

HN ΠΟΤΕ ΟΤΕ ΟΥΚ ΗΝ Ο ΥΙΟΣ

A DISCUSSION ON TIME AND ETERNITY

BY

MEIJERING H. P., 'Ην ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ υἱός. A discussion on time and eternity : VChr XXVIII 1974 161-168. | Les attaques portées par Athanasius contre Arius et les Ariens sur l'éternité du Fils ressemblent à celles que les Platoniciens « orthodoxes », par exemple un Proclus, ont portées contre un Atticus sur l'éternité du monde.

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Recent research into the philosophical background of the theology of Arius suggests that Arius may have been influenced by Platonists like Atticus, since Arius shares with Atticus the emphasis on the divine will,¹ and since Arius' claim that there was once when the Son was not finds its obvious parallel in Atticus' (and Plutarch's) doctrine that the world has a beginning in time.² The present paper intends to pursue this matter a little further by comparing the discussions between Athanasius and the Arians about the generation of the Son to discussions held in Platonism about the creation of the world. It will appear that these discussions concentrate to a large degree on the analogy between time and eternity. This need not surprise us, since Plato's view on time as an image of eternity was well known.³ This view immediately raises the question whether eternity somehow resembles time and whether temporal categories can be applied to eternity.

Let us first examine Athanasius' use of images taken from created reality when he speaks of God. Athanasius states time and again that God is not like man (or like creation in general),⁴ nevertheless he uses images taken from creation when speaking about God. At the same time he vehemently rejects all images which could suggest any corporality or

¹ See G. C. Stead, The Platonism of Arius, *Journal of Theological Studies* 15 (1964) 16 ff.

² See F. Ricken, Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus, *Theologie und Philosophie* 44 (1969) 321 ff. It should be noticed that the emphasis on the divine will and on the temporal beginning of the Son or the cosmos are according to Athanasius connected with each other: The world has, as a product of God's will, a temporal beginning, see e.g. *Contra Arianos* (henceforth abbreviated as C.A.) 3, 60, 61, the Arian statement that the Son owes His being to an act of will by the Father is identical with the statement that there was once when the Son was not, see C.A. 3, 59, 61, 66.

³ See Plato, *Timaeus* 37 D: καὶ διακοσμῶν ἅμα οὐρανὸν ποιεῖ [sc. ὁ γεννήσας πατὴρ] μένοντος αἰῶνος ἐν ἐνὶ κατ' ἀριθμὸν ἰοῦσαν αἰώνιον εἰκόνα, τοῦτον δὲ χρόνον ὠνομάκαμεν.

⁴ See e.g. C.A. 1, 21, 23, 27, 28; 2, 34, 35; *De syn.* 42; *De decr.* 10, 11, 12, 20, 24.

psychic reactions in God. He repeatedly charges the Arians of inferring a corporality of God.⁵ His major objection is obviously that this way of speaking about God suggests that God is a being in time and space, whose generation of the Son therefore takes place in time and excludes the eternity of the Son. Athanasius does not reject all human images of God. on the contrary, certain aspects of human life can be used as an illustration of God's life, e.g. the fact that (as Athanasius sees it) generation in man is an act of nature, not of deliberation.⁶ It is in the same context that Athanasius rejects any attribution of psychic reaction (like that of man) to God: the generation of the Son is not the product of any deliberation which can again disappear as it appeared.⁷ – Although Athanasius, when referring to God, cautiously uses images taken from human life, he obviously prefers images taken from the non-human created reality. These images, though regarded as inadequate,⁸ have the advantage of avoiding the attribution of temporality to God. He particularly likes (as did some theologians before him) the images of the sun and its light⁹ and the well and its river¹⁰ as illustrations of the Father and the Son, since these images underline the eternity of the relation between the Father and the Son. It is obvious that Athanasius makes careful use of such images which do not contradict in any way God's unchangeable eternity. Unlike Plotinus¹¹ Athanasius does not relish in the use of images for God (the Divine), but selects a small number of images to suit his major theological purpose, viz., to show that God is what He is eternally and unchangeably.

These more general observations are, it seems to us, confirmed by the way in which Athanasius attacks the Arian slogan *ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ Υἱός*. It is not clear whether Arius means to say that there was a time when the Son was not, since he also says that the Son was created

⁵ See e.g. C.A. 1, 21; Ad Ser. 4, 6.

⁶ C.A. 1, 26, 27; 3, 67. This means that some aspects of the human act of generation can be used as images for the generation of the Son, other aspects cannot.

⁷ C.A. 3, 65.

⁸ C.A. 2, 17; 3, 32; De decr. 12; cf. C.A. 1, 29.

⁹ See e.g. C.A. 1, 12, 13, 14, 20, 25, 27; 2, 31, 33, 36; Ad Ser. 2, 2; De decr. 20, 24.

¹⁰ See e.g. C.A. 1, 14, 19, 27; Ad Ser. 2, 2.

¹¹ See A. H. Armstrong who observes that no philosopher has ever used images from the realm of the senses to express intelligible reality with more originality and force than Plotinus, but that he is at the same time an acute critic of his images, see his paper, Plotinus, in: *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge 1970) 220–221 and 240. A collection of the most important images used by Plotinus is provided by H. R. Schwyzer in his paper, Plotinos, in *Paulys Realencyclopädie* 21,1 (1951) 526–527.

or generated before all time,¹² and that time has been made through the Son.¹³ These statements show that Arius must have been acquainted with Plato's well-known doctrine stated in the *Timaeus* that time was made by the Demiurge together with the cosmos.¹⁴ Arius is obviously trying, whilst maintaining this tenet of Plato's, to speak, nevertheless, about 'before the cosmos' and 'before the Logos' in temporal categories, since both the past tense *ἦν* and the word *ποτέ* are temporal categories. According to Plato the past tense *ἦν* cannot be applied to eternity.¹⁵ This attempt made by Arius does indeed resemble the attempt made by Atticus to show that the world has a beginning in time. If Atticus had wanted to show only that the world began *with* time, he would have conformed to general Platonic thought, but his obvious belief that the world started *in* time makes him deviate from the letter of the *Timaeus* (which he – strangely enough – wants to defend against non-Platonic interpretations)^{15a} and from the mainstream of Platonic philosophy. In order to see what Atticus may have said on this matter we turn to Albinus' defence of the eternity of the world. Albinus states that when Plato says that the world has come into being this ought not be interpreted as meaning that there was once a time when the world was not:¹⁶ *ὅταν δὲ εἴπῃ γενητὸν εἶναι τὸν κόσμον, οὐχ οὕτως ἀκούσκειν αὐτοῦ, ὡς ὄντος ποτέ χρόνου ἐν ᾧ οὐκ ἦν ὁ κόσμος*. Ricken¹⁷ rightly refers to this passage in Albinus as a striking parallel to the Arian statement *ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ Υἱός*. But it should be noticed that Arius does *not* say *ἦν ποτε χρόνος ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ Υἱός*, whilst it is obvious that Albinus attacks a view which says *ἦν ποτε χρόνος ἐν ᾧ οὐκ ἦν ὁ κόσμος*. In the fragments of Atticus preserved by Eusebius this latter sentence does not appear, and Atticus may not have said this *disertis verbis* (since it too obviously contradicts *Timaeus* 38 B: *χρόνος δ' οὐν μετ' οὐρανοῦ γέγονεν*),

¹² See e.g. Arius, *Urkunde* (Opitz) 1, 30, and Athanasius, C.A. 1, 14; De syn. 46; cf. *infra* 165.

¹³ C.A. 1, 12, 13; De decr. 18.

¹⁴ *Timaeus* 38 B, cf. G. C. Stead, *op. cit.*, 26.

¹⁵ Only the present tense can be applied to eternity, not the past and the future, see *Timaeus* 37 E–38 A.

^{15a} On Atticus' Platonic orthodoxy which is in fact a heterodoxy (as is so often the case with orthodoxy) see H. Dörrie in *Gnomon* 29 (1957) 188 f.

¹⁶ See Albinus, *Epitome* 14, 3.

¹⁷ F. Ricken, *op. cit.*, 329. Much earlier than Arius Christians may have been influenced by the kind of thought about the cosmos as represented by Atticus, as appears from Origen, *De principiis* 4, 4, 1 who attacks the statement that there was *once* when the Son was not (this section from Origen is quoted by Athanasius in *De decr.* 27).

but certain statements made by Atticus imply something very similar. He states firmly that the Demiurge made the cosmos οὐκ ὄντα πρότερον. Especially the word πρότερον as a temporal category implies that there was a time before cosmos.¹⁸ To understand Atticus' thoughts we should not only rely on the fragments of his writings preserved by Eusebius, but also on the references to Atticus in Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*. In explaining *Timaeus* 34 A/B: οὗτος δὴ πᾶς ὄντος ἀεὶ λογισμὸς θεοῦ περὶ τὸν ποτὲ ἐσόμενον θεὸν λογισθεὶς λείον καὶ ὁμαλὸν πανταχῇ τε ἐκ μέσου ἴσον καὶ ὅλον καὶ τέλειον ἐκ τελέων σωμάτων σῶμα ἐποίησεν. Proclus attacks Atticus' view that the word ποτέ refers to a temporal beginning and a part of time.¹⁹ From this attack on Atticus by Proclus it may be deduced that according to Atticus it was possible to say, from the point of view of the creating Demiurge: ἔσται ποτέ ὅτε ἔσται ὁ κόσμος, and this, though from a different angle, is the same as to say ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ κόσμος. If the word ποτέ is here meant as representing a part of time this is the same as ἦν ποτε χρόνος ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ κόσμος. Atticus may in fact not have said this, but something slightly different: ἦν ποτε χρόνος τις ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ κόσμος.^{19a} Proclus tells us that Atticus, in order to maintain his doctrine of the temporal beginning of the world, supposed there were two times, one belonging to the cosmos and on belonging to the movement of chaos out of which the cosmos is created.²⁰ It is obvious that Atticus manoeuvres himself into great logical difficulties in his effort to apply temporal categories to the 'before cosmos'. Very similar difficulties occur in Arius' doctrine of the Logos.^{20a}

¹⁸ Atticus, *fragment* 4, 7 (ed. Baudry). Proclus, with a reference to Aristotle's definition of time, says that the word πρότερον belongs to time, see *In Tim.* 37 D/E.

¹⁹ Proclus, *In Tim.* 34 A/B: τὸ δὲ αὐτὸ ποτέ ἐσόμενον οὐ τῆς κατὰ χρόνον ἐστὶν ἀρχῆς σημαντικόν. ὡς οἶται Ἀττικὸς ... ἔστιν οὖν τὸ ποτέ τοῦτο οὐ χρόνου μῶριον.

^{19a} In his attack on Atticus Proclus says, *In Tim.* 37 D/E: οὐδ' ἄρα χρόνος τις ἦν πρὸ τῆς δημιουργίας. The word ἄρα suggests that Atticus must have said: There was a kind of time before the creation of the world.

²⁰ See Proclus, *In Tim.* 28 B, 37 D/E.

^{20a} *Timaeus* 34 A/B provides a background to Arius' theology not only with its reference to a ποτέ when the cosmos will be, but also with its reference to an inferior deity, θεός, which is the cosmos. This reference to the cosmos as a deity which owes its deity to a higher deity is found elsewhere in the *Timaeus* as well, see 92 C: ὁδε ὁ κόσμος ... εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ αἰσθητός ... μονογενὴς ὢν. This finds its parallel in Arius' doctrine of the Logos of whom he says: οὐδὲ θεὸς ἀληθινὸς ἐστὶν ὁ Λόγος. Εἰ δὲ καὶ λέγεται θεός, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀληθινός ἐστι, ἀλλὰ μετοχὴ χάριτος ... λέγεται ὀνόματι μόνον θεός. In the *Timaeus* there is, as in Arius' theology, no difference between 'to create' and 'to generate', see e.g. 37 C/D where the Demiurge, referred to as ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ, makes (ποιεῖ) time, a little further on, 38 C, it is said that the Demiurge planned to generate time. Similarly Arius says in one and the same sentence

By applying temporal categories to God before the creation or generation of the Son he exposes himself to the criticism made by Athanasius that, despite his assertion that the Son was created before all time, he must have intended to say that there was once a time when the Son was not.²¹

It is interesting to see in how far Athanasius' attack on Arius and the Arians resembles the attack made by the 'orthodox' Platonists on the (within Platonism heretical) doctrine that the world has a temporal beginning, and furthermore how far Athanasius' thoughts on the eternity of God find parallels in the writings of the Platonists. By comparing Arius to Atticus and Athanasius to the 'orthodox' Platonists we do not suggest that Arius had read Atticus and that Athanasius had a detailed knowledge of post-Plotinian Platonism. If we follow the assumption (which is widely adhered to) that Athanasius was familiar with the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius, then there can be no doubt that he had a fairly detailed knowledge of Platonism, since Eusebius quotes long passages from the Platonists (in the case of Numenius and Atticus

of the Son that He was generated ἀχρόνως and created πρὸ αἰώνων (= πρὸ χρόνων, as appears from what he says a few sentences earlier), see Athanasius, *De syn.* 16. Athanasius, however, sharply distinguishes between 'to generate' (used only for the Son) and 'to create' (used only for the world).

²¹ Athanasius accuses the Arians that by applying temporal categories like 'once', 'when', 'before coming into being' to the Logos they suppose time before the Logos, despite their claim that time has been made through the Logos, see C.A. 1.13, cf. 1.14: κἂν γὰρ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ χρόνου προσποιούμενοι φοβεῖσθαι διὰ τοὺς ὀνειδίζοντας αὐτοὺς λέγωσι πρὸ χρόνων αὐτὸν εἶναι, ἀλλ' ὁμοῦς ὅτι διαστήματα τινα διδούσιν, ἐν οἷς μὴ εἶναι αὐτὸν φαντάζονται, οὐδὲν ἤτιον χρόνους σημαίνοντες, καὶ ἀλογίαν περὶ τὸν θεὸν εἰσάγοντες, μεγάλως ἀσεβοῦσιν. Athanasius' attack seems justified by what we read in an Arian quotation given in C.A. 2.24, which reads that God *first* made the Logos, and *then*, with the Logos as mediator, the rest of creation. Here the creative activity of God is represented as taking place in time. Athanasius insists that in God there is no 'follow up' of will and action, but that in God's eternity will and action coincide, see C.A. 2.31, cf. E. P. Meijering, Irenaeus' relation to philosophy in the light of his concept of free will, *Romanitas et Christianitas, Studia J. H. Waszink ... oblata* (Amsterdam 1973) 224. - In his attack on Atticus' doctrine of a kind of time before the world Proclus says, *In Tim.* 37 D/E, that either this time contains past, present and future, in which case it is no different from time belonging to cosmos, or it contains only present, in which case it ought not be called time, but eternity. Proclus insists that before the world there can have been no past and future and therefore no time. Proclus obviously wants to show against Atticus that God's creative activity does not take place in time (similar to Athanasius when he wants to show against the Arians that God's creative activity and God's generation of the Son do not take place in time). Similarly Plotinus says that the cosmos has no temporal beginning and that Plato's remarks in the *Timaeus* which seem to imply a temporal beginning of the cosmos ought not to be taken literally, see *Ennead* 3, 7, 6, 50 ff.

Eusebius is still our main source of knowledge). What we do suggest is that (with or without direct detailed knowledge of the Platonists) the Arians and Athanasius started from positions which can be compared to those held by Atticus and the 'orthodox' Platonists and that they advance their arguments in a way which underlines their kinship with positions held within Platonism. Therefore we feel entitled to compare Athanasius *inter alia* with Proclus, of whose writings he can have had no knowledge, for chronological reasons.

Arian statements like ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν ὁ Υἱός are not found in Scripture, observes Athanasius,²² hereby clearly returning a charge made by the Arians against the ὁμοούσιος.²³ Furthermore Athanasius clearly suggests that the Arian statement is in conflict with reason, when he says that no Greek or Barbarian would dare say of the God he confesses that He was not before He was made.²⁴ The fact that Athanasius regards these statements as both unbiblical and conflicting with reason implies that he attacks the Arians not only with suitable Biblical texts but also with reasonable arguments: in fact he often produces Biblical texts in order to prove his reasonable arguments.

Time has been created through the Son²⁵ and is part of created reality.²⁶ God is above creation and time; temporal categories like 'once', 'once there was not', 'before coming into being', and 'when' cannot therefore be applied to God.²⁷ A consistent application of the rule that no temporal categories can be applied to God would lead to a completely negative theology, a kind of theology Athanasius obviously does not adhere to. Just as he uses certain images taken from created reality as an illustration of God, he also uses certain words which must be called temporal categories when he speaks about God's eternity: God is 'always',²⁸ God is

²² See C.A. 1,10, 11, 22; *De decr.* 18; *Epist. ad Afros* 6.

²³ See e.g. *De syn* 39.

²⁴ C.A. 1,10. This remark is incompatible with what Athanasius claims elsewhere, viz., that it is typical for the Greeks to believe in a deity which somehow (at least partly) has come into being. see C.A. 1,18: 'Ελλήνων γὰρ ἴδια ταῦτα, ὥστε γεννητὴν εἰσάγειν Τριάδα, καὶ τοῖς γενητοῖς αὐτὴν συνεξιστάειν, cf. C.A. 1,17 and *Ad Ser.* 4,7. This contradiction shows that Athanasius sometimes argues *ad hoc*.

²⁵ See e.g. C.A. 1,12, 13.

²⁶ See C.A. 1,11-13.

²⁷ Unlike the Platonists Athanasius does apply the past tense ἦν to God's eternity. This is, of course, caused by *John* 1,1 'Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος: Athanasius sees the ἦν which is used for the Logos as an indication of the Logos' eternity, the ἐγένετο which is used for the creation as an indication of its temporal beginning.

²⁸ See e.g. C.A. 1,11 (many more quotations can be given).

'now',²⁹ God is 'everlasting'.³⁰ Sometimes he even uses temporal categories for God which he elsewhere, in a different context, rejects.³¹ We find the same picture as with the use of images taken from created reality: Athanasius makes careful use of certain temporal categories when speaking about God's eternity (sometimes, but not always, admitting that these are inadequate) whilst rejecting all temporal categories which contradict his basic belief that God is the eternal and unchangeable Being. Here again he differs significantly from Plotinus. Plotinus freely uses temporal categories when speaking about eternity, but at the same time makes it clear that *all* these categories are inadequate (including the category αἰεί).³² – The fact that God is the eternal Being implies, according to Athanasius, God's perfection, which can not be subjected to any progress in time. Therefore there can be no 'progress' in God in the sense that God 'started' as a μονάς and 'ended up' as a Τριάς.³³

The discussions about the eternity of the Son within the early church and about the eternity of the cosmos within Platonism show the great logical difficulties in using images with reference to the Eternal and the Divine. These difficulties arise for everybody. They obviously are different according to the different theological or philosophical purposes pursued:

Atticus wants to show that the world is dependent upon the providence of the Creator, therefore he has to separate the world as much as possible from the Creator. To him, most suitable way of doing this is to state

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ In C.A. 1,29 Athanasius says that God created the world when He saw that the suitable moment to do so had come. He does, however, add the restriction that this is an inadequate way of speaking. When in C.A. 2,57 he says that God started to create, he is clearly using temporal categories without, however, saying that these are inadequate, cf. E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius, Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden 1974) 86 ff.

³² See e.g. *Ennead* 3,7,6,21 ff.: ὅταν δὲ τὸ αἰεὶ λέγωμεν καὶ τὸ οὐ ποτὲ μὲν ὄν, ποτὲ δὲ μὴ ὄν ἡμῶν, ἕνεκα τῆς σαφηνείας δεῖ νομίζειν λέγεσθαι.

³³ See C.A. 1,17: Εἰ γὰρ οὐκ αἰδίως σύνεστιν ὁ Λόγος τῷ Πατρὶ, οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ Τριάς αἰδίου· ἀλλὰ μονάς μὲν ἦν πρότερον, ἐκ προσθήκης δὲ γέγονεν ὑστερον Τριάς, καὶ προϊόντος τοῦ χρόνου κατ' αὐτοὺς ἤρξε καὶ συνέστη τῆς θεολογίας ἡ γνώσις· καὶ ποτὲ μὲν ἐλλειπῆς Τριάς, ποτὲ δὲ πλήρης· ἐλλειπῆς μὲν πρὶν γένηται ὁ Υἱός· πλήρης δέ, ὅτε γέγονε. Cf. C.A. 1,14,18,20,21; *Ad Ser.* 4,7. Plotinus, too, says that eternity implies perfection, being in time implies imperfection, see *Ennead* 3,7,6,37 ff.: Πᾶν οὖν καὶ ὄν καὶ κατὰ πᾶν οὐκ ἐνδεές καὶ οὐ ταῦτα μὲν πλήρες, ἀλλὰ δὲ ἐλλείπον ἢ τοιαύτη φύσις. Τὸ γὰρ ἐν χρόνῳ, καὶ τέλος ἢ, ὡς δοκεῖ, ὅλον σῶμα τι ἱκανὸν ψυχῇ τέλειον, δεόμενον καὶ τοῦ ἔπειτα, ἐλλείπον τῷ χρόνῳ οὐ δεῖται ... ὄν ἀτέλές.

firmly that the world has a temporal beginning, hereby showing that God is before and therefore above the world. But this brings him into conflict with Plato's doctrine that time was made together with the world, which implies that one cannot speak of any 'before' the world. Proclus has no difficulties in demonstrating the invalidity of Atticus' theory of a special type of time before the world.³⁴ – Arius and the Arians want to stress the ontological superiority of the Father above the Son. They can only do this by using terms which imply a temporal priority of the Father to the Son, and this brings them into conflict with their belief that time was made through the Son, which means that there can be no temporal priority to the Son. Athanasius has no difficulties in demonstrating the contradictions in the Arian position.³⁵ – Athanasius, in order to maintain the ontological equality of the Trinity, denies any change in the eternal God, but this brings him into conflict with the belief in contingent acts of God spoken of in the Bible and the Creed. It is difficult to see how an absolute unchangeability of God can be harmonized with contingent acts of God which somehow must imply a change in God, since God does something which He did not (want to) do before.³⁶ – The great genius Plotinus has the least difficulty, since he obviously possesses the noble liberty to create the most suggestive images for the Eternal and the Divine and to criticize his own images at the same time.³⁷ But the price he pays for his safe position is high (some would say: too high): a theology which is, in the end, completely negative.

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³⁴ See *supra* 164, 165 n. 21.

³⁵ See *supra* 165.

³⁶ See on this matter more extensively E. P. Meijering, *Wie platonisierten Christen? Zur Grenzziehung zwischen Platonismus, kirchlichem Credo und patristischer Theologie*, *Vigiliae Christianae* 28 (1974) 15–28.

³⁷ See e.g. the way in which he talks about time as 'having fallen out of eternity' *Ennead* 3, 7, 11, 7 ff. On Plotinus' views on time and eternity see W. Beierwaltes, *Plotin über Zeit und Ewigkeit. Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Frankfurt a/M. 1967).