ON THE DATE OF ATHANASIUS' APOLOGETICAL TREATISES

In which period of his life did Athanasius (295–373) write his two apologetical treatises, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione Verbi*? These two works, which, as appears from the first chapter of *De Inc.*, belong together, have been dated in the early period of his life, in the middle period and in his later years. The history of this dating problem was written by Ch. Kannengiesser, who delivered an interesting contribution to it himself.¹

The apologies were dated in the early period (about 318) by the Maurist Monk, Bernard de Montfaucon, in the *Monitum* to his edition of Athanasius' work (1698).² His only argument was the absence of any trace of the Arian controversy in the treatises. According to Montfaucon they must therefore have been written before that controversy arose. This opinion has been followed by most scholars, among whom is the recent commentator of the treatises, Dr. Meijering.³ He adduces a second argument for this thesis, namely the intellectual and rather cool tone of the two works. This points to a private theological exercise, written by a young man after finishing his studies (p. 108).

The first scholar who opposed to this early date was S. Le Nain de Tillemont in 1702. His main argument was a remark in the introduction of *Contra Gentes*, “we do not have the writings of our teachers at hand now”. From this remark he draws the conclusion that the treatise must have been written by Athanasius when he was in exile, possibly during his exile at Trier (335–337). Tillemont's opinion is followed by Kannengiesser, who has tried to give it a much larger substruction. On the one hand, he argues, even in 318 the Arian conflict was already going on, so that Montfaucon's argument for dating the treatises in that time does not seem to be valid. On the other hand he draws attention to a

² Migne, PG 25, 1.
literary resemblance between a text in *De Inc.* and the *Festal Letters*, written by Athanasius annually from 328, in order to communicate to his suffragan bishops the exact date of the beginning of Lent. In *De Inc.* 40 Athanasius speaks about the heretics as "those who wish to divide the church" (τοῖς βουλομένοις διαίρεῖν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). As Kannengiesser observes in an earlier article devoted to this question, ⁴ in itself this expression does not point to a special heresy, the Arians. But curiously one finds a similar way of speaking in several years of the *Festal Letters*, and there Athanasius has obviously the Arians in mind. Kannengiesser, moreover, noticed a difference between the *Letters* before and after 337, i.e., the year in which Constantine died. While after 337 Athanasius mentions Arius and the Arians by name, he indicates them only in veiled terms before that time. According to Kannengiesser, this had a political reason. Athanasius, who was in exile, would not bring his bishop’s see in danger by attacking the Arians too openly. The absence of traces of the Arian conflict in the apologetical treatises must have the same reason. Moreover, Athanasius could the more easier set aside the conflict there, since an apologetic work did not require taking up a position vis à vis the political and religious problems of the moment. This complex of indications, together with Tillemont’s argument, point to a dating of these treatises in about 336. As Kannengiesser says, probability is the most you can hope to attain on this question.

In 1961 Henric Nordberg published *An attempt at Redating* the treatises under discussion.⁵ According to him, they must have been written during the years of the government of Julian (361–363). For his arguments and their refutation I refer to Kannengiesser’s second article.⁶

Reading the history of this dating problem one may get the impression that this is an insoluble question. Every indication in the text seems to be ambiguous. Montfaucon was certainly right in stating that one finds [293] no clear trace of the Arian conflict in the treatises. But an argument *e silentio* is not convincing, unless one

