

# Athanasius' On the Incarnation and Mission Work Today

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Across the Middle East at this time of the year, the patriarchs of the various Orthodox Churches are preparing their Christmas messages. All those messages will be but a reflection of St Athanasius, who is the source of so much Orthodox thinking on the Incarnation.

Normally, an old treatise like Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* hardly gets noticed outside of Orthodox Churches. Yet, when the book was finally made available in a separate English edition in 1944, the famous Christian writer C S Lewis wrote in its introduction:

Athanasius ... stood for the Trinitarian doctrine 'whole and undefiled,' when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius - into one of those 'sensible' synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today<sup>1</sup>

'One of those 'sensible' synthetic religions..., Lewis remarked.

Lewis is telling us something — it's hard to believe in the Incarnation. It is far easier to settle for something less mind-boggling than a full-blown mystery. When we add divinity to humanity, the result is an unstable compound that our minds want to break down into a simpler formula.

In the time of Athanasius, Arianism proved to be the sensible, synthetic alternative. The modern form is Unitarianism. But Islam also comes

to mind. It can be argued that Islam, which developed three centuries after Athanasius, is but a version of Arianism. Indeed, it lacks all the cumbersome theology about a Trinity, or an Incarnation, or an Atoning Death. Jesus is just a prophet, solely human. Islam's appeal lies in its simplicity.

Yet, here is where Athanasius begins to shine for us who do mission work among Muslims. His thoughts may be old, yet they remain fresh. Athanasius presents to us the reasonableness of the Incarnation. He does this by presenting it in context, intrinsic to the rhythm of God's plan: Creation, Redemption, Judgment.

## 2 SYNOPSIS

It is best to read Athanasius slowly and privately. Still, a brief attempt can be made to summarize his thinking, as long as the reader understands that brevity makes a mockery of profundity.

Athanasius begins his logic by basing his understanding of the Incarnation on the Johannine Word. He firmly believes that there is a Mind behind the Universe. This Mind, this Word, is the reason for Creation and is mirrored in the intricacy of the Design.

He also affirms a Creation ex nihilo. This bold creed is pure logic itself, for if the First Cause is God, there can be no other alternative. So, in his next breath, Athanasius then feels free to undermine the prevalent views of his time:

the Epicureans who said that the universe just happened on its own; the Platonists who affirmed that everything had always existed in some form; and the Gnostics who argued that some other being created it all. Today, Athanasius would be arguing that a solely materialistic cosmology is sad and deficient. His point: if a transcendent God created the cosmos, then a transcendent God can redeem it as well.

Athanasius, indeed, asserts that humanity was meant to share a pure, uncorrupted contemplation of God. We are made in the image of God, that is, God is not a blind force but possesses personhood; and we, in turn, are intended to be sustained in God's presence. When we deny God, we become cut-off from our Source, and so we experience a living death, to be followed by a physical one as well.

This death, as Athanasius understands it, is a return to non-existence:

... as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again. The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore, when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone Who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good.

This sets up the logic of the Incarnation, namely, it happened out of necessity. The 'divine dilemma,' as Athanasius calls it, is that we are at risk of non-existence and God felt compelled to do something about it. The Incarnation becomes a matter of divine honor to restore us:

... it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption. It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be

brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear ... .

God's response to this 'divine dilemma' becomes the heart of Athanasius' argument, developed in detail in chapters two and three. The Incarnation preserves the honor of God. The evil spirits were not about to grab their prize that easily; they might have enticed humanity from God, but they still had to contend with God.

How did God contend? By taking on the satanic powers directly and confronting death itself. God's purpose was to bring about a re-creation, restoring a lost relationship. This could be accomplished only by His direct involvement:

What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.

Here, a Muslim thinker might argue, in a truly Islamic fashion, 'Why go so far? God could just ask us to repent. Would this not be sufficient? Repent and God will forgive us our sin! There is no need for an Atonement.'

This is where the logical train of Athanasius' argument begins to bear down with its inevitable force. Yes, the Muslim objection would be valid if the purpose of God is only to excuse sin. But a mere pardon is not the purpose of God; rather, it is to restore a lost incorruptibility:

Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun and people came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God — no, repentance could not meet the case.

Only the involvement of the Word, who was involved with Creation at the start, could restore the lost, incorruptible nature of humanity:

His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all.

Salvation, then, is not simply repenting or saying a prayer to live forever. It is being renewed in the image of God. Once, we were driven from God's presence; now, we may receive the gift of the Spirit of God to indwell us and to transform us. The proof of the whole fantastic story is, in fact, the very gift of Spirit given to the true disciple. It is the possibility and the experience of being transformed into his likeness that brings us to experience the kind of life that belongs to eternity.

This is why, for the Orthodox, the Incarnation cannot be considered as a separate theological item. The Athanasian approach sets the Incarnation in its wider theological context. It links the coming of Christ with God's entire plan — since the Word was involved in creation, the Word alone can restore us; Christ came to die, but he died to rise and to ascend in glory because God intends us to be glorious once again.

According to a Coptic tradition, Athanasius wrote his treatise out of his deep conversations with Anthony the Great. This, too, should tell us something. Anthony was the founder of monasticism, originally dedicated to restoring

the contemplation of God. In writing *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius was not just setting the Incarnation into a wider theological context, but he was giving its proper spiritual context as well. *On the Incarnation* is not a theoretical work, but it is meant to be experienced and practiced. We can actually be remade into God's image.

### 3 A FINAL WORD

Athanasius writes in dense logic. Reading him makes us want to skim, to 'get the good parts.' And, indeed, I have only presented a slice of his pie. But the real trick is to avoid the quick read and, instead, to allow oneself to feel the implications.

C.S. Lewis did so. A few years after Lewis prefaced *On the Incarnation*, he initiated the *Narnia Chronicles*. The theological underpinning for the Narnia books comes straight from Athanasius. It's all there: the old rhythm of Creation, Redemption, Judgment. In Narnia, Lewis is applying Athanasius' tight theological arguments for modern children, prone to modern Arianism.

Of course, Lewis did not write Narnia to be a Christian tract. It was meant to be a fantasy, pure and simple. But as Lewis was having his fun, his worldview naturally seeps through the pages. The central figure, Aslan the Lion, is an unmistakable Christ-figure, an Incarnate One.

He is there in the moment of creation and sings Narnia into existence. Evil comes to the new world and the powers of darkness feel they have won. In the wretched boy Eustice we see humanity lost. He cannot reform himself; he has turned dragonish. It is only the death of Aslan that can make him into something new.

Aslan's death comes at the hand and the demand of the witch — just as Athanasius taught that the devil demanded Christ's death (and not God). The death happens by the ancient laws: Aslan's death for Eustice's release. What the witch does not realize is that there is also a 'deeper magic' at work, something she can never comprehend but that breaks her magic. In the end, she has won nothing; Aslan has come back to life and Eustice becomes truly redeemed.

The land of Narnia ends in cold blackness and foaming sea and fallen star. Nothing lasts forever, not even the worlds we love. The speaking Lion, who is seldom seen in Narnia, appears again for its final moments. Aslan, the Johannine Word, is intrinsic to Narnia's moments of Creation, Redemption and Judgment. Lewis echoes Athanasius all over the place.

The moment of judgment happens suddenly, when all are rushed past Aslan. To each is given

a private moment before his face, eye-to-eye. The encounter happens suddenly and seemingly at once, but it is enough. The subconscious reaction of each — some to love him, others to hate - determines their existence, or non-existence. The redeemed are led into a new Narnia. They go higher and deeper, deeper and higher.

Lewis 'got' Athanasius. Reading him makes us believe that his Narnia could not exist and does not make sense apart from his Lion. This Christmas season, as we explain the Incarnation to a world in which everyone wants a sensible, synthetic religion, Athanasius reminds us that the Incarnation can only be understood as part of the whole story.

#### **ENDNOTE**

1 St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei with an Introduction by C. S. Lewis* (New York, 1982), page 9.