THE DISTINCTION "UNCREATED-CREATED" OF SAINT ATHANASIUS THE GREAT AND ITS ROLE IN THE REJECTION OF THE ARIAN HERESY

Prof. PhD. Gheorghe F. ANGHELESCU,
Ovidius University of Constanța,
ROMANIA
Email: anghelescug@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the philosophical-theological context, at the crossroads between the 3rd and the 4th centuries, there were at least two opposite cosmological options that were able to preserve, each in its own way, the simplicity of the Divine Principle: rejecting the concept of the world's eternity or accepting a second grade/inferior principle as its Creator. The first option was taken over by the Church in general, following the path defined by the Apologists. The second one was the traditional view of Hellenistic philosophy. Beside these, a preacher-priest from the Church of Alexandria, Arius – and the people who were on his side for different reasons (most of them on the line of Gnosticism) – separated themselves from the teachings of the Church and started to deny, beginning in 318 A.D., the eternity of the Logos. The cosmological issue raised by Arius was a crucial one in this theological dispute due to the soteriological consequences that flowed from it, alien to the Revelation and the (Baptismal) Creeds of the Church. Yet, faith and piety were only defendable in this historical context with lexical weapons and philosophical arguments. This situation was well understood by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria. He made the first attempt to extract the doctrine about God from its limited, non-Christian philosophical understanding and started to defend both the temporality of the world and the co-eternity of the Logos (as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity) with the Father.

Keywords: *Creation; world; Logos; eternity; God's will; time;*

INTRODUCTION

Since his early works, before the outbreak of the anti-Arian controversy, Saint Athanasius the Great polemicized with the Greek-Roman thinkers on topics related to the world's origin and its eternity. For the Church Father and Teacher from Alexandria, this topic was intimately related to the crucial message of the Christian faith: the taking on of human nature by the Divine Logos. Indeed, the interpretation of the teaching on salvation, as presented in the treaty *On the Incarnation of the Word* by this Holy Father, was founded on a conception differing from the classical vision of the Hellenic and gnostic philosophy regarding the cosmos. There was, in the Christian doctrine of Saint Athanasius the Great, a last and radical gap, unsurmountable with the created (human) powers, the one "situated" between the Divine (uncreated) Being and the contingent (created) existence of the world. This approach, expressed with a new, authentically Christian pathos, represented a step forward along the line already drawn by the apologists through the concept "ex nihilo," revolutionary, yet already obsolete.

1. THE UNCREATED GOD – CREATOR, AND SUSTAINER OF THE CREATION

Two radically different types of existence were delineated in this early period: on the one hand, the God, eternal, unchanging, "immortal" and "incorruptible" in His Being; on the other hand, the flow of beings brought into existence by Him "out of nothing," which formed the Cosmos, and appeared submitted to change and "corruption," "mortal," totally dependent on their Creator. The essential ontological tension was precisely between the divine "ἀφταρσία" (incorruptibility) and the "φθορά"[1] (corruptibility) of the cosmic flow. Since the entire creation had begun to subsist *at some point* by God's life-giving will, now, in the present post-Edenic state, of "shutdown" to the Creator, the entropic tendency was initiated in the creatures, virtually latent in the very "nature" of all the things created, by the fact that they are inexistent *per se*.

The creatures do not come from an ontological nothingness (coeternal with or created by God), but receive their existence at a certain moment by being brought into existence creatively and being supported into existence by God's *providence* (from Greek, meaning: care, forethought). However, "broken apart" from their existential support by an act contrary to nature, they acquired a life "according to nature," of non-existence or agony of life, which shows them in the present state intrinsically unstable, fluid, powerless, mortal, submitted to disappearance. Their "new" existence is precarious. If order and stability were present in the world prior to the fall from grace,[2] they were due to the *pronia* work of its Creator. God is the One Who by His creating Word and by the Spirit of His mouth (Psalm 32: 6) ordered into life and intertwined the entire creation, endowing it with a life-giving divine work, which, the rational beings, weakening it willingly (in a more or less assumed manner) tasted and generated in the universe the tendency to disintegration.[3]

Indeed, the creatural "nature" is, in quality of God's work, "very good" (*Genesis* 1: 31; "posse non-mori" as Blessed Augustine puts it).[4] Because of free will, however, the creature can opt for growing weaker in love, drifting away, disobeying and going against its Creator; can submit itself to change inclining toward evil and death (understood in its double aspect, spiritual and material), although without the power to pass at some point for good into a state of non-existence/nothingness.

Saint Athanasius the Great disavowed the notion of "logoi spermatikoi," immanent and inherent in things *per se*, inherited in the Christian theology from the stoic philosophy through Saint Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher, a notion unable to explain God's and man's subjective characters, inducing the idea of a law leading in a deterministic and blind manner the course of the creatures' existence. He states in exchange, based on the content of *Genesis*, that the universe was called into life by a sovereign and all-holding Creator, Who continues to keep it "in existence" by a continual action, yet unnecessary to Himself (free), which takes heed, at the same time, of the free will of the rational creatures.

The fallen man is cause and partaker himself of the "natural" instability of the Cosmos in the present state. By his fallen (human) nature, he shows himself to be, at the same time, "mortal" and "corruptible," although he could have transcended – had he not sinned – this unstable condition by God's grace and God's will. Even at present, he is offered this possibility as a fruit of the objective salvation offered in Christ. Understanding

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[1] G.W.H. Lampe, et al. (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 274, 1474.

[2] Saint Athanasius the Great, *Against the Heathen, Part III*, 38, p. 24; *Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse I*, 71, in "NPNF2-04", p. 387.

[3] Saint Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 57, in "NPNF2-04", p. 67.

[4] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, Book XXII, col. "Loeb Classic Library," vol. 417, p. 376.

deeply this indissoluble relation between the creating work and the redeeming work perfected by the divine Logos (in unseparated unity of being and work with God the Father and the Holy Spirit). Saint Athanasius stands against all such disregard, insinuated by Arianism, of the redeeming work of the embodied Logos (which he considers a new creation and of equal value with the bringing into life "out of nothing" of all that was created).

To reject Arius' (heretical) philosophical conception, promoted by his supporters – hierarchs and emperors – to the rank of theology, Saint Athanasius the Great underlined emphatically in his writings the "soteriological" function of the embodied Son, situated in inseparable connection with His creation-related function and providence-related function. At the same time, the holy hierarch constantly emphasizes, simultaneously, the transcendence of the Word, starting his entire argumentation from the main presupposition of the divine ontological character of the Logos. The Logos is, in Saint Athanasius the Great's terms, "the Only-begotten God," eternally begotten from the Father as from a spring.

This mention indicates the fact that there is an absolute difference between the Logos and all that was created, not just a qualitative difference, as Arius accepted to state, using the distorted syntagm that the Son "was begotten by the Father's will (in the sense of: was created) before time." Saint Athanasius makes a clear-cut distinction in the exegesis he makes for the "problematic" verses invoked by his opponents, using two categories of texts from Scripture: some that show the divine character of the unembodied Logos and others that refer to the Logos as assumed by the embodiment of human nature. Therefore, as "the pillar of Orthodoxy," Archbishop Athanasius states that the Logos is present in the world and takes on a human body, but He is not a creature. However, He is present and working through His divine "powers". In His "Being," as such, He is "outside" the world (uncreated).[5]

2. GOD THE WORD "THE CREATOR" – EXISTENCE SINCE ETERNITY

It is true that this distinction between "essence" and "power" is found even with Philo and Plotinus, two great philosophers of Alexandria, and in the Christian literature starting with the apologists and Clement of Alexandria. However, with Saint Athanasius the Great, it acquires a totally new connotation. It is never applied to the relation between God and the Logos, as even the genial Origen had done, imprecisely. Now, with Saint Athanasius the Great, it serves a new purpose: to delimit strictly God's Being ("internal/ad intra") and His creative and providence-related manifestation ("ad extra").

The world, as the bishop of Alexandria shows, owes to God's good sovereign will its very existence and soars over the abyss of its own vain life and powerlessness, after the fall, only through the divine vivifying grace. But, if the world goes down toward nothingness, it is because of its free fall from the divine protective "arms." God remains faithful to the world,[6] as He does not withdraw His gift completely.

To show the lack of foundation of Arius' affirmations regarding the Son and the name of "divine" attributed to Him, which Arius considered a form of adoption granted to the Logos for the virtuous life of Christ and for the creative power of which He partook by

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[5] Saint Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 17, in "NPNF2-04", p, 45.

[6] See, especially, the works: Louis Bouyer, *L'incarnation et l'Eglise - Corps du Christ dans la théologie de Saint Athanase*, Paris, 1943; A. Gaudel, "La théologie du «logos» chez Saint Athanase", in *Revue des Sciences religieuses*, 11 (1931), pp. 1-26; J.B. Berchem, "Le role du Verbe dans l'oeuvre de la création et de la sanctification d'après Saint Athanase", in *Angelicum*, 1938, pp. 201-232 and 515-558; Régis Bernard, *L'Image de Dieu d'après St. Athanase*, Paris, 1952.

God's will, Saint Athanasius the Great affirms repeatedly that salvation could only have been offered by a Saviour God in nature. At the same time, the creation of the world could not have been so harmoniously and wonderfully ("out of nothing") realized by the Word of God except if He is Himself begotten from the being of the Father, therefore coeternal with God the Father. Starting from these assumptions, Saint Athanasius the Great showed that the main demarcation line between eternal and temporal is found between Creator and creation, not between God the Father and God the Son as Arius' followers unfoundedly stated. The Logos is, therefore, not just Creator (endowed with the divine creative work), but also the inseparable Image of the Father, so "true God from true God." In the creation, He is not just an instrument, but also the ultimate, immediate, and effective cause of the creation, prior not just temporally to it, but also ontologically (as uncreated). His own Being is totally independent from the creation and even of the creative "design" of the world (the divine will). On this point, Saint Athanasius the Great is extremely precise. The basic text is found in *Contra Arianos*, and highlights the following:

> But if what the Father works, that the Son works also, and what the Son creates, that is the creation of the Father, and yet the Son be the Father's work or creature, then either He will work His own self, and will be His own creator (since what the Father works is the Son's work also), which is absurd and impossible; or, in that He creates and works the things of the Father, He Himself is not a work nor a creature; for else being Himself an efficient cause, He may cause that to be in the case of things caused, which He Himself has become, or rather He may have no power to cause at all. If, as you claim, He has come from nothing, is He able to frame things that are nothing into being? Or if He, bring a creature, creates a creature, the same will be conceivable in the case of every creature relative the power to frame others. And if this pleases you, what is the need of the Word, seeing that things inferior can be brought to be by things superior? Or at all events, everything that is brought to be could have been heard in the beginning God's words, 'Become' an 'be made,' and so would have been framed. But this is not so written, nor could it be. For none of the things which are brought to be is an efficient cause, but all things were made through the Word: who would not have wrought all things, was He Himself in the number of the creatures.[7]

3. THE ABSURDITY OF ARIAN COSMOLOGY. ITS FINAL CONSEQUENCES

In brief, the core of Saint Athanasius the Great's argumentation was this: even supposing that the Father would have never wanted to create the world or a part of it, nevertheless, the Logos/ the Son was together with the Father and the Father in Him since eternity. In fact, Saint Athanasius the Great carefully eliminates all the references applicable to the creation in the description he makes of the intimate relation between the Father and the Son. This was his major and decisive contribution to the Trinitarian theology at the crossroads of the Arian dispute. It gave him the possibility to define clearly the concept of creation.

"*Theologia*" in the sense this word had in the Antiquity, and "*oikonomia*" must be strictly determined and different, although they are not contrary to each other. God as existence in Himself precedes absolutely the acts of His divine will. He (God) is much more

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[7] Saint Athanasius the Great, *Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse II*, 21, in "NPNF2-04", p. 359.

than a perfect Creator. When we call God "Father," we refer to something much higher than His relation to the created beings:

> For if we say that the Father has power and mastery over all things by the Word, and the Son rules the Father's kingdom, and has the power of all, as His Word, and as the Image of the Father, it is quite plain that neither here is the Son reckoned among that all, nor is God called Almighty and Lord with reference to Him, but to those things which through the Son come to be, and over which He exercises power and mastery through the Word. (…) And, therefore, the Unoriginate is specified not by contrast to the Son, but to the things which through the Son come to be. And excellently: since God is not as things originated, but is their Creator and Framer through the Son. And as the word 'Unoriginate' is specified relatively to things originated, so the word 'Father' is indicative of the Son. And 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.[8]

Before God created all things, He existed since eternity as a Father, and everything He creates, He creates it by and together with His Son. For Arius' supporters, absorbed with the affirmation of a God - unique Principle, inherited from Greek philosophy and from the Jewish Henotheism of Alexandria, "Unbegotten" and "Father" are names that define different stages of God's existence: the first would designate His eternal being, the second, His relationship with the Son, brought into existence by an act of will at a certain moment (anyway, according to the Arian opinion, which keeps changing continually, either in time, or outside of time, but not co-eternal with the divine Principle). The name of Father or Begetter would have been accepted by God, according to Arius, in order to create the world, which could not have supported at creation the divine touch of the "hand" of His glory. From these erroneous speculations, bordering the absurd, Arius and his followers arrived at reducing God's Being to the Father's personal way of being, "the unbegetting" consequently projecting a subordinatianist vision on the Holy Trinity. The Son, the Only Begotten, was not credited as superior and anterior to the acts of the divine creative will, although this absurd perspective was leading to the conclusion that God the Father is changing, existing a while when He was not a Father, but He became a Father by a volitional act, just like in the logic to which are submitted in the act of procreation the existences from the created world. Saint Athanasius the Great clarifies once again that the personal quality of "being God by nature, Father of His Word,"[9] belongs to God the Father since eternity, and similarly to the Logos belongs that of being His Son.

Commenting on this passage, Father Dumitru Stăniloae has demonstrated the final consequences of the absurd rationalist vision expressed by Arius. In fact, this was the impasse also realized by Plato in the dialogue *Parmenides* regarding the relation one-multiple and the impossibility to avoid the pantheistic character of the pre-Christian cosmology:

> If there is not a Son, as image of God the Father by Whom the creation is brought into existence, the creation comes directly out of God as his image. In this case, the creation is an emanation from God in a pantheistic sense. The so-called God in this case is an essence, from which the world comes out without his wanting it. Everything is submitted in this case to a blind, senseless fatality. Only the distinction between a Son Who is from God's being, as Father, and between a world created by

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[8] Saint Athanasius the Great, *Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse I*, 33, în „NPNF2-04", p. 325.
[9] Saint Athanasius the Great, *Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse II*, 2, în „NPNF2-04", p. 349.

God's will, avoids pantheism, saving God's transcendence from a world unidentified with Him and «not submitted exclusively to some involuntary laws».[10]

To be sure, the Arian distinction of unbegotten (uncreated) God – begotten (created) Son is illogical: "There is no temporal order in the Divine Being." The names of the Persons of the Holy Trinity denote their very way of being, their manner of holding/partaking of the Divine Being. Saint Athanasius rejects the accusation that the birth of the Son from the Father's nature would introduce, in God, change or "passion." The fact of begetting, he considers, is such a natural feature of the Father that, if it was missing, this would mean a diminution of God's being.[11]

There are, therefore, two sets of names applicable to God: the ones that refer to His way of being and the ones that designate God's deeds or actions in relation to the created world. The first concern God in Himself; the others, God in relation to the things "outside" of Himself (the relation with the things created by His will and His council). The erroneous application of these names, in the way Arius had done, led to confusion if not even to absurdity, and, in a final state, to heresy.

CONCLUSION

Athanasius' distinction between "generation/begetting" and "creation" with all its implications, was acknowledged by the Church of Nicea as Orthodox, even during the time of its author, in the fourth century. Later, Saint Cyril of Alexandria reiterated this fundamental concept, following his predecessor.[12] Indeed, his anti-Arian argumentation was relying a lot on the discourses of Saint Athanasius the Great.[13] The divine will be associated only with the oikonomia-related things, in the sense of acts of the divine will supposing deliberation.[14] Toward the end of the classical patristic period, in the East, Saint John of Damascus reiterated, in his turn, in his significant work *De fide orthodoxa (An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith)*, this decisive teaching both for cosmology and especially for theology and Christology, solemnly confirming its perenniality.

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[10] Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae in Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Scrieri I*, *Cuvântul al doilea împotriva arienilor*, II, in col. "P.S.B.", vol. 15, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1987, p. 232, nota 1.

[11] Saint Athanasius the Great, *Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse I*, 29, in "NPNF2-04", p. 325.

[12] Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scrieri*, Partea a III-a, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, II, 5, in col. "P.S.B.", vol. 40, trad., introd. and notes by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1985, pp. 67-74.

[13] Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne*, Lille, 1951, pp. 19-43.

[14] S. Cyrillus Alexandrinus Arhiepiscopus, *Thesaurus de sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate*, *P.G* 75, 47D; 48D.

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[11] Saint Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in "NPNF2-04".

[12] Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Scrieri I*, *Cuvântul al doilea împotriva arienilor*, II, col. "Părinţi și Scriitori bisericești" ("P.S.B."), vol. 15, translation., introd. and notes by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (E.I.B.M.B.O.R.), București, 1987.

[13] Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scrieri*, Partea a III-a, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, in col. "P.S.B.", vol. 40, translation, introd. and notes by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucureşti, 1985.