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The Orations of St Athanasius Against the Arians

In the fourth century, a group of Christians who followed the teachings of Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter, claimed that Christ was not truly divine but a created being. According to Arius, God alone is unique and self-existent: the Son is not. Although Arianism was condemned as heretical at the Council of Nicaea in 325, it continued to exert significant influence. Patriarch of Alexandria, St Athanasius (c.296–373) was among the most vigorous defenders of the orthodox view of the divinity of Christ. This 1873 publication presents the original Greek of four polemical orations directed against the Arian heretics. Also included is an account of Athanasius' life and a commentary on his work provided by William Bright (1824–1901), Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, who specialised in the history of the early church.

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ΤΟΥ ἉΓΙΟΥ
ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΥ
ΚΑΤΑ ΑΡΕΙΑΝΩΝ ΛΟΓΟΙ

THE
ORATIONS OF ST ATHANASIUS
AGAINST THE ARIANS
ACCORDING TO THE BENEDICTINE TEXT

With an Account of his Life

by

WILLIAM BRIGHT, D.D.

CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

Oxford

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

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ERRATA.

P. 180, l. 22, for *Σαμοσαρέα* read *Σαμοσαρέα*.

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INTRODUCTION,

ON THE LIFE OF ST. ATHANASIUS.

THE 'Orations of St. Athanasius against the Arians' are here reprinted from the Benedictine text, in a form which, it is hoped, will prove convenient to students of theology. It seems desirable to prefix to them some account of the life of their ever-memorable author.

I.

Those who think of studying the life of St. Athanasius will need no prefatory assurance of its grandeur. They will probably know something of it, to begin with,—enough to make them desirous of knowing more. The name, a household word through Christendom,—the story, in its merest outline so impressive,—the character, which compelled even Gibbon¹ to acknowledge its majesty,—these are elements of unique, un-failing interest, independently of the attractiveness which all adherents of a great religion must find in the record of such great things done for its cause.

It would be hardly less superfluous to disclaim any expectation of doing justice in a few pages to so broad and lofty a theme. What will be attempted is, to describe this career in its

¹ Gibbon, iii. 69 (c. 21).

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main features, by way of introducing the student to the fuller narratives of Montfaucon or Tillemont; to show, in some degree, from the words of Athanasius himself, and especially from his autobiographical fragments, what the real man was in his own personality,—what he thought, and felt, and aimed at,—how he worked, how he suffered, how, in the long run, he overcame. To conceal that sympathy for his side in the Arian contest, which is involved in the confession of the Nicene faith, would be a paltry and foolish affectation: but, on the other hand, it must never be forgotten that the memory of a hero is not honoured by hero-worship, and that the example of a saint has sometimes been dimmed by hagiology.

Athanasius was born at Alexandria; in the words of the Emperor Constantius, that city contained his ‘paternal home¹’; and his father’s tomb is known to have been situated in its outskirts². Of his family circumstances we know but little: one of his relations lived to suffer persecution from his enemies in A. D. 340³; and his own declaration to Constantine, at a crisis of his life, must be taken to mean that he was, at any rate, not wealthy⁴. The time of his birth can be approximately determined by observing, that his recollections of the ‘persecution under Maximian,’ in A. D. 303–5, were imperfect⁵, and that he was comparatively young when consecrated in A. D. 326, but that he was old enough to receive some theological instruction from teachers who suffered under Maximin Daza in A. D. 311⁶, and that he seems to have written his first theological work as early as A. D. 318. Thus we infer that he was born about A. D. 297: a conclusion which bears on the famous anecdote first told by Rufinus of Aquileia, who must have heard it from contemporaries of Athanasius when he visited Egypt about A. D. 372⁷. Alexander, bishop of Alexandria,—so runs the story,—after finishing a festival service in commemoration of his martyred predecessor, Peter, was expecting some of his

¹ Ath. Apol. c. Ari. 51.² Soc. iv. 13.³ Ath. Hist. Ari. 13.⁴ Apol. c. Ari. 9.⁵ Hist. Ari. 64.⁶ De Incarn. 56.⁷ Rufin. H. E. i. 14; Soc. i. 15; Soz. ii. 17.

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clergy to dine with him in a house standing near the sea. Looking out towards the shore, he saw a party of boys who were evidently imitating Church ceremonies; after watching them for a while with interest, he observed that they were enacting a mimic baptism. This, he thought, was going too far: he caused them to be brought in, and, with some difficulty, elicited from them that one of their number, named Athanasius, had been officiating as a bishop, and others as priests and deacons; and that some boys, who were still ranked among catechumens in the Church, had been 'baptized,' with careful observance of the prescribed forms. Upon which, after consulting the clergy, Alexander resolved to treat this baptism as valid, only adding the episcopal imposition of hands, and the application of chrism to the forehead,—in one word, confirmation. He then, it is added, exhorted the parents of the young officiants to train them up for actual Church ministry; and the 'boy-bishop,' in particular, having been duly sent to school, was 'given back' to Alexander as a 'deposit,' and 'bred up, like another Samuel, in the temple.' The story has a tender, old-world gracefulness, which commended it to the author of the 'Lyra Innocentium¹.' But even if we suppose, with Hefe², that there had been a real intention, not to play, but 'to do what the Church meant to have done,' the account given by Rufinus appears incompatible with the fact that Athanasius must have been about sixteen at the accession of Alexander³. Still, it is likely enough that bishop Peter had discerned in the boy some promise of a high vocation, and had exhorted his parents to watch over it; and it is certain that Alexander did become his kind and fatherly patron, took him into his house, and employed him as a secretary. The position involved some signal advantages. It was much to be admitted, in youth, to

¹ See the verses on 'Enacting Holy Rites,' at p. 187.

² Hefe, Hist. of Councils, b. ii. c. 2. s. 25.

³ Alexander became bishop in A. D. 313; Peter had been martyred in A. D. 311.

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the confidence of the 'Archbishop¹' or 'Pope²' of Alexandria, the occupant of 'the Evangelical throne,' the second bishop in the Church, whose authority over the bishops of Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis, was virtually both patriarchal and metropolitan³; and to 'live, as a son with a father⁴,' under the roof of a prelate beloved for his 'gentle disposition⁵,' must have been a happiness often thankfully remembered amid the storms and conflicts of later life.

Such was the introduction of Athanasius, probably soon after A. D. 313, to the threshold of his ministry. He was eminently qualified to make full use of all his opportunities; and they were many and various. All his antecedents had exercised his powers of observation. He had been bred up in a home ruled by Christian influences, but amidst the many-sided life of that vast city⁶, so 'full of stirs,' an intellectual as well as a commercial meeting-place⁷ for various nationalities,—a scene of collisions, and also of fusions, between widely diverse elements. Whenever he traversed the broad street that ran from the Sun-gate southwards⁸, or looked around him at the Tetracylon, the Alexandrian 'Carfax,' he would find something new in the aspects of that strange population, so frivolous and restless, so bitterly contentious and feverishly excitable⁹: or in the south-

¹ The title of Archbishop first appears in a document of A. D. 326, and seems to be applied to Alexander. Ath. Apol. c. Ari. 71.

² On this title, signifying 'dear father,' and given to all bishops, but specially to the bishop of Alexandria, see Ath. Apol. 64; Euseb. vii. 7; Pearson, Vind. Ign. i. c. 11 (vol. i. p. 304); Routh, Rell. Sacr. iii. 235.

³ Cf. Con. Nic. can. 6; Synes. Ep. 67; Mansi, Conc. vii. 55. See Valesius, Obs. Eccl. in Soc. et Soz. iii. 9; Le Quien, Or. Chr. ii. 353; Neale, Introd. East. Ch. i. 111.

⁴ So St. Cyril of Alex. says, Epist. 1., to the Monks.

⁵ Ruf. i. 1; Neale, Hist. Alex. i. 115.

⁶ Cf. Josephus, B. Jud. iv. 11. 5; Ammianus Marcell. xxii. 16. 7; Greg. Naz. Orat. xxi. 7.

⁷ See Merivale, Hist. Rom. viii. 235; Jowett on Epist. of St. Paul, i. 452; Vacherot, L'Ecole d'Alex. i. 103.

⁸ Strabo, xvii. 1.

⁹ Ammian. xxii. 11. 3; Dion Chrys. Orat. xxxii.; Dion Cass. xxxix. 58; Hadrian ap. Vopiscus, in Hist. Aug. Scr. ii. 719; Soc. vii. 13.

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western quarter he might see the forces of Alexandrian Paganism¹, of its worship and of its thought, concentrated in the towering pile of the Serapeion², which, long years afterwards, was to be literally the stronghold of its furious despair³. If he turned to the south-east, he would reach the Jewish district, where the indestructible race which at one time held two-fifths of the city, and gloried in its grand synagogue and in the legal authority of its ethnarch⁴, still, after many losses and sufferings⁵, held its own,—with its proverbial sharpness in overreaching a Gentile customer⁶, and its sleepless watchfulness for an opportunity of striking at the Church⁷. To the north of this ‘Jewry’ Athanasius passed much time, as a young student, in the ‘Didascaleion’ or Catechetical School⁸, so famous for a line of teachers including such names as Dionysius, Origen, and Clement: its traditions would encourage and urge him to become acquainted with Greek literature⁹; and thus,—apparently in the neighbouring Museum¹⁰, the ancient seat of the Alexandrian university,—he learned ‘grammar,’ logic, and rhetoric¹¹, read the Homeric poems¹², made some progress in Platonic studies¹³, and perhaps acquired the principles of Roman law¹⁴. His mind was prepared for future meditation on the

¹ See Ath. c. Gent. 10, 23; de Incarn. 45.

² Ruf. ii. 23; Clem. Alex. Protrept. 48; Ammianus, xxii. 16. 12. See Milman, Hist. Chr. iii. 68.

³ Soz. vii. 15.

⁴ Philo, in Flacc. 8; Jos. Ant. xiv. 7. 2. See Milman, Hist. Jews, ii. 133.

⁵ Philo, in Flacc. 9, Legat. 19; Jos. B. Jud. ii. 18. 8; Euseb. iv. 2.

⁶ Ath. Orat. c. Ari. iii. 35.

⁷ Ath. Encycl. 3.

⁸ Euseb. v. 10; vi. 3, 15, 26; Jerome, de Vir. Illustr. 36; Soz. iii. 15.

⁹ Euseb. vi. 18; vii. 7. Comp. Soc. iii. 16.

¹⁰ See Ammian. xxii. 16. 15; Matter, L'Ecole d'Alex. i. 287, 301; Newman, Hist. Sketches, p. 95 sq.; Merivale, Hist. Rom. viii. 234. The Museum had been greatly injured in the devastation of the Bruchion quarter in A. D. 272.

¹¹ Newman, in Athan. Treatises (Lib. Fath.), i. 52.

¹² See Ath. c. Gent. 16.

¹³ See Ath. de Incarn. 2, 43; c. Gent. 19.

¹⁴ Sulpicius Severus, ii. 36, even calls him ‘jurisconsultum.’

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hypotheses of pantheism and materialism, and eagerly took hold of the arguments from design to a Creator, and from yearnings after immortality to the existence of the soul¹. But all his early studies were subordinated to the object of becoming 'a scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven.' Christian theology constituted his chief interest²; and he must have already exhibited that high endowment which alone could make versatility truly powerful, and manifold cultivation truly precious,—a commanding and elevating simplicity of aim. And whatever he learned as an ecclesiastical student would come home to him with special meaning and vitality when he remembered how often the streets of his native city had been reddened with Christian blood. Those vivid anecdotes of Alexandrian martyrdom or confessorship³, which we read in the pages of Eusebius (whom Athanasius, as a boy, may have seen in Alexandria about A.D. 309) must have been familiar to all Alexandrian Church-people: and Athanasius must have been told, in his own childhood, how fierce a persecution had been lately rekindled,—how some of the brethren had been literally cut in pieces for their faith⁴. A deep impression, probably, was made on his mind by what he would hear of Phileas bishop of Thmuis, who suffered in A.D. 306, proclaiming his faith in the Divinity of the Crucified⁵: some years later, as we have seen, he listened to teachers who were soon to die for the same confession: and he may well have connected the steadfastness of his own bishop Peter with devotedness to One who, as Peter expressed it, 'being by nature God, became by nature Man⁶.' His acquaintance, whatever was its extent, with such heroic souls, would tend to form in such a soul as his the heroism not less true, nor less religious, which was to bear him so well through the 'long tragedy'⁷ of the future; it would fill him once for all with a deep sense of the realities of Christianity; and

¹ Ath. c. Gent. 27, 28, 30, 33.² See Theod. i. 26.³ Euseb. vi. 2, 3, 5, 41.⁴ Ib. viii. 12. Cf. Ath. de Incarn. 27.⁵ Ruinart's Act. Sinc. p. 519, ed. 1859. See Euseb. viii. 10.⁶ Routh, Rell. Sac. iv. 48.⁷ Hooker, E. P. v. 42. 5.

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his public course is best appreciated when we recognize in him the confessor's spirit. And even after the persecution was over, he would have frequent evidence of the hostility which Christianity, although again a 'licensed religion,' was still called upon to face. Those sharp Alexandrian mockeries which had not spared even kings and emperors were levelled ceaselessly at a religion which affirmed an Incarnation and gloried in a Cross¹, and whose votaries had lately been hurried in masses to a death of ignominy and torture. But another experience of a very different kind, most fruitful in its consequences, did much to intensify the religious convictions of Athanasius: this was his acquaintance with Antony. He tells us, in his 'Life'² of the great hermit, that he had often seen him; and although that reading of one passage which makes him say that he 'for some time attended on him, and poured water upon his hands,' may be considered doubtful, we know that afterwards Athanasius was described as an 'ascetic'³, and that when in later days of trouble he took shelter among the monks of Egypt, he found himself perfectly at home. He contracted an extreme admiration for monasticism, which will not surprise us if we consider that the spiritual enthusiasm of Christianity had found a most emphatic, although a one-sided expression, in such a life as was being led by men who had fled from a town-society at once tainted and brutalized beyond modern conception⁴, and had imitated the first Christians by actually 'giving up all' for Christ. In the character of St. Antony, the morbid and eccentric elements of monasticism were largely counteracted by a rare amount of wisdom, humility, and love. His sound moral judgment⁵, his serene courage, his deep tenderness, even the outward charm

¹ Ath. de Incarn. i, &c.

² 'Its substantial integrity' is undoubted. Newman, Ch. of Fathers, p. 176; Kingsley's 'Hermits,' p. 22. See Cave, Hist. Lit. i. 193. Such a book, indeed, would be likely to receive additions, in the way of marginal notes, from readers who had anecdotes of their own respecting Antony.

³ Ath. Apol. c. Ari. 6.

⁴ St. Chrys. in Oppugn. Vit. Mon. iii. 11.

⁵ See his sayings in Coteler. Eccl. Gr. Monum. i. 340 sq.

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of a face that never lost its bright tranquillity¹, and that would seem especially radiant when,—as Athanasius perhaps saw him,—he stood, conspicuous by his white cloak newly washed, in the very path of the Alexandrian præfect in the last days of the persecution²,—all this union of strength and sweetness would act irresistibly on the imagination and affection of such a youth as Athanasius: nor is it fanciful to think that in subsequent trials he may often have recalled Antony's sentiment, once expressed in Egyptian to younger monks, that 'the longest life of religious labours was nothing to the ages of ages and the crown³.'

But we must now look briefly at Athanasius's first appearance as a theologian. He wrote, for the benefit of a convert from Heathenism, a work consisting of two essays, 'Against the Gentiles' and 'On the Incarnation of the Word.' It appears that its date must be placed earlier than A. D. 319; for it does not allude to the Arian controversy, which broke out in that year. The first of the two treatises offers a refutation of Heathenism, and then argues constructively to Monotheism, and to the recognition of the Divine Son and Word. It exhibits the lively play of a young author's mind⁴, together with a characteristic attention to different aspects of one truth⁵, and a not less characteristic boldness in retorting on Pagans the charge of 'fatuity,' and in analyzing the various apologies advanced for a refined and sublimated polytheism. In the second treatise, Athanasius begins by stating the primary truth of the existence of one supreme Creator, and then shows how, as being all-good, He gave to man reason as a shadow of His own Word, and after 'man's first disobedience,' applied the one remedy for the ruin by a combination of Divine justice and benignity in the personal intervention of that Word, His Son, whose human life was absolutely spotless, and whose death was a world-redeeming sacrifice. The Cross—Athanasius argues—

¹ Vit. Ant. 67.² Ib. 46.³ Ib. 16.⁴ See the variety of illustrations, c. Gent. 5, 8, 31, 38, 43.⁵ E. g. see c. Gent. 1, 45, 33, 35.

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was indispensable, as the truest enhancement of Christ's glory ; and His resurrection could alone account for the moral triumphs of His religion. What mankind needed, an Incarnate God could alone bestow, and Christ alone has bestowed it: the success of His work in the regeneration of humanity is a manifest proof of His Divine Sonship and true Godhead. After dwelling triumphantly on this great subject, the writer urges his friend to study the Scriptures, but to remember that a preparation of heart and will is a condition of appreciating their sense ; and so concludes a treatise of which Möhler¹ has said that it was the first attempt ever made to present the doctrines and facts of Christianity in a philosophically religious form. 'By the sure tact of his noble and Christian nature, Athanasius refers everything to the Person of the Redeemer: everything rests upon Him: He appears throughout.' Already, in Dorner's words, he exhibited his 'intensely fervid' consciousness of 'the vital centre of Christianity' as constituted by 'the living Person of the God-Man, the Redeemer, in His totality²; a consciousness which went with him through life, lay at the root of his theological eminence, and supplied the chief motive for his earnestness in the controversy which broke out, as it appears, almost immediately after he had completed his first work, and—although somewhat under the usual age—had been ordained a deacon.

II.

It was in A.D. 319 that archbishop Alexander was informed of the dissemination, among Alexandrian Church-people³, of strange opinions derogatory to the dignity of the Son of God.

¹ In his 'Athanasius the Great.'

² Dorner, Person of Christ, 1st per. 2nd ep. sect. 2. c. 3. Cf. 3rd ep. s. 2. c. 1 (vol. ii. E. T. pp. 248, 333). See his analysis of the De Incarnatione. 'By the depth of his view of the fundamental idea of Christianity, Athanasius reminds us of the best Fathers of the second century . . . he surpasses them all, however, in clearness and scientific precision;' (p. 259.)

³ Soz. i. 15.

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Their author, it appeared, was Arius, a priest of mature age, who, after a period of misdirected and factious activity, had attained a high position as pastor of the oldest church in Alexandria¹. He was respected for his ascetic life, and admired for his eloquent preaching and dialectical ability; while his influence was enhanced by a dignified demeanour and a voice full of persuasive charm². A private conversation between the bishop and the presbyter had no effect: and Alexander found it necessary to assemble the clergy, and address them on the Unity of the Father and the Son. Arius, having by this time secured a large amount of support, boldly challenged the bishop's statements³, as involving that Sabellian confusion of the Son's personality with the Father's, which Dionysius, the most venerated of Alexandrian 'Popes,' had resisted with so much energy. He then argued that since a father must needs be prior to a son, the Son of God must once have been non-existent, and afterwards⁴, at a period inconceivably remote, have been called, by the Divine fiat, 'out of what had not previously existed.' The consequence, perhaps, was not expressed, but was inevitable: this 'Son' was only a creature, though of all creatures the most ancient and the most exalted. Such was Arianism in its outset: it rested on the assumption that the relation of priority and posteriority attaching to a human parent and child must hold good in regard to a Divine Fatherhood and a Divine Sonship⁵; and (as was afterwards repeatedly observed) it ended by destroying the reality of that Fatherhood and Sonship, inasmuch as no identity of nature could exist between the One Creator and the highest product of His creative will⁶.

¹ Alexandria already possessed what we call the parochial system, Epiph. Hær. 69. 1, 2.

² Ib. 3.

³ Soc. i. 5.

⁴ The 'generation' of the Son was thus viewed by Arius as an *event*, whereas the Catholic doctrine views it as an eternal *fact* in the Divine life.

⁵ Thus, a rationalistic element lay at the root of the theory, although Arius was less consistently rationalistic than Eunomius, Soc. iv. 7.

⁶ Athan. Orat. i. 9, 15, 26; ii. 2, 5; de Decr. 10. See Newman, Arians, p. 213, ed. 1871. Of course, the 'identity of nature' in a parent and child is inadequate to represent the inseparable unity of the Divine 'coinherence.'

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The clerical conference having come to no result,—a remarkable fact, which we may ascribe to the popularity of Arius, to a dread of ‘Sabellianizing,’ and to the influence of Origenistic modes of thought in the direction of an excessive Subordinationism,—Alexander formally summoned the priests and deacons of the city to sign a letter, in which he exhorted the partizans of Arius to ‘renounce their impiety.’ This vigorous step was followed up by the assembling of a Council of his suffragan bishops, nearly 100 in number, which drew forth from Arius and his friends, among whom were two prelates, a fuller exposition of their belief¹, and thereupon passed sentence of excommunication and anathema. Arius retired to Palestine, where he met with a certain degree of countenance from Eusebius the historian, bishop of Cæsarea: but he was more effectively befriended by another Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia in Bithynia, ‘under whose direction’ he wrote a cautiously worded letter of self-justification to ‘Alexander his blessed Pope and bishop,’ in which he spoke of the Son as ‘God’s perfect creature,’ but ‘not as other creatures,’ and as ‘born and created apart from time, and so as to be unchangeable;’ and criticized, as unspiritual and degrading, any language which derived Him from the Divine essence². Alexander and his clergy were exposed to many annoyances at home from Arian intriguers³, and from flippant Arian talkers, who asked the women whom they met in the streets whether a son could exist before he was born⁴. There were many letters to be written in defence of the doctrine denied by Arius, and in order to expose his real meaning: the most important of these, the ‘Encyclical⁵,’ has been assigned, on internal evidence,

¹ Including (Soc. i. 6) the statements that the Son was called the Word after an eternal impersonal Word,—was created to be an instrument in creating,—did not thoroughly know the Father. The assertion that He was capable of change from good to evil was hastily made, and soon recalled.

² See Athan. de Synodis, 16.

³ Theod. i. 4.

⁴ Ath. Orat. i. 22.

⁵ Soc. i. 6. The style of the Encyclical is unlike that of the letter of Alexander to Alex. of Byzantium, Theod. i. 4; Newman, Ari. p. 446.

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to the hand of Athanasius, now, apparently, archdeacon of Alexandria¹. Addressing itself to all Christian prelates, the letter insisted that the propositions of Arius were at variance alike with Scripture and with continuous Christian teaching: and in one sentence, eminently 'Athanasian,' called on its readers to 'hold aloof, as Christians, from those who spoke or thought in opposition to Christ.' Athanasius was among the forty-four deacons who, with thirty-six priests, signed this letter, as they had signed the earlier one: we cannot doubt that his constant sympathy and ready assistance were a powerful support to Alexander; but to ascribe them merely to loyal feeling for a superior, or grateful feeling for a benefactor, to polemical interest, or to ecclesiastical conservatism, or even to zeal for sincerely held opinions, would be gravely to misread his character, and to lose the lesson of his life. Constantine might say, in his letter to Alexander and Arius², that they were wrangling over a trivial question: Athanasius discerned the true greatness of the issue, in regard to Christianity³,—and to Christ. He knew that while Arianism promised much to various minds,—a rational theology, or a just estimate of some Scriptural texts, or a barrier against heretical or materializing conceptions of Deity,—yet in fact it was radically incoherent⁴, offered no permanent standing-ground, conceded either too much or too little as to the position of the Saviour⁵, showed an apparent tendency to Ditheism⁶, and therefore an affinity to Paganism, sought to measure the Infinite by human formulas, wrested some texts and ignored others, exaggerated the force of some Christian writers' dicta, while virtually opposing the broad stream of the Christian tradition and the foundation-principles of the Christian faith, which, by affirming the Divine Unity, the distinct personality of the Son, and His Divinity, included Him within 'the one indivisible essence'⁷, and

¹ Theod. i. 25, 'leader of the choir of deacons.'² Soc. i. 7.³ Bp. Kaye on Counc. of Nicæa, p. 151.⁴ See Waterland, Works, ii. 36 (Serm. 1), Dörner, Person of Christ, vol. ii. p. 243, E. Tr.⁵ See Chr. Remembrancer, Jan. 1847, p. 168.⁶ Ath. Orat. iii. 16; de Syn. 50.⁷ Newman, Ari. p. 260.

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presented to Christians a Christ whom they could consistently adore. He saw, therefore, that what was really involved was the belief in a really Divine Redeemer: and that Arianism was working in the interests of non-Christian thought, and of heresy such as of old had been stigmatized as 'God-denying'.¹ We who can look back on the strange history of Arianism since his time can appreciate, in some sense, the greatness of the struggle in which, thus early in life, he found himself involved. A theory which was to show a vitality so tenacious, an activity so versatile, to fight a long battle with the Church of the fourth century, to win a dominion among barbaric races, to hold Spain until the latter years of the sixth century, to start up after long slumbers amid the confusions of the sixteenth, to mould the belief of Milton and of Newton, to claim 'a home for itself in the Church of England in the person of Samuel Clarke',² to task the energies of such a foe as Waterland, to confront 'Trinitarianism' in a royal presence³, and to leave a deep mark on Irish Presbyterianism,—such a theory, however unsatisfactory to reason, but however repulsive to piety and to faith, must needs have been formidable when it first spoke out, and called forth Athanasius as its adversary. And it was his intense conviction that Christ was God Incarnate, and that His absolute claim on the devotion of Christian souls was at stake in the strife with Arius, which made Athanasius strong to meet the challenge.

That strength was acknowledged when, in the summer of A. D. 325, Athanasius appeared and spoke in the Nicene Council, not as properly one of its members⁴, but as one of the ecclesiastics who were present in attendance on their bishops, and were allowed to contribute to the discussions. 'He contended earnestly,' says Theodoret⁵, 'for the apostolic doctrines, and was applauded by their champions, while he

¹ Euseb. v. 28. Cf. Ath. Orat. i. 38; iii. 51.

² Liddon, Bamp. Lect. p. 18.

³ See Waterland's Works, i. 78.

⁴ The constituent members of the synod were bishops, or delegates of absent bishops.

⁵ Theod. i. 26. Compare Ath. Apol. 6.

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earned the hostility of their opponents.' We can picture him as he stood forth beside Alexander, while all eyes were gradually attracted towards that slight figure which Julian afterwards petulantly sneered at¹, and that beautiful countenance which Julian's great Christian fellow-student compared to the face of an angel²: we can imagine how he appealed, for the eternity and real Divinity of the Son, to Scripture and to immemorial Christian consciousness; how he mentally distinguished the various elements of the Council,—the large orthodox majority, including several whom he venerated as confessors in heathen persecution,—the 'moderate orthodox,' so to speak, who thought that his bishop might have been too stringent in dealing with Arius,—the Arianizers, of whom some were represented by the metropolitan of Cæsarea, and others, more pronounced, by him of Nicomedia,—and the very few thorough-going Arians; how his keen eyes watched, and his memory registered, the confusions and anxieties, the private conferences, the whispers, the significant looks, of the 'Eusebians,' as they agreed to accept, with a view to the proposed doctrinal formula, Biblical phrases regarding the Son, which they could interpret in their own sense³. He was probably prepared to find that their evasive ingenuity made it necessary, in the interests of 'the sense of Scripture⁴,' to insert into the formula, or Creed, one or two phrases outside the area of Scripture language. 'Let us say, The Son is begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, that is, of the *essence* of the Father.' The word *ousia* had been variously employed, in Greek philosophy⁵, for an individual substance, for a genus or species, or for matter. Christian writers had used it for the nature or

¹ Julian, Epist. 51.² St. Greg. Naz. Orat. xxi. 9.³ Ath. de Decr. 20; ad Afros, 5; Theod. i. 8. The Eusebians, at first, presented a document which was 'torn in pieces' as 'perverse' and heterodox, Theod. i. c.⁴ Ath. de Decr. 21. On Athanasius's profound reverence for Scripture, see de Decr. 32; c. Gent. 1; ad ep. Æg. 4; de Syn. 6.⁵ Newman, Arians, p. 190; Ath. Treatises, i. 152; Hussey on Soc. iii. 7; Zeller on Stoics and Epicureans, E. Tr. p. 121.

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being of God, and in this sense Eusebius of Nicomedia had denied that the Son was begotten of the Father's *ousia*¹: for that very reason, the leaders of the majority determined to affirm what he denied, and proposed to intensify the statement by adding that the Son was 'of one essence with the Father,'—the famous phrase *Homoousion*. This latter proposal, as Athanasius must have seen, was fraught with difficulty. In the first place, the term was a philosophical one, and, as such, might prove an embarrassing auxiliary to Christian truth. Again, it had been applied to individual members of one class²; viewed in this aspect, it might seriously compromise the strict Monotheism which lay at the root of Christianity. Thirdly, as *ousia* had sometimes been used for the being of God, considered in the light of what we call His personality, *homoousion* might, to some minds, suggest 'Sabellianism'³. Fourthly, it had been associated by Gnostics with the idea of partition of an existing 'essence,' and this sense had been invidiously imposed on it by Paul of Samosata, the heretical bishop of Antioch. And this very sophism, dexterously put forward by Paul, had induced his judges in the Council of Antioch (A. D. 269) to forbear using the term⁴; so that it could be described as, to that extent, discountenanced by Church authority. In reply to these arguments it could be said, 'The term is now put forward under necessity, in order to protect Scriptural terms from abuse: and it will be quite possible so to use it as not to encumber the faith with philosophic speculations'⁵. Moreover, the context of our proposed Creed, and the very form of the word itself⁶, will guard against any Sabellianizing perversion; and any materialistic

¹ Theod. i. 6. Contrast Theognostus of Alexandria, 'The Son is from the Father's essence, as a beam from light,' Athan. de Decr. 25. See too Tertull. adv. Prax. 4.

² Bull, Def. Nic. b. ii. c. i. s. 2; Newman, Arians, p. 192 sq.; Liddon, Bamp. Lect. p. 430.

³ Routh, Rel. S. iii. 323; Waterland, i. 285; Ath. Treat. i. 203.

⁴ Athan. de Syn. 45; Bull, D. N. ii. i. 10; Routh, Rel. S. iii. 361; Newman, Arians, p. 197.

⁵ Ath. de Syn. 51.

⁶ St. Ambrose, de Fide, iii. 126.

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sense will be excluded by the primary Christian conception of God as a Spirit and as One. It was as fallaciously used that the term was set aside at Antioch: it has been used in a sound sense by great teachers¹; and in that sense, as affirming the Son to be *truly* the Son, therefore truly God, uncreated and eternal²,—and therefore as a bulwark against Arianism³,—it is now proposed for the Council's acceptance.' These arguments prevailed: the 'Nicene Creed' was drawn up⁴, with anathemas appended to it against the maintainers of the several points of Arianism; and so the doctrinal question was settled, and, as Athanasius regarded it, 'the cause of religiousness towards Christ was upheld⁵.'

Two other questions, far less momentous, but not insignificant, were brought before the Council. (1) In regard to the long-standing 'Paschal controversy,' it was decided that Easter should always be kept on a Sunday,—that this Sunday should always be subsequent to the 14th day of the Jewish month,—and that the vernal equinox should be reckoned as preceding that 14th day⁶. More particular information, in regard to each year, was to be furnished by the bishop of Alexandria, with the help of Alexandrian science, to the Church of Rome, and by that church to 'remoter churches⁷.' (2) The other case was that of the schismatic Egyptian bishop Meletius, and his partisans. His character has always been more or less problematical. Athanasius, writing in A. D. 356, or, as some think, in A. D. 361, says that it is fifty-five years since Meletius began his schism⁸: and in another work, written about A. D. 350–2, he tells us that Meletius began it because he had been condemned

¹ See Ath. de Decr. 25. Cf. Tertullian, adv. Prax. 4.

² Ath. de Decr. 20; de Syn. 41, &c.

³ Euseb. of Nicom. had treated it as manifestly inadmissible; St. Ambrose, de Fid. iii. 125.

⁴ See it in Soc. i. 8; compare the differences between it and the revised edition put forth by the Council of Constantinople in A. D. 381.

⁵ Ath. de Syn. 54; comp. ib. 45, 48; de Decr. 20; Ep. ad Jov. 1 sq.; ad Afros, 11.

⁶ See Hefele, Hist. of Councils, b. ii. c. 2. s. 37.

⁷ St. Leo, Ep. 121.

⁸ Ath. ad ep. Æg. 22.

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in a Council, by bishop Peter, for various offences, and especially for an act of apostasy during persecution¹: on the other hand, Epiphanius (evidently relying on Meletian information) describes Meletius as a brave confessor, who broke off from Peter's communion out of zeal against an indulgent treatment of lapsed Christians². The authorities followed by Epiphanius are in various points proved to be untrustworthy: but some documents, first published by Maffei in the eighteenth century³, represent Meletius as having ordained some clergy outside his own diocese, on the pretext of an emergency caused by the persecution, and as having been censured by some eminent confessors, and by Peter, for this irregularity. The charge of apostasy was unknown to the Nicene Council, which regarded Meletius as having gone wrong through 'impetuosity': it may have gradually arisen out of the fact that he had come into collision with other prelates who became martyrs: and Athanasius, it seems, was too ready to believe a story which affixed a brand on the founder of a vexatious schism. The Meletians, in A. D. 325, were numerous, but showed some desire to be reconciled to the Church. The Council thought it best to treat them generously; their chief was received into communion; and all their other bishops were allowed to retain their episcopal rank, after receiving 'a holier imposition of hands,'—probably a reinstating benediction⁴,—and to succeed to any sees that became vacant, if they were duly 'chosen by the people,' and approved by the see of Alexandria⁵. Athanasius thought this course too lenient. 'In the Council of Nicæa the Meletians were, on whatever grounds,—for it is needless now to state the reason,—received into the Church Would that Meletius had never been so admitted⁶!'

¹ Ath. Apol. c. Ari. 59.² Epiph. Hær. 68.³ See Routh, Rell. Sacr. iv. 91 sq.; Hefele, Councils, ii. 2. 40.⁴ Tillemont, vi. 814. Valesius takes it of re-ordination.⁵ Soc. i. 9.⁶ Ath. Apol. 59, 71.

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On returning to Egypt, Alexander carried out this resolution of the Council, after receiving from Meletius a list of his twenty-nine episcopal supporters, with a statement of the number of Meletian clergy in Alexandria and the neighbourhood. Within ‘five months’ afterwards¹ Alexander lay on his death-bed. Athanasius was absent, having probably been sent by Alexander to Constantine’s court, on some Church business²: and we are told on the authority of Apollinaris of Laodicea³, whose father was an Alexandrian, and who was on friendly terms with Athanasius, that the dying prelate called for Athanasius by name. A namesake of his, one of the priests who stood around the bed, replied to the summons. Alexander paid no heed to him, but again and again repeated, ‘Athanasius!’ then, when no one answered, he mustered strength to say, ‘You think you have escaped, but there is no escape for you:’ thereby intimating, says Apollinaris, ‘that Athanasius was summoned to the struggle.’ No one, indeed, could wonder either that Alexander should thus recommend his faithful deacon as his successor, or that in so doing he should augur for him a career of difficulty and conflict. When Athanasius returned, the suffragan bishops met for the election; and, as they afterwards testified⁴, the great body of Alexandrian Churchmen, assembled in the church, persisted, for ‘many nights and days,’ in expressing their wishes,—‘Give us Athanasius, the good, the devout, the true Christian, one of the ascetics! he will be a bishop indeed!’ The majority of the prelates voted for him, ‘in the sight and amid the acclamations of the people.’ This testimony is the more emphatic, in that it does not conceal the fact that the bishops were not unanimously disposed in favour of the young archdeacon. Thus, in the words of Gregory Nazianzen⁵, ‘by the suffrage of the whole people,’—a phrase which cannot mean less than the earnest resolute manifestation of

¹ Ath. Apol. 59.² Epiph. Hær. 68. 6.³ Soz. ii. 17.⁴ Encyclic. of Egyptian Bishops in Ath. Apol. 6; Gibbon, iii. 71.⁵ Greg. Naz. Orat. xxi. 8.