4; *De Incarnatione* 22 – 25

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts 1 and 2* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p.238 – 243

¹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 6 – 9

¹⁷ *Ibid* 1.4

¹⁸ *Ibid* 2.3

¹⁹ *Ibid* 1.4

After introducing his subject, Athanasius immediately says:

‘In the beginning wickedness did not exist. Nor indeed does it exist even now in those who are holy, nor does it in any way belong to their nature. But men later on began to contrive it and to elaborate it to their own hurt.’²⁰

In chapters 2 – 5, he briefly summarizes the biblical account of creation and fall, and explains God’s goodness, humanity, free will, and the fall in such a way so as to defend the character of God from the accusation of being evil. Then he steps back. Having explained why evil is not part of the character of God, in chapter 6, Athanasius criticizes as illogical and impossible the Greek view that evil is a concrete *thing* apart from God:

‘Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.’²¹

In chapter 7, he refutes the dualistic view that there are two gods: one good and one evil. Then in chapter 8, he rejoins the biblical narrative and continues to explain the descent of humanity into error, idol-worship, and evil. From that point, he criticizes idolatry from various standpoints, concluding *Contra Gentes* with the only logical conclusion: that human beings must return to the Word of the Father in whose image we were made. This sets Athanasius up for his companion volume: *De Incarnatione*.

Athanasius wishes to defend the Christian God from every possible accusation of acting in an evil way, or being evil. Athanasius is absolutely against any view which would make God into the ‘maker of evil also.’ For the bishop of Alexandria, God is only good. Therefore all God’s creative works are good. And all God’s intentions towards humanity are by definition good. Athanasius would eschew any attempt to say that God needed, willed, or caused the fall.

Athanasius views himself as defending a truth he has received. This strict separation of evil from the character of God was long taught by the church:

‘The truth of the Church’s theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.’²²

Considered as an evangelist, Athanasius’ strategy is to negate other conceptions of ‘god’ as tainted by evil. They are therefore unworthy of worship, love, and devotion. Only the God revealed in Christ by the Spirit can be called ‘good’ by nature, and comprehensively so. If Athanasius was vague about which ‘god’ he was arguing for, he would have opened up false theologies in the hearts and minds of his audience, who were well acquainted with ‘gods’ who did evil or commanded evil. Athanasius will call this idolatry and examine it thoroughly in *Contra Gentes* chapters 8 – 29.

Later evidence in Athanasius’ first work suggests that this concern is at the forefront of his mind. In chapter 16, Athanasius considers how God’s *nature* impacts what we call *activities* of God playing out in the creation, and how we can identify them and name them. In his criticism of the Greek pagan gods, Athanasius insists that activities flow out of attributes. In his words, ‘their deeds must correspond to their natures.’ That is why Zeus and the other Greek gods are both good and evil. That is, they have the character of ordinary men, and not sober ones at that:

²⁰ Ibid 2.1

²¹ Ibid 6.1 – 2

²² Ibid 7.3

'For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.'²³

If God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the short phrase 'God is love' from 1 John 4:8 takes on the status of declaring God's essential, eternal, and intrinsic attribute and character, which is arguably what the apostle John perceived and intended to say. Athanasius did not quote 1 John 4:8 in his surviving writings,²⁴ and seemed reluctant to put to writing many elaborations about the relations between the divine persons. But he was nevertheless accustomed to identifying the Son by calling him the 'beloved of the Father,' for example, near the climactic conclusion of *De Incarnatione*.²⁵ He is comfortable quoting Scriptures that identify Jesus as 'the beloved' or the equivalent.²⁶

Hence, Athanasius is attesting to 'love' for humanity and 'goodness' towards humanity as fundamental to the Triune God because goodness and love are fundamental to God's character and nature *independently of humanity*. In *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius piles up a long string of statements where he says that God is *intrinsically* good. Sometimes he notes how God shows His goodness through the creation, and continuing to uphold it.

'God is *good* and exceeding noble' (2.2), 'For God, being *good* and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him' (35.1), 'His Word...proceeds in His *goodness* from the Father as from a *good* Fountain' (41.1), 'But the God of all is *good* and exceeding noble by nature, and therefore is kind; for one that is *good* can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not even grudge existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for his loving-kindness' (41.2), 'Because He is *good* He guides and settles the whole Creation by His Word' (41.3), 'Seeing the power of the Word, we receive a knowledge also of a *good* Father' (45.2), 'Being the *good* Offspring of Him that is *good*, and true Son, He is the Father's Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without... but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father' (46.8).

His tendency in *De Incarnatione* is to observe how God's intrinsic goodness is manifested in both creation and redemption, but especially in redemption. The mission of the Son of God to save all humanity from corruption and death reveals God's goodness.

'The *good* Father through Him orders all things' (1.1), 'what men deride as unseemly, this by His own goodness He clothes with seemliness' (1.2), 'He has yet of the loving-kindness and *goodness* of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation' (1.3), 'For God is *good*, or rather is essentially the source of *goodness*: nor could one that is *good* be niggardly of anything' (3.3), 'for what is evil is not, but what is *good* is... [and] they derive their being from God who is' (4.5), 'For it were not worthy of God's *goodness* that the things He had made should waste away... what was God in His *goodness* to do? ... For neglect reveals weakness, and not *goodness* on God's part... It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's *goodness*' (6.5 – 10), 'this great work was peculiarly suited to God's *goodness*... much more did God the Word of the all-*good* Father not neglect the race of men' (10.1), 'inasmuch as He is *good*, He did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself' (11.1), 'being *good*, He gives them a share in His own Image' (11.3), 'God's *goodness* then and loving-kindness being so great' (12.6), 'since it were unworthy of the Divine *Goodness* to overlook so grave a matter' (43.4), 'by His guidance and *goodness*' (43.7).

In addition, Athanasius invokes what would come to later be called the doctrine of divine simplicity: 'God is a

²³ Ibid 16.4

²⁴ James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) does not find 1 John 4:8 in the corpus of Athanasius

²⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 52.1

²⁶ For example, in quoting John 3:35, 'The Father loves the Son' in *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 2.

whole and not a number of parts.²⁷ Then, as he considers God's act of creation and the relationship God has with it, Athanasius says: 'God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness.'²⁸ God's being is His act, in the sense that all acts of God must be consistent with His being. Or, as George Dion. Dragas, in his study of how Athanasius uses the terms 'nature' (*physis*) and 'grace' (*charis*) in the early two volume work, as well as his major dogmatic works *Contra Arianos* 1, 2, and 3, notes that already in *Contra Gentes*,

'In general, God's *physis* [nature] is good and surpasses all excellence... It could be argued that *physis* agrees not only with *ousia*, but also with *act*.'²⁹

Most importantly, Athanasius taught that it is more true, accurate, and faithful to name the Father from the Son than to call God 'Creator' after the creation:

'He who names God Maker and Framer and Unoriginate, regards and apprehends things created and made; and he who calls God Father, thereby conceives and contemplates the Son... If they had any concern at all for reverent speaking and the honour due to the Father, it became them rather, and this were better and higher, to acknowledge and call God Father, than to give Him this name. For, in calling God unoriginate, they are, as I said before, calling Him from His works, and as Maker only and Framer, supposing that hence they may signify that the Word is a work after their own pleasure. But that he who calls God Father, signifies Him from the Son being well aware that if there be a Son, of necessity through that Son all things originate were created. And they, when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made.'³⁰

Athanasius recognized that God is eternally and intrinsically Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is Creator as well, but only became Creator at the moment He created the creation. He was not eternally Creator, since it is logically impossible to name God 'Creator' before the creation. Thus, it is more functional to name God 'Creator.' It is, of course, a true statement from our vantage point as humans. However, it is more personal, perceptive, reverent, and honoring to name God 'Father' after the Son. Calling God thus, for Athanasius, means that we are perceiving and loving God for who He truly and eternally is, as He has revealed Himself to us.

Athanasius says that because God is 'good,' that God must be 'good' to humanity and 'the lover of humanity.'³¹ Khaled Anatolios concurs:

'Thus, in Athanasius, God's goodness and love constitute as much of an ontological statement about God and a description of God's nature (*physis*) as the apophatic statements that appear to indicate divine inaccessibility to the created realm: God is 'good and exceedingly noble by nature. Therefore he is the lover of humanity. The fact that God is *philanthropos* by nature means that his actions are always characterized by that quality, since it is one of Athanasius's principal maxims that actions must correspond to natures.'³²

By comparison, we can consider the Protestant tendency to define 'holiness' or 'wrath' as fundamental *attributes* of God. But are these qualities *attributes* of God? Or are they derivative *activities* of God? In *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius never attributes these particular qualities to God's very nature or character. Here I rely on Athanasius' clarity in distinguishing between God as He is eternally in Himself, in contrast to God as Creator, and his maxim that deeds must correspond to natures. Prior to bringing creation into being, God cannot be considered to be 'holy' or 'wrathful.' Holiness means 'set apart from.' Before God brought other things into existence, from what was God setting Himself apart? Nothing. So, holiness is logically impossible prior to creation. By saying that, we

²⁷ Ibid 28.3; in *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 6, he asserts, 'For the Triad, praised, revered, and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees'

²⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 3.3

²⁹ George Dion. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives* (Rollinsworth, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2005), p.29 emphasis mine

³⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos* 1.33

³¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 35.1; *De Incarnatione* 6.5 – 10; 12.6; 43.4

³² Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.41; and on p.47, 'God's love and goodness thus constitute the basis within God of all the divine initiatives, from the structure of creation to the event of the incarnation...'

are not implying a defect in God. Rather, it is because holiness is a *secondary* quality of God, an *activity* of God towards the creation which flows from God's love. Holiness actually reflects God's loving will to make 'space' for beings other than Himself.³³

The same logic pertains to God's wrath. Prior to creation, towards what was God 'wrathful?' Nothing. For was there something about which the Father was angry at the Son? Certainly not. So, wrath cannot be considered a fundamental, intrinsic attribute of God.³⁴ Wrath is not even a secondary order activity directed at the pristine creation, but rather an activity of God directed at the disordered corruption of sin within fallen humanity (and fallen angels). Even given the corruption into sin, God does not direct His wrath at creation or humanity per se. It is astonishing that Athanasius never uses the terms 'wrath' and 'anger' in his two-volume magnum opus *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. Athanasius was quite capable of telling the biblical story and communicating what he believed to be the essential gospel message without referring to those attributes, qualities, or emotions in God.

Significantly, Athanasius did not believe that God required the fall of humanity to eventually draw human beings into eternal life:

'For He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption.'³⁵

For Athanasius, Adam and Eve and all human beings might not have fallen into corruption. As with Irenaeus, he believed that God was somehow sacramentally present in the tree of life, and that all human beings prior to the fall were invited to partake of this life of God. Athanasius' emphasis in this passage fell on God's desire for them that they 'kept the grace and remained good... [that] they might still keep the life in paradise...' Put differently, if God empowered His precious image-bearing human beings with freedom to perfect their freedom in love for Him, then God did not logically need the fall. This consistent patristic theme stands in stark contrast with John Calvin's view that God actively willed the fall, and then brought it about:

'God *not only foresaw* the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also *at his own pleasure arranged it*.'³⁶

This is because Calvin believed that God's retributive justice was an eternal and intrinsic attribute in God, equal and opposite to His love. If God has two fundamental characteristics, then He must arrange all creation and history and humanity in such a way that He can assuredly demonstrate both of those characteristics. Hence, Calvin believed that God had to cause the fall of humanity, so that some human beings could be damned. The Westminster Confession says that God's glory is the revealing of both His mercy and His justice:

'[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the *glory of His mercy*, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and *of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate*, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.'³⁷

³³ See Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 2nd edition), p.107 – 109

³⁴ So agrees Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), in the entry 'Wrath, Destruction' on p.991: 'In the OT the wrath of God is not viewed as an essential attribute of God, but as an expression of his will as he deals with sinful and rebellious humankind in the context of history.' See also the entry 'Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat' on p.281

³⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 3.4

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7. I am aware of attempts to 'nuance' or 'balance' these statements, of course. At the very least, however, the question is whether Christians should feel the need to defend these statements in any sense. See also *Institutes*, book 1, ch.16, section 3; book 1, ch.17, section 5

³⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 33, paragraph 2. Although Calvin had studied the patristic emphasis on God's empowerment of human free will and their exposition of the biblical texts, he nevertheless decided that God's sovereignty was mutually incompatible with human free will. In *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 2, section 4, Calvin writes, 'Moreover although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.'

High federal Calvinist theologian and pastor John Piper also asserts this position. When asked why God required a world in which He will send some people to hell, Piper answers:

‘His goal is that the full range of His perfections be known. I think this is the ultimate goal of the universe. God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – including wrath and power and judgment and justice – will be displayed.’³⁸

For Calvin and his heirs, God required the fall. For Athanasius, God did not. In fact, Athanasius would say that anyone who thought in that way was actually denying that God was a Trinity. For there is simply no logical way the Triune God could have two faces like this. Retributive justice cannot possibly be an equal and opposite attribute of God as His love is. For prior to creation, God could not express retributive justice on anything or anyone, so retributive justice cannot be an eternal divine attribute. More importantly, if God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then He has only one face: that of love – a love which purifies and cleanses, to be sure, but love nonetheless. Since justice must therefore be an activity of God – not an attribute – towards the creation, God’s justice must be an *activity of His love*, and thus God’s justice must be a restorative justice, not a retributive justice.

God’s wrath can only be an *activity* of His love, directed at that which opposes and resists Him. God’s love and God’s wrath cannot be aimed at the same object. God only expresses wrath towards the corruption of sin which His creatures (human and angelic) acquired of their own free will. Therefore, Athanasius can serve as a corrective to the doctrine of penal substitution and its companions – the doctrines of double predestination, divine retributive justice, and limited atonement.

***Contra Gentes* 2 – 7: God’s Goodness in the Face of Humanity’s Self-Corruption**

In *Contra Gentes* chapters 2 – 7, Athanasius defends God from any accusation of evil or caprice on account of humanity’s wickedness. He does this by explaining God’s intention for the creation. After defending God as ‘good and exceeding[ly] noble,’ he defends God’s creation of the world and humanity as originally unstained and called into deeper knowledge of and communion with God. Human beings were made in the image of the Word of the Father to have power in ourselves to freely ascend in love for God, receiving joy and pleasure and renewal by desiring Him.³⁹ Athanasius says that the mind, the uppermost part of the soul, was created by God to perceive, via the creation, the Word by which the Father made all things. The mind, through contemplation, was how the human being was to transcend itself, and this was to pour ‘pleasure’ into the rest of the soul: ‘taking pleasure in contemplating Him, and gaining renewal by its desire toward Him.’⁴⁰

In chapter 3, Athanasius accounts for human sin as a ‘holding back’ from that which God intended. Instead, human beings began to prioritize themselves and their own bodies higher than the knowledge of God which was accessible through the mind and the soul. Sin, therefore, is fundamentally a disordering of loves. Nothing is evil in itself, appreciated in the correct order. But we human beings betrayed our own vocation.⁴¹

‘They wholly forgot the power they originally had from God... For having departed from the consideration of the one and the true, namely, God, and from desire of Him, they had thenceforward embarked in diverse lusts and in those of the several bodily senses... They began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were even afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality.’⁴²

In chapter 3, Athanasius explains that human beings fixed their minds’ attention on the body and its senses, instead of outward and upward on God the Word. This decision ‘entangled their soul with bodily pleasures, vexed and turbid with all kind of lusts, while they wholly forgot the power they originally had from God.’⁴³ Athanasius makes an important and subtle remark here. ‘The power they originally had from God’ is the power to contemplate God

³⁸ John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

³⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 2.3

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 2.4

⁴¹ *Ibid* 3.4

⁴² *Ibid* 3.4

⁴³ *Ibid* 3.2

via the mind, to orient the emotions and the rest of the soul to delight in the knowledge of God, and thereby to direct the body in service to God. Although he has not yet explicitly brought up the Holy Spirit as the cause of this power, he states that human 'free will' is experienced in the person's soul.

In chapter 4, Athanasius describes the impact of the fall and sin's addictive quality, from the vantage point of the human soul. The soul, which is 'mobile,' has 'power over herself,'⁴⁴ and in fact comes from God, abuses that power. The soul can still discern what is good – that is, God. Yet the soul, because of the pleasure it finds in lusts, abuses its mobility to pursue what is evil. In chapter 5, Athanasius explains evils like murder, adultery, and slander as the result of disorder in the human soul that manifests itself as a misuse of the body. He uses the illustration of a charioteer driving a fine chariot in a race, not towards the goal, but simply for the experience of racing at high speeds, even recklessly:

'All of which things are a vice and sin of the soul: neither is there any cause of them at all, but only the rejection of better things.'⁴⁵

In chapters 6 and 7, Athanasius declares that God is innocent of wrongdoing, despite humanity being guilty of it. And once again, he explains sin as a decision made by the human person located in the soul, which then boomerangs back upon the human soul and within it, to become a pattern of decisions:

'...the soul of man, shutting fast her eyes, by which she is able to see God, has imagined evil for herself, and moving therein, knows not that, thinking she is doing something, she is doing nothing. For she is imagining what is not, nor is she abiding in her original nature; but what she is is evidently the product of her own disorder. For she is made to see God, and to be enlightened by Him; but of her own accord in God's stead she has sought corruptible things and darkness, as the Spirit says somewhere in writing, 'God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions' [Ecclesiastes 7:29].'⁴⁶

Athanasius then describes the human soul behaving in ways that Athanasius called habituation, and what we today would call *addiction*:

'Now the soul of mankind, not satisfied with the devising of evil, began by degrees to venture upon what is worse still. For having experience of diversities of pleasures, and girt about with oblivion of things divine; being pleased moreover and having in view the passions of the body, and nothing but things present and opinions about them, ceased to think that anything existed beyond what is seen, or that anything was good save things temporal and bodily; so turning away and forgetting that she was in the image of the good God, she no longer, by the power which is in her, sees God the Word after whose likeness she is made; but having departed from herself, imagines and feigns what is not. For hiding, by the complications of bodily lusts, the mirror which, as it were, is in her, by which alone she had the power of seeing the Image of the Father, she no longer sees what a soul ought to behold, but is carried about by everything, and only sees the things which come under the senses. Hence, weighted with all fleshly desire, and distracted among the impressions of these things, she imagines that the God Whom her understanding has forgotten is to be found in bodily and sensible things, giving to things seen the name of God, and glorifying only those things which she desires and which are pleasant to her eyes.'⁴⁷

This is both the substance and the symptom of the soul's self-imposed 'disorder,' the word Athanasius used in 7.4 – 5. Speaking of the human soul, Athanasius makes a summary statement:

'For she is made to see God, and to be enlightened by Him; but of her own accord in God's stead she has sought corruptible things and darkness, as the Spirit says somewhere in writing, 'God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions' [Ecclesiastes 7:29]. Thus it has been then that men from the first discovered and contrived and imagined evil for themselves. But it is now time to say how they came down to the madness of idolatry, that you may know that the invention of idols is wholly due, not to good but to

⁴⁴ Ibid 4.2; cf. 44.3, 'For as by His own providence bodies grow and the rational soul moves, and possesses life and thought...'

⁴⁵ Ibid 5.2

⁴⁶ Ibid 7.4 – 5

⁴⁷ Ibid 8.1 – 2

evil. But what has its origin in evil can never be pronounced good in any point—being evil altogether.⁴⁸

Through the contemplation of the mind, and in the worship of God by the soul, we are meant to ‘ascend’ in some sense to the Father by the Word and Spirit, in love and in constant growth. This seems logical, since a finite being experiencing the infinite being means constant growth for the finite party. Sadly, in contrast to the objective contemplation of the Logos, humans turn to subjective ‘inventions’ and ‘imaginings.’

How does Athanasius help us answer the question of God’s goodness despite human evil? Does human evil impugn God’s goodness? Not at all. Human evil is possible – though never necessary – because of three characteristics we share. First, we are capable of experiencing ourselves and our existence as good. Second, we are capable of growth. Third, we are capable of joy. And those three experiences intertwine with each other and mutually reinforce each other in a direction towards God, or away from Him. All our choices are ultimately relational choices.

Athanasius does not say this in his writings yet, but it is easy to see how those three interrelated characteristics of our human experience are rooted in three interrelated characteristics of God. First, God is good. So God must create us in such a way that we are also good (‘God saw that it was good’), we know our existence to be good, and we experience the habitat in which we find ourselves as reflecting God’s goodness. We are conscious of ourselves and of God. Second, God is infinite. That means that we are finite beings relating to the infinite. So the human being is a human becoming, and the two phrases – being and becoming – are inseparable for us. In fact, we owe to patristic Christianity as a whole – especially with Irenaeus and Athanasius – not an individualistic notion of human personhood, but a relational one, and not a static view, but a developmental one. Third, our experience of God as infinitely good means that God must create us as capable of joy and of growing in joy. God desires that we begin our journeys of knowing and loving Him with genuine human experience and consciousness, including the consciousness of making a genuine choice (freedom). Our human experience is a reflection of God’s goodness and God’s infiniteness and, presumably, the joy that is within God as a Triune, relational being, but mapped into space and time and personality. Therefore, all our choices are habit-forming, as Athanasius observes.

Why do we assert that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit revealed by Jesus is good, despite human evil? Because by necessity of God’s infinite, goodness, and joy, the human being is always a human becoming: that is, growing in a direction. Hopefully, that direction is towards greater knowledge of God and love for God, which leads to appropriate knowledge of and love for others. But the other direction is possible as well: away from God towards self-enclosure and a fixation on whatever relative goodness is located in the created world or other created beings. Athanasius will explore the fall in particular in *De Incarnatione*, but his preliminary answers in *Contra Gentes* are more general.

Athanasius’ primary language for sin is ‘disorder’ and ‘corruption’ because he has a healthy doctrine of creation. Placing the secondary good of one’s self, or the affections of someone else (say), above the primary good who is God Himself – that is a disorder. So too is placing the relative good of objects in the created world – like food or resources or beauty or such – above the primary good who is God. Human evil is possible not because human beings are genuinely capable of depriving themselves of all goodness. Human evil is possible because of the superabundance of goodness. The deprivation theory of evil has its own accuracy when we consider the relative moral status of certain actions or ideas. But even a lie, while evil in a relative sense compared with the truth, is parasitic upon that which is good, and therefore still contains in itself something good: rational language, our capacity to communicate with one another, and the impulse to build trust between people. In a framework where all created objects are good, because the good creator God can only bestow goodness in structured form, human evil is possible because we, in our affections, minds, and experience, are capable of disordering the original order of goodness which God created. Human evil is our disordering of the good, as Athanasius says. In Christ, he asserts, we find this good God healing the disorder.

***Contra Gentes* 8 – 29: The Significance of Athanasius’ Refutation of Idolatry**

Before Athanasius turns to the possibilities for a return to God, he produces a diagnosis of further human disorder and descent. In chapters 8 – 29, Athanasius examines idolatry as the outcome of the disorder in the human soul.

Human beings, through the faculty of the unstable soul, devise idol-worship as a more entangling form of corruption

⁴⁸ Ibid 7.5

(8). Human understanding, turning further and further from God, sinks lower, dragging down motivations and behavior (9). The originators of Greek paganism, in particular, from Theseus who commanded that the gods be worshiped, to the artisans who sculpted the gods in the image of men and women, trafficked in lies (10). The supposed deeds of the gods, especially Zeus, are so immoral that even Roman laws forbid the same behavior in human beings (11). We laugh at the volatility, adulteries, drunkenness, and other morally worthless behavior of virtually the entire pantheon of gods (12). Worshiping images made from wood or stone is logically ridiculous (13). The Scriptures rightly condemn the physical manufacturing of idols (14). But again, the behavior of these false gods in the stories told about them, is what turns human beings away from proper piety (15). Appealing to the poets' craft of exaggeration and entertainment to excuse the gods' behavior does not make sense, because the poets do not have license to both condemn the gods for their immoral behavior but also praise them; that is contradictory and 'mutually inconsistent' (16). These tales reflect immoral men, originally, not gods; so attributing to them divine attributes like immortality is false and wrong-headed (17).

Athanasius then explores some of the underlying failures of logic connected to idol-worship. He is thinking about some of his contemporaries who do worship the idols of the pagan Greek gods. How would they defend their beliefs? The argument that the gods should be honored for the arts that they supposedly bestowed upon humanity is applied without consistency, since other inventors and patrons of other useful arts are not so honored, rendering the argument moot (18). The argument that divine things can and should be represented, and made manifest, through material objects like carved idols is senseless (19). For the earth is full of valuable materials like stone and gold, thus what added value does carving impart? The earth is full of animals, thus what added value does animal likeness in stone impart? The talent to sculpt resides in men, yet it makes no sense to worship the works of their hands rather than the talent per se (20). The argument that angels come to cluster around the idol makes no sense, because once again the sculptor's talent is the greater and the idol the lesser, and the sculptor is not venerated in this way (21). The material upkeep of idols shows corruptibility, which cannot be true of the divine (22). The ethnic-cultural specificity (non-universality) of idols shows that they are mere creations of men (23). In fact, the so-called gods of one people are used as ceremonial victims in the practices of another people (24). Human sacrifice is the most troubling inversion of greater and lesser to which idol-worship sinks; it has been practiced by the Scythian Taurians, the Greek worshipers of Ares, the Egyptian worshipers of Hera, the Phoenician and Cretan worshipers of Cronos, and the ancient Roman worshipers of Jupiter Latiarius (25). Human beings learned immorality from pagan idol-worship (26).

Athanasius then addresses the Stoic pantheist who views the entire universe as one body, and who would similarly mock the more primitive idol-worship. Still, the pantheist's admission that the universe is made up of complementary or contrasting parts would have to be projected onto the divine. The idea that the divine is made up of parts is nonsense (27, 28). The pantheist's uneven regard for and treatment of natural phenomenon is incompatible with the idea that God is inherent to and identical with nature (29). To which the modern critic of pantheism can ask, 'When the universe eventually cools off and dies, does 'god' die, too?'

Athanasius shows that he has considered idol-worship at length and with considerable patience. He quotes the Scriptures, but since his pagan audience would not share his conviction that Scripture speaks with an authoritative voice, Athanasius brings in logic to punctuate his own critique of idolatry. Additionally, perhaps he is mindful of his Jewish audience and is hoping that their commitment against idol-worship will dispose them favorably towards his argument. In any case, he mounts a challenge to pagan idol-worship from within, on its own terms. He questions the moral lessons they teach. He deconstructs them as creations of human history, not as truth-bearing tales of prehistory. And his primary logical device is to expose the self-contradictory elements in every version of idolatry. How can the gods be worthy of worship if human laws exist which ban for us behaviors that they apparently encourage? This critique is impressive. He has certainly deepened the problem of sin for his non-Christian audience. By showing more of the magnitude of human folly, he has not only made a case against idol-worship, he has rendered biblical concerns about human origins and human idol-worship into intelligible, defensible positions.

One wonders what Athanasius would make of such modern concepts as 'progress,' 'freedom,' 'American exceptionalism,' 'the market,' 'the corporation,' 'the state,' 'race,' and 'retributive justice.' These man-made institutions are accorded incredible weight and power over human behavior. For example, why do we believe in this or that? 'Because we're *Americans*.' Or, 'Because it's the 21st century. We can't turn back on *progress*.' But Robert F. Kennedy, in a speech in 1968, gave a devastating critique of 'economic progress':

'Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product ... if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.'

'Progress' and 'freedom' are only human *experiences*. If our desire for these *experiences* is not submitted to, grounded in, and shaped by God, the One who is the beautiful, the loving, the good, and the true, then we will wind up serving these concepts and worshiping our own experiences. They are false gods and cruel masters. And when we hold up these experiences as first-order priorities, we, too, become filled with inner self-contradictions because they are human creations, after all. Their power over us comes, as with idol-worship, in providing a cloak of legitimation and justification for human tribalism, greed, self-indulgence, and resentment against their fellow human beings. Sin is terrible, and terrifying.

Athanasius shows that he is able to summon the tools of history, logic, and literature to deconstruct idolatry, the extension of human sin. I have very little doubt he would do the same today with these 'gods' we worship. For as Athanasius demonstrates, we are not only spiritual and intellectual beings, but social and relational beings as well, and the choices we make in our souls become manifested in our bodies and in relationships.

Athanasius aims to produce in his audience the conviction that *sin*, not God, is terrible and terrifying. This stands in direct contrast with evangelism done in some traditions springing especially from Lutheran and Calvinist traditions. Those strategies involve producing in the audience either personal anxiety about God, owing perhaps from Luther's personal anxieties, or guilt in the impending and infinite divine retributive punishment, stemming from Calvin's interest in Latin law, merit, and punishment. In either case, or in the combination of both, what the evangelist seeks is to produce the conviction that God is terrible and terrifying, at least in view of our sin.

No doubt someone would object, based on this statement from Hebrews. Doesn't this passage tell us that God is more terrifying than sin, and that we should portray Him that way?

²⁶ For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a terrifying expectation of judgment and 'the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.' ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' ³¹ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26 – 31)

That is certainly a stern warning. But it is describing the divine fire of purification. Jesus 'made purification of sins' (Heb.1:3). That is, he was the one who burned the corruption of sin out of his own humanity through his own obedience, and 'became perfect' as far as humans go (Heb.5:7 – 10; 12:1 – 2). That's why Hebrews insists that its readers not turn back to the Old Testament sacrifices at the Temple: God once symbolized Himself acting like a dialysis machine, taking into Himself the people's impurity and giving back His purity. But God is now acting in and through Jesus Christ to be a spiritual kidney donor of sorts. God, in Christ, has provided the ultimate sacrifice for us: He's conquered our fatal disease in and through the humanness of Jesus. God has an unquenchable desire to burn everything selfish and sinful out of us. He will never relent, which is why He calls everyone to receive life from Jesus. That is also why Hebrews returns to the image of God who descended in fire at Mount Sinai (Heb.12:18)

– 21; cf. Ex.19), who is now, even in and through Jesus, known as ‘a consuming fire’ (Heb.12:29). God is only terrifying from the perspective of someone who wants to hold onto the very thing He wants to burn away. But that still means that sin is more terrifying than God, from an objective standpoint. So, if we read all of Hebrews in context, the case is closed: Sin is terrifying, because it makes us experience God’s love as terrifying when it should not be so. One can read Athanasius’ *Third Festal Letter* to see how he preaches on the theme of divine fire.

How about an objection based on a saying of Jesus. Doesn’t Jesus say that we should fear God, because he can destroy the soul as well as the body (Mt.10:28; Lk.12:4 – 5)? So we should do evangelism by making God out to be more terrible and terrifying than sin, shouldn’t we? Actually, no. Jesus was referring to the devil in those passages, not God. Because the devil can insinuate our minds with lies that people might choose to believe: lies obscuring the fact that Jesus’ power really came from God’s Spirit (Mt.10:25; Lk.11:14 – 27), and lies obscuring the truth about your own internal uncleanness and need for cleansing (Mt.10:26 – 27; Lk.11:28 – 12:3). God wants to purify the soul and resurrect the body into immortality. It is the devil who can trick us into believing that God’s purification is actually unfair torment. The devil can trick us into becoming accusers of God, as if His endless insistence that we surrender to His healing were pointless because we are absolutely fine. Hell is fundamentally a state of being in which we experience the truth and love of God as unfair torment, based on our own self-deception. The devil has ‘authority to cast into hell’ in that sense. But that still means that sin is terrifying, objectively, not God. A counselor is only terrifying if we want to hold on to our addiction. A doctor or surgeon is only terrifying if we want to hold on to our disease.

Needless to say, Athanasius’ evangelistic strategy is strikingly different than the technique employed by some who make God out to be the supremely terrifying one. To Athanasius, this long expose of idolatry as the inevitable outgrowth of the soul's disorder is meant to produce the conviction that sin is its own punishment. And if the non-Christian person reading this can have any compassion on her/his fellow human beings, Athanasius seeks to enlist that shred of what is genuine in the service of his Christian argument. The disorder in, and damage to, the human soul produces disorder in, and damage to, human relationships. God is neither terrifying nor terrible. Sin is.

At the same time, Athanasius believes that the demonic realm is real, and not just a projection into the mythological of what is simply psychological. As such, Athanasius believes that the demonic realm exerts real power through a lie coursing throughout our human nature, as if we received venom from a snake bite, from which human beings need to be objectively freed. I will await discussion of the demonic and Christ's deliverance, however, until I discuss Athanasius' second volume, *De Incarnatione*.

Contra Gentes 30 – 47: The Way Back

Athanasius then turns to the question of how might human beings return to the God who created them. He calls Moses as a sympathetic witness by quoting Deuteronomy 30:14, ‘The word of faith is in your heart.’ He then refers to the saying of Jesus, ‘The kingdom of God is within you.’ Athanasius advances the thesis that the soul is able to contemplate God (30). He then goes on to defend the existence of the soul. Unlike the animals, human beings are able to think rationally about things that are conceptual, or otherwise non-physical, and not just things that are physical (31). In fact, contemplating things that are eternal and outlast the mortal body demonstrate that we have a rational and immortal soul; this is a key part of how good and evil are discerned, and how the soul can override bodily impulses and senses so as to direct the human being towards higher goals (32). The soul is immortal as proven by its capacity for ‘spontaneous movement,’ as distinct from the movements of the body (33). Here, Athanasius simply asserts that the soul continues to exist and move after the death of the body, although exactly why he expects his audience to agree with him is not stated. Regardless, the soul can turn back to God only through repentance:

‘But turn back they can, if they lay aside the filth of all lust which they have put on, and wash it away persistently, until they have got rid of all the foreign matter that has affected their soul, and can show it in its simplicity as it was made, that so they may be able by it to behold the Word of the Father after Whose likeness they were originally made. For the soul is made after the image and likeness of God, as divine Scripture also shows, when it says in the person of God [Genesis 1:26]: ‘Let us make man after our Image and likeness.’ Whence also when it gets rid of all the filth of sin which covers it and retains only the likeness of the Image in its purity, then surely this latter being thoroughly brightened, the soul beholds as in a mirror the Image of the Father, even the Word, and by His means reaches the idea of the Father, Whose Image the Saviour is. Or, if the soul's own teaching is insufficient, by reason of the external things which

cloud its intelligence, and prevent its seeing what is higher, yet it is further possible to attain to the knowledge of God from the things which are seen, since Creation, as though in written characters, declares in a loud voice, by its order and harmony, its own Lord and Creator.’⁴⁹

Athanasius then turns to consider what human beings should have understood about God simply from the creation. He says that creation demonstrates an order, and order demonstrates intelligibility (35). Furthermore, the coordination of opposite forces and elements, like hot and cold, fire and water, demonstrates with that order a providential coordination and care for human beings (36). Rather than leaning towards the Stoic conclusion of pantheism which he argued against earlier (27 – 29), Athanasius says that this coordination of opposites attests to a God who is transcendent above them, who orders them from beyond. He seems, in fact, to make an argument from the viability of life – especially human life – on top of the coordination of the elements (37):

‘Or how could man, or any animal, have appeared upon earth, if the elements were mutually at strife, or if there were one that prevailed, and that one insufficient for the composition of bodies. For nothing in the world could have been composed of heat, or cold, or wet, or dry, alone, but all would have been without arrangement or combination.’⁵⁰

This sounds remarkably like the so-called ‘anthropic principle’ deployed by scientists and Christian apologists today. The universe and the earth is fine-tuned, and the fact that it is hospitable to human life in particular suggests a divine mind who intended it to be so.

This unity of creation consisting of contrasting elements bears witness to one God (38). If there were many gods, ‘all things would fall into confusion because of their plurality.’⁵¹ The fact that there is only one universe attests to there being one Creator God (39) – although this is, in my estimation, a weak argument, since Athanasius neglects to mention how we might know of other universes. The principle of intelligibility or reason which we see in the universe reflects the principle of reason which must be in God, which is the Word (40).

Who, then, is this Word of God? Athanasius now resorts to Christian discourse. Although he might be allowing the resonances of the term *logos* from Greek philosophy to linger in the air, Athanasius uses explicitly biblical language to anchor his explanation of the Word of God. The Word is ‘the unchanging image of His own Father’ (41.1), a phrase drawn from Hebrews 1:1 and Colossians 1:15. The Word ‘has united Himself with created things’ (41.2) in such a way that what we would call the law of thermodynamics and entropy will eventually be overcome. Athanasius’ own expression is to say that ‘all created nature, as far as its own laws were concerned, [is] fleeting and subject to dissolution’ (41.3). Indeed, he quotes from the Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15 – 18 to specifically counter the concern that the ultimate fate of the earth and the universe will be ‘dissolution.’ At this point, Athanasius would probably agree that this is information is not, in fact, accessible to his general audience, because it is a conviction specific to faith in Christ. He appends, ‘as the ministers of truth teach in their holy writings’ (41.3).

Athanasius recapitulates his argument about the harmonious balance of contrasting elements, this time asserting that the Word is to be credited for it (42). He uses the metaphor of a musician fine tuning the strings of a lyre for the Word handling the universe, adjusting each element to the others (42.3). Although he admits that these examples ‘be inadequate’ (43.4), Athanasius says that the order of the creation brought about by the Word is like a harmonious chorus composed of many voices (43.1), the soul coordinating the impressions of the bodily senses into a coherent experience of an object (43.2), and a king administering a city through various human roles (43.3). The Word of God ‘governs and presides over all’ ‘for the glory and knowledge of His own Father’ (44).

Athanasius now marshals quotations from Scripture to cinch his argument against idolatry and for the Word. As he expounds the Scriptures in this way, he invites his non-Christian reader to explore them further. As Athanasius quotes Jesus’ claim to perfectly represent his Father in John 14:9, he also asserts that the Scripture is ‘all-inspired,’ and ‘if you refer to them, [you] will be able to verify what we say’ (45.2). The Word taught the Jewish people of old to reject idol-worship, says Athanasius as he cites Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 4:19, and then Exodus 20:3 (45.3 – 4). If Athanasius’ readers have been following along to this point, they would only agree that this divine policy was

⁴⁹ Ibid 34.3 – 4

⁵⁰ Ibid 37.4

⁵¹ Ibid 38.3

wise. Strategically, he reads Exodus 20:3 – ‘You shall have no other gods’ – as not simply a command, but a future prediction or prophecy.

Athanasius then concatenates a few biblical references which attest to the magnificent power of the Word in creation (46.1 – 4). Then, he argues that certain nuances of Scripture attest to a divine conversation happening within the godhead, chiefly the divine counsel of Genesis 1:26 and the figure of wisdom in Proverbs 8:27 being present with God in creation (46.5 – 8). The Alexandrian seems to anticipate his adversaries, the Arians, when he insists on piling up identifications of the Word with the Father. The qualities of wisdom and power are not added to the Word from without, but are intrinsic to his very existence as Word of the Father (46.7 – 8).

Indeed, the Word is in the Father who begot him, and vice versa (47.1 – 2). The human problem, then, is that we have turned aside from the Word of God. Athanasius then identifies once more this Word as ‘our Lord Jesus Christ the Savior of all, through Whom the Father orders, and holds together all things, and exercises providence over the universe’ (47.4). So we must return to the Word, now revealed to us in and through Jesus, to receive ‘life everlasting,’ lest we ‘walk the opposite way,’ not ‘of virtue [but] great shame and peril without pardon on the day of judgment’ (47.4).

With that, Athanasius brings *Contra Gentes* to a close, and gestures towards his sequel, *De Incarnatione Verbum Dei*, in which he will explain how the Word of God redeems humanity from corruption and reveals the goodness and love of the one true God.