

Dissertation Report on Vyacheslav Lytvynenko,
“The Doctrine of God and Deification in Athanasius of Alexandria: Relations and Qualities”

By Donald Fairbairn
Robert E. Cooley Professor of Early Christianity
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

General Impression

I give my congratulations to Lytvynenko on his completion of a thorough and engaging dissertation, one that makes a compelling case for the centrality of personal/relational categories in Athanasius' concepts of God and of human deification.

I also want to thank Dr. Karfiková for her excellent work of supervision. Having known Lytvynenko in an earlier phase of his academic career, I am delighted to see from this dissertation how he has expanded his linguistic breadth to include several more research languages and how he has matured as a scholar. I appreciate the role that Dr. Karfiková has played in Lytvynenko's progress.

Strengths of the Dissertation

The dissertation makes a solid and persuasive case for seeing the personal dimensions of both intra-trinitarian life and deification as being primary in Athanasius' thought, and in this way makes a solid contribution to scholarship. The chapter on the *Vita Antonii* makes an even more striking contribution. It seems to me that the interpretation of Antony as the man (already) transformed by Christ and thus as an emblem for the Christian's relationship to God is quite unique, and generally persuasive.

The dissertation interacts impressively with scholarly literature over a substantial range of time (about 120 years), in a number of European languages (at least English, French, German, Russian, Czech, and Greek, and maybe more languages that I do not remember). The handling of divergent scholarly views is both respectful and even-handed, and the assertions of Lytvynenko's own views are stated with appropriate caution and qualification. The dissertation is superbly documented.

The dissertation is clearly organized and written in generally outstanding English. The method for summarizing large amounts of information (quoting brief passages organized into categories) works very well.

Weaknesses of the Dissertation

The statement of the main thesis (p. 20) sets the wrong tone for a dissertation when it claims that the author's view is “not the only right one.” It would be better to state something along the lines of this: “While all three of these elements are present in Athanasius' soteriology, I wish to lend

support to the view that the third one predominates and best enables us to make sense of Athanasius' insistence on the *homoousion*."

The explanation of "qualities" and its synonyms (p. 37) fails to indicate that the author is using these words in the non-technical sense that they had in Athanasius' time. Attributes and properties would later be distinguished sharply in Western Trinitarian theology, and one would not have used them as synonyms. This is an important point that needed to be stressed early in the dissertation.

The discussion of pagan Greek notions of divinity in chap. 2 is very good, but a bit longer than is justified, given the author's overall concerns. The main point here is that although the range of meanings of deification increases as time goes on, both the pagans and Philo see it primarily in terms of immortality. If this is the point, the author did not need to use as much space making it. In contrast, I think the discussion of the biblical roots of deification is a bit shorter than is warranted. If part of what the author is trying to do is to show that Athanasius is using the language of Greek philosophy to express the ideas of Scripture, then I think more space on the biblical treatment and less on the pagan Greek background would have been more appropriate. In particular, Moses' "vision" of God on Sinai, the transfiguration of Jesus before Peter, James, and John, and Paul's vision in 2 Cor 12 are all of crucial significance for Greek theologians of deification. Are they not important for Athanasius? Should they not be mentioned in this section?

The conclusion that Arius is more philosophical than biblical (p. 183) is a bit too quick. The author fails to take into account the fact that Athanasius chooses the MANY biblical texts he will discuss in *Con. Arian*. precisely because Arius uses these passages and interprets them in his own way. Since there are quite a lot of these passages, it is fair to say that Arius is concerned with Scripture. I think this section is weak in its failure to recognize that fact.

There is a great deal of discussion of the problems with the "Latin" approach to the Trinity, but little mention of the fact (or at least the possibility) that this Latin approach was a MEDIEVAL Latin development, not common to the Latin fathers in the patristic era. Acknowledging this possibility would have helped to round out the author's portrayal of patristic Trinitarian theology.

In spite of the generally outstanding English, there are still quite a few typographical errors and minor grammatical errors present. In particular, there are a number of places where possessives are written incorrectly (usually leaving off the "s" after the apostrophe) and a few places where the subject-verb agreement is incorrect.

Overall Assessment

I consider this dissertation more than adequate for the author to be awarded the Ph.D. I do not know whether honours are granted at Charles University, but if they are, I recommend that this dissertation be granted *magna cum laude*.

Potential Questions for the Defense

- 1) Explain the relation between the Platonic and biblical foundations of Athanasius' thought. How does he specifically use the biblical concept of deification to correct, augment, or replace the pagan understanding?
- 2) How does one determine which of several emphases is primary in Athanasius' (or someone else's thought)? If some scholars claim that "physical salvation" is Athanasius' primary emphasis, and you claim that a relational understanding of salvation is primary, how do we resolve this disagreement?
- 3) Athanasius is often accused of having vastly oversimplified the Trinitarian controversy by dividing people holding to many different positions into two groups, orthodox and Arians. Can you discern a principle by which he makes that distinction and justifies it? In other words, what aspect of Trinitarian doctrine fundamentally links all stripes of "Arians" together and distinguishes them from all stripes of the orthodox?
- 4) In what ways did Athanasius anticipate the Christological controversy? Is it fair to say, as some have, that he provided the solution to that controversy before it even arose? If so, what was the solution he offered?

Minor Comments

Since you have so many footnotes, I think it would be better to re-start the footnote numbering with "1" at the beginning of each chapter.

Chap. 1

p. 17 Here you should say that Arius never wrote of deification *in his extant writings* and should mention that you will deal with the possible soteriological significance to his assertions in your chapter on Arius.

Chap. 2

p. 79 It is misleading to say that *Adv. Haer.* is extant in Greek and Latin, since this gives the impression that the whole thing is available in Greek. Substantial fragments are extant in Greek, and all of it is available in a very old, wooden Latin translation. This is what you need to say.

What is your evidence of a direct connection between Irenaeus and Athanasius? One can assume Athanasius' familiarity with Origen, but what about Irenaeus?

The treatment of Irenaeus and Origen is VERY fair to Origen.

Chap 3

p. 101 Surely you mean to write that the double treatise was written BEFORE Con. Arian. You wrote “after,” but that must be simply a mistake.

p. 103 You wrote “Khale” instead of “Khaled” Anatolios.

p. 113 “Disbalance” should be “imbalance.”

The argument that one who deifies must himself be God (p. 114) is a very important one, and the argument that Athan’s focus on acquisitional deification in Con. Gen. comes from his desire to show that we have failed in this task is excellent.

p. 125 The handling of different scholarly views on whether or not Athanasius’ view of human sin and redemption is consistent from Con. Gen. to De Incar is excellent.

pp. 136-7 The treatment of the subject vs. composition of Christ is very good. I think, though, that you should not label the idea that the Logos is the personal subject with the phrase “logos-sarx.” This category (devised by Grillmeier) is too “compositional” and not very helpful, even though it is almost universal. Pelkian’s category “theology of the hypostatic union” (that is, the union in the hypostasis of the Logos) is much better.

I think the discussion of personal subject needs a bit more general introduction, explaining what exactly you mean by personal subject and where you got the phrase from.

Chap. 4

I don’t think Arius uses the word “Father” to describe God very often at all. On p. 163, you may do better to refer to him as the “First Person” or simply as God (in contrast to the Son), since Arius downplays the relational aspect of the divine so completely.

p. 169 Arius aims at refuting the ETERNAL fatherhood of God.

p. 169 Do not say “de-emphasizing of fatherhood as a divine attribute” unless Widdicombe says it that way, in which case you should put it in quotes. Fatherhood is NOT a divine attribute, because attributes by definition are shared by all three persons of the Trinity. Fatherhood is a property of the Father, a description of the way he relates to the Son, just as begottenness is a property of the Son and procession is a property of the Spirit. In order for the attribute/property distinction to make any sense, you need to make clear that attributes are qualities, but properties are descriptions of relations, NOT qualities. Granted, this terminology was not yet worked out in the fourth century, so you should not call attention to it directly, but even so, you should be aware of it in the way you write.

p. 182 This is an outstanding point (citing Kannengiesser) about the style for quoting one's opponent in the ancient world.

The conclusion to the discussion of Arius' christology in this chapter is outstanding. What Arius essentially presents to us is a Christ who has risen up to God and whom we may follow.

The reason the treatment of Alexander belongs in this chapter is that it helps to elucidate Arius' thought. Given that fact, the discussion of Alexander could probably have been shorter, and it definitely needed to be more clearly tied to its purpose of showing by contrast what Arius taught.

Chap. 5

p. 204 Speaking of God in terms of nature goes back AT LEAST to the sixteenth century. It probably goes back to Aquinas and farther. And the Augsburg and Belgic confessions should NOT be called creeds. Confessions are self-consciously very different from creeds—much longer, much more occasional/contextual in their focus, etc.

The main argument in this chapter is excellent, with a very clear explanation of a way of describing the Trinity that hinges on the person of the Father rather than on a "separable" concept of essence.

p. 241 *Contra Arianos*, not *Contra Orationes*

p. 277 At the Alexandrian council of 362, not the Antiochene council.

Chap. 6

Very good job of excluding questions related to the *Vita Antonii* that occupy a lot of scholarly attention but that are peripheral to your concerns. I wonder, though, whether you should at least include a footnote with references to scholars who argue for and against Athanasian authorship. Andrew Louth's suggestion that Athanasius himself re-worked existing Coptic versions into the Greek version, and thus that Athanasius is the author of the Greek version, makes good sense to me.

p. 280 You should say "assuming the Athanasian authorship" rather than "given the Athanasian authorship," because you are not trying to demonstrate that Athanasius wrote the Greek *Vita Antonii*.

Donald Fairman

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