

# St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation

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## I

THE IDEA of Creation was a striking Christian innovation in philosophy. The problem itself was alien and even unintelligible to the Greek mind: *de rerum originatione radicali*. The Greek mind was firmly addicted to the conception of an Eternal Cosmos, permanent and immutable in its essential structure and composition. This Cosmos simply existed. Its existence was "necessary," it was an ultimate or first datum, beyond which neither thought nor imagination could penetrate. There was, indeed, much movement within the world—"the wheel of origin and decay." But the Cosmos as a whole was unchangeable, and its permanent structure was repeatedly and unflinchingly exhibited in its rotation and self-iteration. It was not a static world, there was in it an intense dynamism: but it was a dynamism of inescapable circulation. The Cosmos was a periodical, and yet a "necessary" and "immortal" being. The "shape" of the world might be exposed to changes, it was actually in a constant flux, but its very existence was perennial. One simply could not ask intelligently about the "origin" or "beginning" of the Cosmic fabric in the order of existence.'

It was precisely at this point that the Greek mind was radically challenged by Biblical Revelation. This was a hard message for the Greeks. Indeed, it is still a hard message for philosophers.

The Bible opens with the story of Creation. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." This has become a credal statement in the Christian Church. The Cosmos was no more regarded as a "self-explanatory" being. Its ultimate and intrinsic dependence upon God's will and action has been vigorously asserted. But much more than just this relation of "dependence" was implied in the Biblical concept: the world was created *ex nihilo* i.e., it did not exist "eternally." In retrospect one was bound to discover its "beginning"—post nihilum, as it were. The tension between the two visions, Hellenic and Biblical, was sharp and conspicuous. Greeks and Christians, as it were, were dwelling in different worlds. Accordingly, the categories of Greek philosophy were inadequate for the description of the world of Christian faith. The main

emphasis of Christian faith was precisely on the radical contingency of the Cosmos, on its contingency precisely in the order of existence. Indeed, the very existence of the world pointed, for Christians, to the Other, as its Lord and Maker. On the other hand, the Creation of the world was conceived as a sovereign and "free" act of God, and not as something which was "necessarily" implied or inherent in God's own Being. Thus, there was actually a double contingency: on the side of the Cosmos which could "not have existed at all," and on the side of the Creator-who could "not have created" anything at all. In the fine phrase of Etienne Gilson, "it is quite true that a Creator is an eminently Christian God, but a God whose very existence is to be a creator is not a Christian God at all." The very existence of the world was regarded by the Christians as a mystery and miracle of Divine Freedom.

Christian thought, however, was maturing but gradually and slowly, by a way of trial and retraction. The early Christian writers would often describe their new vision of faith in the terms of old and current philosophy. They were not always aware of, and certainly did not always guard against, the ambiguity which was involved in such an enterprise. By using Greek categories Christian writers were forcing upon themselves, without knowing it, a world which was radically different from that in which they dwelt by faith. Thus they were often caught between the vision of their faith and the inadequacy of the language they were using. This predicament must be taken quite seriously. Etienne Gilson once suggested that Christianity has brought the new wine, but the old skins were still good enough, i.e., the skins of Greek Philosophy. "La pensee chretienne apportait du vin nouveau, mais les vieilles outres etaient encore bonnes."<sup>3</sup> It is an elegant phrase. But is it not rather an optimistic overstatement? Indeed, the skins did not burst at once, but was it really to the benefit of nascent Christian thought? The skins were badly tainted with an old smell, and the wine acquired in them had an alien flavor. In fact, the new vision required new terms and categories for its adequate and fair expression. It was an urgent task for Christians "to coin new names," in the phrase of St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

Indeed, the radical contingency of the created world was faithfully acknowledged by Christian writers from the very beginning. The Lordship of God over all His Creation was duly emphasized. God alone was mighty and eternal. All created things were brought into existence, and sustained in existence, solely by the grace and pleasure of God, by His sovereign will. Existence was always a gift of God. From this point of view, even the human soul was "mortal," by its own "nature," i.e. contingent, because it was a creature, and was maintained only by the grace of God. St. Justin was quite explicit at this point-in opposition to Platonic arguments for "immortality." Indeed, "immortal" would mean for him "uncreated." But it was not yet clear how this creative "will" of God was related to His own "being." And this was the crucial problem. In early Christian thinking the very idea of God was only gradually released out of that 11 cosmological setting," in which it used to be apprehended by Greek philosophical thought. The mystery of the Holy Trinity itself was often interpreted in an ambiguous cosmological context-not primarily as a mystery of God's own Being, but rather in the perspective of God's creative and redemptive action and self-disclosure in the world. This was the main predicament of the Logos-theology in the Apologists, in Hippolytus, and in Tertullian. All these writers could not distinguish consistently between the categories of the Divine "Being" and those of Divine "Revelation" ad extra, in the world. Indeed, it

was rather a lack of precision, an inadequacy of language, than an obstinate doctrinal error. The Apologists were not just pre-Arians or pro-Arians. Bishop George Bull was right in his *Defensio Fidei Nicenae* against the charges of Petavius. And yet, as G. L. Prestige has pointed out, "the innocent speculations of Apologists came to provide support for the Arian school of thought."

The case of Origen is especially significant. He also failed to distinguish between the ontological and cosmological dimensions. As Bolotov has aptly stated, "the logical link between the generation of the Son and the existence of the world was not yet broken in the speculation of Origen." It can be even contended that this very link has been rather reinforced in Origen's thinking. The ultimate question for Origen was precisely this: Is it possible or permissible to think of God without conceiving Him at once as Creator? The negative answer to this question was for Origen the only de-,out option. An opposite assumption would be sheer blasphemy. God could never have become anything that He has not been always. There is nothing simply "potential" in God's Being, everything being eternally actualized. This was Origen's basic assumption, his deepest conviction. God is always the Father of the Only Begotten, and the Son is co-eternal with the Father: any other assumption would have compromised the essential immutability of the Divine Being. But God also is always the Creator and the Lord. Indeed, if God is Creator at all—and it is an article of faith that He is Lord and Creator—we must necessarily assume that He had always been Creator and Lord. For, obviously, God never "advances" toward what He had not been before. For Origen this implied inevitably also an eternal actualization of the world's existence, of all those things over which God's might and Lordship were exercised. Origen himself used the term *pantokrator*, which he borrowed surely from the Septuagint. Its use by Origen is characteristic. The Greek term is much more pointed than its Latin or English renderings: *Omnipotens*, "Almighty." These latter terms emphasize just might or power. The Greek word stresses specifically the actual exercise of power. The edge of Origen's argument is taken off in Latin translation. "*Pantokrator* is in the first place an active word, conveying the idea not just of capacity but of the actualization of capacity." *Pantokrator* means just *kurios* the ruling Lord. And God could not be *pantokrator* eternally unless *ta panta* also existed from all eternity. God's might must have been eternally actualized in the created Cosmos, which therefore appears to be an eternal concomitant or companion of the Divine Being. In this context any clear distinction between "generation" and "creation" was actually impossible—both were eternal relations, indeed "necessary" relations, as it were, intrinsic for the Divine Being. Origen was unable, and indeed reluctant and unwilling, to admit anything "contingent" about the world itself, since, in his conception, this would have involved also a certain "change" on the Divine level. In Origen's system the eternal being of the Holy Trinity and the eternal existence of the world are indivisibly and insolubly linked together: both stand and fall together. The Son is indeed eternal, and eternally "personal" and "hypostatic." But He is eternally begotten in relation to the eternally created world.'

Origen's argument is straight and consistent, under his basic assumptions. It would be flagrantly impious to admit that God could ever have existed without His Wisdom, even for a single moment—*ad punctum momenti alicujus*. God is always the Father of His Son, who is born of Him, but "without any beginning"—*sine ullo tamen initio*. And Origen specifies: "not only of that kind

which can be distinguished by intervals of time--aliquibus temporum spatiis, but even of that other kind which the mind alone is wont to contemplate in itself and to perceive, if I may say so, with the bare intellect and reason"--nudo intellectu. In other words, Wisdom is begotten beyond the limit of any imaginable "beginning"-extra omne ergo quod vel dici vel intelligi potest initium. Moreover, as Origen explained elsewhere, the "generation" of Wisdom could not be interpreted as an accomplished "event," but rather as a permanent and continuous relationship--a relation of "being begotten," just as radiance is perpetually concomitant with the light itself, and Wisdom is, in the phrase of Sap, Sal. 7, 26, an apaugasma photos aidiou (In Jerem. hom, IX 4: ouchi egenesen ho pater ton huion ... ang aei gennai auton (Klostermann; cf. Latin translation in the "Apology" of Pamphilus, PG 17, 564). Now, according to Origen, in the very subsistence of Wisdom the whole design of creation is already implied. The whole creation, universa creatura, is pre-arranged in Wisdom (De princ. 1 2, 2; 29-30 Koetschau). The text of this important passage might have been somewhat edited by the Latin translator, but surely the main argument was faithfully reproduced (cf. the fragment in Greek, in Methodius, De creatis, quoted by Photius, Cod. 235). Origen spoke of "prevision": virtute praescientiae. But, according to his own basic principle, there could be no temporal order or sequence. The world as "pre-viewed" in Wisdom had to be also eternally actualized.' It is in this direction that Origen continued his argument. And here the terms "Father" and "Pantokrator" are conspicuously bracketed together. "Now as one cannot be father apart from having a son, nor a lord apart from holding a possession or a slave, so we cannot even call God almighty if there are none over whom He can exercise His power. Accordingly, to prove that God is Almighty we must assume the existence of the world." But, obviously, God is Lord from all eternity. Consequently, the world, in its entirety, also existed from all eternity: necessario existere oportet (De princ. 1 2, 10; 41-42 Koetschau; cf. the Greek quotation in Justinian, Epist. ad Mennam, Mansi IX 528). In brief, the world must be always co-existent with God and therefore co-eternal. Of course, Origen meant the primordial world of spirits. Actually, in Origen's conception there was but one eternal hierarchical system of beings, a "chain of being." He could never escape the cosmological pattern of Middle Platonism.

Moreover, Origen seems to have interpreted the Generation of the Son as an act of the Father's will: ek tou thelematos tou patros egenethe (quoted by Justinian, Mansi IX 525). On the other hand he was utterly suspicious of the phrase: ek tes ousias patros, and probably even formally repudiated it. For him it was a dangerous and misleading phrase, heavily overloaded with gross "materialistic" associations, and suggesting division and separation in the Divine substance (In Ioh, XX 18; 351 Preuschen; De princ. IV 4, 1; 348 Koetschau; cf. the quotation by Marcellus, given in Eusebius, c. Marcellum 1 4; 21 Klostermann). The textual evidence is confused and inconclusive." It may be true that at this point Origen was opposing the Gnostics, especially the Valentinian conception of pro?ole, and only wanted to vindicate the strictly spiritual character of everything Divine." Yet, there was a flagrant ambiguity. Both the generation of the Son and the creation of the world are equally attributed to the will or counsel of the Father. "And my own opinion is that an act of the Father's will--voluntas Patris--ought to be sufficient to ensure the subsistence of what He wills. For in willing He uses no other means than that which is produced by the deliberation of His will--nisi quae consilio voluntatis profertur. Thus, it is in this way that the existence of the Son also is begotten of Him-ita ergo et filii ab eo subsistentia generatur" (De

princ. 1 2, 6; 35 Koetschau). The meaning of this passage is rather obscure, and we have no Greek text." But, in any case, once again the Son is explicitly bracketed together with creatures."

There was an unresolved tension, or an inner contradiction, in the system of Origen. And it led to an inner conflict, and finally to an open split, among those theologians who were profoundly influenced by his powerful thought. It may be contended, indeed, that his trinitarian theology was intrinsically orthodox, that is, pro-Nicene, so that the interpretation of his views by St. Athanasius and the Cappadocians was fair and congenial to his ultimate vision. Indeed, Origen strongly defended the eternity of the Divine Generation and, at this point, was definitely anti-Arian. If we can trust St. Athanasius, Origen explicitly denounced those who dared to suggest that "there was when the Son was not," *en pote hote ouk en ho huios*," whosoever these people might have been (see the quotation from Origen in St. Athanasius, *De decretis* 27). Yet, on the other hand, the general scheme of his theology was utterly inadequate at many crucial points. In any case, the controversies of the fourth century can be properly understood only in the perspective of Origen's theology and its problematic. The crucial philosophical problem at the bottom of that theological controversy was precisely that of time and eternity. Within the system itself there were but two opposite options: to reject the eternity of the world or to contest the eternity of the Logos. The latter option was taken by Arius and all those who, for various reasons, sympathized with him. His opponents were bound to insist on the temporality of the world. The problem of creation was the crucial philosophical problem in the dispute. No clarity could be reached in the doctrine of God until the problem of creation had been settled. Indeed, the essence of the controversy was religious, the ultimate issue was theological. But faith and piety themselves could be vindicated at this historic juncture only by philosophical weapons and arguments. This was well understood already by St. Alexander of Alexandria: *philosophon theologiei* says Socrates of him (1 5). St. Alexander made the first attempt to disentangle the doctrine of God out of the traditional cosmological context, while keeping himself still close to the tenets of Origen."

Arius himself contended that the Logos was a "creature," a privileged creature indeed, not like others, but still no more than a *ktisma* originated by the will of God. Accordingly, God for him was primarily the Creator, and apart from that, little, if anything, could be said of the unfathomable and incomprehensible Being of God, unknown even to the Son. Actually, there was no room for "theology" in his system. The only real problem was that of "cosmology"--a typically Hellenic approach. Arius had to define the notion of creation. Two major points were made: (a) the total dissimilarity between God and all other realities which "had beginning," beginning of any kind; (b) the "beginning" itself. The Son had a "beginning," simply because He was a son, that is-originated from the Father, as His *arche*: only God (the Father) was *anarchos* in the strict sense of the word. It seems that with Arius the main emphasis lay on the relation of dependence as such, and the element of time was comparatively irrelevant for his argument. Indeed, in his famous letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, Arius stated plainly that the Son came into existence "before all times and ages" *pro chronon kai pro aionon* (*apud Epiph.*, *Haeres.* LXIX 6; 156 Holl, and Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 1 4, 63; 25 Parmentier). St. Athanasius himself complained that the Arians evaded the term *chronos* (*Contra Arianos* 1 13). Yet, they obviously contended that all things "created" did somehow "come into existence," so that the state of "being" has been

preceded, at least logically, by a state of "non-being" out of which they have emerged, ex ouk 6VTCOV. In this sense "they did not exist before they came into existence"ouk en prin gennethe. Obviously, "creatureliness" meant for the Arians more than just "dependence": it implied also an "essential" dissimilarity with God, and a finitude, that is--some limitation in retrospect. On the other hand, it was strongly stressed that all Creation was grounded in the will and deliberation of God: thelemati kai ?oule as Arius himself wrote to Eusebius. The latter motive was Origenistic. Indeed, Arius went much further than Origen: Origen rejected only the Gnostic pro?ole but Arius repudiated any "natural" affinity of Logos with God. Arius simply had nothing to say about the life of God, apart from His engagement in Creation. At this point his thought was utterly archaic.

It is highly significant that the Council of Antioch in 324/5--that is, before Nicaea--took up all these major points. The Son is begotten "not from that which is not but from the Father," in an ineffable and indescribable manner, "not as made but as properly offspring, 11 and not "by volition." He existed everlastingly and "did not at one time not exist." Again, "He is the express image, not of the will or anything else, but of His Father's very hypostasis." For all these reasons the Son could not be regarded as "creature." Nothing has been said about Creation. But one can easily guess what "Creation" and "creatureliness" meant for the Fathers of the Council. All elements, of which the later clear distinction between "begetting" and "creating" (or "making") has been construed, are already implied in the conciliar statement. St. Athanasius made a decisive contribution at the next stage of the dispute.

## II

Already in his early writings, before the outbreak of the Arian strife, St. Athanasius was wrestling with the problem of Creation. For him it was intimately related to the crucial message of the Christian faith: the redemptive Incarnation of the Divine Word. Indeed, his interpretation of Redemption, as it was expounded in *De Incarnatione Verbi*, is grounded in a distinctive conception of the Cosmos. There was, in the vision of St. Athanasius, an ultimate and radical cleavage or hiatus between the absolute Being of God and the contingent existence of the World. There were actually two modes of existence, radically different and totally dissimilar. On the one hand--the Being of God, eternal and immutable, "immortal" and "incorruptible." On the other--the flux of the Cosmos, intrinsically mutable and "mortal," exposed to change and "corruption." The ultimate ontological tension was precisely between the Divine *aphtharsia* and the *phthora* of the Cosmic flux. Since the whole Creation had once begun, by the will and pleasure of God, "out of nothing," an ultimate "meonic" tendency was inherent in the very 11 nature" of all creaturely things. By their own 11 nature," all created things were intrinsically unstable, fluid, impotent, mortal, liable to dissolution: [extended passage of Greek text not reproduced here] Their existence was precarious. If there was any order and stability in the Cosmos, they were, as it were, superimposed upon its own "nature," and imparted to created things by the Divine Logos. It was the Logos that ordered and bound together the whole Creation--*sunechei kai susphingei*--counteracting thereby, as it were, its inherent leaning toward disintegration. Indeed, the creaturely "nature" itself is also God's creation. But it was inwardly limited by its creaturely condition: it was inescapably "mortal" and mutable. St. Athanasius formally disavowed the notion of seminal *logoi*,

immanent and inherent in the things themselves. Creation stood only by the immediate impact of the Divine Logos. Not only was the Cosmos brought into existence "out of nothing," by an initial and sovereign creative fiat of God, but it was maintained in existence solely by the continuous action of the Creator. Man also shared in this "natural" instability of the Cosmos, as a 11 composite" being and originated "out of the non-existing": ek tou me ontos genomenoi By his very "nature," man also was "mortal" and "corruptible"--kata phusin phthar T6c,-and could escape this condition of mortality only by God's grace and by participation in the energies of the Logos: chariti de tes tou Logou metousias tou kata phusin ekphugontes By himself man was unable "to continue forever"-ouch hikanon eie kata tov tes idias geneseos logon diamenein aei (Contra gentes 40 to 43; De incarn, 2, 3, 5). The pattern of this exposition is conspicuously "Platonic." But St. Athanasius used it judiciously. The cosmic or "demiurgic" function of the Logos was strongly stressed in his conception. But His Divine transcendence was also vigorously stressed. Indeed, the Divine character of the Logos was the main presupposition of the whole argument. The Logos was, in the phrase of St. Athanasius, "the Only-begotten God," originating eternally from the Father as from a spring, a pege There was an absolute dissimilarity between the Logos and the creatures. The Logos is present in the world, but only "dynamically," that is, by His "powers." In His own "substance" He is outside of the world: ektos men esti tou pantos kat ousian, en pasi de esti tais eautou dunamesi (De incarn. 17). Now, this distinction between "essence" and "powers" can be traced back to Philo and Plotinus, and, indeed, to the Apologists and Clement of Alexandria. But in St. Athanasius it has a totally new connotation. It is never applied to the relationship between God and Logos, as had been done even by Origen. It serves now a new purpose: to discriminate strictly between the inner Being of God and His creative and "providential" manifestation ad extra, in the creaturely world. The world owes its very existence to God's sovereign will and goodness and stands, over the abyss of its own nothingness and impotence, solely by His quickening "Grace"-as it were, sola gratia. But the Grace abides in the world."

In his struggle with the Arians St. Athanasius proceeded from the same presuppositions. The main demarcation line passes between the Creator and the Creation, and not between the Father and the Son, as Arians contended. Indeed, the Logos is Creator. But He is Creator precisely because He is fully Divine, an "undistinguishable Image" of the Father, aparangaktos eikon In creation He is not just an "instrument," organon He is its ultimate and immediate efficient cause. His own Being is totally independent of creation, and even of the creative design of the world. At this point St. Athanasius was quite formal. The crucial text is in Contra Arianos II 31: [extended Greek passage not included]--Even supposing that the Father had never disposed to create the world, or a Part of it, nevertheless the Logos would have been with God and the Father in Him. . . This was the core of the argument. In fact, St. Athanasius carefully eliminates all references to the oikonomia Of creation or salvation from his description of the inner relationship between the Father and the Son. This was his major and decisive contribution to Trinitarian theology in the critical situation of the Arian dispute. And this left him free to define the concept of Creation properly. Theologia in the ancient sense of the word, and oikonimia must be dearly and strictly distinguished and delimited, although they could not be separated from each other. But God's "Being" has an absolute ontological priority over God's action and will.

God is much more than just "Creator." When we call God "a Father," we mean something higher than His relation to creatures (Contra Arianos 1 33). "Before" God creates at all, *polloi proteron* He is Father, and He creates through His Son. For the Arians, actually, God was no more than a Creator and Shaper of creatures, argued St. Athanasius. They did not admit in God anything that was *huperkeimenon tes ?ouleseos* But, obviously, "being" precedes "will," and "generation," accordingly, surpasses the "will" also: [Greek not included]. Of course, it is but a logical order: there is no temporal sequence in Divine Being and Life. Yet, this logical order has an ontological significance. Trinitarian names denote the very character of God, His very Being. They are, as it were, ontological names. There are, in fact, two different sets of names which may be used of God. One set of names refers to God's deeds or acts—that is, to His will and counsel—the other to God's own essence and being. St. Athanasius insisted that these two sets of names had to be formally and consistently distinguished. And, again, it was more than just a logical or mental distinction. There was a distinction in the reality itself. God is what He is: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an ultimate reality, declared and manifested in the Scriptures. But Creation is a deed of the Divine will, and this will is common to and identical in all Three Persons of the One God. Thus, God's Fatherhood must necessarily precede His Creatorship. The Son's existence flows eternally from the very essence of the Father, or, rather, belongs to this *housia* The world's existence, on the contrary, is, as it were, "external" to this Divine essence and is grounded only in the Divine will. There is an element of contingency in the exercise and disclosure of the creative will, as much as His will reflects God's own essence and character. On the other hand, there is, as it were, an absolute necessity in the Trinitarian being of God. The word may seem strange and startling. In fact, St. Athanasius did not use it directly. It would have embarrassed Origen and many others, as offensive to God's perfection: does it not imply that God is subject to certain "constraint" or fatalistic determinism? But, in fact, "necessity" in this case is but another name for "being" or essence." Indeed, God does not "choose" His own Being. He simply is. No further question can be intelligently asked. Indeed, it is proper for God "to create," that is, to manifest Himself *ad extra*. But this manifestation is an act of His will, and in no way an extension of His own Being. On the other hand, "will" and "deliberation" should not be invoked in the description of the eternal relationship between Father and Son. At this point St. Athanasius was definite and explicit. Indeed, his whole refutation of Arianism depended ultimately upon this basic distinction between *housia* and "will," which alone could establish clearly the real difference in kind between "Generation" and "Creation." The Trinitarian vision and the concept of Creation, in the thought of St. Athanasius, belonged closely and organically together."

Let us examine now in detail some few characteristic passages in the famous Athanasian Discourses against the Arians. The accurate dating of these "Discourses" is irrelevant for our present purpose.

1 19: God is described in the Scripture as the Fountain of Wisdom and Life. The Son is His Wisdom. Now, if one admits with the Arians that "there was when He was not," this would imply that once the Fountain was dry, or, rather, that it was not a fountain at all. The spring from which nothing flows is not a spring at all.—The simile is characteristic of St. Athanasius. It reappears often

in the "Discourses." See, for instance, 11 2: if the Word was not the genuine Son of God, God Himself would no longer be a Father, but only a Shaper of creatures. The fecundity of the Divine nature would have been quenched. The nature of God would be sterile, and not fertile: *eremos ...* [Greek passage not included] Both the argument and the imagery can be traced back to Origen. *Otiosam enim et immobilem dicere naturam Dei impium est simul et absurdum* (De princ. 111 5 2; 272 Koetschau). But, as we have already seen, in Origen the argument was ambiguous and misleading. It was ambiguous because there was no room for any clear discrimination between "being" and "acting." It was misleading because it coupled "generation" and "creation" so closely and intimately together as not to allow any demarcation line. This ambiguity is avoided carefully by St. Athanasius. He never uses this argument-from the Divine "fertility"-in reference to the will of God. On the contrary, he formally refuses to follow Origen at this point,-of course, without quoting him.

1 20: God was never without anything that is His own: [Greek not included]; On the other hand, created things have no affinity or similarity with the Creator: [Greek not included] They are outside God: *exouthen autou. have received their existence by the grace and appointment tou to logo of the Word: chariti kai ?oulesei autou to chariti I genouena.* And, St. Athanasius characteristically adds, "they could again cease to exist, if it pleased their Creator" [Greek passage not included]. For, he concludes, "such is the nature of created things"-[Greek not included] See also 11 24 and 29: [Greek] *all(YTC(CFLV.* Now, at this very point St. Athanasius had to face an objection of his opponents. They said: Is it not so that God must be Creator always, since the "power of creating" could not have come to God, as it were, subsequently? 06K [Greek] Therefore, all creatures must be eternal. It is significant that this counter-argument of the Arians was actually Origen I 's famous argument, based on the analysis of the term *pantokrator* Only the conclusion was different. Origen's conclusion was that, indeed, creatures were eternal. For the Arians that was blasphemy. By the same argument they wanted to reduce *ad absurdum* the proof of the eternal generation. It was an attack both on Origen and on St. Athanasius. St. Athanasius meets the charge on his own ground. Is there really such t "similarity" between generation and creation--  
*ti 6[10LOv-that what must be said of God as Father must also be said of Him as Creator: hina ta epi tou patros tauta kai epi ton demiourgon eiposi?* This is the sting of the Athanasian rejoinder. In fact, there is total disparity. The Son is an offspring of the substance: *idion tes ousias gennema* Creatures are, on the contrary, "external" to the Creator. Accordingly, there is no "necessity" for them to exist eternally: *ouk anagke aei einai.* But generation is not subject to will (or deliberation): *to de gennema ou RDOUX~GEL hupokeitai* It is, on the contrary, a property of the substance: *alla tes ousias estin idiotos.* Moreover, a man can be called "a maker," *poietes*, even before he has made anything. But nobody can be called "a father" before he has a son. This is to say that God could be described as Creator even "before" Creation came into existence. It is a subtle but valid point in the argument. St. Athanasius argues that, although God could ' , indeed, have created things from all eternity, yet created things themselves could not have existed eternally, since they are "out of nothing," *ex oul onton*, and consequently did not exist before they were brought into existence: *ouk en trin genetai.* "How can things which did not exist before they originated be co-eternal with God?" This turn of the argument is highly significant. Indeed, if one starts, as Origen did, with the eternity and immutability of God, it is difficult to see, how anything truly "temporal" could have

existed at all. All acts of God must be eternal. God simply could not "have started." But in this case the proper "nature" of temporal things is ignored and disregarded. This is precisely what St. Athanasius wanted to say. "Beginning" belongs to the very "nature" of temporal things. Now, it is the beginning of temporal existence, of an existence in time and flux. For that reason creatures cannot "co-exist" with the Eternal God. There are two incomparable modes of existence. Creatures have their own mode of subsistence: they are outside God. Thus creatures, by their very nature, cannot "co-exist" with God. But this inherent limitation of their nature does not, in any sense, disparage the power of the Creator. The main point of St. Athanasius was precisely this. There is an identity of nature in generation, and a disparity of natures in creation (cf. 126).

1 36: Since created beings arise "out of nothing," their existence is bound to be a state of flux: angoiomenen echei ten phusin. Cf. 1 58: Their existence is precarious, they are perishable by nature: ta dunamena apoles?ai. This does not imply that they will actually and necessarily perish. Yet, if they do not actually perish, it is only by the grace of the Creator. The Son alone, as an offspring of the substance, has an intrinsic power "to co-exist" eternally with the Father: idion de to aei einai kai sundiamenein sun to Patri. See also 11 57: The being of that which has existence "according to a beginning" can be traced back to a certain initial instant.

In the later part of his third "Discourse" St. Athanasius discusses at great length the Arian contention that the Son has been begotten by "the will and deliberation" of the Father: {Greek not included} (111 59). These terms, protests St. Athanasius, are quite out of place in this connection. Arians simply attempt to hide their heresy under the cover of these ambiguous words. St. Athanasius suggests that they borrowed their ideas at this point from the Gnostics and mentions the name of Ptolemy. Ptolemy taught that God first thought, and then willed and acted. In a similar way, St. Athanasius contends, Arians claim that the will and deliberation of the Father preceded the generation of the Word. He quotes Asterius at this point. "In fact, however, these terms-"will" and "deliberation"-are only applicable to the production of creaturely things. Now, Arians claim that unless the Son's existence depended upon the "deliberation" of the Father, it would appear that God has a Son "by necessity" and, as it were, "unwillingly"-anagke kei me Thelon. This kind of reasoning, St. Athanasius retorts, only shows their inability to grasp the basic difference between "being" and "acting." God does not deliberate with Himself about His own being and existence. Indeed, it would be absurd to contend that God's goodness and mercy are just His voluntary habit, and not a part of His nature. But does it mean that God is good and merciful unwillingly? Now, what is "by Nature" is higher than that which is only "by deliberation" -[Greek not included] The Son being an offspring of the Father's own substance, the Father does not "deliberate" about Him, since it would mean "deliberation" about His own being: [Greek not included]. God Is the Father of His Son "by nature and not by will-[Greek not included]. Whatever was "created," was indeed created by the good will and deliberation of God. But the Son is not a deed of will, like creatures, but by nature is an offspring of God's own substance: {Greek not included} It is an insane and extravagant idea to put "will" and "counsel" between the Father and the Son (111 60, 61, 62).

Let us summarize. The theological writings of St. Athanasius were mainly occasional tracts, tracts

for the time. He was always discussing certain particular points, the burning issues of the current debate. He was interpreting controversial texts of the Scripture, pondering and checking phraseology, answering charges, meeting objections. He never had time or opportunity for a dispassionate and systematic exposition. Moreover, the time for systems had probably not yet come. But there was a perfect consistency and coherence in his theological views. His theological vision was sharp and well focused. His grasp of problems was unusually sure and firm. In the turmoil of a heated debate he was able to discern clearly the real crux of the conflict. From tradition St. Athanasius inherited the catholic faith in the Divinity of the Logos. This faith was the true pivot of his theological thought. It was not enough to correct exegesis, to improve terminology, to remove misunderstandings. What needed correction, in the age of St. Athanasius, was the total theological perspective. It was imperative to establish "Theology," that is-the doctrine of God, on its proper ground. The mystery of God, "Three in One," had to be apprehended in itself. This was the main preoccupation of St. Athanasius in his great "Discourses." P~re Louis Bouyer, in his admirable book on St. Athanasius, has rightly stated that, in the "Discourses," St. Athanasius forces the reader "to contemplate the Divine life in God Himself, before it is communicated to us." This was, according to Pere Bouyer, the main emphasis in the book. In this perspective one can see the radical difference between the Divine and the creaturely. One sees the absoluteness of the Divine transcendence: God does not need His creatures. His own Being is perfect and complete in itself. And it is this inner Being of God that is disclosed in the mystery of the Trinity." But the actual mystery is double. There is, indeed, the mystery of the Divine Being. But there is another concomitant mystery, the mystery of Creation, the mystery of the Divine oikonomia No real advance can be achieved in the realm of "Theology" until the realm of "Oikonomia" had been properly ordered. This, surely, was the reason why St. Athanasius addressed himself to the problem of Creation even in his early treatises, which constituted, in a sense, his theological confession. On the one hand, the meaning of the redemptive Incarnation could be properly clarified only in the perspective of the original creative design of God. On the other, in order to demonstrate the absolute sovereignty of God it was necessary to show the ultimate contingency of the created Cosmos, fully dependent upon the Will of God. In the perspective of the Arian controversy two tasks were closely related to each other: to demonstrate the mystery of the Divine Generation as an integral feature of the Divine Being itself, and to emphasize the contingency of the creaturely Cosmos, which contingency can also be seen in the order of existence. It was precisely in the light of this basic distinction-between "Being" and "Will"that the ultimate incommensurability of the two modes of existence could be clearly exhibited. The inner life of God is in no way conditioned by His revelatory self-disclosure in the world, including the design of Creation itself. The world is, as it were, a paradoxical "surplus" in the order of existence. The world is "outside" God; or rather it is precisely this "outside" itself. But it does exist, in its own mode and dimension. It arises and stands only by the will of God. It has a beginning precisely because it is contingent, and moves toward an end for which it has been designed by God. The Will of God is manifested in the temporal process of the Divine Oikonomia. But God's own Being is immutable and eternal. The two modes of existence, the Divine and the creaturely, can be respectively described as "necessary" and "contingent," or "absolute" and "conditional," or else, in the apt phraseology of a distinguished German theologian of the last

century, F. A. Staudenmeier, as *das Nicht-nicht-seyn-kkonnenzende* and *das Nicht-seyn-konnende*. This corresponds exactly to the distinction between the Divine Being and the Divine Will." This distinction was made and consistently elaborated, probably for the first time in the history of Christian thought, in the heat of the Arian debate by St. Athanasius of Alexandria. It was a step beyond Origen. St. Athanasius was not only an expert controversialist, but a great theologian in his own right.

The Athanasian distinction between "Generation" and "Creation," with all its implications, was already commonly accepted in the Church in his own time. A bit later, St. Cyril of Alexandria simply repeated his great predecessor. Indeed, his *Thesaurus de sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate* depended heavily upon the Athanasian "Discourses." Only instead of "will" and "deliberation," St. Cyril spoke of Divine "energy": [Greek not included] (*Thesaurus*, ass. 18, PG 75, 313; cf. ass. 15, PG 75, 276: [Greek not included] also ass. 32, PG 75, 564-565). And finally, St. John of Damascus, in his great *Exposition of the Faith*, repeated St. Cyril. "For we hold that it is from Him, that is, from the Father's nature, that the Son is generated. And unless we grant that the Son co-existed from the beginning with the Father, by Whom He was begotten, we introduce change into the Father's subsistence, because, not being the Father, He subsequently became the Father. For the creation, even though it originated later, is nevertheless not derived from the essence of God, but is brought into existence out of nothing by His will and power, and change does not touch God's nature. For generation means that the begetter produces out of his essence offspring similar in essence. But creation and making mean that the creator and maker produces from that which is external, and not of his own essence, a creation which is of an absolutely dissimilar nature." The Divine Generation is an effect of nature, *tes phusikes gonimotetos* Creation is, on the contrary, an act of decision and will-*Theleseos ergon* (*De fide orth.* 1 8, PG 94, 812-813). This antithesis: *gonimotes* and *thelesis* or *?oulesis* is one of the main distinctive marks of Eastern theology." It was systematically elaborated once more in late Byzantine theology, especially in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). St. Gregory contended that unless a clear distinction had been made between the "essence" and "energy" in God, one could not distinguish also between "generation" and "creation." And once again this was emphasized, somewhat later, by St. Mark of Ephesus. It was a true Athanasian motive, and his arguments again came to the fore.

Now, the question arises: Is the distinction between "Being" and "Acting" in God, or, in other terms, between the Divine "Essence" and "Energy," a genuine and ontological distinction-in *re ipsa*; or is it merely a mental or logical distinction, as it were, *kat epinoian*, which should not be interpreted objectively, lest the Simplicity of the Divine Being is compromised." There cannot be the slightest doubt that for St. Athanasius it was a real and ontological difference. Otherwise his main argument against the Arians would have been invalidated and destroyed. Indeed, the mystery remains. The very Being of God is "incomprehensible" for the human intellect: this was the common conviction of the Greek Fathers in the Fourth century-the Cappadocians, St. John Chrysostom, and others. And yet there is always ample room for understanding. Not only do we distinguish between "Being" and "Will"; but it is not the same thing, even for God, "to be" and "to act." This was the deepest conviction of St. Athanasius.

*This article Originally appeared in Studia Patristica, Vol. VI, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag; Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Band 81, 1962), 36-57. Reprinted by permission of the author.*

(From Volume Four of the Collected Works, Aspects of Church History)

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ATHANASIUS, ST. Bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373, dominant 4th-century churchman, and theologian in the battle for orthodoxy against arianism; b. Alexandria, c. 295; d. Alexandria, May 2, 373 (feast, May 2). Life. Athanasius was born apparently of a Christian family and received a good classical education that was followed by a solid scriptural and theological formation. At an early age (c. 312) he entered the ranks of the Alexandrian clergy and was ordained a deacon (c. 318) by Bishop Alexander, whom he served as secretary.Â Studia patristica 2 (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 64; Berlin 1957) 282â€“287. g. florovsky, "The Concept of Creation in Saint Athanasius," *ibid.* Our father among the saints Athanasius of Alexandria (also spelled "Athanasios"; from Greek, "immortal") was a bishop of Alexandria and major theological writer in the fourth century. He is also called Athanasius the Great and (by the Coptic church) Athanasius the Apostolic. He was born in 298 and died on May 2, 373. His feast day in the Orthodox Church is January 18. St. Athanasius. Please help support the mission of New Advent and get the full contents of this website as an instant download. Includes the Catholic Encyclopedia, Church Fathers, Summa, Bible and more â€” all for only \$19.99...Â Athanasius was the greatest champion of Catholic belief on the subject of the Incarnation that the Church has ever known and in his lifetime earned the characteristic title of "Father of Orthodoxy", by which he has been distinguished ever since. While the chronology of his career still remains for the most part a hopelessly involved problem, the fullest material for an account of the main achievements of his life will be found in his collected writings and in the contemporary records of his time.