

Theology of the Body, Theology of the Word

Nathan Schneider

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By the standards of discourse that defined the course of Christian dogma in the conflicts and heresies of the fourth century, ostensibly there was no theology among the monks of the desert. In the major cities of the increasingly divided Roman Empire, the recently-legalized Christian communities endured a crisis about the nature of God and the meaning of salvation proclaimed by Jesus. It was a conversation formed the intricate distinctions inherited from Greek philosophy, likely inaccessible to many Christians, and to a degree, the whole Latin West. The discourse did not subsist in mere theory, however; in addition to the question of practical church doctrine, the contest could not be separated with the dangling prize of political legitimation that official orthodoxy would gain. With so much at stake, both in spiritual and temporal realms, the intensity of the disputes from all sides threatened to leave the church in permanent schism. Nevertheless, apart from these particular standards, documents the desert monastic movement left behind demonstrate that it did have a theology, which I take to mean a conversation about the nature of God and the meaning of salvation. Rather than relying on technical terms and theories, a discourse of the word, their theology was a discourse of the body, explored and explained through ascetic practice itself. Unlike the theology of the city, that of the monks was broadly admitting of diversity in method, practice, and phrasing within a common theological community.

I will argue that this theology in the desert may be understood, not only as a parallel discourse to that of the cities, but as a conscious reaction to it and especially to the discord in the ecclesiastical Body of Christ that it came to represent. In the desert, disagreement could more readily be met with inclusion rather than division. Still, the distinction cannot remain so simple. I will use the figure of Athanasius, who was both a polemicist of the city and popularizer of the desert, to explore the intersection between these worlds. As theologian, the ideal of the desert becomes for him not only one of practice alone, but an ideal of a truer, more particularly Christian way of doing theology.

Theology in the City

In the city of Alexandria, the ancient metropolitan and ecclesiastical center closest to the Egyptian monasteries, theological dispute had become a defining principle by the fourth century. Throughout the Empire well after the Council of Nicaea in 325, it was a focal point of a series of contentious doctrinal disputes. The Arian controversy, which Nicaea had been intended to resolve, remained a divisive threat. At the same time, Melitian factions plagued the bishopric even after they had been formally reconciled to orthodox communion by the Council.¹ Since the rise of Constantine in 312, the church had been in the process of defining itself as an institution with definite political ties and a need to consolidate its dogma for a new scale of apologetics and public authority. The medium of these early conflicts was articulated theological dispute, accompanied by political maneuvering and the threat of excommunication.

The life of Athanasius was immeshed in these conflicts, and its course is indicative of their nature and degree. He rose to the office of bishop in Alexandria in 328, and was immediately faced with the post-Nicene doctrinal crises of the empire. From the beginning Athanasius resisted yielding any theological ground, and resisted Constantine's orders to restore Arius to communion in the city.² Throughout, his career was marked by the controversies. In 335, he was excommunicated through the influence of Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia on the pretense of Athanasius' violent methods in dealing with the Melitians, only to be welcomed back into communion with Rome in 340. Having been restored as bishop, he was removed once again from office by an Arian armed coup in 356, and remained in exile for six years.³ The cycle of exile and return repeated several times. During his exiles, Athanasius took refuge in the desert among the growing communities of hermits and cenobites there. He enjoyed tremendous support from them, and in turn went on to write the preeminent apologetic document of their cause, the *Life of Anthony*. But the bulk of his prolific writings reveal a preoccupation with the disputes of the city. Even in the *Life*, Anthony is made out to share

¹Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 133-135.

²Ibid., 134.

³Ibid., 135, 140-141.

Athanasius' concern with the doctrines of the heretics, a conversation that is not reflected at all in his sayings as they were passed down among the monks.⁴

The content of the fourth century theological disputes was mired with the sophisticated language of elite discourse in the eastern Roman Empire. Much of its concern was over the nature of the Trinity and a theory of Christian salvation. The Arian movement, for instance, denied that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father,⁵ a doctrine that had been formulated in Nicene orthodoxy alongside a concept of three *hypostases* or persons of the Godhead. On a larger scale, the intricate language of these controversies was building the increasing divide of misunderstanding between churches of the Greek East and the Latin West. As the discourse developed, West began to suspect East of tritheism on one hand, as well as of the influence that Arianism left in its wake.⁶ To the Latin observers, and also to those in the East who were uninitiated in Greek philosophy, the disputes constantly threatening schism in the young public church were impenetrable and perhaps tragically irrelevant.

However, the structure of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* is a reminder that, to the world of Alexandria, the terms of this discourse had real importance. Throughout, the text is an attack on the Arian controversy, arguing for the necessary unity of God and Christ for the hope of salvation.⁷ But in its final chapters, he turns to the claims of non-christians, Jews and pagans. In his context, theological orthodoxy meant not only theory, but a unified position with which to spread the teaching of the church to a cosmopolitan world. Erudite Greek alone, furthermore, had a cultural capital in the ancient cities that Athanasius could not afford to do without. The language of the dialectic functioned as an "overlapping consensus" that would be meaningful and potentially convincing to all groups at once.

⁴*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward, SLG (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

⁵*Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. 1917, s.v. "Arianism," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01707c.htm>.

⁶Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 138.

⁷Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ed. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

Theology in the Desert

By the city's standards, the first principle of the desert was absence. The diversity of religions, authorities, and theologies in Alexandria had no counterpart in the Egyptian desert. The conditions of life, exacerbated by asceticism, was harsh and mere bodily existence was the most immediate reality. As a result, the nature of debate was quite different there. Precision was less important than demonstration, and theory could never be so meaningful as display. In one episode from the Sayings, a council of monks is held to deal with a monk who has sinned. Moses the Ethiopian at first refuses to go, but when he is finally compelled to, he brings along a leaking jug and explains, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." At these words the council immediately adjourns and forgives the sinful monk.⁸ In this manner, the language of reasoning of the desert privileged bodily demonstration and narrative above legalism. One imagines that such criteria for proof as these were not so common at Nicaea, for instance, where the very wording of dogma was critical. To a brother with authority over other monks, furthermore, Abba Poemen instructs him to "be their example, not their legislator."⁹

Desert asceticism had its theological origins in the work of early Christian thinkers like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, who wrote in the context of persecution and martyrdom.¹⁰ It was principally a theology of opposition against hostile political authority, coupled with sacrificial nonresistance drawn from the passion narratives of Jesus. Because the climax of the martyr's journey is bodily death, this tradition encounters the divine through the martyr's body. Bringing the patterns of the martyrs to the desert, the monks developed a theology of *ars moriendi* in of consumption, appetite, physical isolation, love, and weeping carry pressing theological meaning. Both Anthony and Evagrius are reported to have taught, for instance, that "without temptations no-one can be saved."¹¹ These temptations, in turn, come to be the

⁸Ward, *Sayings*, 138-139.

⁹Ibid., 191.

¹⁰Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 177.

¹¹Ward, *Sayings*, 2, 64.

daily minutiae of the monk's life. Similarly, practice of charity, rather than logic, can become a meaningful lesson about the Trinity: "If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ."¹² The challenge of constant prayer, furthermore, reveals a cosmology of angels and demons, which can be seen more plainly the more advanced in ascetic practice a monk becomes.¹³ Talk about the nature of God and the presence of spiritual forces occurs precisely in saying about how a monk should live and face bodily demons.

Implicit in the desert theology is an assumption about absolute integration between the body and the divine. In effect, it could certainly resemble the theology incarnation taught by Athanasius, which of course the bishop went to great lengths to emphasize in his treatment of Anthony. Nevertheless, the monks always resisted formulations of theological language resembling that of the city. Terms like *ousia* and *hypostasis* are completely absent from the Sayings and the accounts of Palladius. But even with regard to Anthony, Athanasius explicitly resists portraying the hermit as a learned man. Nevertheless, he confounds the Greek philosophers, who "went away marveling because they had not seen such understanding in an untrained man."¹⁴ Athanasius' Anthony goes on to describe the cause of his wisdom as founded in the ascetic experience, which is capable of reaching a kind of understanding unattainable through the city's philosophy.

Therefore, for those in whom the action through faith is present, the demonstration through arguments is unnecessary, or perhaps even useless. For what we perceive by faith you attempt to establish through arguments.¹⁵

Anthony continues, asserting that the discourse of action is more secure for true knowledge than that of the philosophers because of its communion in the activity of God.

We Christians, then, do not possess the mystery in a wisdom of Greek reasonings,

¹²Ibid., 3.

¹³Ibid., 138.

¹⁴Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), 84.

¹⁵Ibid., 87.

but in the power supplied to us by God through Jesus Christ.

Given his own extensive education in Greek learning, and the medium of his discourse as bishop, Athanasius directs this attack to the very theological dialogue he participates in. Doing so may reflect a longing to transcend the painful disagreements that quite concretely threatened exile for him and schism in the church.

Disagreement in the desert has different consequences. Palladius tells of two brothers who swore off their inheritance became monks, Paesius and Isaias.¹⁶ The two differed over how to use the inheritance money and give their lives to God. One gave it all away to the church and become an ascetic, while the other used it to build a monastery and serve the poor himself. After they died, factions of monks emerged, one siding with the choice of first brother, and another with the second. Finally Abba Pambo is called to settle the conflict, and he promptly declares that the two manners of living are equal. When the monks are unsatisfied, he confirms the verdict with a vision: “I saw both of them standing in paradise in the presence of God.” The pattern set by Pambo’s judgment is a common one in the monastic tradition, in contrast to the subtle, irreconcilable disputes of the city; inclusion is always preferable to exclusion, and apparently different phrasings of the theology of the body are nearly always acceptable, suited to the needs and talents of individuals.

The theology of the body is not without its borders, however. There is a concept of heresy, though its meaning is correspondingly different from the city’s doctrinal heresies. It inevitably refers to a vocabulary of sacramental action. In the stories of Palladius, there are a number of monks whose practices isolate them so much from their companions that they come to be regarded with suspicion.¹⁷ However, a line is drawn very definitely at those who abandon their ascetic discipline, or worse, grow so proud in their practice that they dismiss the sacramental authority of the church and lose interest in the eucharist, the reception of the body of Christ.¹⁸ Though Athanasius might be tempted to describe this as a doctrinal

¹⁶Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, trans. and ed. by Robert T. Meyer (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), 49-51.

¹⁷See especially Adolinus, who is “suspected of being a monster,” in *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 88, 133.

affirmation of the hegemony of the church, which in a sense it also is, the monks' themselves describe it simply as a lapse in the ascetic practice of humility.

Conclusion: Competing Magesteria?

With the common emphasis on eminence of the eucharist and incarnate salvation, the convergence of Athanasius' orthodoxy and the desert theology is undeniably evident, though each might describe it in different language. One is of the word in the city, while the other is of the body. This difference in medium is not without significance; for instance, body theology corresponds better to the simple wisdom of Jesus in the Gospels that confounds the learned scribes and Pharisees, just as Anthony does the philosophers. Furthermore, we have seen how the theology of the body allows for inclusion of diversity more easily than the bishops' doctrines could. As such, the desert represents a foil to the turmoil of Alexandria. It is a vision of the a church unified, untroubled by schism, and committed in eucharistic communion to practice of a radically Christ-like life. The desert's opposition, then, is a nuanced one. Rather than some anarcho-schismatic expression of mere dissatisfaction with the city, or even the passive resistance of the martyr movement, the desert represented an ecclesiastical utopia, an image of the church finally free of the division that plagued it.

As Athanasius the theologian constructs the discourse of Anthony, therefore, it is a discourse of Eden, reflected against the fallen, destructive theology necessary in the cosmopolitan city. Importantly, it naturally and unquestioningly absorbs his theology of incarnation as so axiomatic that it is unspoken; upon it everything else rests. It is then possible to abandon the philosophers' terms and turn to practice, faith, and the human body itself, in which full incarnated divinity can be sought. It is a human-scaled discourse and a practical christology, representing the death to not only the city's proud learning but to Athanasius' own, and a reborn conversation that speaks through the most immediate and unencumbered human conduit to the divine.