KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN EUSEBIUS AND ATHANASIUS

BY

CHRISTOPHER STEAD (CAMBRIDGE)

The knowledge of God in Eusebius and Athanasius is a subject which in competent hands might form an impressive conclusion to our conference. To do it justice in a single paper is quite another matter; it opens up a wide range of enquiries, and touches on some of the most intractable problems of philosophical theology. For instance, are we to consider what can be said about God?—that is, what sort of human language can be so adapted as to describe the hidden and comprehensive reality which underlies our whole existence? Or should we be looking for some experience of contact with God which is necessarily so remote from our usual acts and thoughts that it cannot be described in normal terms and has to be indicated in the language of paradox? Or again, should we judge it a mistake to present these alternatives? I have suggested that knowledge of God may be conceived either in terms of rational statements or of mystical consciousness; but in pointing this contrast, I am using the categories of modern Western philosophy; we shall find, I think, that our chosen authors conceive their problem quite otherwise; their most important category being the intellect, nous, which implies both rational content and the directness of intuitive perception.

1. We need, therefore, to find a simple down-to-earth point of departure; and I propose to begin from a well-known passage in the De Incarnatione, c. 12. In this chapter Athanasius enumerates the various means of knowing God which had been devised by his divine providence; previous to the Fall, it would seem, and anticipating its possibility, God provided for man’s negligence: προενοιήσατο καὶ τῆς ἄμελείας τούτων, ἵν’ ἔλαν ἄμελήσαεν δὶ ἑαυτῶν τὸν Θεὸν ἐπιγνώναι, ἔχωσι . . . τὸν δημιουργὸν μὴ ἀγνοεῖν. He mentions first what we may call ideal knowledge, which should have been sufficient for man if he had not sinned. Next comes the possibility of recognizing the Creator through attending to the works of his creation. Thirdly, God provided for the Law and the Prophets, whose teaching is more accessible, since in that case mankind can learn from other men. But since all these means were ineffective in the face of human wickedness, God finally adopted the expedient of renewing men through the presence of his own Image, the Logos, after whom they were first created; so the Word of God came down to earth in his own person: δὲ ὁ τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγος δὶ ἑαυτοῦ παρεγένετο, c. 13.7. There are thus four possible
ways of knowing God, if we may trust Dr. Meijering's analysis in *Athanasius contra Gentes*, p. 114; though Athanasius' treatment of the third way contains a rather complicated resumptive clause and refers to the 'saints', οἱ ἁγίοι, who may possibly be Christian teachers distinct from the Prophets, the μακάριοι διιάσκαλοι mentioned in c. 1. For the purpose of this paper I intend to consider only the first item on the list; I shall try to examine the ways in which Athanasius and Eusebius explain our ideal knowledge of God.

2. Any treatment of the *De Incarnatione* will naturally refer to its companion piece, the *Contra Gentes*; and we must take account of a certain difference in perspective between these two works, which compare rather differently with the thought of Eusebius. The divergence is especially marked in their early chapters, and it prompted a young Oxford scholar, as he then was, Dr. Andrew Louth, to draw a sharp contrast between them.¹ They differ, he maintains, in the account they give of the Fall of man, but also in the assumptions they make about our knowledge of God. 'The *Contra Gentes* gives an account of man's fall from a state of contemplation to a state subject to sensual pleasures. It is a timeless account. It is atypical of Athanasius—but typical of Alexandrian theology generally—in using allegorical exegesis. *De Incarnatione* is historical, realist, and turns, not on intellectual contemplation, but on the obedience and disobedience of man.'

I agree with Dr. Meijering that this contrast is overstated. In my own opinion, neither book presents a perfectly consistent picture. The case is rather, that in each of them Athanasius is drawing upon traditional themes, and selects rather different points for emphasis. But it is certainly not the case that the theology of one book contrasts en bloc with that of the other.

First, then, the *CG* certainly does not begin by considering the Fall of man in allegorical terms. One can see this clearly if one contrasts Athanasius with Philo. Philo repeatedly suggests that the first man symbolizes intellect, *nous*, and the first woman symbolizes sensation, *aisthēsis*.² But Athanasius does not tell us that the first man symbolizes anything at all; at most, we can say that he treats him as an example of a general truth. He states that God's purpose was that men should enjoy uninterrupted communion with him, and adds that this actually happened in the case of 'the first man ... who was called Adam in the Hebrew tongue'; the only hint of allegory here is a reference to the place which Moses figuratively called the Garden—τροπικὸς παράδεισον ὄνοµασεν, c. 2. Athanasius then states that men, οἱ ἄνθρωποι, neglected the contemplation of God and sought for satisfactions close at hand, in the pleasures of the body; and this again is illustrated by the case of the first man—τοῦ

² Philo *Leg. All.* 1.92. 2.5—8, 16, 31, 38, 40, 70f. etc.