

**Soteriology in Athanasius of Alexandria**  
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**Introduction:**

Athanasius (c. AD 296-373) has been seen as a representative of those who embodied Christianity during the fourth century. As Newton puts it, “Athanasius did more than anyone else to bring about the triumph of the orthodox Nicene faith over Arianism, a struggle to which he devoted forty-five years and for which he was exiled five times.”<sup>1</sup> His struggles against paganism promoted by Roman Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus (c.296-363) known as “Julian the Apostate” caused him to exile from Alexandria. However, in his defense of the theology of salvation, “the bishop was not deeply disturbed by the Emperor’s displeasure, for it is reported that he regarded the exile which Julian imposed upon him to be nothing more than a cloud that would soon pass away... The bishop found a much danger in the Arian reduction of Christ to the status of a demigod . . . because of their ascription of saving power to a creature [because] they claimed that the Son of God was a creature”.<sup>2</sup>

Athanasius’s struggles with the Arian Christology, especially in his teaching on salvation, confronted, on one hand though indirectly, the pagan teaching of Julian, and on the other hand, it dealt with “the anathema appended to the symbol of the Nicene Council”<sup>3</sup> which expressed the opinion of Arius<sup>4</sup> and his followers. Arianism “believed in a single supreme God who made

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<sup>1</sup>John Newton, “Athanasius,” in *Who’s Who in Christian History*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup>James Breckenridge, “Julian and Athanasius: Two approaches to Creation and Salvation,” *Theology* 76, no. 632 (February 1973): 73-74.

<sup>3</sup>S. Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, *The Orations of S. Athanasius Against the Arians* (London: Griffith Farran & Co. 1800?), 8.

contact with the world through lower creatures such as the Son and the Spirit. The Son was a suffering divine hero who was to be worshipped, very much like the hero gods of the Greeks.”<sup>5</sup>

Our focus in the following pages will be on Athanasius’s teaching on salvation<sup>6</sup> (without necessarily confining it to his response to the Arians and Julian) as found in his apologetic and pastoral duties. His soteriology is found in his concepts of divinization or deification on which our attention will more focused. Even though the focus will be on theological discussion, few words will be said on the implication of this experience into the community life according to Athanasius. For him, theology was never disassociated with practical living<sup>7</sup> exemplified in ascetism “que Athanase pratiqua très tôt, dans l’ entourage de l’ évêque Alexandre son père.”<sup>8</sup>

## I. Sin and the Concept of Divinization in Athanasius

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<sup>4</sup>The anathema runs as follows: “The Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes those who say that there was a time when the son was not; and that he did not exist before He was born; and that he was made of what did not exist; or that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence from the Father, or that He was created, or is variable and changeable.” (*The Orations of S. Athanasius Against Arians*, p.8).

<sup>5</sup>Newton, “Athanasius.”

<sup>6</sup>It has been said that “Athanasius was not a systematic theologian: that is he produced no many-sided theology like that of Origen or Augustine. He had no interest in theological speculation, none of the instincts of a schoolman or philosopher. His theological greatness lies in his firm grasp of *soteriological* principles, in his resolute subordination of everything else, even the formula *ὁμοούσιος*, to the central fact of Redemption, and to what that fact implied as to the Person of the Redeemer.” (*Prolegomena*, chapter IV, § 1 “The Theology of S. Athanasius,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. iv* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971, p. lxix).

<sup>7</sup>According to William Kerr, “theologically and practically, Athanasius owed much to his mentor Alexander. The bishop grounded the young man in Eastern theological methodology and yet protected him from the common Alexandrian danger of esoteric speculation by keeping him engaged in pastoral duties. Thus Athanasius was able later to keep a right balance between his profound appreciation for the absolute nature of truth and the significance of this truth in the life of saints and sinner alike.” William Kerr, “Athanasius,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 1964 ed.

<sup>8</sup>Annick Martin, “Athanase d’ Alexandrie, L’ Eglise d’ Égypte et les Moines: À Propos de la vie d’ Antoine,” *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 71, no. 2 (Avril 1997): 172.

Students of Athanasius are mostly frustrated by the lack of an organized written corpus of what could be called “Athanasian Theology”. Athanasius had no intention of writing a theological system. He only found himself defending the truths of the Scripture against the then Arian heresies that threatened the deity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Unlike today’s theologians, Athanasius did not have a heap of books from which he would build his own teachings. He relied on the Scripture and tradition in dealing with non-orthodox teachings that surfaced in the church. He ‘taught the right teaching. Whatever he taught was, and still is the right and exact Orthodox teaching of the church. In spite of the fact he lived in the Fourth Century and that there were not many Christian books in his time, yet he was able to absorb the teaching of Christ transmitted to the church through tradition and the Holy Scriptures, to understand it and to assimilate it, and to express it rightly and accurately and honestly. Athanasius was one among the few who are recognized by the Church as teachers and saints at the same time.’<sup>9</sup> Kerr is right that “the writings of Athanasius were tools forged in the heat of battle”<sup>10</sup>. However, a cursor reading of his writings reveals the apologetical ability of Athanasius and his methodological finless. In each of his chosen area of writings, Athanasius was “severely methodical and as a scientific theologian, he made a permanent contribution to Christian thought.”<sup>11</sup>

While Athanasius did not have a systematized doctrine of sin, his understanding of evil or sin is clearly stated in his defense *Against the Heathen* 2:1-2:

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<sup>9</sup>Bishop Gregorius, “The Significance of Saint Athanasius for the Coptic Orthodox Church,” in *Politique et Théologie Chez Athanase d’ Alexandrie*, éd. Charles Kannengiesser (Paris, France: Éditions Beauchesne, 1974). 20-21.

<sup>10</sup>Kerr, “Athanasius.”

<sup>11</sup>John Alzog, *Universal Church History*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio: Robert Clark & Co, 1874), 494.

Evil has not existed from the beginning. For even now it does not exist in the saints and does not exist at all in their sphere. But men started to conceive of it later on and to imagine it against themselves. Hence they shaped for themselves the idea of the idols, regarding as being what is not. For God, the Creator and King of the universe who is beyond all being and beyond human imagination, since he is good and supremely beautiful, made through His own word, our Saviour Jesus Christ, human race in His own images.<sup>12</sup>

In his studies of the use of sacrificial ideas in the Greek Christian writers Young notes that, “Athanasius maintains that evil is non-existent, and yet his whole attitude reveals his consciousness of being in conflict with the power of evil.”<sup>13</sup> Although evil did not really exist<sup>14</sup>, evil still had such power that people were held in bondage of it, a bondage from which they could not free themselves. “When mankind first abandoned the contemplation<sup>15</sup> of God, the Creator of all that truly is, they turned to their own bodies and their bodies’ sensations. These they then, wrongly, began to conceive and value as independent from God.”<sup>16</sup> And in his *Contra Gentes* 7 says “The soul of men, shutting the eye through which it could see God, imagined evil . . . Thus evil’s invention occurred to men and was formed from the beginning.”<sup>17</sup> For him, man’s

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<sup>12</sup>E. P. Meijering, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 16-17.

<sup>13</sup>Frances M. Young, *The Use of sacrificial ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), 199.

<sup>14</sup>According to Pettersen, when Athanasius writes of evil being ‘unreal’ or ‘non-existent’ (C.G. 4), “he means that it is unreal and non-existent in the primary sense of the words: it is not real and existent as the eternal God is. It is also unreal and non-existent in the secondary sense of the words; it is not real and existent as a virtue like goodness in whose existence comes of participation in the non-contingent Source of all goodness. It is unreal and non-existent in the sense that a person, being a creature, cannot bequeath being to anything. For being contingent, a person cannot give life.” Alwyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 64.

<sup>15</sup>As one of the “‘deification’s cognates’ (virtue, knowledge, vision, light, glory, grace, adoption, participation, and union), contemplation (θεωρία) provides a natural link between knowledge and vision because it seems to partake of the quality of both: the term *contemplation* expresses an activity that is both a form of knowing and a form of seeing. And according to Gregory (II.3.23), ‘contemplation is supernatural; the one who is never separated from eternal glory is the one who knows and possesses God by a true contemplation that transcends all creatures. Thus, the light that comes from contemplation differs radically even from knowledge derived from the scriptures.’” A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 106-112.

<sup>16</sup>Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 3 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. iv, 5).

turn to himself deprived him the knowledge of the true God. Instead of worshiping God, man worshipped himself and thus entered into idolatry.

Athanasius sees each individual affected by this evil. He “stresses that everyone’s failure to worship the one true God, with the consequent loss of true self-knowledge, or responsibly living in community and of rightful respect of God’s creation, is without excuse.”<sup>18</sup> And the remedy for this failure is a personal response, that is, “repentance: a free, willing and responsible turning from the mind’s idolatrous figments to seeing the world from the divine perspective and thereby recognizing again the one true God who reveals himself therein.”<sup>19</sup>

Based on this concept of evil, then Athanasius’s view of salvation was that of restoration and recreation. Unlike the doctrines of Trinity and Christology, the doctrine of salvation was widely accepted during the early period of the Church history. “The biblical data was accepted unanimously everywhere with no differentiation into the schools of thoughts or the theories of atonement to which modern theologians are accustomed. Instead, the early Fathers looked at salvation from its different aspects.<sup>20</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons looked at Salvation as the “restoration of human nature. By becoming man (Incarnation), Christ sanctified all humanity and restored it to its original status...The Idea of restoration lies at the root of two of the theories of redemption; *recapitulation and deification*. Irenaeus summed up his concept of salvation in the phrase that Christ “through his transcendent love, become what we are, that He might make us

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<sup>17</sup>Alvyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 63.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Rodolph Yanney, “Salvation in St. Athanasius’s On The incarnation of the Word,” *Coptic Church Review* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 44.

what He is Himself.”<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus looked at “*Christ as Victor*”<sup>22</sup> while Tertullian in the third century looked at salvation and redemption from ‘legal’ or ‘forensic’ aspects in which “Christ is regarded as a substitute who endures God’s punishment instead of Humanity, rather than as its representative and he was the first to coin the term *satisfaction*”<sup>23</sup> to describe Christ’s work, though not in the exclusive way in which it was used in the Middle Ages.”<sup>24</sup>

Unlike most of the Western Church fathers who “focused upon sin and treated Christ as the atoning victim, who reverses the fall of Adam,”<sup>25</sup> Athanasius’s theology went beyond the mere abolishing of sin and penalty by the doctrine of satisfaction and atonement of his predecessor. He instead argued that the nature of man must be changed for salvation to be realized in human. “He keeps repeating that sin resulted in two major consequences: the change of human nature and the fall of man into the grasp of death. Any salvation, in order to be true to its name, has to take care of both problems.”<sup>26</sup> Influenced by Neoplatonic Philosophy<sup>27</sup>, Julian taught that

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<sup>21</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5, Preface (*Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A. D. 325*, vol. 1, eds, Alexander Robert, and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973, 526).

<sup>22</sup>Based on Romans 7:4; 1Cor. 15:23, 26; Phil. 2:10, Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14-18, many early Fathers saw salvation as a victory of the devil and over the powers of sin. “Irenaeus referred to Adam and Eve as mere children who were early seduced by Satan. As a result, they became captives of sin, death and Satan. The Church Fathers have used various examples to describe how Christ conquered these Satanic forces in order to free the captives” (Yanney, 45).

<sup>23</sup>In the beginning of the twelfth century, “St. Anselm of Canterbury, through his treatise *Cur Deus Homo* caused a major shift in the concept of salvation, which since then had a great impact on both the East and West. He was right in repudiating the notion that the devil had rights over fallen humanity. However, he established the *doctrine of satisfaction* to describe Christ’s death as a vicarious satisfaction to the Father for the sins of the world” (Ibid, 46).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Rowan A. Greer, “Christ the Victor and the Victim,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 53, no1-2 (January-April, 1995): 1.

<sup>26</sup>Yanney, 48.

Salvation does not consist in man *becoming* (emphasis is original) divine. Rather, salvation consists in man acting upon the knowledge that he is divine by virtue of his reason. Such knowledge is attained through philosophy which, according to Julian, ‘consists in despising the body and keeping the mind on divine and pure thoughts.’ The knowledge which is derived from such discipline is absolutely necessary for salvation.<sup>28</sup>

One would say that the problem of Julian was that of the Gnostics who “taught that those men destined for salvation had to understand their real nature and origin as sparks of the divine trapped in the material world from which they were offered a way of escape; the human predicament was the result of a cosmic accident or a pre-mundane act of *hybris* which imprisoned the unfortunate spirits in an alien environment; liberating knowledge or *gnosis* was what the gnostic offered as the way of salvation.”<sup>29</sup> It is against this kind of salvation, which is found in a created world and by human effort that Athanasius fought against. Against both the Gnostics and

Against Arian subordinationist theology, Athanasius insisted that the Logos<sup>30</sup> was *homoousios* with the Father; i.e., fully and eternally divine. Only God could effect the

<sup>27</sup>“Within the context of Neoplatonic thought, no matter how corrupt or spiritual insensitive man may appear to be, the solution to the human predicament is to be found within man himself. Such a belief is based upon the assumption that man, like the universe, is an extension of God. There is no radical discontinuity between the divine and the human. According to Julian, the soul is ‘akin to and related to the gods.’ The basis of this kinship is rationality. Reason is that which rules; the irrational is that which is ruled” (Breckenridge, “Julian and Athanasius, p.75).

<sup>28</sup>Breckenridge, 76.

<sup>29</sup>Frances M. Young, “Redemption — The Starting-point of Christian Theology —I,” (*The Expository Times* 88, no. 12 (September 1977): 360.

<sup>30</sup>As Bercot is right when he says “it would be quite difficult to understand most of the early Christian writings without some appreciation of the meaning and significance of the Greek word *logos*, particularly as a title of Christ. Since our English translations usually translate *logos* as “Word” when this title is applied to the Son, English-speaking Christians usually fail to appreciate the term *logos* and its significance. The Moffatt version of the New Testament, however, often leaves *logos* untranslated when it is used as a title for the Son (Jn. 1.1; Rev. 19:13). Moffatt left the term *logos* untranslated because in Greek that term means far more simply ‘word.’ Its ranges of meaning could include ‘reason,’ ‘rational principle,’ and even ‘mind.’ Early Christians used the term *logos* extensively when speaking about the Son of God. When John refers to the Son as being the Logos of God, the early Christians understood him to mean that the Son is the eternal Rational Principle of the Father, the Father’s counselor before all ages.” David E. W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Belief* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), x-xi.

salvation of humanity, exaltation beyond the limitations of human nature which Athanasius spoke of as deification: *theōsis or theopoiēsis*. The Incarnation of the Deity himself raised mankind to be able to share in the very life and glory of the Godhead. Athanasius became the spokesman of the classical doctrine of Christian divinization: ‘God became man in order that man might become God’ [*De Incarnatione Verbi* 54:3]<sup>31</sup>

Athanasius did not invent the idea of deification. It was “by far the most widespread understanding of salvation in the early centuries of the church Catholic.”<sup>32</sup> This idea was found among the Greek cultic belief and philosophical systems. As Norman puts it,

Although at first deification was ascribed to a choice few, in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. the cult of the heroes and the dead was expanded, along with the growth in the idea of the immortal soul. Nevertheless, until the rise of the Mystery Religions, an actual exaltation to the level of the gods was confined to heroes or rulers such as Alexander. The notorious orgiastic rites and feasts of the Dionysian cult symbolized the attainment of union with the god. Orphism was also centered on sacred feasts, but included purification aimed at liberation of the soul from the body. The doctrine that the nature and origin of the soul were entirely divine is seen for the first time in Orphism, and divinization became a restoration to the original state of purity from materiality.<sup>33</sup>

Even though this idea of divinization has been misunderstood or ignored by theologians, it has both a spiritual and a physical meaning in the teachings of Athanasius. As Greer puts it,

‘Divinization’, though often given a mere spiritual significance, has two aspects for Athanasius. It is the knowledge of God, a knowledge which requires the likeness of knower and known because of the Platonic axiom that like is known by like. And this knowledge is the perfect contemplation of God, a knowing of the good that enables humans to do the good. Thus knowledge is equated with moral virtue and is a way of speaking of the moral and spiritual dimensions of redemption. Divinization, however, is also ‘incorruption.’ The term has a physical meaning and is Athanasius’s way of speaking of the resurrection of the body. It is easy enough to see how Athanasius relates to the way in which the New Testament describes redemption. Moral and spiritual concepts—reconciliation, justification, becoming children of God, knowing, loving, seeing God—correlate with the physical nature of resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Keith Edward Norman, “Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1980), iii. The

<sup>32</sup>Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: 1971), 153.

<sup>33</sup>Norman, 12-13.

<sup>34</sup>Greer, 3.



The adoption of the notion of deification in the Early Fathers “has been attributed to the pressure to outdo their pagan opponents in superlatives describing Christian salvation or simply to explain Christian concepts in terms that pagans could understand, i.e., in a missionary endeavor.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the fact that “Athanasius is not generally considered an original or innovative theologian, his emphasis on this concept and its organic necessity to his system is unique”<sup>36</sup> and this divinization, that is, “the doctrine that man’s ultimate destiny and fulfillment is to become like God forms the heart of Christianity for Athanasius.”<sup>37</sup>

Of course one should remember that prior to Athanasius, there was no clearly outlined doctrines of salvation or redemption of man in this early stage of the church. The doctrines of Trinity and the Person of Christ were more prominent. “It is reasonable, at the same time to claim that Athanasius’ treatise *On the Incarnation* gives us the basic perspective”<sup>38</sup> in the doctrine of salvation through his concept of divinization.

## II. Incarnation & Salvation

In speaking of the importance of the Incarnation for our salvation, Athanasius clearly states that “For of His becoming Incarnate we were the object, and for our salvation He dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body.”<sup>39</sup> For Athanasius and other early Church fathers, “there is no particular moment or event in the life of Christ that takes precedence

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<sup>35</sup>Norman, 47.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>38</sup>Greer, 3.

<sup>39</sup>*Incarnation of the Word* 4:3 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second series, vol. 4, p. 38).

over or can stand alone to bring salvation without the rest.”<sup>40</sup> They maintained that “the acts Christ wrought for our salvation include his conception, birth, baptism, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, sending the Spirit and second coming. The incarnation as a whole restored humanity.”<sup>41</sup> As Torrance puts it,

This understanding of Jesus Christ not as God *in man* but as God *as man* meant that Athanasius had to understand the humanity of Jesus Christ in a profoundly vicarious manner. He understood the humanity of Jesus Christ as the humanity of him who is not only Apostle from God but High Priest taken from among men, and the saving work of Christ in terms of his human as well as his divine agency—it is the human priesthood and the saving mediatorship of Jesus Christ in and through his human kinship with us that Athanasius found so significant.<sup>42</sup>

For Athanasius, “if the original state of man was on a divine level, from which he has fallen so as to be subject to death and corruption, then the Incarnation serves a double role. As both God and man, Christ pays the ransom due on man’s part for sin by his own death, and reforms the image of God within humanity, restoring him back to the level of deity.”<sup>43</sup>

Athanasius teaching on salvation is based on lost of the salvific knowledge of God which was seen as “a capacity requiring full actualization and as a means towards effecting incorruption, an idea which revolves around the Stoicizing notion that the soul or mind is the governing principle of the body and its passions.”<sup>44</sup> Athanasius recognized the “problem of man’s inherent rottenness and need for re-creation”<sup>45</sup> or restoration of man to the status that

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<sup>40</sup>George Bebawi, “St. Athanasios: The dynamic of Salvation,” *Sobornost* 8, no 2 (1986): 29.

<sup>41</sup>Yanney, 49.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 228.

<sup>43</sup>Norman, 95.

<sup>44</sup>Greer, 4.

<sup>45</sup>Frances M Young, “Redemption — The Starting-point of Christian Theology —I,” *The Expository Times* 88, no. 12 (September 1977): 362.

would allow him to contemplate God and worship him as the true God. Only ‘the contemplation of God empowers the human mind to fulfill its task of governance not only in a moral fashion by healing the passions but also in a physical fashion by rendering the body incorruptible.’<sup>46</sup>

According to Athanasius, a creature cannot accomplish this restorative act of man. “The renewal of humanity according to the image of God required the appearance of the Word, God’s image, among human beings, and the restoration of human knowledge of God required that this Word use a body to make himself known to human beings now attuned to their physical senses.”<sup>47</sup> Only God alone can accomplish this great task. It is therefore clear that “the incarnate Word *restores* the knowledge of God lost by Adam and Eve and bestows upon human nature the incorruption designed for humanity but never attained by Adam and Eve, who fell before they had grown into the resurrection-life.”<sup>48</sup> With the historical event of Incarnation, humanity escapes its fate and regains its hope. Young summarizes Athanasius account of man’s fate and hope as follows:

God brought forth everything from non-existence or non-Being by the power of his Word (Logos); and man in particular he endowed in a special way with the Logos, his own image and likeness. The Logos imparted to man both life and knowledge. By deliberate disobedience, man forfeited the gift of the Logos, with the result that he is not only lost in ignorance, darkness and idolatry, but also is drifting back into non-Being, the nothingness from which he was created. Unless human nature has the Logos restored, it will be annihilated; if is re-endowed with the true Logos of God, it will be divinized, and this restoration has in fact taken place in the incarnation, when the Logos was united with human flesh.<sup>49</sup>

Athanasius sees the fall of man as the reason for the Incarnation of the Word. For him,

<sup>46</sup>Greer, 4.

<sup>47</sup>Incarnation of the Word 13-16.

<sup>48</sup>Greer, 4.

<sup>49</sup>Young, “Redemption,” 362.

The incarnation was a decisive event in the process of salvation. God himself acted by pulling down the barriers to his fallen creature and bringing to light life and immortality, with the knowledge of his true nature. A demigod would have been of no use to man. The moral aspect of the process of Redemption, the idea of the knowledge of sin, of atonement, and the forgiveness of sin, are of only secondary interest to Athanasius. Salvation from death and the life-giving fellowship with God are central.<sup>50</sup>

According to Athanasius, “God made man for incorruption, but man fell away and death reigned supreme. The Word called them into being, but by turning away from their Creator, the only source of their being, they declined into a state verging on non-existence and corruption. Man is mortal, but through his likeness to the Self-existent One, he would have been immortal, had he not fallen.”<sup>51</sup> In disputing against the Arians<sup>52</sup> on the reason why the One who existed in the form of God became man for our sake, it was clear, according to Athanasius, that

Our redemption from sin and from death must have been impossible had not God Himself vouchsafed to be made man. We should have remained forever in the region of the death; we never could have ascended into heaven; we should have lain in Hades. Therefore in those expressions, ‘God hath highly exalted Him,’ and ‘He hath given Him a Name, the Apostle chiefly considered what was done for our sakes and on our account.’<sup>53</sup>

For Athanasius, Christ’s “coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men.”<sup>54</sup> In his Second Oration, 55, Athanasius gives an extensive reason for the

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<sup>50</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1998), 72.

<sup>51</sup>T. Herbert Bindley, trans. Athanasii, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei: Athanasius On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1903), 23.

<sup>52</sup>As Campenhausen puts it, “Athanasius had realized the scope and significance of the theological conflict from the outset. The Arian doctrine of ‘createdness’, that is, the no longer essentially divine nature of the Redeemer, was for him not the questionable or perverse solution of a theological problem but the end of the Christian faith itself, the betrayal of everything the Church had been concerned with from the very beginning.” Campenhausen, p. 71-72).

<sup>53</sup>S. Athanasius, *The Orations of S Athanasius*, 57.

<sup>54</sup>Archibald Robertson, trans. *St. Athanasius on The Incarnation* (London: D. Nutt, 1891), 7.

Incarnation. “This” he said, “was the reason why the Savior come among men, to bear witness to the truth of God, to die upon the cross for our redemption, to raise us up from the dead, and to defeat all the machinations of the devil. Had it not been for these ends, He had never assumed our flesh.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike the Neoplatonism that promotes rationality as the agent of salvation, Athanasius “reminded his readers that the power of salvation does not reside within man. But he also reminded them that the agent of salvation is not incorporeal. An incorporeal Savior could not be apprehended by man, since the soul has dulled its spiritual sensitivity. Therefore the incorporeal Word has condescended to reveal himself in a human body so that eyes which are enslaved by things of the flesh will discover God in the flesh. The Word, Athanasius says, was “humanized that we might be deified.”<sup>56</sup> In summary, Athanasius causes of the incarnation could be summed up as follows:

No other could change corruption into incorruption but the Creator. No other could restore the man the lost Image but the express Image of the Father. No other could make mortality immortality but the very Life Itself. No other could teach us about the Father but the Son Himself. But He came also especially that the debt of death due from all might be cancelled. But the indwelling of the Word His body became incorruptible; and thus in Christ’s body the death of all was fulfilled, and death and corruption extinguished forever.<sup>57</sup>

### **III. Deification: Salvation in the Sense of a Holistic Restoration**

The term recreation/restoration is of importance in Athanasius’s soteriology of man. In comparing the work of Christ and of the Greek gods, Athanasius asks the question: “But what is this to what was done by the Savior, in that, instead of healing a wound, He modified a man’s

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<sup>55</sup>St. Athanasius, *The Orations of S. Athanasius Against the Arians*, 147.

<sup>56</sup>Breckenridge, 80, paraphrasing *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 54:3.

<sup>57</sup>T. Herbert Bindley, *De Incarnatione* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1903), 29.

original nature and restored the body whole.”<sup>58</sup> In his letter *Ad Epictetum* 7, Athanasius ascertains that

But the Saviour having in very truth become Man, the salvation of the whole man was brought about . . . But truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word Himself.<sup>59</sup>

For Athanasius, the aim of salvation was a total restoration of man even beyond his original status. As Yanney puts it,

Restoration of humanity reaches its summit in *theosis*. For Athanasius, as for the Fathers as early as the second century, *theosis* for man (literally deification or divinization) although it cannot be adequately translated, is an expression that is contrasted with incarnation in relation to God. He took what is ours and gave us what is his. The aim of incarnation of the Word was not merely the return of man to his state before the fall, but to a higher state which Adam failed to reach, which is *theosis*, a state of union with God, and becoming the sons of God.<sup>60</sup>

This holistic nature of salvation in Athanasius includes

The redeeming and sanctifying of man in his human affections and in his mind in Jesus Christ for they have been renewed in him *for our sakes* (*Contra Arianos* 2:53). The incarnational assumption of our fallen Adamic humanity from the Virgin Mary was essentially a sanctifying and redeeming event, for what Christ took up into himself, the whole man, he healed and renewed through his own holy life of obedient Sonship in the flesh, and his vicarious death and resurrection. Central to this understanding of salvation is the fact that our mind is sanctified and renewed in Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Comparing the salvation language used by both Eusebius and Athanasius, Young records these terminologies found in both writers: “They speak of illumination and revelation, the end of ignorance and darkness, the destruction of idolatry and immorality; they speak of purification

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<sup>58</sup>*Incarnation of the Word* 49: 2 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second series, vol. iv, 63).

<sup>59</sup>*Ad Epictetum* 7 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. iv, 572-73).

<sup>60</sup>Yanney, 50.

<sup>61</sup>Torrance, 230

from sin, of sacrifice and ransom, of victory over the powers of evil, of the conquest of sin and death, of the gift of immortality and incorruptibility, of ‘divinization.’”<sup>62</sup>

Athanasius attributes the task of recreation to the Holy Spirit. In his letter to Serapion, he spoke of the Holy Spirit as “l’ Esprit de sainteté et de renouvellement, tandis que les créatures participent à la sanctification et à la renovation.”<sup>63</sup> For Athanasius, the renewing or recreation of the believer is done through the power of the Holy Spirits. Salvation is individualistic and by freewill of man, though through the journey to salvation the believer is not left alone, but it is made “*through and with Christ in the Holy Spirit.*”<sup>64</sup> As for the means of deification of individual Christian,

Athanasius maintained the necessity of the individual’s ethical striving to take part in deification. The incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ were, albeit necessary and even primary, insufficient in and of themselves as historical events to actualize election to grace in the Augustinian sense. The general salvation must be appropriated by each individual through faith, baptism, and the works of love in order to be effective.<sup>65</sup>

The holistic element of deification was clearly expressed by Timothy Ware as quoted by Blaising in the following six classifications:

- (1) Deification concern every Christian, not just an elite group of saints. (2) Deification does not exclude the consciousness of sin but rather ‘presupposes a continued act of repentance. (3) The methods of deification are simply those of the normal Christian life, which Ware interprets as ‘go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God ‘in Spirit and truth,’ read the Gospels, follow the commandments.’ (4) Deification “is not a solitary but a social process” expressing the concomitant reality of love of God and love of neighbor. (5) The process of deification is both active and passive, involving both mystical contemplation and acts

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<sup>62</sup>Young, “Redemption,” 316.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Lebon, *Athanasie d’ Alexandre: Lettres à Sérapion sur la Divinité du Saint Esprit* ( Paris: Éditions du CERF, 1947), 63-64.

<sup>64</sup>Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 263-64 (Paraphrasing *Incarnation of the Word* 57:3).

<sup>65</sup>Norman, 109-10.

of compassion and love to others. (6). “Finally, deification presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Craig Blaising is right when he says that “deification is not a common term in the language of evangelical spirituality. To speak of a Christian or any other human being as being deified or divinized will most likely be met with an evangelical response of incomprehension or suspicion or both.”<sup>67</sup> It should be noticed that Athanasius’s soteriology rose in a time of great turmoil and changes and his method was of contextualization for the contemporary audience. His doctrine of salvation as deification “has received scant attention from modern historians of early Christianity.”<sup>68</sup>

Even though Athanasius’s deification has been accused of elevating man to the level of God, for him, “deification is a necessary corollary of the Christian faith, not a concession to pagan longings. His emphasis on participation, or deification by grace as opposed to nature, safeguards against both polytheism on the one hand and pantheism on the other. The deified Christian is never equal to God in essence, and remains subordinate by nature or is one identified with God so as to lose his individual consciousness or activity.”<sup>69</sup> There is a difference between

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<sup>66</sup>Craig A. Blaising, “Deification: An Athanasian View of Spirituality” (paper presented at the 39<sup>th</sup> National Conference of The Evangelical Theological Society, at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, 3 –5 December 1987): 8.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>68</sup>Norman, 2.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 206.



Christ and a deified Christian. Irenaeus also thought this concept of deification even though he himself never used the term *per se*. Quasten summarized Irenaeus ideas in these words:

The redemption brought by the Son of God has liberated mankind from the slavery of Satan, sin, and death. Moreover, it has summed up the whole of mankind in Christ. It has effected the reunion with God, the adoption by God, and the assimilation to God. But Irenaeus avoids the word 'deification'  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  in this connection. He uses the terms 'to be attached to God', 'to adhere to God', '*participare gloriae Dei*', but he avoids effacing the boundaries between God and man, as was customary in the pagan religions and in the Gnostic heresies. Irenaeus makes a distinction between *imago Dei* and *similitudo Dei*. Man is by nature, by his immaterial soul, an image of God. The *similitudo Dei* is the similarity to God of a supernatural kind which Adam possessed by a voluntary act of God's goodness. This *similitudo Dei* is effected by the divine Pneuma.<sup>70</sup>

In his *Four Discourses against the Arians*, Athanasius confesses that what Christ possesses by nature, the believer attains it by grace.

. . . for to become as the Father, is impossible for us creatures, who have been brought to be out of nothing . . . Though we are men from the earth, are yet called gods, not as the True God or His Word, but as has pleased God who has given us that grace; so also, as God do we become merciful, not by being made equal to God, nor becoming in nature and truth benefactors (for it is not our gift to benefit but belongs to God), but in order that what has accrued to us from God Himself by grace, these things we may impart to others, without making distinctions.<sup>71</sup>

It is clear therefore to conclude that the doctrine of salvation through deification lies at the heart of Athanasius's Christianity. The salvation of mankind or his recreation and renewal was the Incarnation. The salvation-recreation of man by God through the Christ Incarnate reaches its ultimate goal in the deification of the believer who by grace attains the higher level than that he lost by his sin of disobedience and idolatry.

Athanasius was not alone in thinking about the deification of believers. In the Early church and especially among the Church Fathers, the concept of deification was expressed

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<sup>70</sup>Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol.1, *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1950), 311.

<sup>71</sup>*Four Discourses Against The Arians* III.19 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. iv, 404*).

through other related terminologies such as the union of believers with Christ, the oneness with the Son and the Father, the joining of man to God, the union and communion of God and man, the partaking of nature and glory of God by man. Most of the church fathers “stressed that man realizes his true existence in the measure which he is raised up toward God and is united with him.”<sup>72</sup> We hear voices like that of Justin Martyr (c.160) declaring: “We have learned that only those who have lived close to God in holiness and virtue are *deified* [emphases mine].”<sup>73</sup> For Theophilus, if man “would incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he would receive immortality as a reward from Him. And he would become divine.”<sup>74</sup> And in his writings *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus reminded his reader that Christ “caused man to cleave to and to become one with God . . . Unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility.”<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus continues that

The Lord has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh. He has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man. He indeed imparted God to men by means of the Spirit. On the other hand, He has attached man to God by His own incarnation. He bestowed true and enduring immortality upon us at His coming by means of communion with God.<sup>76</sup>

Being a co-heir with Christ and in his companion confer to believers this status of deification. Hippolytus advising his readers to know who the true God is and by means of this

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<sup>72</sup>Panayiotis, Nellis, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of Human Person* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 15.

<sup>73</sup>Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin* 21, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 170.

<sup>74</sup>Theophilus, *Theophilus to Autolycus* 27, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 2, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 105.

<sup>75</sup>Irenaeus, *Irenaeus Against Heresies* 18:7 *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 448.

knowledge, “will be a companion of the Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by lusts or passions and never again wasted by disease. For you have become divine . . . . God has promised to bestow upon you, because you have been deified and begotten unto immortality.”<sup>77</sup>

It is very clear that for both Athanasius and his other contemporary Church fathers, deification meant that union with Christ and the believer characterized by a life that shuns immorality and enables man to share in the divine nature and attributes. Athanasius’ union was “une union intérieure. Par elle, seulement, l’homme croyant devient lui-même sujet des traits et des énergies divines selon la grâce; les traits et les pouvoirs divins deviennent ses propres traits et pouvoirs, et pour cette raison la mort ne peut plus le vaincre.”<sup>78</sup> In the early church as in Athanasius, deification of man, as noted Bercot, “refers to the Christian’s union with God in this life and to their becoming partakers of the divine nature after the resurrection.”<sup>79</sup> For Cyprian (c.250), What man is, Christ was willing to be—so that man may also be what Christ is<sup>80</sup> [and] what Christ is we Christians will be, if we imitate Christ.<sup>81</sup>

While the deification language may raise suspicions among contemporary theologians, a closer look at the bible may indicate the sources of this concept. Both in the Old and New Testaments, believers are called “gods” (Ps. 82:1), “partakers of Christ” (Heb. 3:14) and

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 1:1, 527.

<sup>77</sup>Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 5, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 153.

<sup>78</sup>Dumitru, Staniloae, “La Doctrine de Saint Athanase sur le Salut,” dans *Politique et Théologie Chez Athanase d’ Alexandrie*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Paris, France: Éditions Beauchesne, 1974).278.

<sup>79</sup>David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 199.

<sup>80</sup>Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian 6:11, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 5, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 468.

“partakers of divine nature”<sup>2</sup> Peter 1:4) In this passage, Peter offers the key biblical proof text that speaks of believers participating in divine nature. There is a union between the human and the divine. Man takes part in what is essentially divine. In his sacerdotal prayer, Jesus’ prayer to his Father: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You; that they also may be one in Us. (John 17:20,21).

Paul’s teachings on Christian maturity has nuance towards the deification or rather, in the words of St. Nicholas Kavalas<sup>82</sup>, a ‘Christification’ of a believer. Believers are encouraged to become “mature in Christ” (Co. 1:28), have the attitude of Christ (Phil. 2: 5), and to grow from infancy into spiritual “manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph.4: 13), and so acquire the mind of Christ (1Cor. 2:16) by renewing their mind and therefore able to know the mind of God, his desire, and will (Rom. 12:1-2). In these passages, “Paul is not advocating an external imitation or a simple ethnical improvement but a real Christification. The salvation of a man is something much wider than redemption; it coincides with deification.”

When Paul says, ‘It is not I who live but Christ lives in me’ (Gal 2: 20), what he means is that he is already “Christified” or to use Athanasius term, he is already deified because he has attained that knowledge and worship of the true God. He is no longer fixed in his own sensations but he lives in constant contemplation of God.

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 6:15, 469.

<sup>82</sup>St. Nicholas Kavalas, commemorated in the Orthodox calendar on 20 June, was born in Thessalonike around 1320-3 and became a monk at old age. In his treatise on *Life in Christ* Kavalas explains that the union and communion of a man with Christ is realized by man’s “being,” by knowledge and by the will. For Him, “Union with Christ, then, belongs to those who have undergone all that the Savior has undergone, and have experienced and become all that He has experienced and become”( *Life in Christ*, 521A). Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 107-140.

Despite his lack of systematized doctrine of salvation, Athanasius's teaching on salvation contributed to the protection of Christianity against the pagan culture of his time. His theology concurs with the biblical teaching on the image of God, the transformation of our mind and the future glorification of believers. It is therefore legitimate to say, in the language of Athanasius, that "the Christian even now is in a process of *θέωσις*, being progressively united to God, receiving the transformation of his/her corruptible and depraved nature and being adapted to eternal life. The way of *θέωσις* is the way of the Christian life, which is to say that *θέωσις* is the Eastern Church's doctrine of sanctification."<sup>83</sup> The language and notion of Christian deification in Athanasius may be uncomfortable today, but it is orthodox and biblical. His language may be unfamiliar to our developed theological terms, but the truth of his teaching is not wanting. Every Christian worthy the name of Christ in a world gone morally bankrupt through different forms of idolatry, just like that of Athanasius, should strive for this deification whereby his daily desire is to be Christlike in his character and be progressively transformed in the image of the Son of God as the day of judgment approaches.

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<sup>83</sup>Blaising, 3.

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