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The Two Soteriological Traditions of Alexandria[1]

Mr Hart, who is Lecturer in Systematic Theology in the University of Aberdeen, suggests that there is something to be learned for theology today from a study of christological and soteriological controversies in the early church.

The relationship between the Christian gospel on the one hand and the conceptual framework of any given society on the other, has posed a problem for the Church in every age at the level of missionary practice as well as that of theological enterprise. How, in our attempts to express or proclaim the message entrusted to us, ought we to use the language and thought forms of our day? How ought we to interact with what Lesslie Newbigin has recently referred to as the 'plausibility structure' of our culture (namely that combination of beliefs and assumptions which determines what our society can accept as plausible)?[2] How ought we, as Christians, to allow this *Weltanschauung* to affect our message, or, conversely, to be affected by it? The answer which we give to this evangelical and methodological question cannot but determine the shape and substance of our theology, for it is not simply a question about communication, but one which forces us back to consider the very nature and task of Christian theology, and so, ultimately, the nature of the gospel itself.

It is easy for us to forget, in our reading of the early Fathers, that their writings were motivated by these very same existential concerns. They too belonged to a culture to which the gospel was essentially alien and into which it entered as a 'hard saying'. They, like us, desired to see their fellow men and women discovering their salvation in Christ. They too faced the difficult question as to how this was to be achieved, how people were to

[1] A paper originally given as the opening lecture of the academic session in King's College, University of Aberdeen, October, 1987.

[2] In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London, 1986, 10f. Newbigin himself borrows the term from Peter Berger.

be brought into this new perspective on life. They too, that is to say, wrestled with the problem of the *contextualization* of the gospel. In what follows we shall be concerned largely with the nature of the responses made to this challenge by two particular representatives of the eastern patristic tradition, and with the consequences for their respective presentations of that which lies at the very heart of the Christian faith; namely the doctrine of redemption.

It is not uncommon for modern studies of the doctrine of redemption in the patristic East to suggest that, in its broad outlines at least, it represents a decisive shift away from the language and conceptuality of the New Testament.[3] The Fathers of the East, we are told, began their dialogue with the 'plausibility structure' of hellenism by adopting its basic presuppositions, dressing the gospel up in completely new clothes until it no longer resembled the 'good news' of the biblical witness at all. The influential work of Harnack in the field of *Dogmengeschichte* is all too evident here, even among scholars who would consider themselves far removed from his particular theological predilections. 'Theology', Harnack tells us, 'is dependent upon innumerable factors, above all the spirit of the time; for it lies in the nature of theology that it desires to make its object intelligible'.[4] Thus the Fathers, in their apologetic concern, employed readily the categories provided by the contemporary religious mind, this being a necessary consequence of the transfer of the gospel from jewish onto hellenic soil. In so doing they transformed the Christian message, introducing 'another gospel' in which man's problem was believed to lie not so much in his sinfulness and need of forgiveness, as in his attachment to the created realm of phenomena which detracted from his participation in the eternal heavenly realities, his deification (θεοποίησις) in fact.

The plausibility of this analysis rests, as is so often the case, in the fact that it embraces grains of truth as well as falsity. The Greek Fathers *do* employ the *language* of the philosophers in expressing their understanding of the Christian gospel. We ought not to expect it to be otherwise. They were, after all, doing their theology in a particular cultural matrix, within the setting

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[3] So, for example, Professor H. E. W. Turner, who is anything but *radical* in his approach, maintains that 'one of the most interesting features of the patristic period is the steady retreat from anything which could be described as authentic Paulinism . . . the monumental genius of St. Paul' he argues 'had little influence upon the theology of the early church'. *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, Mowbrays, London, 1952, 24.

[4] *History of Dogma* Vol.1 (ET London, 1895), Preface to the First Edition, x.

provided by the 'plausibility structure' of their day, and in order to express themselves at all they had to use language and conceptuality familiar to their fellows. The question is, however, not whether the Fathers *used* the language of their day so much as *how* they used it and what they *meant* by it! The failure of much modern patristic scholarship has, it would seem, been to take particular terms which the Fathers use, such as incorruption (ἀθανασία) and immorality (ἀφθαρσία) and talk of a bond or union (συναφή) having been established between God and man in the incarnation of the Logos such that man has been *deified*, and to interpret these *as a matter of course* out of the cultural context of hellenism, where their meaning is quite clearly at odds with the Evangel of the New Testament.

In what remains of this paper I will suggest that when the Alexandrian Fathers are considered carefully, and the way in which they engage with the contemporary world-view is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that *two very different strands* of theological tradition exist. One strand allows its presentation of the gospel to be decisively shaped by the 'plausibility structure' of the day, making extensive use of contemporary language and conceptuality in an essentially uncritical manner. The other makes use of much the same language, yet it allows the key elements of the gospel message to challenge the very foundations upon which the popular view of reality rests, pointing to a new basis for our view of the world, and thus transforming the meaning of certain words altogether in their application to the *kerygma*. The result, as we shall see, is two quite different presentations of the nature of salvation, and thus of the very essence of the gospel itself.

I. The Plausibility Structure of Alexandria

Alexandria in the late 2nd–early 3rd centuries was something of a melting-pot where philosophical and religious ideas were concerned.[5] The dominance of Platonism was still very much in evidence, however, whether in the guise of Middle Platonism or

[5] See Quasten, *Patrology* (Newman Press, Maryland, 1963), 6: 'This city of learning, famous for its monumental library and its schools of religion, philosophy, and sciences, was the place where Christianity came in greater contact with Hellenism than in any other metropolis of the East or West. Thus in this setting the fundamental problem of faith arose, the problem of faith and science and the connected problem of the philosophical foundation and defense of the faith'.

the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo.[6] The peculiar fusion of philosophical and religious elements, whereby the Platonist description of how it is that men come to know the truth became coincident with an understanding of how it is that men come to be saved, had begun already with Philo, but came to fruition in the philosophical-theology of the Neo-Platonists, not least in the writings of their chief protagonist Plotinus.[7] In Plotinus, therefore, we have to do with a pagan contemporary of the early Alexandrian Fathers, and with a system of 'redemption' which may be said to embody the influences of the contemporary mind. For this reason the Plotinian corpus provides a particularly useful control for our reading of his Christian contemporaries. Space forbids a detailed consideration of what is an extremely complex system, and I want to highlight very briefly three key elements of Plotinian Neo-Platonism.

Its dualistic understanding of the cosmos

The hallmark of all types of Platonism is its division of reality into two self-contained, and to some extent mutually exclusive and antagonistic categories.[8] On the one hand there is the realm of reality proper: namely the realm of perfect, eternal (and for Plotinus *divine*) universal Forms or Ideas. This is the realm of true being and hence of truth. On the other hand there is the imperfect realm of phenomena: the objects of sense, ever in a state of flux and 'becoming', and thus never the locus of 'truth' in the proper sense. True 'dogginess' is not to be found in individual dogs but in the perfect universal idea of what dogs ought to be; true humanity is not to be located in individual men and women, but in the *idea* of humanity, to which they conform more or less perfectly. The human mind in its quest for truth, therefore, must ever *withdraw* from the realm of phenomena, and seek the perfect ideas. Consequently the historical and phenomenal are relegated in the knowing process. Truth is to be had, in fact, in

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[6] On these traditions and their influence upon Christianity see, for example, Coplestone, *History of Philosopy*, Volume 1 (7th impression, Search Press, London, 1976) 451–463; Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers;* Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria;* Mclelland, *God and the Anonymous* (A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology), Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1976.

[7] The main body of Plotinus's writings are to be found in the *Enneads*, translated into English by Stephen Mackenna, Faber and Faber, London, 1956.

[8] See, e.g. *Enneads* II.4.iv, III.8.xi, V.1.vii, VI.5.ii.

inverse proportion to man's involvement with the empirical and historical.[9]

The absolute transcendence of God

In addition to this gulf between physical and spiritual, particular and universal, Plotinus introduces yet another which is distinctively his own. According to his understanding 'God' is made up of 3 aspects or hypostases—The One, the Divine Mind and the World Soul. These latter two properly belong to the *kosmos noetos*, the realm of perfect being and truth, and as such are knowable by the human mind, representing the apex of the vast Platonist ontological hierarchy, and hence the summit of the human quest for truth. In his discussion of The One, on the other hand, in an apparent attempt to safeguard the mystery of ultimate reality from this rationalistic epistemology, Plotinus insists that he (or it) is 'beyond being' (ἐπεκείνα τῆς οὐσίας).[10] He is thus *absolutely transcendent* even in relation to the other two divine hypostases. As such, therefore, the One is also beyond knowing. We cannot know what he is in his innermost essence, nor declare it. His 'being' (οὐσία) remains an absolute mystery and cannot be known by the mind.[11]

Thus Plotinus introduces a profound disjunction *within God himself* which has far-reaching implications for any theology which chooses to endorse it. On the one hand there are those aspects of God which are knowable by man through contemplation and dialectic. Yet these are not proper to the *being* of God, but only attach to that being which is itself utterly unknowable and unspeakable. We can know what God is towards us, therefore,

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[9] This is certainly the case for Plato as his parable of the Cave in the *Republic* Book Seven, 514a f. demonstrates. The release of man and his ascent to view the real world rather than the shadowy representations of his hitherto subterranean existence is a painful one and one to which he is resistant. It requires discipline, and is not to be construed as the fulfilment of some potentiality towards which man is naturally disposed. Whilst Plotinus seems perhaps to have a more optimistic view of the relationship betwen the phenomenal and the ideal, he nevertheless subscribes to the basic dualism inherent in Platonism, and insists that man's 'rational soul' must withdraw from the sensible in order to engage in the rational ascent to truth (see, e.g., V.1.iv).

[10] See V.1.viii. In fact Plato also uses this language to refer to 'the Good' (see *Republic* 509B). but Rist notes that for Plotinus the phrase has a stronger sense, indicating an absolute distinction between finite and infinite (see *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, C.U.P., 1967, Chapter 3).

[11] See VI.7.xxxviii; V.4.i.

but not what he is in himself.[12] Furthermore there can be no immediate interaction between this absolutely transcendent deity and the created realm in either its physical or spiritual aspects.

Salvation as man's ascent into the divine realm

Notwithstanding the unknowability and unspeakability of The One, Plotinus is at least able to tell us that he/it is the source or origin of all things, and that all reality is caught up in a process of *emanation* from and *return* to him. In particular he sees the rational soul of man as belonging by nature to the divine realm, and as involved in a gradual ascent from the realm of physical objects to the state of knowledge of the truth. This process is variously descibed as an ascension,[13] a withdrawal into the inner-man,[14] and a return to one's origins.[15] Herein, it might be suggested, lies the *redemptive* motif of Neo-Platonism. The human soul's transport or pilgrimage within the divine realm of Forms and its striving for union (reunion) with The One is certainly given a religious significance. Yet let it be noted that according to this model man does not need a *saviour* as such, since he is *already* divine, and must simply recognize his true being, and realize it ever more fully by the pursuit of truth and knowledge. The call of Plotinus is very much a call to *werden das was du bist*! When the soul thus purifies itself from the contamination of fleshy existence and embraces the contemplative way,[16] it participates (μετέχει) in the Divine Mind which is the source of all virtue, and, Plotinus notes, 'one would not be wrong in calling this state . . . likeness to God (ὁμοίωσιν . . . πρὸς Θεόν)'.[17]

II. Clement of Alexandria: Making the Gospel Relevant?

The reason for this all too brief sketch of Neo-Platonism is that

[12] This is the approach which has come to be known as Apophaticism or the Negative Way of theology. Yet we miss the point if we understand by this a theology which defines God in terms of what he is not. For Plotinus we must go beyond simply saying 'God is not x', and recognize that 'God is not *not* x' either! The whole point of this approach is the insistence that God is beyond prediction, whether positive or negative, and that therefore all language about him must be understood in a wholly different manner. For Plotinus The One transcends the multiplicity which is the very basis of all conceptuality and definition.

[13] See, e.g. III.viii.8, I.iii.1, IV.iii.4.

[14] See VI.ix.7, V.viii.13, I.vi.9.

[15] III.viii.ix.

[16] See, e.g. III.vii.1f.

[17] I.ii.3. See Armstrong (ed.), *Loeb Classical Library*, Plotinus I, 134–135.

when we turn to Clement of Alexandria, we find that his attempts to make sense of the significance of Jesus (who he is and what that means for our human situation) are couched in terms which have a somewhat familiar ring about them.

Apologetic method and the gospel

Titus Flavius Clemens was born *circa* AD 150 into a non-Christian family. As a subsequent convert from paganism to Christ, he was keen to draw others to his new-found faith, and sought to utilize the tools of his extensive philosophical education accordingly. His desire was to use philosophy, which, he maintains, 'is characterised by investigation into truth and the nature of things',[18] in order to set forth convincingly the truth concerning those things which Christians believe. This would seem to be the task of philosophical theology in any age. But it raises again the whole question of *how* this is to be done. How ought the theologian to address the culture of his/her day in such a way as to *convince* it of the Gospel's truth and relevance? What is the most appropriate and effective way of going about the missionary task?[19]

Clement's own response to this problem is one which determines the whole shape of his theology, and ultimately robs it of its distinctively Christian element. He seeks to meet his 'opponents' on their own terms; to begin by endorsing their presuppositions, their way of looking at the world, their 'plausibility structure', and to show that *within this framework* the Christian gospel is yet the most logical and attractive option. This approach is rooted in his characteristically positive attitude to the whole greek philosophical tradition, which he considers to be every bit as much a preparation for the coming of Christ as the history of the Jews, a part of that same providential purpose of God which shapes the understanding and life of the people of Israel to form what Professor T. F. Torrance has called the 'womb of the incarnation'.[20]

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[18] *Strom.* I.v.32.

[19] This question is usefully addressed in the contemporary context by, for example, T. F. Torrance's essay 'Theological Persuasion' in *God and Rationality*, Oxford, 1971, 195–206, and Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, 1986.

[20] See, e.g. *Strom.* VI.viii.67 where Clement suggests that philosophy was given by God to the greeks as 'a covenant peculiar to them' to prepare them for the coming of Christ. Also I.xvi.80: 'If the Hellenic philosophy comprehends not the whole extent of the truth . . . yet it prepares the way for the truly royal teaching . . . fitting him who believes in providence for the reception of the Truth'.

To be able to argue with an opponent on his/her own terms and win the argument would seem, at first sight, to be an attractive approach. If we can first secure certain shared points of view, a common denominator of basic agreement, perhaps we can *use* that as a stepping-stone on the way to persuasion or conviction. This is an approach which Christian apologetics has often sought to take. Doubtless it can, in some instances, be a successful approach. What we must recognize, however, (and what Christian apologetic and missionary enterprise has so often forgotten) is that there are instances where this approach is doomed to failure before it begins due to certain *fundamentally incompatible elements* in the two perspectives, and where what we are seeking is precisely a 'paradigm shift' on the part of our opponent. In such cases, for the Christian theologian to begin by endorsing that conceptual framework and basing his arguments upon it would seem to be a counter-productive step. To the precise extent that his arguments depend upon the old paradigm they are unable to perform the necessary task of challenging and overturning it. What may be required is something more along the lines of proclamation or testimony rather than argument of this eristic variety.[21].

That Clement did not see the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem in this way, and so began his theological enterprise by *endorsing* the plausibility structure of hellenism, led to the total (albeit undeliberate) distortion of the Christian gospel in his hands. I want to demonstrate that fact by referring to three aspects of his theology in particular.

The humanity of Christ as the locus of God's self-revelation

According to the author of John's Gospel 'The Word became flesh

[21] T. S. Kuhn has suggested that in the natural sciences discoveries, and the process of change which they initiate, are often like this. The choice between competing paradigms, he notes, 'cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm and that paradigm is at issue. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defence. The resulting circularity does not, of course, make the arguments wrong or even ineffectual. The man who premises a paradigm when arguing in its defence can nonetheless provide a clear exhibit of what scientific practice will be like for those who adopt the new view of nature. That exhibit can be immensely persuasive, often compellingly so. Yet, whatever its force, the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle. The premises and values shared by

and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten who came from the Father, full of grace and truth'.[22] And, according to Jesus 'No one sees the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'[23] yet 'He who has seen *me* has seen the Father'.[24] These are words which, according to the evangelists, are spoken by Jesus in the midst of his historical ministry. It would seem, in fact, to be central to the message of the New Testament that God has involved himself in a revealing and reconciling act towards man, and that to this end the eternal Son of the Father *became* man and dwelt among us; that he took our humanity upon himself and lived out a life of obedient sonship, culminating in his sacrificial death on the cross and glorious resurrection and ascension; and that all this was somehow *for us* and for our salvation. In other words, the scriptural accounts attach an ultimate revelatory and reconciling significance to the *incarnate* Christ and to his historical ministry.

In the writings of Clement, however, we find a rather different emphasis. His faithfulness to the Platonist divide between the intelligible and phenomenal realms[25] prevents him from attaching any ultimate signficance to events or individuals within the realm of the sensory or the historical. Truth, whether about God or anything else, is not to be located in the words or actions of particular individuals, but in the eternal ideas which they imperfectly embody, and is reached as the mind *begins* with sensible particulars, but engages in a process of 'unrepentant abstraction' (ἀμετανόητος χωρισμός)[26] in which the particulars are left behind as the accidental and dispensable vehicle for eternal truth.[27]

When Clement considers the incarnate Christ, therefore, he is faced with a problem of some magnitude. How can any *ultimate* revelatory significance be attached to the words and actions of the man Jesus? How can 'God' be said to 'become man' in the first place,

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the two parties to a debate over paradigms are not sufficiently extensive for that' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94).

[22] Jn. 1:14

[23] Mt. 11:27.

[24] Jn. 14:9.

[25] See *Strom.* V.vi.39; V.xiv.93; V.1.7: 'Bound in this earthly body we apprehend the objects of sense by means of the body; but we grasp intellectual objects by means of the logical faculty itself'.

[26] See *Strom.* V.xi.67.

[27] This, Clement insists, is 'the sacrifice which is acceptable to God . . . For he who neither employs his eyes in the exercise of thought, nor draws aught from his other senses, but with pure mind itself applies to objects, practises the true philosophy'. The disciples of Pythagoras were, he reminds us, enjoined to five years' silence 'that, abstracting themselves from the objects of sense, they might with the mind alone contemplate the Deity' (*Ibid.*).

when the very ideas of the divine and the phenomenal are (within this paradigm) exclusive of one another? Is this not precisely 'foolishness to the Greeks'?[28] Here there would seem to be a fundamental disagreement between the 'plausibility structure' of hellenism and that which the gospel compels us to proclaim. The way in which Clement seeks to resolve this dilemma is one whereby it is the gospel that suffers.

His solution is to draw a sharp distinction between that which Christ is and does *as man*, and that which he is and does as divine *Logos*. *As man* Christ can be said to teach us how to live, to be the pattern (ὑπογραφή) to which we must conform our lives.[29] But he cannot *as man* be said to teach us anything ultimate about God, or to communicate that true *gnosis* which leads to salvation.[30] This we only begin to obtain as we progress beyond the human words and actions of Jesus, and allow the divine Logos to illuminate our minds as our teacher (διδάσκαλος).[31] Leaving aside the accidental truths of history, therefore, we must ascend instead to the eternal truths of reason which they obscure, and whilst Clement never separates the human Jesus from the divine Word, the distinctions which he makes invite such a separation, and deny the human Christ any ultimate or permanent significance as an historical individual. Thus, although Clement affirms, for example, the historical event of the Cross, it does not have the *ultimate* revelatory or reconcilatory signficance within his system that would seem to be required by fidelity to the apostolic testimony.[32] The man Jesus, in all he does and says is but a *temporary provision* for man's ignorance,[33] and is, like all other

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[28] This is precisely the question addressed to the Christian Church by the contemporary pagan polemicist Celsus. See Origen's Contra Celsum, IV.14: 'God is good and beautiful and happy, and exists in the most beautiful state. If, then, he comes down to men, he must undergo change, a change from good to bad, from beatiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune, and from what is best to what is most wicked. Who would choose a change like that? It is the nature only of a mortal to undergo change and remoulding, whereas it is the nature of an immortal being to remain the same without alteration. Accordingly, *God could not be capable of undergoing this change*'. My italics.

[29] See, e.g. *Paedagogos*, I.vi.26.

[30] This point is well made by McLelland, who notes of Clement that 'His theory of the two realms drives a wedge between the Saviour's historical work and his ultimate role as Teacher' (*op. cit.*, 74).

[31] See, e.g. *Protreptikos* 11. See also *Protrepitkos* 8–9.

[32] See *Paed.* I.v.24. We note, however, the comment of Bigg: 'If we ask "why the birth, the passion, the cross?", why Jesus redeemed us in this way ... Clement has no answer' (*op. cit.*, 72). Whilst the vocabulary of the sacrificial ministry of Christ is present in his writings, Clement rarely develops or discusses it, having, on the whole, a rather different overall perspective on salvation from the New Testament writers.

[33] See *Strom.* VII.ii.8: 'For what he was, was not seen by those who, through the

phenomena, to be ultimately transcended in our knowledge of God. That knowledge which saves, therefore, is not knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, but rather the esoteric *gnosis* to which the initiated ascend.[34]

Thus we find in Clement's writings a curious anticipation of the nineteenth century tendency to separate the Jesus of history from a so-called 'Christ of Faith', and one which, in its insistence upon relativizing the significance of the historical, is just as potentially damaging to the expression of the apostolic gospel.

The utter transcendence of God and the deity of Christ

We saw that Plotinus introduces a second 'division' within the Godhead itself, between the One and the other two 'persons', stressing the absolute transcendence and unknowability of God in his innermost eternal being. So also in Clement, in addition to the divide betweeen phenomenal and noumenal, there is yet another, between God in his economic condescension and revelation in the divine Logos on the one hand, and God in his eternal 'being' who lies *beyond* this activity in which he is known, and beyond all thought and expression.[35] 'The Divine Being' he insists, 'cannot be declared

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weakness of the flesh, were incapable of taking in the reality. But having assumed sensible flesh, he came to show man what was possible through obedience to the commandments'. Here Clement specifically links the condescension of the Son in taking flesh to the inability of man in his fleshly existence to know the divine Logos who belongs properly to the intellectual realm. The point would seem to be not that sinful man is unable to have fellowship with a holy God, but rather that that which is preoccupied with the phenomenal can have no intercourse with the noumenal. Thus the noumenal Logos enters temporarily into the phenomenal realm in order to enable us to leave it behind.

[34] This is reflected particularly in Clement's biblical hermeneutic in which he distinguishes quite clearly between two basic levels of meaning in the text; firstly there is the sense 'according to the bare reading' (*Strom.* VI.xv.131) which is available to all without distinction: on the other hand there is the mystical sense. (See *Strom.*VI.xv. 'From the fact that truth appertains not to all, it is veiled in manifold ways, causing the light to arise only on those who are initiated into knowledge'. Such might feasibly maintained, perhaps, by a certain interpretation of Jesus' parables, but Clement's treatment of subjects such as the true significance of the jewish Tabernacle in *Strom.* V.vi.33 demonstrates that he applies it much more widely, and that the resultant gnosis extracted from the text has little to do with anything inherent within its literal sense.)

[35] See, e.g. *Strom* IV.xxv.156: God, Clement tells us, 'being not a subject for demonstration, cannot be the object of science. But the Son is wisdom, and knowledge and truth, and all else that has affinity thereto. He is also susceptible of demonstration and description'. This, of course, implies a distinction between God and the Logos of the sort which was later rejected in its overt Arian form as incompatible with the gospel message.

as it exists,'[36] but only in the works or power of the Logos.[37] This, then, is a distinction between the God whom we know in his revelation and the God who lies beyond that revelation.

The problem here is not with the distinction *as such*. There can be little disagreement with the idea that our knowledge of God in his self-revelation falls far short of the fullness of God himself. The question is not, therefore, as to the *adequacy* of our knowledge of God's economy, but rather as to the *appropriateness* of that knowledge. Is what God reveals to us really himself, or something else which has no necessary bearing upon his true nature? Are we able to affirm that what we know of God is *appropriate* to God, or must we admit that ultimately he himself remains entirely unknowable, thus driving a dangerous wedge between God's being and his act; dangerous because in the final analysis it robs us of any real knowledge of God at all, or of any real reconciliation with him, and thereby of any Christian assurance. We may know what Jesus is like, but *God* might turn out to be very different!

Clement's intentions are without doubt thoroughly orthodox. But the road to heresy is paved with good intentions, and in practice he presses this distinction between the divine essence and economy to a point whereby the appropriateness of what we know of God in his revealing Logos must ultimately be called into question.[38] From here it is but a small, and logical step to argue that in fact the Logos is not *fully* divine (not homo *ousios*) at all, but only that which is 'closest' to God, or divine in some secondary sense. When, therefore, Clement refers to the Son as 'energy' or 'power' of the Father,[39] or as that which is nearest to the Almighty One,[40] he is taking the first tentative steps down the very dangerous path which led to the outright denial of Christ's divinity in the Arian heresy, with all its devastating consequences for epistemology and soteriology.

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[36] *Strom.* II.xvi.72.

[37] 'For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; nay more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens' (*Strom.* V.xii.81–2). The language here is remarkably similar to that used by Plotinus in speaking of the One. If the *essence* of God himself remains unknown, however, his works or powers are knowable. See *Strom.* VI.xviii.166; VI.xii.150.

[38] So, e.g. with reference to the 'Father of the universe' he writes: 'It is without form and name. And if we name it, we do not do so properly, terming it either the One, or the Good, or Mind, or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator, or Lord. We speak not as supplying his name . . . For each (name) by itself does not express God; but all taken together are indicative of the power of the Omnipotent' (*Strom.* V.xii.81).

[39] See, e.g. *Strom.* VII.ii.7.

[40] See, e.g. *Strom.* VII.ii.5.

The salvation of man as his participation in the eternal heavenly realities

Thirdly, and lastly, we turn to Clement's understanding of what it is that salvation consists in, and once again we find that his answer is shaped by his engagement with hellenism. For Clement, as for Plotinus, man is made up of two separable elements—the rational soul, and the body with its 'animal' soul.[41] The rational soul belongs, by virtue of its creation in the divine image,[42] to the *divine* realm, and its attachment to the body is a temporary hazard from which it must be set free so that it can once again ascend into the realm of immortality and, being 'purified' from things physical, attain the glorious vision of and union with God.[43]

Thus man is already *potentially* that which he is called to become by the acquisition of knowledge and truth,[44] he has within his nature as rational spirit that which he requires in order to be saved. The role of the divine Logos in salvation is thus to guide and illuminate man's divine mind,[45] *by virtue of their common nature*, until man becomes a 'god walking about in the flesh',[46] until, namely, he is *deified*.[47] Thus there is a sense in which men may be said to *need* a Saviour, but it is the divine Logos, and not the incarnate Christ who saves, and he does so not by becoming himself a mediator, but rather

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[41] Thus, for example, he compares man to the Centaur of greek mythology, a simile which emphasizes the dichotomous nature of human existence, man's body belonging properly to one realm, and his rational soul to another. (See *Strom.* IV.iii.9.)

[42] In Clement this Judaeo-Christian notion is fused with elements of the Plotinian concept of emanation from the One insofar as it clearly understood in terms of a likeness of substance between the Logos and the soul whereby the latter *images* the former and *participates* in it. Man's rational soul is an image of the true image of God, namely the Logos. (See, e.g. *Strom.* V.xiv.94.)

[43] See, e.g. *Strom.* V.xiii.83: 'It is not without eminent grace that the soul is winged, and soars, and is raised above the higher spheres, laying aside all that is heavy, and surrendering itself to its kindred element'.

[44] See, e.g. *Strom.* VI.xi.95–xii.96: 'By nature we are adapted for virtue; not so as to be possessed of it from our birth, but so as to be adapted for acquiring it . . . And it is intended that we should be saved by ourselves. This, then, is the nature of the soul, to move itself. Then, as we are rational, and philosophy being rational, we have some affinity with it.'

[45] 'Through him alone, when he has risen within the depth of the mind, the soul's eye is illuminated' (*Protrept.* VI).

[46] *Strom.* VII.xvi.101.

[47] Clement is the earliest Christian father to apply this term confidently to the doctrine of salvation, and in his hands it clearly represents an intrusion of hellenic categories into the biblical notion, its reference being to the participation of man in the divine realm of existences, and his imitation of the divine nature of the Logos. See, e.g. *Protrept.* XI, *Paed.* I.xii.98, *Strom.* VII.i.3 etc.

by *showing* man that he has within his own soul the capacity to bridge the gap between God and man, by realizing that which is latent within his very nature.

That this is a gospel wholly alien to the pages of the New Testament ought to be clear enough. In seeking to *make* the gospel relevant for his own culture, rather than realizing that its relevance lay precisely in challenging and sanctifying the presuppositions of that culture, Clement succeeds only in making it *redundant*, a message which tells people what they already knew well enough from the popular philosophers; 'good news' which is, in fact, *no* news at all!

III. Athanasius: Challenging the Foundations

When we turn to consider the writings of Athanasius, more than a century has passed in Alexandria, but time alone could hardly account for the fundamentally different tone of his theology. It is not that Athanasius avoids or rejects his culture. On the contrary he often uses language identical to that of Clement, speaking of man's salvation as his being united to God or deified, language which would have been familiar to his contemporaries from its use in popular philosophy and religion. It is for this precise reason that so many scholars have simply categorized him, along with his Alexandrian predecessor, as a 'Christian Platonist'. What I want to suggest, however, is that whilst he uses many of the same terms, Athanasius is operating with a totally different interpretative framework, and thus fills those same terms with a new significance and meaning, a meaning which is not determined by the parameters of Platonism, but by the reality which he makes his starting point and his criterion for theology; namely the scandalous truth that God has become man for our sakes.

In making the incarnation the fact which determines his view of reality, rather than a fact which has to be slotted into an *a priori* 'plausibility structure', Athanasius stands Christian theology and apologetic method in Alexandria on its head. 'Let us set forth', he urges, in the earliest of his writings, 'that which relates to the Word's becoming man and to his divine appearing among us, which jews traduce, and greeks laugh to scorn, but we worship'.[48] Rather than seeking to demonstrate the essential congeniality of the gospel to the outlook shared by his contemporaries, and translating it into terms acceptable to them, Athanasius lays it out instead in all its scandal that they might be forced to acknowledge it for what it really is,

[48] *De Incarnatione* 1.9f. (ET Thompson, Oxford Early Christian Texts, 134–5).

'because what men cannot understand as impossible (God) shows to be possible, and what men mock as unsuitable by his goodness he renders suitable'.[49] Thus greek philosophy, like all human wisdom, must come under the judgement of the cross, which is the manifestation of the wisdom of God.

But Athanasius does not just *begin* his theology with the fact of the incarnation, and then move on to discuss other issues; rather he allows its radical significance to percolate through the whole of his understanding of man in his relationship to God, and it is nowhere more radical than in his exposition of the doctrine of redemption. I want to consider briefly two irreducible emphases in his understanding of the person of the Saviour in their implications for his understanding of salvation.

The full humanity of Christ

There has been considerable scholarly debate in recent years over the question of whether or not Athanasius does actually affirm the full humanity of Christ.[50] Restrictions of space prevent us from even beginning to raise the question in that form, and the simple statement must suffice that Athanasius's understanding of the nature of redemption not only suggests, but positively demands a Saviour who is like unto us in *all* things excepting sin.

For Athanasius, Jesus Christ is God who has become the man for other men; he is the man who stands in between us in our sinfulness and the Father in his holy love and *mediates* within that broken relationship. Thus he is the man who dies on the cross and in whose death 'all died'.[51] God realized, Athanasius tells us, 'that the corruption of men would not be abolished in any other way except by everyone dying . . . therefore he took to himself a body which could die, in order that, since this participated in the Word who is above all, it might suffice for death on behalf of all. . . . Consequently, by offering his temple and the instrument of his body as a substitute

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[49] *De Incarnatione* 1.16f. (Thompson 134–7).

[50] The question was first raised by F. C. Baur in the nineteenth century and has dominated Athanasian studies ever since. In this century the contributions of M. Richard ('St. Athanase et la psychologie du Christ selon les Ariens', *Mélanges de Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 4, 1947) and A. Grillmeier (*Christ in Christian Tradition*, Mowbrays, London, 1965) have exercised enormous influence, both answering the question negatively. For a thorough and critical evaluation of the entire debate the treatment of G. D. Dragas (*St. Athanasius Contra Apollinarem*, Athens, 1985) is warmly commended.

[51] See *Contra Arianos* 1.41 (ET Newman, Longmans, Green and Co., p. 220; of Migne, *Patrologia Graeca Latina*, Vol. 26, Paris, 1957, Column 96).

for all men, he fulfilled the debt by his death'.[52] 'For there was need of death, and death on behalf of all had to take place in order that what was owed (ὀφειλόμενον) by all men might be paid. Therefore . . . the Word himself . . . took a body which could die in order to offer it as his own on behalf of all'.[53] For this reason, Athanasius says, we no longer die as those who have anything to *fear* from death, but as those who await with confidence the resurrection. Christ, then, is the man who dies that death which is the wages of sin for others.

But Jesus is not just the man who stands in between us and God and mediates at the point of his *death*; for Athanasius the whole *life* of Jesus is an offering to the Father on our behalf. 'He humbled himself' Athanasius says 'in taking our body of humiliation, and took a servant's form, putting on that flesh which was enslaved to sin'.[54] 'He became a servant instead of us and on our behalf'[55] and in this same flesh 'He sanctifies himself to the Father for our sakes . . . that he himself may *in himself* sanctify us, . . . that he may become righteousness for us, and that we may be exalted in him, and that we may enter the gates of heaven which he has also opened for us'.[56] In other words Christ's whole life of obedient sonship lived in the power of the Spirit is a life lived *for others*, and not just a preparation for death on the cross. It is only insofar as we are united to the one true Son in his *humanity* that we have access to the Father,[57] who when he looks upon us sees us not as we are in ourselves, but as we are clothed with the righteousness of his Son.[58] Thus, says Athanasius, 'because of our relationship to his body, we too . . . are made God's sons'.[59]

Jesus, then, is the man for others. As such it is his assumption of and sharing in our human nature which qualifies him for the task of Mediator, and not, as with Clement, the fact that both he and we already belong to some third level of 'spiritual' existence which is, strictly speaking, neither fully divine nor fully human. Jesus is the *man* who stands in our place at every point of our relationship with the Father and mediates for us,[60] the man who came in order to bear

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[52] *De Incanartione* 9.1f. (Thompson 152–3).
[53] *De Incarnatione* 20.33f. (Thompson 184–5).
[54] *Contra Arianos* 1.43 (Newman 222; PGL 101).
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Contra Arianos* 1.41 (Newman 220; PGL 96).
[57] *Contra Arianos* 1.39 (Newman 217; PGL 92–3).
[58] *Contra Arianos* 1.41 (Newman 221; PLG 97):'If the Son be Righteousness, then he is not exalted as being himself in need, but it is we who are exalted in that Righteousness which is he'.
[59] *Contra Arianos* 1.43 (Newman 222; PGL 100).
[60] 'His flesh' Athanasius maintains 'before all others was saved and liberated,

the curse for us[61] and to open up the way to heaven for us by bearing us up in his risen and ascended humanity,[62] he is the man who is the one true Son of the Father, and in whom we are adopted as sons and daughters,[63] and subsequently empowered by the Spirit to begin to live out lives worthy of that status.[64] But of course it is also true that Jesus is significantly more than the man for other men; he is also the God who has *become* the man for others.

The full divinity of Christ

There could hardly be any doubt as to Athanasius's commitment to the full divinity of the Saviour. By far the larger part of his literary output is taken up with precisely this question in his repeated and unwavering condemnation of any position that suggested that Christ was less than *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father, the phrase ultimately endorsed as orthodox by the council of Constantinople in AD 381 after a period of considerable wrangling. But this forces us to ask the question why it was so important to Athanasius that the precise status of the Saviour in relation to God should be defined in this way. Assuming that it was true enough, wouldn't it have saved a lot of ecclesiastical headaches simply to accept the reductionist presentation of Arius, according to whom Christ was the 'highest of all created beings'. This was, after all, a very high view of Jesus; was it not high enough?

Athanasius clearly didn't think so, and his reasons were soteriological ones. He realized that our understanding of the nature of salvation, and, indeed, of God himself, was at stake in any attempt to spell out who Jesus was which detracted from what he believed to be the full truth of the matter, namely that Jesus of Nazareth *God himself* has come among us as man for our salvation.

Firstly an Arian Christ robs us of any true knowledge of God, for we are back with a Saviour who himself falls on our side of the

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. . . and henceforth we, becoming incorporate with it, are saved' (*Contra Arianos* 2.61, Newman 329; PGL 277).

[61] *Contra Arianos* 2.46 (Newman 311; PGL 248).

[62] See, e.g. *Contra Arianos* 1.43 (Newman 223; PGL 101): 'If the Lord had not become man, we had not been redeemed from sins, nor raised from the dead, but had remained dead under the earth; nor exalted into heaven, but lying in Hades'.

[63] *Contra Arianos* 3.19 (Newman 381; PGL 361): 'For although there be one Son by nature, True and Only-begotten, we too become sons, not as he in nature and truth, but according to the grace of him that calleth'.

[64] Thus, Athanasius notes, we 'could not become sons, being by nature creatures, otherwise than by receiving the Spirit of the natural and true Son' (*Contra Arianos* 2.59, Newman 326; PGL 273).

Creator/creature distinction. What we know of Jesus, therefore, can no longer be considered to reveal the Father to us in a personal way, but only information about him which may or may not be reliable. God *himself* remains unknown to us. For Athanasius the truth could hardly be more different: 'He came as a man and took to himself a body like theirs' he tells us 'in order that those who were unwilling to know him by his providence and governing of the universe, yet . . . might know the Word of God who was in the body, and through him the Father'.[65] The Arians, in their attempts to make sense of the New Testament *kerygma*, used the term 'Logos' in what was an essentially greek way, and so isolated the Word from God himself.[67] In doing so they sacrificed what was to Athanasius the very heart of the gospel, namely the fact that God is to be understood not as the isolated monad of the philosophers, but rather as a loving community of persons, having revealed *himself* in terms of that Father-Son relationship set forth in the personal dynamics of the life of Jesus, which relationship we are now given to share through union with the incarnate Lord. Thus the incarnate Christ is the epistemological point of departure for Athanasius, the place where all knowledge of God must begin, for it is here in this man that God has chosen to reveal himself to us finally. To reduce Jesus to the status of a creature, therefore, albeit the first and greatest of all creatures, can only have the direst of consequences, for it is in effect to cut this God out of revelation.

But an Arian Christ also cuts God out of *redemption*. The fullness of the gospel for Athanasius is not just that we are saved by the mediation of a third party in some private transaction with an angry deity; it is that God so *loved* us that he sent his only Son to be our Saviour, that God himself has become human in order to work out our salvation for us from within our very humanity. Thus, he argues, it is because of the Father's love for the human race that the Son condescends to become man, thus enduing the creation itself with the status of sonship through himself.[67] Again, 'the Word of God, who loves man, puts on him created flesh at the Father's will, that . . . he might quicken it in the blood of his proper Body, and might open for us a new and living way . . . through the veil, that is, his flesh.'[68] For Athanasius the incarnate Logos is none other than God himself. When this man acts, therefore, God acts; when this man

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[65] *De Incarnatione* 14.28f. (Thomspon 168–9).

[66] Thus of the views of Asterius the Sophist Athanasius writes: 'to speak thus of the Word of God is not the part of Christians, but of Greeks' (*Contra Arianos* 2.28. Newman 286; PGL 208).

[67] *Contra Arianos* 2.64 (Newman 335; PGL 284).

[68] *Contra Arianos* 2:65 (Newman 334; PGL 285).

proclaims forgiveness and healing, God proclaims forgiveness and healing. That is the entire burden of Athanasius's gospel; namely that Christ does not mediate as a third party in the dispute between God and man but as one who himself *belongs to both parties*. Thus the reconciliation between God and man takes place first and foremost not in some external transaction, but rather within the very inner dynamics of the incarnation itself, as the Son of God becomes a man and lives out within human flesh a life at-one with his eternal co-existence with the Father and the Spirit. In order for this to happen this same flesh must be put to death in an act which is, paradoxically, at once the divine judgment upon human sin, and also the supreme act of utter self-sacrifice and obedience to God, in which the Son completes the sanctification of our humanity in himself.[69] Thus the Son of God unites his own humanity (which is ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) to God, not by *divinizing* it in some mysterious manner in which the spiritual side of man ascends to become a part of the divine nature, but rather by healing it in its relationship to God, and restoring it to life in all its fullness.

Yet if Christ is not God, as the Arians were forced to argue due to their faithfulness to the contemporary *Weltanschauung*, then this gospel disintegrates, robbing man of any ultimate assurance about forgiveness of sins, and of that personal κοινωνία between Creator and creature which the New Testament proclaims as the result of Christ's self-sacrifice. For *this* gospel depends on something which the Arians cannot confess; namely that the agency of the Father and the Son should nowhere be held more closely together than on Calvary. It was precisely this that the Nicene Fathers sought to defend in their confession of the *homoousion*.[70]

This then is the fullness of the Gospel of salvation, according to Athanasius, that we are united to the Son of God who put on our humanity in order to renew and heal it, to secure forgiveness and reconciliation for it, and that in this union we are taken up into the very life of God himself as adopted sons and daughters of the Father. 'Therefore did Christ assume the body created and human' Athanasius tells us, 'that having renewed it . . . he might deify it in

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[69] *Contra Arianos* 1.46 (Newman 227; PGL 108).

[70] *Contra Arianos* 3.16 (Newman 377; PGL 353): The Arians 'cannot see the one in the other, because their natures and operations are to them foreign and distinct to one another'. Ironically many perfectly 'orthodox' presentations of the atonement in Western Protestant (and not least *Evangelical*) circles actually require no more than an Arian Christ insofar as they fail to hold the incarnation and the atonement together, and thus tend to view the cross as the place where a holy God punishes sinful man, rather than putting himself in the place of man in a supreme act of love, and bearing the punishment in our stead.

himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after his likeness'.[71] Here at last we find the characteristically eastern language of redemption as a 'deifying' of man through union with God. Yet it has little to do here with the departure of man's rational soul from the phenomenal realm into the realm of divine Forms. On the contrary it is a deification tied very much to flesh and blood—Jesus' flesh and blood in fact, to which we are united. 'For as the Lord' Athanasius notes 'putting on the body, became man, so we men are made gods by the Word, as being taken to him *through his flesh*, and henceforward inherit life everlasting'.[72] This union with the humanity of Christ is in itself a union with the humanity of *God*; God as man, the man for others, who gives to others that they might share with him in his loving relationship with the Father in the power of the Spirit, that they might, in short, share in the inner life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I began this paper by suggesting that the existential concerns of the early Fathers were really not so very different from our own, and that the problem of the contextualization of the gospel is one which spans the ages, just as it spans the breadth of our multi-cultured world today. What we have seen is that different responses to this problem led historically to divergent expressions of the gospel in the patristic east. The ultimate difference between Clement and Athanasius is one of theological method rather than one of belief. This is necesssarily the case since the formal and the material, method and content, cannot be separated in theology. One's point of departure and procedure along the way inevitably determine one's ultimate destination.

What distinguished Athanasius from the Alexandrian catechetical and apologetic tradition which formed his inheritance was a profound recognition of the bankruptcy of hellenic thought as a framework within which to proclaim and expound the becoming of God in the incarnation. This was a message which could only meet with resistance from hellenism, and which as such had to be proclaimed over against it. To seek to accommodate the greek philosophical framework would have been to concede in advance the ground upon which one stood as a *Christian* theologian. If we can learn anything from comparing these two traditions in Alexandrian theology, therefore, it is the ever-present danger inherent in any attempt to commend Christianity to its cultured despisers. What we must never forget is that it is precisely insofar as the gospel is a scandal to human wisdom that it confronts men and women in all its

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[71] *Contra Arianos*. 2.70 (Newman 340; PGL 296).
[72] *Contra Arianos* 3.35 (Newman 400; PGL 397). My italics.

relevance. To the extent that we seek to lessen that scandal, therefore, we hinder rather than aid its cause. There can be no question as to the responsibility of Christian theology to address unbelief in every age. The real question remains, however, as to the most appropriate *form* of that address. It may well prove to be the case that far more is to be lost in seeking to deal with unbelief on its own terms than is ever to be gained.