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Our Knowledge of God: Insights from the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Controversies



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Christianity is a faith which—among other things—claims certain things to be true: about God, the world and our human species. In recent times a number of strategies have been devised which attempt to bypass or evade Christianity's claim to be true, but they will not finally work—except to bring about the contempt in which evasions of the faith's offensive truth claims are justly held. This claim for truth is made first of all by a community of belief known as the Church, and takes the form of articulation in creeds and confessions. Over the course of history, there has been—at least until the era we call "modern"—a general and remarkable unanimity about the content and centrality of those creeds. It is when theologians begin to articulate the details that the real disagreements begin. In fact it could be said that creedal agreement as has been achieved came about largely as the result of the labors, including the major disagreements, of theologians. The salutary feature of this process is that it teaches us that truth in all spheres, and especially this one, can be achieved, and then only precariously, by the most rigorous public debate and testing.

COLIN E. GUNTON

The fourth century proved a period of great importance to the Church in its development of Trinitarian theology. Commonly this is called the Arian Controversy, though it has been increasingly recognized in recent years that Arius, whose deposition for heresy from the presbyterate at Alexandria signaled the start of intense disputes, did not have quite the prominence he was given at one time.¹

To an outsider, the doctrinal disputes of this century can appear forbidding. For one thing they were protracted. If the dispute between Arius and his bishop started about 318, it was to rumble on in one form or another over the next seventy years. During that period it took many twists and turns, complicated by ecclesiastical politics that as often as not had little to do with Trinitarian doctrine. Some, following the historian Edward Gibbon who reputedly sneered at a Church which was split over the significance of a diphthong, have concluded that this is a prize example of a foolish obsession with the niceties of doctrine.² What a pity that the Church did not use the new-found freedom it had under Constantine and his successors for something more positive!

Then, another deterrent to close study of this period may be the fear that the Church in this period uncritically swallowed aspects of Greek philosophy and so skewed its under-

standing of the Scriptures. After all, this is the period which saw the emergence of such words or phrases as *homoousios* (of one substance) and one *ousia* in three *hypostases* as touchstones of orthodoxy. Since none of these expressions has an obviously scriptural ring, it might be tempting to conclude that here we have an undesirable philosophical borrowing. Yet it is as well to note that this charge against the orthodoxy of the fourth and fifth centuries originated with Friedrich Schleiermacher and received its most detailed scholarly treatment in the writings of Adolf von Harnack.³ Both Schleiermacher and Harnack were liberals who wished to downplay the dogmatic element in Christianity. They were effectively and perhaps deliberately conflating two quite different objections to Christian orthodoxy—first that the process of developing Christian dogma was fundamentally mistaken or at least highly overvalued, and then that this process historically had in fact been diverted from the proper track by pagan philosophy.

The relation between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine in this period is complex but has been extensively handled by a number of recent scholars, so that there is no need to go into detail about it here.⁴ Some remarks, however, are in order more generally about the development of doctrine. The Trinitarian disputes of the fourth century revealed the inadequacy of the Church's earlier language in dealing with the relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to one another. Some noted writers, including Justin Martyr, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea, had even spoken of Christ as "second God"—and this when Christians were loudly proclaiming their monotheism amid a culture of pagan polytheism.⁵ Clearly the time had to come when the churches would state how their worship of Jesus Christ was consistent with the confession of one God.

Yet, hardly anyone realized the need for theological development at the beginning of the Arian Controversy. Instead, most saw themselves as defenders of a traditional orthodoxy against the insidious inroads of heresy.⁶ They did not at first realize the necessity of new theological formulations. Some wanted to retain purely scriptural language for speaking of the

relationship of Father to the Son. Thus, creeds appeared saying that the Son was like the Father "as the Scriptures say and teach."⁷ But this did not touch the nub of the problem. Scriptural language was being understood by leading bishops in quite contradictory ways. Is Fatherhood intrinsic to the Supreme Being so that he was always in relation to his Son? Or is Fatherhood just a metaphor to describe a special type of creation?

To answer these important questions, bishops had to turn to language and phraseology outside the Scriptures. Thus, the most significant advances in the controversy were made when agreement was widely reached on suitable language with which to accommodate the biblical data on the Trinity. With some appropriateness Richard Hanson speaks of this as "a trial and error" process.⁸ For a long time, even the word *homoousios* lay under suspicion because of an interpretation among some supporters of the word that there was no personal distinction between Father and Son. That suspicion was removed only when it was agreed to recognize a significant difference between *homoousios* and *tautoousios* (of the same substance); the latter alone was held to embody the error that there were no personal distinctions in the Godhead.⁹ This, I should emphasize, was a decision on how to use theological language.

These fourth-century debates are worthy of our study because their conclusions persist, though that is not to say either that the last word on Trinitarian doctrine was spoken in that century or that every aspect of that legacy was above criticism. While these debates stress metaphysical points, we are not on that account to eschew them as irrelevant or to see them as divorced from practical piety. If Jesus himself in his great prayer in John 17 could define eternal life as "to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," the issues lie at the heart of the Christian faith.¹⁰ It is from the perspective of our knowledge of God that I intend to approach them. This may seem unusual, but I believe such an approach can be justified given the importance of this theme in Scripture and given the distinctive ideas on this subject of Arius and some of his successors.

THE KEY ELEMENTS IN THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

First it may be helpful to set out the main elements of the doctrine of the Trinity and to point to the main errors which have arisen in connection with it. Here I borrow a simple grid which Roger Nicole has drawn up.¹¹ I emphasize this is a simple starting-point. Each aspect of the doctrine could be explored in more depth. Nicole has identified three propositions, all of which must be concurrently affirmed:

1. There is one God and one only.
2. This God exists eternally in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3. These three are fully equal in every divine perfection. They possess alike the fullness of the divine essence.

Errors arise when only two of the propositions are affirmed and the third is denied. Thus, if (2) and (3) are affirmed while (1) is denied, we end up with tritheism—the view that there are three gods. This has not proved a particularly significant error in Church history. Though debates have arisen in which individuals have been accused of tritheism, it is very hard to substantiate such a charge, because an element of mystery surrounds the divine oneness. Clearly God's unity is quite different from solitariness, but beyond this it is hard to go.¹² Only, if the persons of the Godhead were conceived as acting out of step with one another would a charge of tritheism hold weight—as in some crude formulations of the atonement where the Son goes behind his Father's back to win a reluctant God round to the forgiveness of those sinners who trust in Jesus.

A more common error affirms (1) and (3) but denies (2). This is called Modalism or sometimes Sabellianism. In other words, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are viewed as successive manifestations of the same divine being. God has almost to assume a different persona as he engages with different situations in the history of his dealings with mankind. Such ideas

tend to go very well with dispensationalism of one form or another, but they are also found in young Christians who have not considered the implications of such gospel teaching as Christ's praying to his Father or his saying that he had not come into the world to do his own will but the will of his Father who had sent him. As long as churches have endeavored to follow the light of the Scriptures, it has been comparatively easy to illustrate the inadequacy of Modalism.

The same, however, cannot be said for the error which affirms (1) and (2) but denies (3). This is called Subordinationism, of which Arianism has proved the most troublesome form, especially as it claims a high view of Jesus Christ. Subordinationists postulate a hierarchy of divine beings of whom the Father is undoubtedly supreme. Unlike Modalism, this view can adduce evidence from the gospels in its support. Not only does Jesus say at one point that the Father is greater than he is; but the whole tenor of his life on earth is one of willing submission to his Father's will. There are even passages which suggest that this attitude of obedience to his Father applied before he came into the world (as in John 5:30; 6:38), and one passage which extends it into the age to come (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

It is not surprising that Subordinationism can take various forms—some less divorced from the biblical evidence than others. Indeed, the view which came to represent orthodoxy at the end of the fourth century was not altogether free of subordinationist tendencies.¹³

ARIUS AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

By the start of the fourth century Christians regularly stressed the incomprehensibility of God. Generally they would clarify this by saying that God could be known through his works, but it was impossible, indeed mad presumption, for anyone to say they grasped God's essence. Arius not only stood firmly in this tradition but exaggerated it with his claim that not even the Son of God could understand the being of his Father.¹⁴

His reason was the supremacy of God over all his cre-

ation, including his Son, the first and most outstanding of his creations. He wrote in the most popular of his theological works to survive, "God himself is inexpressible to all beings. He alone has none equal to him or like him, none of like glory. We call him unbegotten on account of the one who by nature is begotten; we sing his praises as without beginning because of the one who has a beginning. We worship him as eternal because of him who was born in the order of time. The one without beginning established the Son as the beginning of all creatures."¹⁵ Having established the ontological superiority of his Supreme Being over his Son, Arius proceeded to draw conclusions about the Son's knowledge of his Father—"God is inexpressible to the Son; for he is what he is for himself and that is unutterable, so that the Son does not have the understanding that would enable him to give voice to any words expressing comprehension."¹⁶ Being a creature dependent entirely on his Father's will for his existence, the Son could not penetrate the mystery of his Father's essence. He could not even fully understand his own essence, claimed Arius!

To our minds—and to many in Arius's own day—this will seem shocking. For one thing, it runs contrary to the specific teaching of Scripture that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."¹⁷ It will affect the special knowledge the Son claimed to bring of his Father. But on its own terms Arius' stance was thoroughly logical. If the Son of God was only a creature, albeit of a special type, and God could not create a being equal to himself, then the Son of God must be limited in his knowledge. We mortal creatures are unable to fathom all the mysteries of the physical world in which we are placed, as God demonstrated to Job. So, we can expect even the Son of God, with his creaturely understanding, to fall short of that understanding which the Supreme Being will have of his essence. Inevitably, an Arian view of the Son (and for that matter the Spirit) will limit any revelatory function that can be undertaken by him.

On Arius's understanding, the Son of God could certainly

act as an exemplar of piety, and we do find later Arians stressing the obedience of the Son to his Father, including those passages where the Son is obviously worshiping his Father. But this is quite a different thing to revealing the heart of God himself. For if we use the Pauline description of Christ as "the image of the invisible God," he must be a limited or partial image since his capacity to behold God is restricted by his status as a creature. Piety for the Son of God, as well as for all God's people, would recognize and worship the unique supremacy of the Supreme Being. You may have noticed above that Arius used the language of praise or worship in emphasizing the distinction between the Supreme Being and his Son—"We sing his praises as without beginning because of the one who has a beginning. We worship him as eternal because of him who was born in the order of time." This is surely indicative of what constitutes true worship as far as Arius is concerned. It is recognizing the uniqueness of the Supreme Being and honoring him, not least in precise theological language, for that uniqueness.

It is this which has sometimes led to the criticism that Arianism has a cosmology but no soteriology.¹⁸ And I believe this is, on the whole, a fair criticism. But if we want to view Arianism sympathetically within the context of its own time, we should remember that Christianity was still a minority movement within a polytheistic culture. Besides, the visible Church had been racked with many movements and teachers, especially the Gnostics, who in the eyes of others gave a deficient account of God. This meant that Christians had to be decided in their views on God; they could not drift along with the views of surrounding culture or even assume that every teaching on God in the Church was right. In modern Britain, where agnosticism about the existence of God is prevalent, it is tempting to think it is commendable to have a definite belief in God. But we should be alert to a different set of dangers presented by a culture with a multiplicity of competing ideas about God—or indeed, gods. Arianism emerged in a world closer to Arabia three centuries later where Islam was to blossom with its claim both to reassert the rights of the true

God amid the confused ignorance of Arabian polytheism and at the same time to avoid the errors of contemporary monotheists, notably Jews and Christians. There are significant parallels between Islamic and Arian doctrines of the Supreme Being. While Arius could say that his Supreme Being had "none equal to him or like him, none of like glory," the famous Surah of Unity in the Quran declares, "Allah is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was he begotten. None is equal to Him."¹⁹ There are similarities too in the stress both Arianism and Islam give to the divine will. The most appropriate way for God to deal with his creation in both systems is by his divine fiat.

THE NEO-ARIANS AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

As it happens, the most extensive Arian writings to have survived from the controversies of the fourth century derive not from Arius or any of his contemporaries, but from Eunomius, a writer from the next generation.²⁰ Together with his mentor, Aetius, Eunomius was leader of a radical school of Arians, dubbed in their own day Anomoeans from the Greek word "unlike" because they affirmed that the Son of God was unlike the Supreme Being in essence. Modern scholars, however, tend to use the term Neo-Arian to designate them.

In many respects Eunomius and his school reflected the teaching of Arius, but with new emphases and then with what might appear a complete reversal of Arius' teaching on the knowledge of God. The distinction between the terms *agenetos* (unbegotten) and *gennetos* (begotten) was central to their theology. Elaborating on 1 Corinthians 8:6, Eunomius could affirm, "There is one God, unbegotten, uncreated, unmade, and one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the offspring of the Unbegotten (but not like any other offspring), the creature of the Uncreated (but not like any other creature), the thing made of the Unmade (but not like any other thing made)."²¹ For Eunomius, as for all Arians, "begetting" in the case of the Supreme Being meant exactly the same as creating. But Eunomius did not hesitate to speak of his Supreme Being as "unbegotten essence," an assertion which to his

opponents implied that he claimed to know the essence of God.²² Though a claim to identify and to understand the essence of God ran counter to traditional Christian thought as well as to the teaching of Arius, Eunomius was happy to stand by it, and it became one of the hallmarks of the Neo-Arian system. On one occasion Eunomius went so far as to say, "God does not know anything more about his own essence than we do, nor is that essence better known to him and less to us; rather, whatever we ourselves know about it is exactly what he knows, and, conversely, that which he knows is what you will find without change in us."²³

In his own day Eunomius's claim was as shocking as it appears to us. But we should not overlook its considerable apologetic value. Some outsiders would be much more impressed by a claim to a precise knowledge of God's essence than with the opposing view that true knowledge of God consisted in recognizing his incomprehensibility. Besides, it could be tied in with the teaching of John 17:3 which rooted eternal life in the knowledge of the "only true God" and of Jesus Christ whom he had sent.²⁴ Only, with Eunomius, this was the metaphysical knowledge of two distinct beings of quite different status. So, despite the real difference with Arius over the possibility of humans knowing God, Eunomius's view of piety turned out to be very similar. It was effectively to confess the true nature of God. "When we say 'unbegotten,'" he declared, "we do not imagine that we ought to honor God only in name, in conformity with human invention; rather, in conformity with truth, we ought to repay him the debt which above all others is most due God: the acknowledgement that he is what he is."²⁵ It may sound like a pious aspiration to honor God with correct thoughts and appropriate speech; but in practice it meant nothing more than working through the logical implications of *agenetos*, the term so greatly beloved of these Neo-Arian theologians. It is little wonder that their opponents claimed they had turned theology into a form of logical sophistry. This, however, does not imply that Eunomius consciously imported pagan philosophical ideas into his theology. On the contrary, he believed that the term *agenetos* was thoroughly scriptural.

Even if it was not found on the pages of Scripture, it was hallowed by long tradition, and entailed by the uniqueness of the Supreme Being himself.

Eunomius took a more traditional position when he allowed that men could come to some knowledge of God through contemplating the works of God. In particular, the Supreme Being had demonstrated his power and activity with his own special creation of his Son.²⁶ But Eunomius would not allow that this Son could mirror the essence of God. So, knowledge gained from God's works was inferior to that gained from logical analysis of the term *agennetos*. It was more indirect and so less satisfactory; basically it carried the same implications as in original Arianism. Since the Supreme Being could not impart any of his own being to the created order, which for all Arians included his Son, such knowledge as men can have of him through any of his creation will be limited. Indeed, Eunomius contended that the most appropriate action for the Supreme Being is his will.²⁷ Even the Son of God came into being by the will of the Supreme Being. Where it is only open to creatures to see the results of God's will, inevitably that God will seem a remote, possibly even an arbitrary being. Eunomius preserved enough of the Christian tradition to include a testimony to the goodness of God, which he believed was manifested in the sort of Son he created; but where such controls are absent, as in the Muslim tradition, men can be left with a God who relates to the world by his will and nothing more. Ramon Lull aptly criticized Islam for acknowledging only two active principles in God, his will and his wisdom, while it gave no place for the operation of his goodness or greatness.²⁸

We must, therefore, be wary of any theological system which asserts the transcendence of God and leaves little place for the condescension or the active goodness of God in the world he created. Such a system may give an appearance of exalting God, but it will in the end leave humans divorced from any intimate knowledge of God. There will be an unbridgeable gap between humans and God, caused not by human sin but by the ontological gulf God has placed

between himself and his creation. This picture of God will have undermined the biblical teaching on sin, whose gravity is determined by the fact that men have rebelled against the goodness of a God who has intimately involved himself in his creation.

RESPONSES TO FOURTH-CENTURY ARIANS

Opposition to Arianism at this time is synonymous in the popular mind with the name of Athanasius. The picture of *Athanasius contra mundum* has become a powerful model for those who would take a solitary stance for truth in the face of prevailing error. Though the picture is something of an exaggeration and glosses over the coercive measures Athanasius himself took as Bishop of Alexandria to enforce his authority, he did seem even to his contemporaries an almost mythical figure.²⁹

It is, therefore, appropriate here to consider certain themes from Athanasius which illustrate his different slant on the knowledge of God. For Athanasius it was fundamental both that the Creator should want his rational creatures to know him and that his rational creatures (that is, human beings made in his image) should attain true happiness only in knowledge of him. This is illustrated by the following passage from *On the Incarnation of the Word*, a work unconnected, as far as we can judge, to the Arian Controversy:

What benefit is it to creatures when they do not know their Creator? Or how could they be rational when they do not know the Reason (or Word) of the Father in whom they have come into being? For they would be no different from irrational creatures if they knew nothing more than earthly things. Why did God make them at all when he did not want to be known by them? Therefore, to prevent such a situation arising, in his goodness he gives them a share in his own image, our Lord Jesus Christ, and makes them in his own image and likeness. As a result, graciously endowed with an understanding of the image, I mean the Father's Word, they may be able to gain through him an understanding of the Father, and with this knowledge of their Creator they may live a happy and truly blessed life.³⁰

Humans, however, have despised the goodness of God to them in their original creation, and have necessitated remedial action on God's part. Though we might hesitate at details of Athanasius's anthropology, which effectively made the soul with its faculty of reason and its ability to distinguish good from evil into the image of God, Athanasius does rely for much of his analysis of sin on Paul's treatment in Romans 1. Like Paul, he insists that human sinfulness results from a rejection of natural revelation and acquires its seriousness from the very fact that all have been given knowledge of their Creator. With this background Athanasius identifies two purposes for the Word of God to take on flesh and dwell among us; these are to overcome the effects of our sin and at the same time to reveal his Father more immediately to us. Athanasius, however, does not tie these two purposes as closely as he might. When he talks of the Word or Son of God revealing his Father, his examples are all directed toward the obviously supernatural. He has nothing to say of what the humility or condescension of Christ reveal of the divine character. When, for example, he discusses the revelatory nature of the cross, he turns to the extraordinary events in the natural world—"The sun hid its face, the ground shook, the mountains were torn asunder, and all men stood in awe. These things demonstrated that the Christ on the cross was God, while the whole creation was his servant and bore witness through its trembling to the presence of its master."³¹ Since Athanasius did recognize that Jesus' death on the cross was a vicarious atonement for the sins of his people, he missed an opportunity to enlarge on the revelation of the divine character or glory through the cross.³² But his basic point that all that Jesus did was a revelation of God was sound.

It is no surprise to find that Athanasius made use of a trio of related texts from John's Gospel—"I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:11); "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) and "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30)—to establish that the Son of God can be no creature but must stand in the closest possible relation to his Father.³³ After all, if one creature, however special, could make

such remarks about himself, he was virtually denying that he was mutable and that he was bound as a creature to follow the dictates of his Creator. With a true Son the situation was quite different. Only one who was a natural Son of God, in this case one who was eternally with his Father, could reveal his Father.

Indeed, in one fascinating passage Athanasius suggests that the Arian Supreme Being is barren and that there is something deficient if this God can relate to other beings only by an act of will—

If the divine essence itself is not fruitful but barren, as they say, like a light that does not shine and like a dry fountain, are they not ashamed when they declare he has creative energy? When they deny what is by nature, how do they not blush when they desire to give priority to what is by will? If he frames things that are external to him and before had no existence by willing them into being, and becomes their maker, much more would he be Father of an offspring from his own essence. For if they allow that God expresses his will about things which are not, why do they not recognize in God something which lies above the will?³⁴

Undeniably there are aspects here of a philosophical approach to theology which operates independently of scriptural guidelines. Nonetheless, the general point is valid that the Arian Supreme Being, who relates to the created order simply by acts of will, is less satisfying than the biblical picture of the Father, who always was with his Son (and we might add, the Holy Spirit) and acted always with him.

Athanasius also reacted against the element of arbitrariness that appeared in Arian theology as a result of their stress on the divine will. Contending that only an uncreated and eternal being could undo the curse of death that lay on us because of our sin, Athanasius challenged Arians to say how a created being could achieve that. The answer he received from some Arians was that God had simply to say the word and he would, through the Savior, undo the curse of death.³⁵ But Athanasius felt this was totally unsatisfactory. It may be that

Arians did hold that the Son of God had come into the world for the salvation of human beings. It may also be that they expressed that salvation in terms of *theosis*, like their Trinitarian opponents.³⁶ But they had yet to say how a created intermediary being, however special a being he was, could bring salvation to fellow-creatures. How could he impart what was not naturally his? To say, in effect, that God can will anything he likes is an unhelpful response. Any serious treatment of God's way of salvation has to say both how it befits the character of God and how it matches human need.

Athanasius recognized both these soteriological aspects and dealt with them in more or less detail. The exposition of particular texts, however, is not his strong point. Indeed, the comment of Richard Hanson is fair: "Athanasius is often wholly astray on the details of the Bible; but he has a remarkably firm grip, indeed in view of his career one might say the grip of a bull-dog, on its main message."³⁷ It would not be difficult to enlarge from the Scriptures on what Athanasius says of the Son as the revealer of his Father. This features as a key theme not only in John's Gospel, but also in Matthew 11:25-27 and Luke 10:21-22.

In John's Gospel Jesus, the Word of God, reveals God by virtue of who he is. He is the Word of God who was with his Father in the beginning, and yet is God in his own right. By donning flesh, he has revealed on earth the nature of the Father in a way no earlier theophany had done. While on earth, he was in his Father's bosom and privy to his counsel in all things. Unlike an emissary, who has his own special job to do or message to pass on and that is the end of the matter, the Son of God is inextricably bound up with the Father—"the Father is in me and I am in the Father." To see Jesus (that is, to recognize him for who he really is) is to see the Father also.³⁸

Correspondingly, to fail to see who Jesus is carries the direst consequences; it is a choice for darkness rather than light, a decision to abide under God's wrath rather than accept his way of salvation.³⁹ These ontological details are not given to us in Scripture for mere academic interest. Rather, they are closely tied to Jesus' exclusive claims. Jesus' words—

"I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me"—however deeply unpopular they may be in our pluralistic environment, are substantiated by his remarks about the mutual indwelling of his Father and himself. Thus, if Jesus were wrong and lied outrageously in his claim that he was in the Father and the Father in him, his further claim that he was the one true way to the Father could be dismissed as false and his implicit promise that he could take his followers to the Father would prove hollow. As editor of the Gospel, John the evangelist adds his own endorsement to the actual words of Jesus about the unique relationship in which Jesus stood to his Father. This occurs as early as the prologue and John's first personal remark—"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." I have already cited Matthew 11:27, which confirms from the lips of Jesus his unique ability to make his Father known. The identity of Jesus, including his standing with God the Father long before the incarnation, is thus a central scriptural theme. The Arian Controversy cannot be dismissed as hair-splitting over some peripheral issue.

WHAT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

So far, it might seem that the disputes of the fourth century might be better described as binitarian than as trinitarian. After all, the initial stages of the dispute were taken up with the Father/Son language—was it just a metaphor or did it denote something at the heart of the very being of God? This did not involve the Holy Spirit, and for a long time the status of the Spirit was left aside. Even when questions were raised about this, churchmen were reluctant to probe deeply. In part, this was a result of the comparative silence of the Scriptures, where the Spirit is certainly the most mysterious member of the Trinity. In part, too, it reflects hesitations about theological controversy. Some dispute was necessary; the Arian challenge did demand a close look at the relation of Father and Son. But the Neo-Arians were felt by many to have shown an inappropriate attitude to theology when they turned it into a

matter of public debate where all and sundry, believer and unbeliever alike, could participate. Thus, formulations about the Spirit in the latter part of the fourth century were cautious. When the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople, the so-called Second Ecumenical Council, it declared briefly, "We believe in . . . the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father; and who is worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son, and who spoke through the prophets."⁴⁰

In the Scriptures the Spirit has a key role to play in imparting knowledge of God. This is made clear when Christ prepares his disciples for his physical departure and first speaks at length of the Holy Spirit. After describing the Spirit as "the Spirit of Truth" he proceeds to delineate his work in these terms—"he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." The Spirit would not engage on some ministry of his own independently of the other members of the Godhead. On the contrary, his task would be to throw the spotlight on Jesus Christ and to illuminate the significance of his work.⁴¹

When the apostle Paul takes up the question of why the Corinthian believers have accepted the gospel message while many others do not, he ascribes this to the activity of the Spirit of God. People unenlightened by the Spirit of God will find the gospel nonsensical, but for those who do have the Spirit it is a very different matter. Paul's reasoning includes this—"The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."⁴² The Spirit is being accorded the same insights into the mind of God as Christ claimed to have of his Father. But from what has been said already we should not draw the conclusion that illumination has now become the specialist function of the Spirit within the Trinity. In fact, all three persons of the Godhead are involved in this important work. For example, when Jesus worships his Father for hiding the truth from the wise and revealing it to babes, it is the Father to whom he ascribes this

choice and the subsequent illumination.⁴³ Or again, if we look at the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, it is interesting that while Christ should address these churches as "I," each letter should end with the injunction, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what *the Spirit* says to the churches." Clearly Christ and the Spirit are working in tandem in this act of revelation. In fact, we have here one example of the maxim—*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*—the external works of the Trinity are undivided. This is not to say that within the work of revelation or illumination it is impossible for us to make distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. When we are told that the Spirit's task is not to draw attention to himself but to bring glory to Jesus, this differentiates his ministry of revelation from that of Jesus himself.

A full biblical treatment of our knowledge of God should involve the Holy Spirit. We would expect each Person of the Trinity to be involved in the important work of illumination. But perhaps the Spirit's role here is often neglected just because he casts the spotlight away from himself and on to Christ who in turn gives us knowledge of the Father.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

The Arian Controversy involves us inextricably in questions of the nature and activity of God before the world ever came into being. This is manifest in the two opposing slogans from the start of the controversy. "Always the Father, always the Son," contended Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. "There was when he (the Son) was not," retorted Arius. Both Arius and Bishop Alexander assumed that it was both possible and desirable to talk of God before the foundation of the world. Today, in many Christian circles this sort of talk is out of fashion. Such people will inevitably find the Arian Controversy a bewildering irrelevance. It seems to have little to do with the Christ they know.

Certainly, fourth-century creedal statements tend to overemphasize metaphysical statements about God in his inner being and before the foundation of world at the expense of how the Triune God has acted for the salvation of

his people.⁴⁴ We might ask, however, whether we have not gone to the opposite extreme. Maurice Wiles has pointed out that Arianism, which enjoyed a dramatic revival in the English-speaking world at the beginning of the eighteenth century, had all but vanished by the end of that century.⁴⁵ The reason he gives for its demise is instructive. The course of the eighteenth century saw the loss in large measure of a supernatural worldview. Links between heaven and earth, if there was a heaven at all, were minimized. The existence of angels and demons alike was exorcized from the thoughts of respectable men. In this sort of environment Arianism, with its gradations in supernatural beings, could not thrive. The prevailing view among the majority of educated people became effectively of a closed universe where our only links with reality are through our senses.

Though Christians may readily dismiss the idea of a closed universe, it may not be so easy to escape all its implications. When it comes to the godhead, we look to the Incarnate Jesus for illumination. This is natural enough; from his actions in the Gospels we do learn of the divine character. But there is a danger that we stop at the visible actions and fail to look at his words which take us beyond what is immediately visible. This, in part at least, may explain why our day has seen the emergence of such bizarre views as those of Oneness Pentecostals who give the name Jesus to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a modalist picture of the godhead. If we are to do justice to the revelation in the Gospels, we cannot shirk such questions as "Where does Jesus come from?" or "How does he relate to the Father of whom he speaks?" We might assume that it is fruitless speculation to consider what God was doing or how he was in himself before the foundation of the world; but the Scriptures take a different view. It tells us that the Father and the Son always mutually indwelt one another and that this mutual indwelling was continually one of love, because that affects how believers should be toward one another. For Christ prayed that his followers be one just as he and his Father are one, and should share the love which has characterized that relationship. It does matter whether

this relationship always existed or whether the Supreme Being brought it into existence at some point, perhaps with the specific intention of benefiting human beings (the Arian view). Clearly the measure of the Father's love for the world will be affected by the status of the Son he gave. Imagine John 3:16 being rewritten in Arian vein as "God so loved the world that he gave his highest and best created angel so that all who believe in him should not perish." That falls a long way short of the love the Father showed when it was his eternal and beloved Son whom he sacrificed.

The Scriptures also tell us that the people of God were the objects of his thoughts and love before the foundation of the world; that was the time when we were chosen in Christ—even though such teaching might be misused for arrogance or complacency.⁴⁶ The Scriptures, therefore, do not allow us to be agnostic or indifferent about talking of God as he is in himself or before the world came into being.

A related and more complex question concerns how far scriptural data concerning the economic Trinity (that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as they act for our redemption) allow us to reach conclusions about the immanent Trinity (the Triune God in himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Do we say with Karl Rahner that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity?⁴⁷ Or should we express agnosticism about the immanent Trinity and speak only with confidence about the economic Trinity? This, for example, is a central issue in the long-standing *filioque* dispute between eastern and western churches.⁴⁸ No doubt, Scripture itself gives primary weight to the economic Trinity, and this is reflected in the liturgy and preaching of the churches. Moreover, there would be something defective about the faith of anyone who was concerned exclusively with the immanent Trinity and had little interest in what the Trinity had done and was doing for him. Such a faith would be akin to that of the demons highlighted by the apostle James. On the other hand, there are dangers in postulating a gap between our knowledge of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, because salvation is not simply

viewed as a transaction between members of the godhead; it must also involve the knowledge of the true God—a knowledge which is most supremely given in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. If, however, the persons of the Godhead were in our redemption only acting out parts which did not really correspond to the way they are toward one another, then that redemption has taught us little of the character of God. The real relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit would be hidden behind a temporary arrangement they had reached to secure the salvation of humans. This is certainly less extreme than the Arian view that God does not need a rationale to achieve our salvation; he can bring it about as he wills. But the net effect will be much the same. God's method of salvation will not disclose his character. And there will be little effect on the hearts of those who hold that it is in some sort of mechanical or artificial way that God has achieved their salvation. The apostle Peter, however, talks of Christians at their regeneration acquiring knowledge of "him who called us through his own glory and goodness."⁴⁹ In other words, the gospel message which brings our salvation can do so only because it enables us to grasp something of the glorious character of God. Of course, Peter was not suggesting that new Christians would all immediately start to meditate on the work of the separate Persons of the Trinity; but his general point about our acquiring a true knowledge of God would be weakened if there were something artificial about the role of these Persons in the atonement.

A further lesson concerns the importance of the language we use of God. Arius and his followers downplayed the language of Father/Son and made it into a metaphor. The Neo-Arians went a step further and effectively tried to substitute the *agenetos/gennetos* (unbegotten/begotten) distinction. It is a credit to Athanasius' grasp of the issues both that he discerned this trend before the Neo-Arians became prominent and that he warned of its consequences. It was no light thing to change titles (Father/Son) which were given by God in Scripture for words (*agenetos/gennetos*) which were both unscriptural and ambiguous.⁵⁰ Athanasius held that Father-

hood was of the very essence of God; it implied the eternity of his Son. Though Athanasius did not say as much, this would mean that the relationship of God the Father to God the Son was paradigmatic for all human father/son relationships rather than vice versa.

I doubt if anyone today would see any attraction in the Neo-Arian alternative titles for the Supreme Being. But there have been other assaults on the biblical language for God. Notably, some feminists have dismissed the Father/Son language as an undesirable legacy from a patriarchal society. They could back this up in a moderate way by saying it was a metaphor which no longer worked in our very different society—a strategy which has some similarity to that used by the Arians. Or they could take a more extreme course and say that the language was entirely of human construction reflecting on to God the values of human society of that time. No Arians would have appealed to such a course since they all held to the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

Study of the names and titles given to God in Scripture is potentially a vast topic. Here I will confine my remarks to one observation—the Arian controversy shows that it is important to ask whether some titles are more fundamental than others, and to say why.

LEARNING ABOUT THE TRINITY

Viewed historically, the doctrine of the Trinity has had a checkered career within the Christian Church. Sometimes, especially in the pre-Nicene Church, there has been an implicit understanding of the Trinity without much direct focus on it. At other times the formulated doctrine has been virtually an embarrassment. At still other times it has assumed great importance and become in effect the leading doctrine of orthodoxy.

Perhaps, in the light both of the relatively confused statements which existed in the Church in the centuries prior to Nicea and of the difficulties which attended the formulation of fourth-century orthodoxy, we should say that the developed doctrine of the Trinity is a mark of a mature Church,

theologically speaking. It is not a doctrine whose significance younger Christians will readily appreciate. Interestingly, in the early years of the Reformation at Geneva, Guillaume Farel faced criticism, which also affected his better known colleague, John Calvin, because he had produced a *Summary* of Christian doctrine which had omitted the Trinity. Farel's reason was not that he denied the Trinity (though this accusation was made against him), but that he thought the doctrine was too profound for the people with whom he had to deal.⁵¹

Many of us will sympathize with Farel, especially if we have had to explain Christian doctrine to outsiders. Yet it is important for a church to address the question of how it is going to lead its members to maturity in this respect. The Trinity does not make for an easy theme to preach on. Yet detailed appreciation of the New Testament presupposes some framework for understanding its references to the different Persons of the Godhead. Most of the Arian literature from the fourth century is now lost, often by deliberate destruction; but such writings as remain do suggest that the Arians were trying to be faithful to their own understanding of Scripture. That emphasizes the importance of an accurate grid with which to interpret Scripture.

One of the best sources for such a grid, in my judgment, is the Athanasian Creed. Despite its name it has nothing to do with Athanasius; it is in fact a Western creed dating from c. 500. Unfortunately this creed is out of favor for various reasons. Its ontological treatment first of the Trinity and then of the person of Christ (in answer to Nestorianism) may appear tedious in its details. Yet, it is not that the creed is verbose—far from it. It is a model of conciseness, as any good creed should be. Those who complain of its excessive detail are failing to grasp the complexity of these early disputes on the Trinity, and are ignoring one of the best antidotes to ignorance of this important doctrine. Perhaps a more serious objection has been the view that the creed links salvation to orthodox doctrine. After all, it begins with these sobering expressions—“Whoever wishes to be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith, which faith, if anyone does not

keep it whole and unharmed, without doubt he will perish everlastingly.” This has been taken to imply that salvation is the fruit of intellectual understanding and of consent to Trinitarian doctrine. Gerald Bray, however, has pointed out that the creed speaks not of believing but of holding the catholic faith—which he interprets as clinging to it for dear life like some treasure to be guarded at all costs. Then, when this creed begins to expound doctrine as such, it takes up the language of worship rather than that of belief—“Now, the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity.” It makes it clear that worship is possible only where there are right thoughts about God.⁵²

The Athanasian Creed is not perfect. (What human creed could be an absolutely perfect reflection of the Scriptures?) It does emphasize metaphysical doctrines about the Trinity and the person of Christ—the areas which had occasioned the church the greatest dispute up to that time—and says little of the actual work of salvation. But if we understand these limitations and major on its strengths, the Athanasian Creed will prove a most valuable repository of the orthodox teaching from these early disputes. Once it is mastered, it will provide believers who already have some knowledge of the New Testament with a framework which will allow a deeper appreciation of these Scriptures. The creed will help to fulfill Christ's promise that those who already have will be given more.⁵³

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Notes

1. R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988), xvii-xxi. The standard work on Arius is that of

- Rowan D. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).
2. Interestingly, the Emperor Constantine at one stage thought the quarrel between Arius and his bishop one of mere semantics—cf. his letter to them as recorded in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 2:68. Edward Gibbon, however, did not take the view that is generally attributed to him. In chapter 21 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* he says the diphthong has caused “the profane of every age” to mock; but his own position is much more nuanced.
 3. G. L. Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1984), 17-19.
 4. There are helpful, brief comments in Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, 83-91; and Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 856-69.
 5. G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (second edition, London: SPCK, 1952) 140-46.
 6. Even Arius himself had written with his supporters to his bishop in Alexandria, saying “Our faith, which we have from our forefathers and which we have also learned from you, holy father, is this”—Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 247.
 7. Cf. the creeds cited by J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (second edition, London, Longmans, 1960), 285-94.
 8. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 869-75.
 9. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 223-25.
 10. John 17:3 was a favorite text for Arians, cf. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 836-37; but in the wider context of John’s Gospel it is clear that Christ was not talking of a knowledge of two distinct beings.
 11. Roger Nicole “The Meaning of the Trinity,” in *One God in Trinity*, edited by Peter Toon and James Spiceland (London: Samuel Bagster, 1980), 1-10.
 12. Cf. the remarks of P. P. Jenson in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 1:350.
 13. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1998), 144-49.
 14. For more detail on this see my paper, “Our Knowledge of God: The Relevance of the Debate between Eunomius and the Cappadocians” in *Tyn-dale Bulletin* 41:1 (1990), 66-69.
 15. From the *Thalia* of Arius. On the background to this, see Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 62-66. I have used Williams’ translation from pages 101-02.
 16. Williams, *Heresy and Tradition*, 103.
 17. Matthew 11:27.
 18. That is not to deny that attempts have been made to link Arianism with

- soteriology—see Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 17-22. I am not convinced of any direct connections between Arianism and soteriology. It is quite another matter to consider the soteriological implications of Arianism.
19. Surah 112. The translation is that of N. J. Dawood in the Penguin (Harmondsworth, 1974) edition.
 20. Here I refer only to writings related to the Trinitarian controversies. Eunomius’ works are edited and translated by R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: University Press, 1987). The subsequent translations from Eunomius are all from this edition.
 21. *Apology* 28 (Vaggione, 75). Eunomius goes on to cite in support of his view a text beloved of all Arians—Proverbs 8:22 in the Septuagint version.
 22. *Apology* 7 (Vaggione, 41).
 23. Fragment 2 (Vaggione, 179).
 24. Vaggione identifies eight allusions to this text in the works of Eunomius.
 25. *Apology* 8 (Vaggione, 41-43).
 26. *Expositio fidei* 3:31-3 (Vaggione, 155); *Apology* 24 (Vaggione, 65).
 27. *Apology* 23 (Vaggione, 65).
 28. Cited in Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (Boston, New York, Chicago: American Tract Society, 1905), 114-15.
 29. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (ET, London: A and C Black, 1963), 80.
 30. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 11:2-3.
 31. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 19:3.
 32. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 20:2.
 33. E.g., Athanasius, *Discourse Against the Arians*, 1:34; 2:54; 3:5, 16, 67.
 34. Athanasius, *Discourse Against the Arians*, 2:2.
 35. Athanasius, *Discourse Against the Arians*, 2:68.
 36. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* 241. Theosis combines ideas of sanctification and adoption, and was in turn based on the language of 2 Peter 1:4. For further background to this idea in Athanasius see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (4th edition, London: A and C Black, 1968), 377-79.
 37. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 424.
 38. Cf. John 1:18; 3:13; 6:46; 12:45; and 14:7-10.
 39. John 3:13-21 and 31-36.
 40. There are some problems about when and where this creed, which is popularly called the Nicene Creed, was first endorsed—see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* 296-331. Western versions of this creed declare that the Spirit proceeds from both Father and the Son. For almost 1,000 years

this has been a bone of contention between Western and Eastern churches. As someone has put it, this is the longest Trinitarian dispute of all!

41. John 14:16, 26; 16:13-15.
42. 1 Corinthians 2:10-11.
43. Matthew 11:25-26. In Luke's version (10:21-22) the Holy Spirit is also involved as Jesus is said to be full of joy through the Holy Spirit when he praises his Father.
44. Not all in the early church believed that it was appropriate to talk of God before the foundation of the world. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11:12, was familiar with one Christian response to the question—"What was God doing before he made the world?"—which said that he was preparing hell for those who asked such abstruse questions. Augustine totally disapproved of such a response.
45. Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy—Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: University Press, 1996), 157-64.
46. Ephesians 1:4.
47. On the background to this see Peter Toon, "Ways of Describing the Holy Trinity" in *Reformation and Revival Journal*, 10:3 (2001) 109-14.
48. There can be little doubt, for example, that the notion that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father is faithful to the scriptural presentation of the economic Trinity. Many Eastern theologians would agree to that. The question, however, is whether we can extrapolate from there to the immanent Trinity—Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 146-47.
49. 2 Peter 1:3.
50. Athanasius, *Discourse against the Arians* 1:34; cf. *Defence of the Nicene Definition*, 22.
51. B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of the Trinity" in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 205.
52. *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, 175-91, gives an excellent summary of the contents of the creed. Interestingly, where the creed does use the verb "believe" it adds "faithfully and firmly." I have made use of the translation he appends on pages 209-11, which is actually by Roger Beckwith. For those wanting more scholarly details on this creed the standard work is J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (London: A and C Black, 1964).
53. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 79-80, points out that theology, whether in the form of systematics, creeds or whatever, is intended to help people in their understanding of Scripture. It will threaten the authority of Scripture if it claims to do any more. The Athanasian Creed should be assessed in that light.