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A. M. Mazzanti, I. Vigorelli (a cura di)

Krisis e cambiamento in età tardoantica
Riflessi contemporanei



KRISIS E CAMBIAMENTO IN ETÀ TARDOANTICA

RIFLESSI CONTEMPORANEI

ANGELA MARIA MAZZANTI – ILARIA VIGORELLI
(a cura di)



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DIONYSIUS OF ALEXANDRIA IN AND OUT OF HIS TIME

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Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria from c. 250 to 268, was a witness and actor in two of the gravest crises of the church, on account of which his name survived to exacerbate another crisis long after his death. Neither the Decian persecution nor that of Valerian could silence him, though he suffered under both. The longest surviving excerpts from his correspondence record his part in these events, and we possess the remains of other letters prompted by the controversies to which these events gave rise. He shared the common fate of those who uphold the catholic heritage in one generation, only to be found guilty of the new heresy which bedevils the next generation. The object of this paper is to explain how the same man could be at once a hero to Eusebius the historian, an incubus to his own successor Athanasius the Great and a theological novice, worthy at most of a fleeting compliment, to Basil of Caesarea.

EUSEBIUS

Apart from an entry in Jerome's treatise *On Famous Men*, which asserts that he studied with Origen and presided over the catechetical school in Alexandria,¹ all that we know of the life of Dionysius is contained in the sixth and seventh books of the *Church History* by Eusebius of Caesarea. For Eusebius he is a pillar of the church, second only to Origen in his eloquent reprobation of false teaching, and surpassing him in the

¹ Jerome, *On Famous Men* 69.

frequency and severity of his afflictions under successive persecutors. Origen, as a presbyter, was often employed to rip the mask from heresy before an assembly of bishops; Dionysius condemns it magisterially in his letters to fellow-bishops, especially his counterparts in Rome. Both, therefore, embody the principal interests of the *Church History*, bearing witness to the unanimity of the episcopate under extreme duress. Eusebius intimates, both in his rebuttal of Porphyry and in his references to his own apology for Origen, that the latter was not everywhere in good repute; if his collection of testimonies to the sanctity of Bishop Dionysius is prompted by any recent assault, he does not allude to it, unless there is a calculated irony in his citing the Alexandrian at one point as a witness to the talents of his contemporary, Dionysius of Rome. We shall see below that it was the Roman prelate who had put the orthodoxy of his Alexandrian brother to the question. Eusebius, however, introduces Dionysius of Alexandria into his narrative first, without commentary, as the successor to Heraclas, and next, in a pendant to his account of Origen's tribulations, as the author of a letter to one Germanus in which he denies that he fled from persecution in the reign of Decius.² On the contrary, he avers, he had purposely exposed himself to capture and was awaiting the consequences when, without any knowledge or collusion on his part, the place of his confinement was invaded by a mob of believers, who routed the guards and hurried him off in spite of his remonstrations.

Another letter to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch,³ recounts the arrest of a multitude of Christians, some of whom lost all spirit when they discovered that their choice was either to sacrifice or to be sacrificed, while others did not even wait for the torture before confessing the faith which they knew to be a capital crime in the eyes of their tormentors. Not a way of escape was open to them by day or night, says Dionysius, if they would not utter the abominable words; the sick were not spared,

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.40. On the evidence as to the content of Decius; edict which can be gleaned from his letters see A. BRENT *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, 297-298.

³ *EH* 6.41.

and the elderly Mercuria was only one of the many women whose courage proved superior to the rack, the whip and the sword. These trials, as Christ had warned, were a stumbling-block to the elect; where three were tested at once, only two endured, and their reward was first to be hanged and then to be burned alive in “unquenchable fire”⁴—a quip, of course, as the one fire which is truly unquenchable was reserved by God for their executioners. Dionysius makes special mention of the Egyptians who withstood all terrors, not least a lad of fifteen years, Dioscorus, who was released when it was found impossible either to argue or to cajole him into recantation. Another man, Nemesion, had at first been wrongly arrested as a robber, and was discovered in the course of his imprisonment to be a Christian; although he was acquitted of the first charge, it was vouchsafed to him to die, like Christ himself, between two thieves. The timidity of another group of Christians provoked a crowd to rush forward, presenting themselves for the sacrifice in such numbers that the guards were seized by fear.

One result of the Decian persecution was a schism between the party which was willing to readmit those who had lapsed after suitable penance and those who held that no reconciliation had been promised to them in this world. Eusebius, whose own position is clear, wishes us to know that Dionysius was of the same mind. His letter describing the martyrdoms under Decius⁵ ends with an exhortation to imitate the clemency which the martyrs themselves extended to those who had lapsed and returned to faith. Another, addressed to the rigorist Novatian after he and his supporters had formed their own church in opposition to Cornelius of Rome,⁶ admonishes him that the pains of those who strive to maintain the peace of the church are not less noble than sufferings at the hands of persecutors; on another occasion, however, he recalls, not without admiration, that an old man named Serapion, repenting of his weakness, had elected to seek no forgiveness

⁴ *Ibidem* 6.41.17. Cf. *Iliad* 16.123.

⁵ *Ibidem* 6.40-41.

⁶ *Ibidem* 6.44. Cf. F.C. CONYBEARE, *Newly-Discovered letters of Dionysius of Alexandria to the Popes Stephen and Xystus*, «English Historical Review»25 (1910) 111-114.

than that of God, and after partaking of the eucharist, was put to death at his own behest by his grandson. At the opening of his seventh book, Eusebius says that he will allow Dionysius to present the historical record, quoting first a letter to Stephen of Rome in which he declares that the churches in the Levant and Asia Minor are united in condemnation of Novatian.⁷ The last name in his catalogue is that of Firmilian of Cappadocia, who, after Stephen had attempted to browbeat Cyprian of Carthage into accepting baptisms administered by the Novatianists, had written an indignant letter to Cyprian denouncing the arrogance of the Roman bishop. Eusebius, while he briefly adverts to the quarrel between the bishops of Rome and Carthage, observes his usual principle of quoting only documents which illustrate the *homonoia* or concord of the church.

Thus, when he transcribes the bishop's invective against the Sabellians from the same letter, he gives no hint that (as we shall learn below from Athanasius and Basil) the writings of Dionysius on this topic were suspected of falling into the opposite heresy. What he quotes indeed is unexceptionable: the petitions of many distressed believers have forced Dionysius into writing an answer to the heretics who deny the distinction of persons in the Godhead, thus exhibiting no faith in the incarnation and no awareness of the Holy Spirit. If there was any controversy between Eusebius and Marcellus of Ancyra at the time when he wrote the seventh book of the Church history, he will no doubt have been glad to record this judgment on an error which he regularly imputes to his adversary; on the other hand, his conduct during the Arian crisis suggests that he would not have been disturbed by the absence of any term which signified the unity of nature in the Godhead. The rebaptism of schismatics is the subject of the next letter, addressed to the Roman presbyter, Philemon,⁸ in which Dionysius protests that he would not have entered upon this subject but for a heavenly vision and the example of his predecessor Heraclas, who had required no

⁷ *EH* 7.4-5.

⁸ *Ibidem* 7.7.

second immersion when receiving converts into the catholic fold from a heretical communion. In another communication to Dionysius of Rome, he declares himself an enemy to Novatian because the latter, in denying the efficacy of catholic baptisms, has slighted the mercy of Christ, disowned the faith of those before him and banished the Holy Spirit. A letter to Xystus of Rome, the successor of Dionysius,⁹ laments the case of a venerable presbyter of his own diocese, who had been persuaded that the baptism which he received at the hands of heretics was invalid, could not be induced by any assurances to participate in the eucharist.

The letters of Dionysius concerning the persecution under Valerian complete this ample dossier.¹⁰ Holding to the convention that good Emperors do not persecute—a commonplace for Eusebius in the Church history—he informs his correspondent, Xystus of Rome, that the relief that the church enjoyed under Valerian proved short-lived because the Emperor lent his ear to a certain Macrianus, the “archisynagogus of the magi”, who had previously been a minister of the imperial finances (twñ kaj’olou log wn). Punning on his own Greek, Dionysius scoffs that he did nothing for the catholic good, but became an enemy of the catholic church, thus sundering himself from the mercy of him who is before everything, through everything and in everything. Failing to assume the imperial purple, which was his true goal, Macrianus bequeathed his ambitions to his two sons, and the result was an object lesson in the visitation of the father’s sins upon the children. To document the sufferings of the bishop himself, Eusebius returns to the tract against Germanus,¹¹ in which the charge of unlawfully convening an assembly is shown to be baseless because the transcript of his trial before Aemilianus reveals that the latter aimed at nothing less than to make him forswear his Christianity. When he could not persuade him to honour the gods whom the nations honour, Aemilianus exiled him to Libya, affording him no time to convene an assembly. Dionysius adds that

⁹ *Ibidem* 7.9.

¹⁰ *Ibidem* 7.10.

¹¹ *Ibidem* 7.11.

this punishment providentially spread the gospel to parts in which it had not hitherto been published. The only crimes of which he can be convicted by Germanus are indifference to worldly distinctions and repeated tribulation under interdicts, hazards, threats and inquisitions.

A letter to Dometius rehearses at length the miseries of male and female, old and the young, the soldier and the civilian, with a further narrative of his own captivity under Valerian and a catalogue of those who had earned the crown by their endurance. These communications leave us in no doubt on the one hand of his indomitable fidelity to the church or on the other of his loyalty to the Emperors Valerian and Gallienus in any matter which did not compromise the sovereignty of God. His status as a confessor thus established, he can speak with authority on any question. The chapter before the one that records his death¹² contains a long excerpt from a letter which, though addressed to a cleric named Nepos, is designed to protect the laity from false teachers who are crying up the Book of Revelation against the gospels and epistles of the New Testament, protesting that he does not mean to disparage this work, Dionysius argues none the less that it cannot be the work of John the evangelist. The former conceals his identity, whereas the author of Revelation tells us his name in the opening sentence; as the book unfolds, it proves to have barely a syllable in common with the gospel, in contrast to the first epistles of John, which is wholly of a piece with the gospel in its choice of word and idiom. Moreover, both the gospel and the epistles are free of the barbarisms which litter the writing of this other John. Eusebius, as we know, entertained his own doubts regarding the authorship, and even the authority, of this text, and his reasons for quoting the verdict of an eminent prelate require no exploration. Similarly, the pronouncements of Dionysius on rebaptism and the Sabellians are not reported by Eusebius in defence of his orthodoxy (which, so far as we are given to understand, was never impugned), but with the purpose of lending his unanswerable voice to the decisions of the party to which Eusebius adhered.

¹² *Ibidem* 7.25 on Revelation; 7.26 on the death of Dionysius.

ATHANASIUS¹³

We may be sure that this estimate was widely shared, and that the refusal of Dionysius to affirm the word *homoousion* was as much an embarrassment to the Nicene party as it was a source of gratification to their opponents. For this reason Athanasius mingles bluster with hermeneutical dexterity in a long treatise *On the Opinion of Dionysius*, which begins, as he so often does, in a belligerent posture.¹⁴ Only those who were lacking in reverence for the saintly prelate could accuse him of holding tenets which are at odds with the church's teaching on the divinity of Christ. To attribute any but orthodox doctrines to him is to prove oneself an enemy of Christ and an Ariomaniac. No allowance is made for those who acknowledge in good faith both the authority of Nicaea and the sagacity of Bishop Dionysius, but are perplexed to find the one expressly denying what the other expressly affirms. Athanasius similarly assumes in his *Orations against the Arians* that no-one can ask how the ignorance and weakness of Christ incarnate can be reconciled with his divinity unless they have taken the Arian position. In both works we are given to understand that truth is not so well protected by the answering of a difficult question as by an embargo on questioning—the natural position of an embattled man, but in this case of a man who seeks battle gladly. Taking for granted the Nicene formulae that his real or supposed interlocutors are contesting, Athanasius declares that they are maligning the bishop whom they purport to honour, though he knows well enough that their purpose is to build an impeachment of the Nicene formula on the authority of the bishop. Echoing Luke 22.52 (“have you come out against me as a thief?”) he likens them to robbers who, once detected, try to palliate their guilt by naming men of virtue as their accomplices.

Throughout the letter the condemnation of Arius is taken to be secure and irrevocable. If this were a fact and not a protreptic fiction, we should

¹³ Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii Magni*, ed. B. de Montfaucon, in *Athanasii Opera Dogmatica Selecta* (Leipzig: Teubner 1953), 92-139.

¹⁴ *Sent.* 1, 94 Montfaucon.

be bound to date this treatise to the interval between 325 and 341, the year in which the bishops at the Dedication Council declared that on inspection they found no heresy in the teaching of Arius. Since, however, Athanasius insists at all times that the Arians have been routed in argument even if they remain truculent in error, it would not be prudent to base any scholarly inference on his claim to be speaking for the whole body of Christians. It would be equally injudicious to surmise that, because he brands them Ariomaniacs, his opponents were self-confessed adherents of Arius; as the bishops protested when acquitting him in 341, the ecclesiastical rank which gave them the right to judge forbade them to embrace him as a teacher. Moreover, there was at least one infelicity in the letter of Dionysius to Ammonius which could not be alleged against Arius, the description of the Son as a *poiêma*, or thing made. Arius had styled him a creature, but not as one of the creatures;¹⁵ the evidence for the appearance of this term in the anathemas to the Nicene creed is not so strong as the evidence for the proscription of *poiêton* in the main text of the creed, which was all the more readily endorsed because no-one present had affirmed it.¹⁶ By hinting that those who failed to read his predecessor as he did were guilty of Arianism, Athanasius forestalls the possible charge that Dionysius had held tenets even more unpalatable than those of Arius, with whom he shared a reluctance to affirm the homoousion as a text of orthodoxy.

Having decreed that no-one who impugned the faith of a saint can be a true believer, Athanasius now discharges a battery of texts at the Ariomaniacs, all of which bear testimony to the Godhead of Christ and his closeness to the Father. Was he not God, and *with God in the beginning*? Can it be said of a creature that *all things were created through him*, or that he is the *one Lord through are all things*? How

¹⁵ See e.g. Athanasius, *On the Synods* 16 and *Orations against the Arians* 1.21.

¹⁶ Against Athanasius, *On the Decrees of Nicaea*, appendix and Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8, see Basil of Caesarea, Letter 125; Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius* 3; Hilary, *On the Synods* 84; Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.12; M.F. WILES, *A Textual Variant in the Creed of Nicaea*, «Studia Patristica» 26 (1993) 428-433.

can be of any other nature than that of God when he says *I am in the Father and the Father in me*, while the Father himself says of him, *My heart has disgorged a goodly word?*¹⁷ Those who deny that Christ is God in the face of such plain testimony are of the tribe of Caiaphas, who, instead of worshipping Christ when he declared himself the Son of God, pronounced him worthy of death. This is an extension of a familiar libel on Arius, that by slighting the divinity of Christ he had reduced him to the level of a mere prophet, thereby falling into the error of the Jews who had crucified him. Innuendo of this kind was all the more menacing after Constantine had issued a thunderous warning to those who persisted in keeping easter as a passover in defiance of the Alexandrian calendar and Nicene legislation.¹⁸ Thus confuted,¹⁹ the reprobates appeal to a patriarch of the church, just as the Jews appealed to their father Abraham, only to be told by Christ that Abraham had no part in their works. The comparison implies that the status of patriarch is a guarantee against error; had Dionysius proved himself unworthy of his office, would he not have been deposed by the suffrage of his fellow-bishops? Again we may wonder whether Athanasius could have used this argument after his own deposition in 339; again we must remember that in his mind the councils that successively deposed him were no true councils, that the Emperor who ratified the verdict was exceeding his powers, and Julius of Rome, who overruled the verdict of the eastern bishops, was seconded by the one council of the 340s which had not been tainted by doctrinal error.

All these judgments, the last above all, were open to dispute; what was not in dispute was that after Nicaea, the one oecumenical gathering of this epoch, the episcopal ban had fallen on Eusebius of Nicomedia, the hitherto formidable patron of Arius, whose known opinions contradict

¹⁷ *Sent.* 2, 96 MONTFAUCON. Cf John 1.1; John 1.3; 1 Corinthians 8.6; John 14.11; Psalm 45.2.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.18-19.

¹⁹ *Sent.* 3, 98 MONTFAUCON.

two important clauses of the Nicene Creed.²⁰ Eusebius returned from exile to become the inveterate foe of Athanasius; if he was still alive at the time of writing, or if Athanasius thought that those who had slandered Dionysius were of his party, his argument that Dionysius had suffered no comparable sanction acquires some piquancy. It might be objected that no competent power to depose a bishop was at the disposal of the church in the late third century; but this is easily answered, for in 269 a council held in Antioch, over which Dionysius himself might have presided but for illness, deposed the bishop, Paul of Samosata, for his overweening conduct and his refusal to confess the incarnation. Paul, whom some believe to have held an office or at least a position of favour either with Rome or with Palmyra, would not consent to be ousted; it was only the intervention of the Emperor Aurelian, fresh from his conquest of Palmyra, that made it possible to dethrone him and appoint a successor to the vacant see.²¹ Those who knew the history of this affair—and it was written in the *Church History* of Eusebius—might be expected to reason that if one bishop could be deprived of his see for heresy, another bishop's retention of his see was a certificate of innocence in the eyes of his ecclesiastical peers.

Athanasius might not have wished to stir a memory of this council after Basil of Ancyra revealed that, in the course of dethroning Paul, the eighty bishops at Antioch had also rejected the term *homoousion*.²² Eusebius made no mention of this decree in his *Church History*, perhaps because the church of his time was divided by this term and his intention in recounting the deposition of Paul was to illustrate the success of the episcopate in preserving its unity under pagan rulers. Athanasius would appear to have possessed little information about this council,

²⁰ See Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6.3 ("from the *ousia* of the Father"); Ambrose, *On the Faith* 3.15.151 (homoousios).

²¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.27 and 29. See further F. MILLAR, *Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian*, «Journal of Roman Studies» 61 (1971) 1-17; U.M. LANG, *The Christological Controversy at the Synod of Antioch in 268/9*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 51 (2000) 54-80.

²² See Athanasius, *On the Synods* 45. At *Syn.* 43 he alludes to the correspondence between the two Dionysii and his own commentary on this.

and his assertion that it denounced not the term itself but an invidious construction that had been put upon it by Paul is nothing more than a conjecture; so much is clear from the fact that Hilary offers quite a different explanation, which is no doubt equally fanciful.²³ By contrast, he professes to have at hand the means of correcting false deductions that have been drawn from the unwillingness of Bishop Dionysius to adopt the word *homoousios*, for this author makes it clear in subsequent letters that he was writing for an occasion and has come to regard his own words with some misgiving. The efforts of Dionysius to avert the suspicion of heresy prove that he held to the standard which was later to guide the Nicene Fathers: the interpreter of his letter to Ammonius must therefore consider not merely its words but the circumstances of its composition. Throughout these opening chapters Athanasius follows the pattern that is exemplified in chapter after chapter of his *Orations against the Arians*: first he maintains, in the light of the church's teaching and the general tenor of scripture, that a text cannot mean what the Arians wish to make of it, then he proceeds to show that their error arises from their failure to grasp the "argument" (hypothesis²⁴) of the passage in which it occurs.

The motives for his writing to Ammonius are described with an exactitude which suggests that his own hand furnished the information. Some bishops in the Pentapolis of Libya, we hear, had taken up the teaching of Sabellius with such vigour that Christ was barely preached in the churches. This again is the error of Paul of Samosata, and the response of Dionysius was to dwell upon the distinction of the Son from the Father in terms which were designed to leave no doubt that he was an object of veneration in his own right. The great churchman therefore wrote with a different purpose and in a wholly different style from that of Arius, who was not content to blaspheme the Son but

²³ HILARY, *On the Synods* 81, taking the word to mean that there is no differentiation of the persons.

²⁴ *Sent.* 4, 100.25-26 MONTFAUCON. Cf. *Orations against the Arians* 2.18-24 with J.D. ERNEST, *Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context*, «Vigiliae Christianae» 47 (1993) 341-362.

chose Sotadean verse as his ribald medium. The scansion of Sotadeans remain obscure to us,²⁵ so that scholars are divided as to whether this is merely a scurrilous epithet or a correct identification of the metre of the *Thalia*; at any rate, Athanasius the superior integrity of the bishop is demonstrated by his readiness to amend his teaching as soon as he became conscious of the offence that he had given to orthodox readers. From these palinodes it becomes apparent that in his first letter he had tempered the formulation of his theology to the needs and capacities of the recipients. We should note that Athanasius has not yet quoted a single word of the letter: the reader must be predisposed to read it with charity, just as he must be reminded at every turn to withhold this indulgence from Arius, notwithstanding the machinations of others on his behalf.

Quotation from the letter is further postponed by a list of apostolic sayings which, if taken alone, might tempt us to suspect them of denying Christ's divinity. *Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved to you by God; in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene whom you crucified; God vouchsafed a proof to all in the man whom he determined, having raised him from the dead*²⁶—all these proclamations are addressed to unbelievers who have yet to learn that Jesus is the Messiah and are not ready to be told that he is God. Even the martyr Stephen died with a phrase on his lips which might imply that Jesus was no more than a son of man.²⁷ Before we cite this reticent preaching as though it confirmed the Arian claim that the Son is a passible creature, we should recall that when the same men were in the company of believers, they did not hesitate to use such words as *Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God, or the effulgence of his glory and the impression of his substance and who being in the form of God, thought it no robbery to be equal with God.*²⁸ Thus it was with

²⁵ See M.L. WEST, *The Metre of Arius' Thalia*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 33 (1982), 98-105, responding to G.C. STEAD, *The Thalia of Arius and the Testimony of Athanasius*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 19 (1978) 20-52.

²⁶ *Sent.* 7., 104 MONTFAUCON. Cf. Acts 2.22-23; Acts 4.10; Acts 17.30.

²⁷ *Sent.* 7. Cf. Acts 7.56.

²⁸ *Sent.* 8, 106 MONTFAUCON. Cf. Matthew 16.26; Hebrews 1.3; Philippians 2.6.

Dionysius also, who, being forced on one occasion to accommodate his language to the mean understanding of the Sabellian dissidents, went on in other missives to extol Christ as the word, the wisdom, the power, the breath and the glory of the Father. His admirer does not add that these are the metaphors which Origen had culled from the Wisdom of Solomon and the opening chapter of Hebrews:²⁹ while Origen's doctrine of the eternal sonship is commended in *On the Decrees of the Nicene Synod*, it was possible (as Marcellus saw) to discern an Arian tendency in his identification of Christ with the created Wisdom of Proverbs 8.22.³⁰ Leaving the biblical texts to speak for themselves, Athanasius insists that the more honorific sayings of Dionysius, like those of the apostles, turn the scale against those which might be thought to occlude the divinity of the Son.

At last we come to the content of the letter to Ammonius, in which we are given to understand that Dionysius quoted the verses, "I am the vine and my Father is the gardener; he was faithful to the one that made him; made so much better than the angels"; and the verb "created" from Proverbs 8.22.³¹ The last two are texts to which Athanasius applied his own casuistry in the *Orations against the Arians*; here, before addressing the correct interpretation of them, he observes that other letters of Dionysius reveal his acquaintance with such verses as "I and the Father are one and He who has seen me has seen the Father."³² Without telling us, however, what his predecessor made of them, he argues that these utterances must be read with an eye to the knowledge or unbelief of those to whom they were first addressed. The vine is the bodily nature of Christ, of which he has made us members, allowing himself to be styled a creature inasmuch as he has assumed that nature for our redemption. Again the pronouncement that he was faithful to the one who made him must be understood of the flesh that he received from the Virgin Mary, while he is economically said to have been made better than the

²⁹ See e.g. *First Principles* 1.2.9-10, citing successively Wisdom 7.25 and Hebrews 1.3.

³⁰ Eusebius, *Against Marcellus* 1.4.49.

³¹ *Sent.* 10-11, 108-110 MONTFAUCON. Cf. John 15.1; Hebrews 3.2; Hebrews 1.4.

³² *Sent.* 10, 108 MONTFAUCON. Cf. John 14.10 and 14.9.

angels because in his human capacity he proclaimed a law superior to the one that was dispensed to Moses through these intermediaries. Athanasius does not maintain, as he does in the *Orations against the Arians*, that the adjective “better”, in contrast to “greater”,³³ implies a superiority in nature; from this we may deduce either that the *Orations* were not yet written or that he has chosen to limit himself to the glosses that Dionysius supplies elsewhere in his correspondence. If he quotes Dionysius at all, however, he does so intermittently, for Dionysius is not the one who wrote that, if we deny the divine *ousia* to the Son, we make him consubstantial with the human race.³⁴

The speech that he now puts into the mouth of his hero³⁵ is certainly not a quotation but his own composition, a verbose rebuttal of those who confound the politic application of these verses with the Arian misuse of them in disparagement of Christ. His meaning can be condensed in the assertion that, just as the gardener is not the vine, so the one who is in the flesh is not the Father but the Son. Commenting acidulously that all things are clear to those with knowledge, but dark to those who have fallen away from the teaching of the catholic church, Athanasius relates that when the letter to Ammonius became known, some orthodox Christians of the diocese complained to Dionysius, bishop of Rome, that the Alexandrian patriarch held the Son to be no more than a creature.³⁶ In his own exculpation Dionysius of Alexandria not only wrote to his namesake, but published a *Refutation* and an *Apology*, in which he compared his detractors to those of Paul. If this is not enough to prove that his sentiments were those of the apostle, the Arians who accuse him of denying the eternity of the Son must reckon with such pronouncements as: “there never was when God was not the Father”, or “Christ always existed and was always Word, Wisdom and Power, for God did not want these things before bringing forth the Son, yet neither is the Son’s being from himself but from the Father”. A little

³³ *Orations against the Arians* 1.58-59.

³⁴ *Sent.* 12, 112.15 MONTFAUCON.

³⁵ *Sent.* 12, 112-114 MONTFAUCON.

³⁶ *Sent.* 13, 114 MONTFAUCON.

later, says Athanasius, Dionysius affirms that “If he is the refulgence of an eternal light, he himself must be eternal; for since the light always exists, manifestly so must the refulgence”. In the same passage he goes on to equate the Son with the Wisdom in which the father delighted before the ages; elsewhere he styles the Son light from light, concluding that like the father he must be eternal. Another quotation intimates that if Spirit is eternal (as it must be, for God is spirit), the Son who is a breath of his power must also be eternal; again he states that the Son who is from the Father is ever beside the Father and instinct with being.³⁷

Again the debt to Origen is clear,³⁸ but Athanasius saves all his shafts for the Arian controversy. “Not without cause”, wrote the patriarch, “is the Son said to be eternal”; and again, “God is eternal light without beginning or cessation, and therefore the refulgence shines forth and coexists eternally.” Evidently he was not one to say, with Arius, that “the Son did not exist before he came forth and there was once when he was not”.³⁹ If there are some who murmur that Dionysius names the Son without the Father and the Father without the Son, they will blush to read his own commentary on these omissions:⁴⁰

I named the Father, and before making mention of the Son, I had already signified him in the name Father; I joined to him the Son, and even had I not named the Father before, he had none the less been comprehended in the name Son; I added the Holy Spirit, but together with this I said whence and through whom he proceeded”.

Dionysius thus appears to have taken the Trinity, not merely the Son’s relation to the Father, as the subject of dispute; from these sparse words we may glean that he was one of the first to affirm the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father through the Son. Athanasius appends the startling dictum that “we expand the monad indivisibly into the triad,

³⁷ *Sent.* 15, 116-118 MONTFAUCON.

³⁸ See e.g. *First Principles* 1.2.2 and 4.28.

³⁹ *Sent.* 16, 118 MONTFAUCON.

⁴⁰ *Sent.* 17, 120 MONTFAUCON.

and we compress the triad irreducibly into the monad”.⁴¹ This need not mean any more than Gregory Nazianzen meant when he said that we cannot think of the three without the one or of the one without the three;⁴² readers other than Athanasius might have been disquieted by the proximity of this language to that of Marcellus or Ancyra, who was thought to have spoken literally of contraction and expansion in the Godhead.⁴³ Even Marcellus, however, was an ally to those who held that every expedient must be tried against Arianism, and there was evidently no danger that the charge of Sabellianism would be pressed against Dionysius. Having accumulated so many proofs that he was not an Arian either, his defender quotes at last the words that had given offence in his letter to Ammonius, though even now they are flanked by his subsequent qualifications and not presented in their original form.

In a long citation, Dionysius plays down the significance of two similes which could not be excused by any scriptural precedent.⁴⁴ In one the Father is imagined as a sower and in the other as the architect of a ship; both, he pleads, were cursory examples which he admits to have been of less utility than the ones which follow, in which he expressly calls the son the offspring of the Father and compares him to a stream that proceeds from a spring and to a plant growing from a seed. Those who denounce his reluctance to say that the Son is *homousios* with the Father—an expression which he cannot find in the

⁴¹ *Sent.* 17, 120.21-23 MONTFAUCON. Athanasius’ lapidary citations from Dionysius of Alexandria in this treatise may be contrasted with the long and triumphant excerpt in *On the Nicene Decrees* 26 from the missive addressed to the patriarch by his Roman namesake. In terms that were later to be echoed by Arius in his letter to Alexander of Alexandria (*On Synods* 16), the Pope of the west denounces those who make three gods of one by “dividing the monad”. Adapting the same locution in his own reply, Dionysius of Alexandria acquits himself of tritheism without giving any quarter to the Sabellians, whom he and Dionysius of Rome regarded as a common enemy.

⁴² Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 40.41.

⁴³ Eusebius, *Against Marcellus* 2.6.1-4.

⁴⁴ *Sent.* 18, 120-122 MONTFAUCON.

scriptures⁴⁵—must admit that these images represent the Son as a being of one kind (*homogenês*) with his progenitor.⁴⁶ A theologian is not to be judged summarily on the evidence of two unwise conceits. According to Athanasius, therefore, Dionysius simply disavowed the solecisms which the Arians have adduced as vindications of their own teaching; the Arians, he crows, must say in their turn why they reject the *homoousion*, or why, if Dionysius made an error in affirming it, they parade his words as a charter for their own heresy.⁴⁷ The Arians, whoever they were, would have found this reasoning sophistical, for (as Luise Abramowski has remarked⁴⁸) the Alexandrian Dionysius never makes this term his own, though he does implicitly concede it to his namesake. They might also have noted that Dionysius, unlike Athanasius, does not justify the false similes by referring them to the body or flesh of the saviour; hence they had reason to doubt the asseveration that this caveat should be attached to every use in his works of terms which appear to denote creation or origin in time.⁴⁹

Athanasius sought the protection of Julius, bishop of Rome, after repeated condemnations by his eastern colleagues ended in his deposition and exile. We need not be surprised then that he omits to ask the question that we cannot refrain from asking: why should any Pope of Alexandria in the third century submit to such an interrogation by the Pope of Rome? We may wonder more reasonably why, having shown by implication at least that Dionysius of Rome was a patron of the *homoousion*, he makes nothing more of this fact here or in any other writing. We may guess that at the time of composition the word was to him already a token but not yet a shibboleth of orthodoxy; judging by his reticence in the *Orations against the Arians*, this would be true at any time between 325 and 350. His failure to cite Dionysius in the

⁴⁵ *Sent.* 18, 122.4 MONTFAUCON.

⁴⁶ *Sent.* 18, 122.7 MONTFAUCON.

⁴⁷ *Sent.* 19, 124 MONTFAUCON.

⁴⁸ L. ABRAMOWSKI, *Dionys von Rom (d. 264-5) und Dionys von Alexandria (d. 268) in den arianischen Streitigkeiten des 4 Jahrhunderts*, ZKW 93 (1982) 240-272.

⁴⁹ See e.g. *Orations against the Arians* 2.44.

treatise *On Synods*, if only as a counterpoise to the Council of Antioch's proscription of the term in 269, is less intelligible, unless he feared that it would add disgrace to the frailty of Pope Liberius, who in 357 lent his signature to the Sirmian creed which denounced all use of the term *ousia*. Whatever his motives, Athanasius dwells not so much on what was demanded in Rome as on what was yielded in Alexandria. As a further proof of his indifference at this time to verbal concord where there was evident unanimity of thought, he allows us to see that his predecessor never goes so far as to state that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, though he insists that he is not alien to the Father in his *ousia*.

On the other hand, he can demonstrate beyond controversy that Dionysius never regarded the Father as the maker of the son, for having stated that a Father is not the maker of his own progeny, Dionysius avers that "as Word I do not reckon him a thing made, and God I call not his maker but his father."⁵⁰ He also pleads that even if he spoke without qualification of the making of the Son, this need not imply that the Son is an artefact, any more than this is implied when an author is said to be the maker of his book or a righteous person a "doer" (factor) of the law. The pertinence of these remarks becomes more apparent when, after a recapitulation of other similes which vindicate the eternity of the Son, Athanasius sets the Arian notion of the Word against that of the Alexandrian bishop. Arius says—though perhaps this is an invidious paraphrase rather than a transcription—that the one whom we style the Word is not the thought or speech that is proper to the Father, but is alien to him in nature and his Son only by adoption; Dionysius, by contrast, likens the Word's procession from the Father to that of a stream from its spring, without impairing the unity of nature. The word in the heart is distinct from the thought that leaps from the tongue—that is, the word and the thought are one, but the heart and the tongue remain two.⁵¹ Here we observe a rare departure from the example of Origen, who opined that a simile drawn from human speech would

⁵⁰ *Sent.* 21, 126 MONTFAUCON.

⁵¹ *Sent.* 23, 130 MONTFAUCON.

make the Son a mere epiphenomenon of the Father;⁵² as we have seen, however, Dionysius did not have to fear the imputation of Sabellianism.

Athanasius challenges Arius with his customary invective: no wonder that this enemy of Christ should pursue Dionysius, for did not Christ tell his followers that *if they persecute me they will persecute you?*⁵³ What use are these infelicitous images of the ship and the plant to the heretics, when Dionysius also declares the son to be consubstantial with the Father and from his substance? These are Nicene definitions, not the *ipsissima verba* of the patriarch, but Athanasius quickly camouflages the inaccuracy by repeating his testimony to the indissoluble unity of the Father and the Son. The Arian distinction between the indwelling word of the Father and the adopted Word is shown to be futile by another excerpt in which Dionysius says that there was no other word anterior to the procession of the true Word, who was with God from the beginning as the wisdom in whom he delighted.⁵⁴ Athanasius comments that it is not the Word but the workmanship of the Father that is alien to his nature;⁵⁵ it is true, therefore that when the Word became flesh the flesh did not share the nature of God, but in his capacity as Wisdom, truth and Lord, the Word is his natural and not his created or adopted Son. It only remains to applaud the good policy of Dionysius, who suited his words to the error that he had set out to explode, and thus did not commence with texts such as “I and the Father” are one or “He who has seen me has seen the Father”, of which it is now opportune to remind the Arians because they have fallen into the contrary error.⁵⁶ His object being to convince the Sabellians that the Father is not the one who became incarnate, he begins with texts pertaining to the manhood of the Saviour. In correcting Arians, one must begin with texts that reveal the divinity, in the evergreen hope of bringing them to repentance, though

⁵² Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.54.151.

⁵³ *Sent.* 24, 130 MONTFAUCON.

⁵⁴ *Sent.* 25, 132-134 MONTFAUCON.

⁵⁵ *Sent.* 26, 136 MONTFAUCON.

⁵⁶ *Sent.* 26, 134 MONTFAUCON. Cf. John 10.30 and 14.9.

it is all too obvious that they have no more to do with the church than the church with them.⁵⁷

BASIL OF CAESAREA⁵⁸

Basil assumed the mantle of Athanasius as the champion of Nicaea, but did not become so intractable in his defence of the *homoousion*: so long as the formula “like in substance” (*homoios kat’ousian*) was reinforced by the term “incomparable” (*aparallakton*), the identity of attributes was preserved, although without this proviso it might suggest that the Son is a weak representative of the Father. He had some reason to favour this second locution, not only because it clearly implied the distinctness of the two persons but because the party opposed to him maintained not only that the Son is a creature—the defining characteristic of an Arian for Athanasius—but he was in substance *anomoios*, that is unlike the Father. When he replies to a friend’s inquiry concerning Dionysius of Alexandria, he declines to make any apology for the bishop which might offer some latitude to the Anomaeans. Being no Alexandrian, he shows no disposition to spare a man who in his estimation “is not admirable in all that he writes, while some of them we absolutely condemn”. His asperity is not cooled by the absence of books, which forbids him to quote Dionysius word for word; the letter to Ammonius was evidently well known, as was its success in the confutation of the Sabellians. But whereas Athanasius commends his strategy in saying no more than the matter in hand required, it seems to Basil that Dionysius fell unwittingly into one heresy in his intemperate flight from another. Accentuating the difference between the hypostases he neglected the unity of the *ousia*; having at first denied the *homoousion*, he affirmed it in his submission to Dionysius of Rome, which in Basil’s view is not a clarification but a recantation. Athanasius cites only orthodox sayings about the Spirit,

⁵⁷ *Sent.* 27, 136-138 MONTFAUCON.

⁵⁸ Basil of Caesarea, Letter 9 in *Letters*, ed. J. DEFERRARI (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 93-102.

but according to Basil Dionysius “let fall expressions not all becoming to the Spirit, excluding him from the Godhead that is worshipped and numbering him below with the created and worshipping nature”.

In the treatise *On the Holy Spirit*⁵⁹ the suffrage of Dionysius to the existence of the Spirit as a third person of the Trinity has some rhetorical value, as Basil says, because he was generally regarded as an opponent of Nicene doctrine. This strategic use of him, however, is only further proof that Dionysius of Alexandria was no longer for Basil the champion of orthodoxy and Christian virtue as he had been for Eusebius, not even a maligned saint, as he had been for Athanasius. With Basil we are entering an epoch in which the good name of an ante-Nicene writer cannot be saved by any historical concessions—the age which saw the condemnation of Origen and the obsolescence of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. In this third generation it is possible to say openly that the Bishop’s detractors were not wrong; he was not a consummate pedagogue or a master of indirection, but a specimen of episcopal fallibility in the age before the church could speak with the majesty of an imperial synod.

⁵⁹ *On the Holy Spirit* 29.72, in the edition of B. PRUCHE, Cerf, Paris 1968.