

Peter J. Leithart

Athanasius

(Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality;
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), xviii+204 pages.

This new study by Peter Leithart, one of the most versatile of present-day Christian authors (witness his competency in writing biblical commentaries as well as studies of a mutual favorite, Jane Austen), is a tour-de-force in many ways. Without minimizing elements of recent portrayals of the Alexandrian bishop as something of an ecclesiastical thug, Leithart demonstrates that Athanasius' literary defence of the deity of Christ is nevertheless one of those key moments in the history of the church that we ignore at our peril. In this regard, Leithart provides the series of which this book is the initial volume with an excellent start: this is patristic *ressourcement* at its finest. Athanasian trinitarianism, which has been the object of attack since the onset of the Enlightenment project in the late seventeenth century ("Athanasianism" was a deliberate term of abuse employed by eighteenth-century Socinians), is shown to be a vital representation of the biblical doctrine of God, as necessary for our theological health as it was for Athanasius' contemporaries.

For example, concluding chapter 3, "The One God," probably the most brilliant chapter of the book, Leithart rightly points out that failure to appreciate the implications of Athanasius' doctrine of the Trinity

has sent certain forms of social Trinitarianism down a blind alley. The Trinity is not, as social trinitarianism has suggested, a modern egalitarian democracy, made up of distinct but identical individuals. The persons are indeed equal, but not identical. At its best, though, social trinitarianism has been a plea to take personhood of the persons seriously; it has been a plea for a scriptural exposition of the ontological life of the Trinity in which the persons converse together as they do in the Gospel story (page 88).

A great part of the response to modern social trinitarianism, however, also falls short of Athanasius' robustly biblical model, as Leithart notes:

the response to Trinity-as-democracy should not be the implicit subordinationism that has infected some traditional trinitarianism; we do not need to resort to a unilateral hierarchical Trinity, paternal monarchianism or paternal causality, to avoid the problems of social trinitarianism. An asymmetrical account of triune life [towards which Athanasius' corpus points] takes the pleas of social trinitarianism seriously, and can get at all the dynamism and personal interactivity that social trinitarianism wants, without threatening to collapse into tritheism (page 88).

Leithart has an excellent grasp of the secondary literature and shows himself a skilled interpreter of Athanasius' exegesis, though I, for one, wish he had not been as reliant as he is on the antiquated translations of the Athanasius volume in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. On

occasion he does employ more recent translations, but, from this reviewer's point of view, he should have done his own translation when nothing more recent existed. Critical to understanding the Fathers is being able to follow their train of argument and biblical interpretation, and the dense Victorian prose of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers is often more of a hindrance than a help for the modern reader in this regard.

It needs mentioning that there was one element of Leithart's *ressourcement* of Athanasius' theology that I found particularly unhelpful, namely, his argument that "Athanasius's trinitarian theology is more radically trinitarian than that of Augustine" (page 86, also argued at length on pages 75–77). Here Leithart seems to be rehearsing a variant of the old charge raised by many patristic scholars of the past century, namely, that whereas the eastern Fathers were truly trinitarian, Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity had a fundamental unitarian slant. Recent patristic analysis, though, has shown this to be a basic misreading of the Latin Father.¹

More attention could have been given to Athanasius' portrayal of model piety in his *Life of Antony* (treated somewhat sparingly on pages 169–171). Surely Athanasius intends us to view his hero Antony as *the* model of Christ-likeness and the fullness of the Spirit. Other patristic authors, though, were not so sure about Antony as such a model. Basil of Caesarea, for one, spent much of his career as a monastic reformer seeking to produce a form of communal monastic piety that was an implicit rejection of the eremitic model promoted by Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*.

There is also good reason to have said more about Athanasius' ontological discussion of the Spirit in his *Letters to Serapion* (dealt with on pages 77–80; though see also pages 157–165 for discussion of the work of the Spirit). In these letters, Athanasius rectifies the shortcomings of his earlier writings in which the Spirit did not loom large. The pneumatology of these letters anticipates the work of the Cappadocian Fathers and can therefore be rightly regarded as critical to the architecture of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (381).²

In the final analysis, however, this is a truly convincing study of the importance of Athanasius' theology for our ongoing theological reflection, in which the triune God is once again looming large, a matter surely of deep satisfaction to the angels and glorified saints, among which number we trust is to be found the human subject of this book.

¹ See, for example, Keith Goad's comparative study of the trinitarianism of Gregory of Nazianzus and that of Augustine in his "A Comparison of The Patristic Model of the Trinity and the Contemporary Social Analogy of the Trinity" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary", 2010).

² See as fundamental in this regard, Adolf Laminski, *Der Heilige Geist als Geist Christi und Geist der Gläubigen. Der Beitrag des Athanasios von Alexandrien zur Formulierung des trinitarischen Dogmas im vierten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag GMBH, 1969), which is strangely absent from Leithart's secondary literature.