The influence of Athanasius of Alexandria on contemporary approaches to Theo-drama

Introduction

Christian writers have often drawn on concepts from story-telling, narrative, and stage performance in order to illuminate history and revelation. In the last half-century, however, a thorough systematic theology has developed in which the history of creation, the interactions between God and humanity, and eschatology are all expressed as drama. Hans Urs von Balthasar is the progenitor of this theo-dramatic approach.

In this essay I investigate whether some aspects of theo-drama find their source and inspiration in the much earlier thought of Athanasius, particularly in his text *On the Incarnation*.

Athanasius and *On the Incarnation*

Athanasius (c. 296-373 CE) attended the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and later served as Bishop of Alexandria (Farmer 2011). Much of his life was spent in exile, largely because of his opposition to Arianism. Against the Arian claim that Jesus was created rather than eternal, Athanasius asserted that Jesus was of one substance (homoousios, or ὁμοούσιος in Greek) with the Father (Cross and Livingstone 2009a). The book *On the Incarnation* was written by Athanasius as a sequel to his earlier *Against the Gentiles*, but according to the translator, John Behr, whether these were written before or after the controversies with Arianism is unclear (Athanasius 2011, 24).

Three key chapters of *On the Incarnation* are headed “The divine dilemma regarding life and death”, “The divine dilemma regarding knowledge and ignorance” and “The death of Christ and the resurrection of the body”. An outline of those chapters is provided in the appendix, but they are neatly summarised in the final section of the third chapter, which notes that Christians should not be ashamed to say that “the Saviour raised up his body”, that he is the true Son of God who took on a body for the salvation of all, taught about the Father, destroyed death and “granted incorruptibility to all through the promise of the resurrection” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 32).

Humanity was made in the divine image but became corrupted (Athanasius 2011, secs. 3–5). In contrast to that, Athanasius emphasises the eternal existence of the Word, who “takes for himself a body” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 8) so that the image of God could be re-created in us (Athanasius 2011, sec. 13) and so that all people “might gain a notion through him of the knowledge of the Father” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 19). This two-fold mission of redemption and education will be discussed more below.

In this text, Jesus’ incarnation is inseparable from his death and resurrection. By “sojourning” among us and offering his body “as a substitute for all” he fulfilled the requirement for death. But by virtue of the Word’s own incorruptibility he also brought a promise of incorruptibility to all through his resurrection (Athanasius 2011, sec. 9). As a consequence, we no longer need to fear death (Athanasius 2011, sec. 21,27-29).

Theo-drama I – Balthasar

Sixteen centuries after Athanasius, starting in 1973, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) published a massive five-volume work that “shows how many of the trends of modern theology … point to an understanding of human and cosmic reality as a divine drama” (“Theo-Drama” 2016). Balthasar was a Swiss, Catholic theologian, a friend of Karl Barth, and a Jesuit for the middle 30 years of his life (Cross and Livingstone 2009b; Henrici 1991, 7–22).

Balthasar views the interactions between God and humanity as an unfolding drama, with God as the author, Jesus as the “chief actor” (Balthasar 1992, 17) and Spirit as director. The creativity of those three contributors is expressed in a theatre (the world) through a performance (history) that involves all of humanity in the *dramatis personae*.

For the most part Balthasar does not directly engage with Athanasius, to the extent that an otherwise complimentary commentator views his lack of engagement as a significant inadequacy (Daley 2004, 202). Nevertheless, some key themes from *On the Incarnation* can be seen in Balthasar’s writings.

As a starting point, both view history as Christo-centric, with a script that is driven from above, at God’s initiative, and yet enacted from below (see for example Balthasar 1992, 15). As Athanasius wrote, the God Word “sojourned as a human being, taking to himself a body like theirs” so that “from below” (that is, through the actions of a human body) people would

come to know the God Word and through him know the Father (Athanasius 2011, sec. 14). Both Balthasar and Athanasius acknowledge that this educative intention of the incarnation is complemented by a redemptive intention: they jointly assert that "the Word is at work making God intelligible" (Kannengiesser 1991, 62) and also that "the Savior … banished death from us and renewed us" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 16).

Both authors portray the divine movement as a kenotic descent, though Balthasar extends that concept well beyond Athanasius. For Athanasius, God, including the pre-existent Word, cannot die, but took on a body that was capable of dying (Athanasius 2011, sec. 9). The incorporeal became physical (Athanasius 2011, sec. 11) though was not constrained by that embodied form (Athanasius 2011, sec. 17). The body was mortal and yet immune from corruption (Athanasius 2011, sec. 20). Jesus allowed himself to suffer the ignominy of the Cross (Athanasius 2011, sec. 24). Balthasar makes kenosis a central concept (MacKinnon 1986, 165; Treitler 1991, 171–73) and follows the descent of the Word not only from the infinite to the finite, but from human life to the depths of hell. For Balthasar, it is not only in becoming human and suffering death that Jesus emptied himself, but that self-emptying is a fundamental quality of the God-head (Quash 2004, 151; Balthasar 2000, vii).

The self-giving descent of the God Word results in an elevation of corrupted humanity. Balthasar notes that a central feature of Jesus' mission is this "wondrous exchange" (Balthasar 1992, 237) that occurs between God and humanity through the incarnation. He cites Athanasius in that context, though not from *On the Incarnation*. The idea is nevertheless on display in *On the Incarnation*, for instance in the claim that "He was incarnate that we might be made god" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 54).

Notwithstanding these similarities between Balthasar and Athanasius, the shared themes described above are common to other Patristics, and Balthasar draws on that whole tradition rather than on Athanasius specifically. In both *Theo-Drama* and *Mysterium Paschale* there are multiple allusions to Athanasius and several direct quotes from *On the Incarnation*[1] but no sustained discussion nor acknowledgement of Athanasius as a key inspiration.

A deeper influence on Balthasar by the Athanasian, or at least Patristic, heritage might be implied by the movement from *role* to *mission* that Balthasar discusses at the end of the

[1] e.g. *On the Incarnation* sec. 25 is referred to in *Mysterium Paschale* p. 130, and sec. 45 is quoted in *Mysterium Paschale* p. 167.

Prolegomena (Balthasar 1988, sec. III). Here Balthasar comments on the important shift in the way we might answer the question "Who am I?" in the light of a theo-dramatic interpretation of life. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius is at pains to show that the essence of the God Word is not an arbitrary role that was assumed while Jesus was embodied. On the contrary, the book's thesis depends on understanding the *intent* of the incarnation, that is the nature of the God Word's mission. Athanasius would not have used that terminology, and Balthasar gives no credit to him for the idea, and yet it is fundamentally the same conclusion that Balthasar makes. Furthermore, the same can be said of the rest of humanity: our essence does not depend on an arbitrary role we might play but on our mission. The dramatic tension established in the Bible does not end with the final verse of Revelation, because "the man who is a serious co-actor with God … contribute[s] to the unfolding of this dramatic tension" (Balthasar 1988, 645). That is to say, we share with Jesus not only something of the same divine image but also the same mission to redeem the world and to make the Father known.

Theo-drama II – other authors

Other theologians have extended Balthasar's theo-drama and made additional linkages to Athanasius. Raymund Schwager, for instance, appropriated theo-drama in his political theology (Schwager 2004) as well as using Athanasius as a key source for his understanding of redemption (Schwager 1986, chap. 3).

Kevin Vanhoozer also creates a bridge between Balthasar and Athanasius. Following Balthasar, Vanhoozer suggests that "The Christian life is fundamentally *dramatic*, involving speech and action on behalf of Jesus' truth and life. It concerns the way of living truthfully, and its claims to truth cannot be isolated from the way of life with which it is associated" (Vanhoozer 2005, 15). He proposes a canonical-linguistic approach to theology, which "maintains that the normative use [of language] is ultimately not that of ecclesial *culture* but of the biblical *canon*" (Vanhoozer 2005, 16).

For Vanhoozer, "The church is a company of players gathered together to stage scenes of the kingdom of God for the sake of a watching world" (Vanhoozer 2005, 32). An ecclesiology based on theo-drama does not imply that a fixed script is performed repeatedly. On the contrary, "to be faithful in its witness, the church must constantly be different. Indeed, at times it must even *improvise*" (Vanhoozer 2005, 128).

An example of this contextualised improvisation is Athanasius' appropriation of the term *homoousios* (same substance) in his response to Arianism (Vanhoozer 2005, 128–29), which eventually led to the standard Trinitarian formulation adopted after the First Council of Constantinople (O'Collins 1995, 177–82). Homoousios is not a biblical term and the lengthy controversy over how to express the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit could not be resolved by merely repeating what Scripture already said. Furthermore, homoousios had been used by Gnostics and Arians, and so it was a bold and creative response on Athanasius' part to improvise by introducing a new meaning to the term[2].

Vanhoozer makes an important distinction between scriptwriting and improvisation. The "script" in his version of theo-drama is affected by the canon, tradition, Jesus and the on-going inspiration of the Spirit, but should not be re-written by the church (Vanhoozer 2005, 31). Scriptwriting, he claims, is what the Arians sought to do through denying the full deity of Jesus whereas Athanasius' use of homoousios constituted improvisation within the script (Vanhoozer 2005, 343). The distinction, in that example at least, strikes me as post-hoc justification from the point of view of the dispute's victor. If Arianism had prevailed would not Vanhoozer claim the reverse, that it was Athanasius who had engaged in illegitimate scriptwriting?

This understanding of theology, and in particular, mission, as improvisation is developed in more detail by Samuel Wells[3]:

> The Bible is not so much a script that the church learns and performs as it is a training school that shapes the habits and practices of a community. This community learns to take the right things for granted, and on the basis of this faithfulness, it trusts itself to improvise within its tradition. Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its traditions in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do. (Wells 2004, 12)

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[2] Both hypostasis and homoousios are key concepts in Athanasius' stance against Arianism, and Balthasar concurs with Athanasius' application of them to Trinitarian ontology (Balthasar 1992, 210–11). These concepts, however, are not presented in *On the Incarnation*.

[3] The two books were published within a year of each other, but based on the inter-textual citations it seems likely that the role of improvisation in Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine* was largely inspired by Wells.

Like Vanhoozer, his approach is also indebted to Balthasar (Wells 2004, 46–51) and, in a small way, to Athanasius (Wells 2004, 182).

Conclusion

Though claiming a pivotal role for *On the Incarnation* in the development of modern theo-drama would be an exaggeration, there are clear signs that key proponents of theo-drama have found support for their approach from Athanasius. The work of Hans Urs von Balthasar reflects the same understanding of the Word made flesh who dwelt among us as Athanasius and other Patristics. Balthasar proposes that the incarnation is the pivotal scene in a divine drama. Others have extended the dramatic metaphor to show how it might guide ethics and mission.

On the Incarnation, as part of the church's tradition, does not define or even constrain the way today's church enacts the script. Rather, through recording one performance of a key scene, it serves as an example of faithful improvisation within that script. In theo-drama, as in *On the Incarnation*, the God Word is the primary actor, and the performance of history unfolds as the human and divine players respond to each other's actions. Theo-drama asserts that the on-going mission of the church is both redemptive and educational: precisely the two purposes that Athanasius assigns to the incarnation.

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Appendix: Précis of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*

The fourth century work *On the Incarnation* is traditionally split into five major sections (plus a prologue and conclusion) but this essay focusses on the first three sections, headed "The divine dilemma regarding life and death", "The divine dilemma regarding knowledge and ignorance" and "The death of Christ and the resurrection of the body". The intent is both educational (to help Christians understand God's action in taking on a human body) and apologetic (to argue for Christian claims in the light of various opposing interpretations of Jesus' life and death).

In style, the language usage is informal (at least in the Behr's English translation of the original Greek text), with many questions that are often phrased rhetorically. Athanasius often appeals to reason, analogy and to the authority of Christian scriptures.

On the Incarnation commences with an account of the creation of the world, emphasising that, contrary to Epicurus, Plato and some Christian heretics, "God brought the universe into being through the Word[4]" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 3). God specially blessed humans with rationality, knowing the risk that they might turn away – as they quickly did. In the natural order of things we would never have existed, but by God's will we came into being and had the opportunity to experience incorruptibility. Having transgressed the one commandment God set, we returned to that natural state of mortality and nothingness. It is important to start here, because our human plight and God's love for us is the whole reason for the Word's subsequent "embodiment" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 4).

A dilemma faced God in relation to human corruption: it would be *absurd* for us not to die, for that would make God a liar since the original law said that transgression would lead to death; but it would be *improper* for something partaking in the Word to perish[5]. The path through the horns of this dilemma required a re-creation that was equal to the first creation (Athanasius 2011, sec. 7). That is why the incorporeal, incorruptible and immaterial Word came into our realm. In his love for human beings, and having pity on our weakness, "he takes

[4] "The Word" is left undefined here, having been fully described in the prequel *Against the Gentiles*. In the introduction Athanasius links "Christ" to "the divinity of the Word of the Father" through whom "the good Father arranges all things, by him all things are moved, and in him are given life" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 1). Throughout the text, titles such as Saviour, Lord Jesus Christ, image of the Father and Word are used almost interchangeably. An oft repeated phrase is "the God Word" (θεὸς Λόγος).

[5] "It was not worthy of the goodness of God that those created by him, should be corrupted" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 6).

for himself a body". He wasn't simply "in a body" as though just manifesting an appearance to us – he "prepared for himself … a body" and "made it his own" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 8). The Word realised that there was no other way to undo the corruption of humans except by dying. But God cannot die, so he took on a body that was capable of dying. By offering his body "as a substitute for all" he fulfilled the requirement for death. But by virtue of the Word's own incorruptibility he also brings a promise of incorruptibility to all through his resurrection (Athanasius 2011, sec. 9).

A similar dilemma can be seen in regard to human rationality. God bestowed on us a grace – the image of Jesus Christ was built in to human being – so that "they might be able to receive through [Jesus] a notion of the Father, and knowing the Creator they might live the happy and truly blessed life" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 11). But humans foolishly despised that grace, turned away from God, and fashioned idols to replace God. What was God to do? On the one hand, God could do nothing and allow humans to be deceived, but that would raise the question of why God created rational humans in the first place. On the other hand, God had already provided evidence in creation, the law and prophets to prompt human thinking in the right direction and those interactions had not worked. Somehow the grace – the divine image – needed to be restored to humans[6] and that is why "The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image[7]" (Athanasius 1944, sec. 13).

The incarnation shows God's love for humanity in two ways. First, it banished death and recreated us. But it also performed an educational role, as Jesus' visible life revealed him to be "the Word of the Father, the ruler and king of the universe" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 16). The Word "possessed a real and not illusory body" but at the same time he did things that revealed him to be Son of God, Lord, Creator, Maker, divine – such as commanding demons and healing illnesses (Athanasius 2011, sec. 18). All of these things were done so that, seeing Jesus, people "might gain a notion through him of the knowledge of the Father" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 19).

[6] This is the sense in which we should interpret Athanasius' later assertion that "He was incarnate that we might be made god" (Athanasius 2011, sec. 54).

[7] I have drawn this quote from Sister Penelope Lawson's translation because the Behr translation is quite obscure. Behr writes, ungrammatically, "So the Word of God came himself, in order that he being the image of the Father, the human being 'in the image' might be recreated." Perhaps there is a typographic mistake in that publication and the sentence may have been intended to read "So the Word of God came himself, he being the image of the Father, in order that the human being 'in the image' might be recreated."

The Incarnation is inseparable from the Passion. The Word “sojourned among us” so that he might die for us. He “offered the sacrifice on behalf of all” to free us from the liability to our past transgression and to show through his incorruptible body the “first-fruits of the universal[8] resurrection” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 20). As a consequence, we who are “faithful in Christ” no longer die in the way we used to. Since corruption was destroyed by the grace of the resurrection, when we die we only “dissolve” for a time. We do not perish but are more like “seeds sown in the ground” with the assurance that we will rise again (Athanasius 2011, sec. 21).

Various questions could be posed about why Jesus’ death and resurrection occurred the way they did. For the benefit of non-Christians Athanasius explains why it would not have been as appropriate for Jesus to die from an illness, or in private, or to arrange his own death (Athanasius 2011, secs. 21–24). For Christians, he notes several other symbolic and cultural reasons for death by crucifixion (Athanasius 2011, sec. 25).

A clear proof that death has lost its sting through the incarnation is that Christians are no longer scared of it. “Human beings, before believing in Christ, view death as fearsome and are terrified by it. But when they come to faith in him and to his teaching, they so despise death that they eagerly rush to it.” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 27) Anyone who sees and understand the confidence of Christian martyrs should see the cause – that the Christ we follow has destroyed the power of death (Athanasius 2011, sec. 29). The same is shown by the *lives* of Christians, who forsake adultery, murder, injustice and greed, and who discard idolatry (Athanasius 2011, sec. 30). All of those visible facts are inevitable consequences of the previous argument about the incarnation: if the Word came into a body then it has to be that the body will die since it is mortal but that the body cannot remain dead because it has become the “temple of life” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 31).

The fourth and fifth sections – “Refutation of the Jews” and “Refutation of the Gentiles” – are not covered in this summary.

[8] Notwithstanding his frequent use of “all” in this book, Athanasius is not a universalist. The Word may have come for all people and all may be resurrected, but Athanasius remains clear that there will be a judgement leading to either the “kingdom of heaven” or to “eternal fire” (Athanasius 2011, sec. 56).