

ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA AND EARLY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY
OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the life and doctrine of Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria to find a uniquely Athanasian Christian spirituality. We will seek to understand the zeitgeist of the fourth century as a means to contextualize Athanasius' ascetic approach to spirituality. As well, we will examine *The Letter to Marcellinus* to evaluate his understanding of the role of revelation in worship and spiritual formation. In conclusion, we will seek to appropriate Athanasian spirituality for the Church today.

THE LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria was a metropolis rich with philosophical and religious traditions.¹ It was the tradition of this great, cosmopolitan city for centuries to represent the pulse of modern religious and philosophical ideologies in the Mediterranean world and beyond.² Philo, Clement and Origen were the pillars of religious philosophizing in Alexandria³ who charted out a course for Athanasius that he would follow, extend and adapt to his own vision of Christian orthodoxy. Alexander the Great founded this city with great expectations in around 332 B.C.E.⁴ and it quickly became one of the pillars under his reign. It was chief among all Roman city-states as a place of unparalleled cultural activity.

¹ Alwyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (Ridgefield: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), 3-5.

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon Volume 1, 2* ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 187.

³ Gonzalez, 189.

⁴ Gonzalez, 186.

From the time of Alexander's foundation of the city to beyond the Roman period it was the most important commercial city in the Mediterranean world. A marvelously cosmopolitan city... an array of magnificent buildings: the great lighthouse, the Pharos, two superb harbours to exploit its outstanding commercial potential and a series of canals linking Lake Mareotis, the temple of the Imperial Cult, the famous Museon—perhaps the major center of intellectual endeavour in antiquity but sadly destroyed in the 270s during civil conflict— and the Serapeum which in time became under the Romans the greatest center of pagan worship in all of Egypt.⁵

Athanasius was the progeny of a wealthy legacy, especially of the Alexandrine form of Christian philosophy that would inform his thought life and be profoundly influential as he began to develop his own uniquely biblical, pastoral and Nicene theology. It was under this legacy of culture and philosophy that Athanasius was brought into the world.⁶

Athanasius was born around 295 AD.⁷ As far as his early life is concerned, there is almost no viable evidence attesting to it.⁸ Rufinus gives an account of Athanasius's

⁵ David Ivan Rankin, *From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 113.

⁶ Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 239.

⁷ Some scholars have questioned this date based on a debate about Athanasius meeting the required age of thirty for the bishopric before his appointment to the See of Alexandria.

⁸ Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 246.

youth from his edition of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (10.15).⁹ At the minimum, it does seem that he was genuinely an Alexandrian by birth and was mentored by the Bishop of his hometown, Alexander. The talents of the young Athanasius likely drew the attention of his bishop. As a young deacon, Athanasius attended to Alexander at the ecumenical council in Nicaea (325 AD) where we witness our introduction to his ecclesiastical career. While there are accounts of his direct engagement in debate and defense at Nicaea¹⁰, his attendance alone was pivotal to his theological and spiritual formation.

Not long after the council of Nicaea, Bishop Alexander passed away (April 17, 328)¹¹, leaving his ecclesiastical responsibilities to the young deacon, Athanasius (June 8,

⁹ Drobner, 246-247. In this account "Rufinus reports that Bishop Alexander had come to know Athanasius in his childhood at the shore. His attention was drawn to him when he played "baptism" with his playmates, assuming the role of the bishop. When Alexander investigated this in detail, he realized that Athanasius had accurately performed the rites, so Alexander acknowledged the baptism to have been carried out legitimately. After consulting with his parents, Alexander placed Athanasius in the care of the priests for his training, and so he grew up "in the temple like Samuel." This account is suspicious, coming from one of Alexander and Athanasius's detractors.

¹⁰ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 7.

¹¹ Drobner, 246.

328)¹². Soon after his appointment to the bishopric, he launched a tour of his diocese to garner support among his clergymen.¹³ He was especially interested in bolstering support for his budding relationship with the ascetics of the Egyptian desert.¹⁴ From early in his career, Athanasius expressed deep fondness for the monastic way of life.¹⁵ His relationship with the monastic community of the early fourth century was vital to his success in the contest against the Arians¹⁶ as well as evidence of his particular vision of Christian spirituality.¹⁷

¹² Ibid, 246.

¹³ Richard P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 249.

¹⁴ Frances M Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 40.

¹⁵ Saint Athanasius, Patriarch Of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg with William A. Clebsch (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 6-7.

¹⁶ David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 1-2.

¹⁷ Nathan Kwok-kit Ng, *The Spirituality of Athanasius: A Key for Proper Understanding of this Important Church Father* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), 123.

Athanasius was a much beleaguered and revered figure during his episcopate in Alexandria (328-373 AD).¹⁸ He was exiled five times¹⁹ during the course of his ecclesiastical career, but his advocacy of Nicene theology enabled a generation of orthodox theologians to put the proverbial nail in the coffin of the Arian controversy, thus effectively defending the genuine Gospel of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The force of his obsession with Nicene and apostolic theology has been evaluated from a number of vantage points. Many have politicized²⁰ his ambitions and painted him the villain of Nicaea. While his abiding motivations are open to speculation based on some of his political moves, this giant of the ancient church must also be evaluated on the basis of his own testimony and the testimony of his supporters. As we go forward, we will

¹⁸ Saint Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, 1.

¹⁹ During Athanasius' reign as Bishop of Alexandria, which lasted 45 years, he spent roughly seventeen years in exile. First Exile- Under Constantine, 2.5 years (July 335-November 337) in Trier (Germany), Second Exile- Under Constantius, 7.5 years (April 339-October 346) in Rome, Third Exile- Under Constantius, 6 years (February 356-February 362) in Egyptian desert, Fourth Exile- Under Julian, 10 months (October 362-September 363) in Egyptian desert, Fifth Exile- Under Valens, 4 months (October 365-January 366) in Father's tomb.

²⁰ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-2.

evaluate selected readings as a means to discern the spirituality of Athanasius, as well as try to draw some conclusions regarding the spirituality of early Christianity, during the fourth century.

**UNDERSTANDING FOURTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN AN
ATHANASIAN MODE**

Grasping patristic Christian spirituality as a general category is effectively unmanageable without parsing out each era of early theology. Exploring 'Athanasian' spirituality through his works and life are a means to gain insight into the early Christian spirituality of the fourth century. Before continuing we should define 'spirituality' as it relates to Christian faith.

In our world today there are a number of ways spirituality could be understood, but for our purposes we want to define this term in a restrictive sense, as it pertains to spirituality of a Christian type. Spirituality is, according to this purview

...the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian experience, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.²¹

Another helpful definition, including the Trinitarian consideration of spirituality

²¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 2.

Christian spirituality fundamentally focuses on the communion one has with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and the ways in which that communion is initiated, maintained and improved. On the other hand, it is based on actual lived experience and is always grounded in a particular context. It is closely linked with religious psychology, social culture and many other related disciplines.²²

These definitions will provide a guide for us to pursue a particularly Athanasian way of spirituality, as we try to understand what it means "to seek, know and experience God."²³

A word on our limitations in exploring Christian spirituality is in order. Care should be taken when we try to evaluate ancient sources, generally speaking. It is an even more delicate process to extract so-called 'spirituality' from early church data. Kannengiesser captures the reasons for this difficulty succinctly in his work entitled *Early Christian Spirituality*.²⁴

²² Ng, *The Spirituality of Athanasius*, 37.

²³ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 18.

²⁴ Kannengiesser, *Early Christian Spirituality*, 2-3. "First of all, the collected sources are all *literary* by nature, whereas nothing is more fitting to an authentic experience of Christian spirituality than a devoted and contemplative silence. If circumstances impose it, or if silence itself becomes overwhelmed by its inner mystical tension, one would expect at most some kind of *oral* communication: mystical tension, the spontaneous song of the soul or the outcry of a prayer, or the confession of Christian beliefs. On the other hand, it is clear that literature belongs to a less immediate mode of sharing the

This lengthy note (see footnote 24 below) is highly instructive regarding the immensity of the limits we face when trying to treat spirituality as an academic discipline or a category of philosophy. Essential aspects of Christian spirituality are difficult to grapple with philosophically and may remain in the category of 'mystery', leaving the academic inquiry of the subject wanting in both qualitative and quantitative substance.

Athanasian Spirituality

Nathan Ng suggests a helpful methodological framework for investigating the spirituality of St. Athanasius. He

experiences and attitudes generated by religious fervor. And what should one say of the *silent*, but more eloquent witnesses of Christian devotion engraved with a unique artistry in the cronstones [Cross tones or cornerstones?], the famous khatchkars, still planted on the hills and in the valleys of windy highlands on Soviet Armenia? From the fourth century on, at the other end of ancient Christianity, a similar non-figurative response may be seen in consecrated stones, like those called Fahan Mura Slab and Kilfountain of Reask Pillar, in the northern and southern corners of early Christian Ireland. What of the message of all the paintings and frescoes hidden in the Roman catacombs, or of miraculously preserved mosaics from the fourth or fifth century, still glittering in the Mediterranean sunshine on the walls of ancient basilicas? In St. Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai, a huge set of very old materials was recovered by the local monks on 26 May 1975. As these treasures contain musical notations of a very early period in which such data was lacking previously, new insight may be gained into popular expression of early Christian spirituality."

suggests that there are three possible approaches to understanding his spirituality. The first approach is to evaluate Athanasius' spirituality from his personal background. This category of investigation is an attempt to understand his cultural milieu, family setting and religious community. Second, we should seek to understand his overt behaviors over a long period, as indicators of his internal spiritual condition. Lastly, we need to carefully weigh his words.²⁵ Based on these criteria, Ng goes on to warn that there is much debate about each of these categories in Athanasian studies, but that the most stable of all of these criteria for evaluation are the words, in the form of teachings and writings.²⁶

Among the Patristic theologians, you would be hard pressed to find one who would make any clear delineation between spirituality and theology. It seems that these two categories would simply be indistinguishable. They would certainly distinguish various purposes for their writings, such as polemic, apologetic, homiletic, spiritual and

²⁵ Ng, *The Spirituality of Athanasius*, 38-39.

²⁶ Ng suggests a further limitation by weighting the most stable of Athanasius' works as his theological treatises. With limited space and time for this project I will simply select the most pertinent works for communicating Athanasian spirituality, whether it be his theological or spiritual writings.

devotional works as well as Athanasius' hagiography, *The Life of Anthony*. There would not likely be a category separating theology from spirituality though. As Ng puts it "While spirituality is the inner belief and reality of theology, theology is in turn its outward expression."²⁷

Character Attestation

From the outset, Athanasius' task in the treatise *On the Incarnation* was to give voice to the silent majority in his believing community. He never felt a real concern for the abstract speculations of intellectuals. Even if they were eager to introduce a new systematic strength into the public predication of the gospel, the young bishop saw them more or less withdrawn to the fringe of this community.²⁸

Athanasius spoke the vernacular of everyday Christianity.²⁹ As Kannengiesser said "His way of reasoning

²⁷ Ng, 43.

²⁸ Charles Kannengiesser, ed., *Early Christian Spirituality*, translated by Pamela Bright, Series: *Sources of Early Christian Thought*, Series ed. by William G. Rusch, vol. 6, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 12-13.

²⁹ It has been duly noted that every turn of Athanasius' career can be interpreted from the political concerns he had as the first bishop of Alexandria under the newfound toleration of the Constantinian era. The interpretation of Athanasius' behavior and words are being interpreted for the purpose of uncovering spirituality and not political intrigues. The limits of this work do not allow for a thorough investigation of the political question, but it should be acknowledged as an area of concern while interpreting Athanasius' life and doctrine. See Nathan Ng, *The Spirituality of Athanasius*, 21-30, for a thorough explanation of the confused situation regarding Athanasian studies.

always remained accessible to the man in the street."³⁰ He was concerned with biblical interpretation and instruction in a pastoral sense. This sweeping methodology in his theological task explains his popularity, especially among the ascetics of the Egyptian desert.³¹ His supporters considered him an ascetic of the first order. While he may not have been a cenobite in the strictest sense, he was the champion of Christian ascetic living and certainly spent enough time in exile to practice the disciplines familiar to a desert monk. The expressed feelings at his appointment as Bishop in 328 AD show the support he garnered as the spiritual leader of Alexandria.

Not a word did they speak against him, as these persons represented, but gave him the most excellent titles they could devise, calling him good, pious, Christian, an ascetic, a genuine Bishop.³²

³⁰ Charles Kannengiesser, *Early Christian Spirituality*, 14.

³¹ Charles Kannengiesser, "Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of His Time," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 479.

³² Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4: Enhanced Version*, early Church Fathers. Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009).

Asceticism

Asceticism is the clear tenor of Athanasian spirituality. This was a prevalent religious and philosophical mode for appropriating ideologies during the fourth century.³³

The orator Dio Chrysostom was not atypical in describing the attempt to live a truly admirable life as a more stubborn battle than that fought by famed Spartan warriors. In a similar fashion, the noble senator Seneca advised the young Lucilius that he was commending to him a way of life that was itself a battle, and that he should approach this struggle with his own passions as any trained soldier would a war.³⁴

There is clear, ancient attestation to these types of commitments in philosophical schools and religious cults.³⁵

³³ Paul R. Kolbet, "Athanasius, the Psalms and the Reformation of the Self," *Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006, January 1): 86. "The sort of letter that Athanasius wrote to Marcellinus was, in fact, quite common in late antiquity. It had become fashionable for Christians and non-Christians alike voluntarily to take time to devote themselves to training that would further their spiritual progress. This training took the form of a daily struggle with their own humanity that was not unlike that undertaken by those first Christian ascetics in the desert who battled their own passions and demons."

³⁴ Kolbet, *Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self*, 86.

³⁵ Kolbet, *Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self*, 86-87. "Representatives of the Hellenistic philosophical schools were particularly aware of the manifold resistance that human beings face in committing to the philosophic life. Cicero lamented that "as soon as we come into the light of day ... we at once find ourselves in a world of iniquity amid a medley of wrong beliefs, so that it seems as if we drank in deception with our nurse's milk.""

Due to the pervasive popularity of asceticism, it is not surprising that Athanasius and the early desert monks took up a lifestyle defined by austere principles. There was certainly biblical precedent set by Moses, Abraham, John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Egypt had been a location of mystical spiritual experiences and lent itself to remaining a locality of spiritual import. As such, it was a formative location and modality for Athanasius' spirituality.

Epistola ad Marcellinum as a Demonstration of Athanasian Spirituality

In *The Letter to Marcellinus*,³⁶ Athanasius gives us a window to his views on appropriating Psalms as a "spiritual practice."³⁷ Kolbet expresses the tenor of Athanasius' letter "as commending a daily regime of Psalms to be taken on voluntarily as spiritual exercises to conform the self to a certain ideal."³⁸ The language he uses is reminiscent of those Hellenistic schools of philosophy operating in an ascetic mode.³⁹ Athanasius tells Marcellinus that the Psalms

³⁶ Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria. *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg with William A. Clebsch (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

³⁷ Kolbet, 86.

³⁸ Ibid, 89.

³⁹ Ibid, 89

are a tool to "attend to yourself, if you should see the foe attacking...and should you wish to fortify yourself for the contest against him, recite Psalm 38."⁴⁰ In Athanasius' vocation as ascetic, he is appropriating the Psalms at a formative level and teaching Marcellinus to do the same. This reflects in his incarnational vision of the Psalmic traditions as well.

Those legislators among the Greeks possess the grace as far as speaking goes, but the Lord, being true Lord of all and one concerned for all, performed righteous acts, and not only made laws but offered himself as a model for those who wish to know the power of acting. It was indeed for this reason that he made this resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion.⁴¹

This is Athanasian spirituality at its core. The appropriating of Psalms as a discipline has profound potential to form the character of the careful student. What is being formed in the hearts of Christians, according to Athanasius, is Christ himself. The very life and bowels of Christ, formed in the Christian is the 'therapy and correction for every emotion.'

⁴⁰ Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, 117.

⁴¹ Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus*, 112.

Of central importance to understanding Athanasius' vision of spiritual formation in his *Letter to Marcellinus* we must understand the theological underpinnings framing his ideologies. As was stated earlier, theology and spirituality were inseparable categories for Athanasius and he would have moved seamlessly between these two areas. Since defense of doctrine was such a predominant part of his vocation we should seek to understand how this affects his vision of spiritual practices and formation.⁴² This theological ordering and reformation of the soul through the Psalms captures the comprehensiveness of Athanasius' ideas about the whole man, formed in the image of creator God.⁴³

The revelation of God's Word and the unique form that Psalms take allow for the assimilation of the revelation in a comprehensive way. It is our loss of truth regarding God

⁴² Kolbet, 90. "Since doctrines occupy such a central place in this tradition by providing the soul with reliable guidance, it is all the more necessary first to establish what these doctrines were for Athanasius, and locate the theological framework that directs the particular pastoral instructions given to Marcellinus. When seen in terms of these doctrinal convictions, Athanasius's contention becomes more intelligible that the Psalter furnishes exercises capable of reforming the disordered movements of the soul through speaking, acting, and singing."

⁴³ See Kolbet, 90-97 for a thorough treatment of the relationship of Athanasius dogma and its importance for appropriating the Psalms.

and self which requires consolation. It is the disorder of the human soul that calls for the reordering according to the Psalms.

Yet the Book of Psalms is like a garden containing things of all kinds, and it sets them to music, but also exhibits things of its own that it gives in song along with them.⁴⁴

The reality of experiencing the whole revelation of God in the Psalms makes it a location of vital theological formation, leaving the unmistakable tattoo on the heart of the one studying them diligently. As a song's lyrics hang in the heart of the songstress, so the Psalms hang in the heart of its practitioner, leaving the soul affected by the revelatory knowledge it encompasses. The end result is reformation of the soul through assimilation of scriptural truths.

Athanasius encouraged the careful use of the Psalms as a part of the program of asceticism leading to a life submitted to the glory of God. Athanasius practiced and perfected his use of the scriptures in a monastic environment. He cultivated like-mindedness with the desert monks and they mutually benefited one another spiritually.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Athanasius, Marcellinus, 102.

⁴⁵ The monks certainly benefited the political career of Athanasius, as it seems highly unlikely that he would have survived forty-five years in his volatile see without

This ascetic program would lay the foundation for Christian spirituality for the rest of the history of Christianity, even to this day.

being harbored frequently by his cenobitic friends. See Kannengiesser, *Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of His Time*, 479.

ATHANASIAN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR TODAY

After spending a significant amount of time with Saint Athanasius, there are a variety of relevant applications of his brand of spirituality for today. The first issue addressed through the application of Athanasian spirituality is the avoidance of an empty, secularized kind of spirituality that is popular today. The foundation of this friendly commentary on the Psalms is a deep plunging of the most significant theological issues central to the Christian faith. Today, as we fill seminaries with the best and brightest from the Church, we often ask ourselves what the agenda is for our theology. The student asks themselves, "What am I going to do with this fine degree?" Digging into the vital theological questions of the Patristic era and especially the crucial questions Athanasius and his contemporaries faced helps to establish a foundation of orthodoxy upon which all other sorts of spiritual, theological and pastoral edifices can be hung. Jumping into 'spirituality' without the Trinitarian and Christological foundations is a recipe for more of the same

steady diet of 'new' ideas, trying to make the Church grow. Athanasius shows us the way to a meaningful and deeply satisfying spirituality by defending the cause of the Church in his Nicene theology.

Secondly, Athanasius provides us with a recipe for avoiding the lazy, consumerist spirituality being sold to Christians today. This capitalistic Christian product being consumed today is a formula for frustration and disillusionment. Many will buy Christian goods and services only to be left with no real solutions for what ails the heart and soul. A careful reflection on Athanasian spirituality (and thus ascetic spirituality) reveals that there will be work involved. When reviewing all the various ways Athanasius calls his friend Marcellinus to discipline, it is shocking to the average Church attendee in the Western world. There is a real aversion to work in our 'grace alone' driven Christian communities.

Third, Athanasius was primarily concerned with matters relating to his pastoral duties as the bishop of Alexandria. This focus is evident in his correspondence with Marcellinus. Though an intellectual powerhouse, evidenced by his prolific works, Athanasius was concerned with shepherding his flock more than satisfying his intellectual curiosities. Here we have a clear path to take

regarding pastoral and Christian concerns. There are many fascinating theological ideas to entertain and nurture, but we should consider our trip to the heights of intellectual ruminations as shepherds first, seeking to read the times and provide biblical council to God's Church.

Fourth, Athanasius' clear vision of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, evidenced in this letter, guides today's Christians into an appropriating knowledge of God's revelation and of self through the work of the Spirit and teaches us to employ tools for spiritual transformation in the Psalter. The constant reference to the transformative power of the Psalms is based on an appropriating of God's full revelation. This provides the substructure for properly evaluating our life, as one checks their appearance in a mirror. This is the message of the Psalms, according to Athanasius. His prescription of understanding self is based on an understanding of Scriptures and not on careful, psychological evaluation. Today, there is an absence of deep, abiding understanding of the narrative of God's revelation and thus a misunderstanding of our place in the greater meta-narrative of God's kingdom reign. The Psalms unfold the revelation in a vernacular of song and poem, sowing the truth into the hearts of men, uplifting his cause in their lives.

The experience of embracing Athanasius' teaching in his *Letter to Marcellinus* gives us a peek into the cenobitic life. Did Athanasius create cenobitic monasticism or did he witness it and articulate what he found in his many exiles? He is likely not the progenitor of the monastic impulse, but surely captures the zeitgeist of fourth Century spirituality and makes it accessible. His spiritual theology was crafted in the desert with the likes of Anthony and the plethora of other monks fleeing there to try to preserve genuine Christian experience.

We have seen, as we review the life and times of Athanasius, a bishop pursuing the fulfillment of his pastoral duties with all diligence. For all of the many errors of this saint, we have been left a wonderful record of his theological and spiritual life. It is easy to evaluate this man's actions in retrospect and cast judgments on his character and motivations. I hold that our judgment should be reserved when reading history. If someone was to tell the story of my entire life from birth to death, it would chronicle a terrifying tale of some triumphs, but many more failures of character. This would be true for most, thus we should reserve our judgment and be tempered in our thoughts about Athanasius because we know that history will judge us as well.

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