

# **The Origin And Terminology Of The Athanasian Creed**

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## **I. THE ORIGIN OF THE CREED**

Although Roman tradition claims that Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria who died in 373, wrote the Athanasian Creed, most scholars are agreed that perhaps the only positive thing that may be said about the authorship of the creed is that it was not written by Athanasius. There are a number of reasons which are advanced to support this. For one thing, the creed is a Latin creed of the Western Church. Although Athanasius did spend some years of exile in the West, apparently he never became sufficiently familiar with Latin to have used it in his writings. All of his known works are in Greek. Another reason for doubting his authorship is that the creed is not mentioned by Athanasius himself or by his Greek eulogists. A third reason is that the creed was unknown to the Greek Church until about 1200, and has never been accorded official recognition by that church. Finally, and perhaps the most decisive reason against the idea that Athanasius was the author is that the controversies which are treated in the creed, for example, the question of the relationship of the divine and human natures of Christ, did not develop until several decades after Athanasius had died. Thus determining the exact origin and the true author of the Athanasian Creed has proved to be quite difficult, if not impossible.

The common acceptance that Athanasius was the author lasted until the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first to voice doubts about the authorship was a man by the name of Joachim Camerarius, a German classical scholar. But his "heretical" idea that Athanasius was not the author raised such a storm of protest that he did not follow up on it. Some time later, John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury, spoke guardedly of the creed as having been written "as some think, by Athanasius, as some others, by Eusebius of Vercellae." Toward the close of the century, however, both the historian Cardinal Cesare Baronius and Richard Hooker gave their powerful support to the ancient tradition and temporarily put to rest some of the doubts.

But not for long; in 1642 a Dutch humanist, Gerhard Jan Voss, demonstrated the sheer impossibility of reconciling the obvious facts about the creed with the time of Athanasius. He suggested that the creed appeared at the time of Charlemagne, ca. 742-814. On the other hand, James Ussher, archbishop of Armagh, while accepting Voss's critical argument, contended that the evidence required a much earlier date, about the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century for the anonymous author.

The collapse of the traditional defense was as complete as it was sudden. Henceforth it was taken as settled, in all circles where scholarship prevailed, that Athanasius could not have written the creed. But if he didn't, who did? A number of candidates for its composition were nominated. The French Jesuit Pasquier Quensel, for example, pressed the claims of Vigilius of Thapsus in north Africa on the grounds that he had published works against the Arians and Sabellians and supposedly was credited with a treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity. Quensel's learned rival, historian Joseph Anthelmi, hailed Vincent of Lerins as the author. He drew attention to the similarities of style between the creed and Vincent's known writings and also made much of the fact that Vincent had expressed the intention of publishing a fuller exposition of the true doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Still another noted historian and librarian,

Ludovici Muratori, was inclined to cast his vote for the Italian-born bishop of Pointers, Venatus Fortunatus.

Much of what had been offered by the above mentioned men and others had been in the nature of guess work, intelligent enough but hardly pretending to be founded on extensive research. The first really careful, scientifically constructive attempt to explore the origin of the Athanasian Creed was made by Daniel Waterland, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge and one of the most learned and effective champions of Anglican orthodoxy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. About his time the doctrine of the Trinity was being subjected to violent attacks, and so to vindicate the church's retention and use of a so uncompromisingly Trinitarian document as the Athanasian Creed in its liturgy Waterland wrote his book, "A Critical History of the Athanasian Creed." As far as his nominee for authorship goes, he put forth the name, more confidently than convincingly, of Hilary, bishop of Arles. In proposing him, Waterland was moved by such considerations as, Hilary became bishop in 429, that he is said to have written a number of short tracts including an exposition of the creed, and that he was an ardent admirer of Augustine and his ideas.

Little or no progress was made in the study of the creed for almost 150 years after the appearance of Waterland's book. Scholarship was not dead but contented itself with ingenious but unprovable guesses. However, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a sudden revival of interest in the creed took place beginning in England. In 1867, the Royal Commission on Ritual proposed to discontinue the creed's use in services or at least soften the force of the damnatory clauses. For several years a fierce controversy raged as conservative supporters of the creed stoutly resisted the eager ranks of the abolitionists. Since both parties appealed to history, the former to exalt and the latter to undermine the creed's authority, the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century proved to be an era of vigorous research.

First in the field was E.S. Ffoulkes with the improbable suggestion that the creed was a forgery put together by Paulinus of Aquilea, the favorite theologian of Charlemagne. Much more noteworthy was the "two-portion" hypothesis of C.A. Swainson and J.R. Lumby. Their theory was that the two sections of the creed, dealing with the Trinity and the Incarnation respectively, were originally independent compositions and were only joined together to form the present creed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This theory received initial popularity but it was dead before the century was out. Its immediate effect was to stimulate a vast amount of investigation, especially into the early manuscripts and commentaries on the creed. The pioneer work in this area was done by G.D.W. Ommanny and A E. Burn who were able to explode the "two-portion" hypothesis by unearthing early 8<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts which contained the entire creed and by pointing to commentaries going back at least that far which treated the creed as a single whole.

As a result of the extensive studies on the part of men like Ommanny and Burn scholarship in England rallied on the whole to a position broadly similar to that of Waterland; although they did not all agree with Waterland's idea that Hilary was the author. Ommanny believed the author was Vincent of Lerins. Burn claimed that Honoratus, bishop of Arles before Hilary, was the author.

Suffice it to say at this point in our paper that scholars do agree that the true author, whoever he may have been, is to be found in the Western Church.

While we have not come to a concrete conclusion as to the authorship of the Athanasian Creed, it is possible to be a little more conclusive as to the time when the creed was written. As we have noted earlier, Voss suggested the time of Charlemagne (742-814) as the date of origin. His contemporary, James Ussher, claimed a much earlier date, about the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup>

century. Daniel Waterland's thesis was that the creed's composition can be dated fairly confidently between 420 and 431. These limits were reached as a result of an analysis of the theology of the creed. The section dealing with the Trinity seemed to him to presuppose the teaching and the very language of Augustine's "De trinitate," which was not made public, so he claimed, until 416. It was reasonable to assume that this previous writing exerted an influence on the author of the creed. The later date depended on his conviction that the creed did not take issue against Nestorianism. As Nestorius' condemnation took place at Ephesus in 431, the creed must have preceded that date according to Waterland's theory. He was also convinced that Gaul was the region in which the creed had originated since it was there that it was first received and esteemed, commented on, and introduced into the liturgy.

Ommann and Burn, while not agreeing on the author, contended that the 5<sup>th</sup> century was the time of writing, while you will recall, that Swainson and Lumby had said the "united parts" of the creed appeared in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Because of the similarities, another scholar, F. Kattenbusch, questioned Waterland's widely accepted premise that the creed presupposed Augustine's Trinitarian theology. It was at least as likely, he argued, that Augustine was familiar with the creed and was inspired by it. Kattenbusch was thus inclined to date its origin to the very beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Still another scholar, F. Loofs, worked out a theory of gradual development and growth. He agreed that the creed had originated in the south of France, but many authors whose names are now lost had contributed to the creed's growth and its elements had been polished over many generations. The outer limits of dating, he believed, were roughly 450 and 600.

Turning to more recent studies of the Athanasian Creed concerning its authorship and date we find the same varying opinions. Broadly speaking they can be classified into two groups, according as they seek to place the date of the creed either in the final decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century or around the last generation of the 5<sup>th</sup> and first generation of the 6<sup>th</sup>. Many theories could be mentioned.

A theory which first attracted widespread interest was that of K. Kunstle. In his view the creed was a Spanish document dating about 380-400. However, there were too many weaknesses in his argument and it was subsequently dismissed.

A much more striking and elaborately argued thesis was put forward by the Jesuit, H. Brewer in 1909. It was his conviction that the creed was the work of Ambrose of Milan (334-397). Brewer agreed wholeheartedly with Waterland that the creed shows no acquaintance with Nestorianism. On the other hand, he accepted Kattenbusch's explanation that it was a case of Augustine's borrowing from the creed rather than the other way around. He believed the date of writing to be between 382-384. He also stressed the fact that, as he saw it, the Athanasian Creed is much more of a hymn than a creed and recalled that Ambrose had inaugurated antiphonal singing at Milan. He was even able to cite a passage in which Ambrose speaks of a powerful hymn of his consisting of a Trinitarian confession. He clinched his case, as he supposed, by analyzing the thought and language of the creed and by demonstrating in all sorts of minute particulars how it reflected the theological, stylistic and even linguistic idiom of Ambrose.

In contrast to Kunstle and Brewer, a group of distinguished scholars has persisted in dating the creed somewhere in the period 430-542 and they associate it with the monastery at Lerins, off the south coast of France. The most persistent of this group was Germain Morin. First he favored a Spanish origin for the creed and dated it in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with Martin of Braga as its most probable author. But he changed his mind, and for most of his life he held that it was connected with if not actually written by Caesarius of Arles.

We have had six pages of guesses, theories and ideas about the origin and authorship of the Athanasian Creed. I suppose we could have six or even sixty more. But we still would have no precise or definite answers. But I believe that we can say this about the creed; the Athanasian Creed was the last of the three ecumenical creeds to be written. It was not written by Athanasius for reasons already mentioned. Neither the author or the exact date when it was written are known. Considering all the possibilities, it probably originated in southern France around the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The original purpose of the creed was instructional. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century it was a standard requirement of the Western Church for the clergy to memorize the creed and use it in their teaching of the people. It was also put to music and became a part of the liturgy. The Lutheran Reformation retained this creed together with the Apostles' and Nicean creeds and included it in the Book of Concord. Luther is reported to have said of the Athanasian Creed: "I don't know if the church of the New Testament since the time of the apostles has had a more important writing."

## II. THE TERMINOLOGY OF THE CREED

The Athanasian Creed is composed of forty carefully constructed clauses or verses each containing a distinct proposition. The body of the creed divides into two unequal but clearly distinct sections. Verses 3-25 are an expression of Trinitarian doctrine, being rounded off at verse 26 with the assertion that everyone who wants to be saved must accept the view of the Triune God just set forth. Verses 27-34 are concerned with the Incarnation, stressing in particular the Church's teaching about Jesus Christ as one person, fully divine and fully human. Verses 35-39 stand apart from this principal theme, being a sort of appendix perhaps borrowed for the most part from the Apostles' Creed, and concluding with a solid affirmation of the resurrection of all mankind from the dead and the separate destiny awaiting the believers and the unbelievers.

The first two verses and the last serve as a kind of frame, their purpose being to emphasize as forcefully as possible the importance of loyalty to the catholic (universal Christian) faith as expounded in the creed.

The style of writing and vocabulary are representative of a sophisticated literary document. The rhythm of the creed's verses varies from the cretic spondee used in 18 verses to a spondee cretic and a dactyl spondee used in one verse each. Of course, the creed was written in Latin.

The creed opens with a couple of verses which, the first positively and the second negatively, proclaim the binding necessity, from the point of view of eternal salvation, of unwavering belief in the catholic faith. (Read vs. 1-2). Verses 3-25 then go on to express the doctrine of the Trinity. The Godhead is at once a Trinity in unity and a unity in Trinity. God is one substance, yet three persons. This doctrine is then expounded in a sequence of carefully ordered movements.

(Read vs. 3-6). Here the two apparently contradictory truths are set down. We are warned against, on the one hand, confounding, that is, obliterating the distinction between, the three persons; and on the other hand, dividing or splitting asunder the one indivisible substance. The conclusion is then drawn that since the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while they are distinct persons, possess and are one and the same God, each must have exactly the same glory and majesty as the other two.

(Read vs. 7-14). In these verses the creed develops this theme by listing the various attributes applicable to the Godhead and so to the three persons. God is uncreated,

incomprehensible, eternal and omnipotent. So each of the three persons of the Godhead possess those attributes the Godhead itself possesses. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, each is uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal and omnipotent. Yet there are not three Gods, but one.

(Read vs. 15-19). The conclusion is drawn that the doctrine of the Trinity leaves no loophole for tritheism. Each of the three persons is fully God and Lord. But one cannot deduce from this that there are therefore three Gods and three Lords. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, is one God.

Are the three persons in God different? If their substance, essence or being is identical, are Christians justified in regarding them as really distinct? Apparently everything that can be said about any one of them can equally be said about the other two. Yet there are not three Fathers, three Sons, or three Holy Ghosts; nor are there three parts of God; but one Father, one Son, one Holy Ghost, one God. This subject is covered in verses 20-23. (Read vs. 20-23). The Father derives His being from none, He is not made, created or begotten. The Son also is not made or created for He is eternal. But God the Father begat His Son from eternity. The Holy Ghost, also eternal, is not made, not created, not begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son. Each of the persons of the Trinity is distinct from the others, yet they are one God.

The following verses make the point that none of the three persons within the one divine substance is prior to or greater than any other; all three are coequal and coeternal. (Read vs. 24-25).

This section concludes with the words: (Read vs. 26).

Scholars agree that from the words which are used and the way in which the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is expressed, the author of the Athanasian Creed had in mind the heresies of Sabellianism and Arianism. Sabellianism, or modalism, was the doctrine which denied the reality and prominence of the personal distinctions in the Trinity, regarding Father, Son and Holy Spirit as mere names for the one Godhead in the successive phases of Its self-revelation. It is clearly against teaching like this that the ban on “confusing the persons” in verse 4 and the claim in verse 5 that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are separate persons, are directed.

Arianism held that the Son, far from being of one and the same substance as the Father, was of a different and inferior substance. Verse 4 speaks against this “dividing of the substance”, and in verse 6 it is declared that the Godhead possessed by all three persons is identical. Further reference is made against the false doctrine of Arius in the rest of the section.

The second section of the Athanasian Creed concerns itself with the doctrine of the person of Christ. The burden of the Christological section (vs. 27-34) is that our Lord Jesus Christ is at once fully God and fully man. (Read vs. 27-31). Though Jesus is complete God and complete man there is no division in His being, even after the Incarnation. This insistence on His unity is hammered home in four successive verses.

(Read vs. 32-34). Jesus Christ is both true God and true man; one person, two natures. In becoming a true human being God was not changed into man but true God took upon Himself true manhood in a personal union. The natures are not to be confused (verse 34), Christ is both God and man, two natures, but He is only one person. Colossians 2:9 states: “In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” A body, however, does not constitute a person by itself. Therefore taking its cue from this passage the Athanasian Creed says: “For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ,” (verse 35).

The creed concludes with a brief summary of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ with a final statement that whoever does not believe in Jesus Christ cannot be saved. (Read vs. 36-40).

The question has been raised as to whether the Athanasian Creed repudiates the false doctrine of Nestorius. His view was that in Jesus Christ the divine and human were present in such a fashion that there were in Him two distinct beings or persons rather than two natures in one person. Daniel Waterland, you may recall, answered the question with an unhesitating no. Waterland wrote: "There is not a word of 'the mother of God' or of one Son only, in opposition to two Sons, or of God's being born, suffering and dying: which kind of expressions the Creeds are full of after Nestorius's times."

However, J.N.D. Kelly in his book on the creed believes that there are indeed signs in the creed showing an interest in Nestorianism. There is the four-times repeated emphasis on the oneness of the God-man. Even more evidence is found in verses 33 and 34. The affirmation in verse 33 that Jesus Christ is "one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God," defined exactly the orthodox position against Nestorius. Verse 34, "one altogether, not by confusion of the substance but by unity of person," may also be interpreted as being anti-Nestorian in intent. I would agree with Mr. Kelly that the author did have Nestorianism in mind when he wrote this section on the Incarnation.

The reference in verse 30, "Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting," seems also to be directed against the error of Apollinaris of Laodicea. He taught that the divine being took the place of the soul in Jesus Christ.

Throughout these pages we have been talking about the Athanasian Creed in its historical setting. No attempt has been made to assess its permanent value as a statement of Christian belief, much less to offer suggestions as to its use. But in regard to the value of the creed permit me to close this paper with the words of another writer.

The early church had to struggle against many heresies which corrupted the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In these struggles against false doctrine she was forced to state the true teachings of Scripture in creed and confessions. The Athanasian Creed may be regarded as the high point of development of creeds in the early church. It was written when the church had faced and overcome most of the heresies. But the old heresies keep returning, and the "new theology" consists mainly of these old heresies, adapted to the twentieth century. There are few false doctrines that someone hasn't thought of before. Because the Athanasian Creed maintains the teaching of the Word of God, it remains meaningful and dear to the faithful sons of the church of Jesus Christ. (Floyd Brand, "The Athanasian Creed". Black & Red, Vol. 70 No. 2 June, 1966)