







DEFENCE OF THE NICENE DEFINITION





ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

DEFENCE OF THE  
NICENE DEFINITION

*Translated from the Greek by John Henry Newman*  
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*edited by Philip Schaff, D.D., LL.D.*

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The *Holy Nativity Patristic Library* presents the foundational texts of the early Christian Fathers in carefully typeset pocket editions. Each volume is drawn from the public-domain English translations of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* – the thirty-eight-volume collection edited by Philip Schaff and his collaborators between 1886 and 1900, which remains the most comprehensive English-language gathering of the patristic writings ever assembled.

We have undertaken to issue these works one at a time, as portable single-author editions, so that they may travel where the original folio volumes cannot – in a coat pocket, on a long flight, beside a hospital bed. Each volume preserves the Schaff translation and the translator's introduction. The foot-

note apparatus is retained where it serves the text; we have set aside those notes that pertain only to the nineteenth-century volume context, and any commentary at variance with the Orthodox confession of the Fathers themselves. We add a subject index and a scripture index for the text in hand.

The texts are typeset in IM Fell English, a face cut by John Fell in seventeenth-century Oxford and freely available again through the work of Igino Marini. The Greek is set in Philokalia, designed for the Athonite tradition.

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## CONTENTS

<i>About This Series</i>	vii
--------------------------	-----

### DEFENCE OF THE NICENE DEFINITION

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Defence of the Nicene Definition</i>	9
Ch. I. Introduction	9
Ch. II. Conduct of the Arians towards the Nicene Council	17
Ch. III. Two senses of the word Son	27
Ch. IV. Proof of the Catholic sense of the word Son	54
Ch. V. Defence of the Council's phrases	64
Ch. VI. Authorities in support of the Council	89

Ch. VII. On the Arian symbol "Unorigi- nate"	105
<i>Index of Subjects</i>	121
<i>Index of Scripture References</i>	128
<i>A Note to the Reader</i>	133
<i>Also from Holy Nativity Press</i>	137



DEFENCE OF THE NICENE  
DEFINITION



## INTRODUCTION

*By John Henry Newman, Translator*

This letter must have been written in the interval between the return of Athanasius in 346 and his flight in 356. Acacius was already (§3) Bishop of Cæsarea 339; Eusebius of Nicomedia is not referred to as though still living (he died 342). Moreover the language of §2 (“for in no long time they will turn to outrage,” &c.) implies a period of actual peace, but with a prospect of the repetition of the scenes of the year 339. This actually occurred in 356. Accordingly we must probably place the tract under the sole reign of Constantius, between 351 and the end of 355.

It is written in answer to a friend who in disputing with Arians had been posed by their objection to

the use of non-scriptural terms in the Nicene Definition. He accordingly asks for some account of what the council had done.

Athanasius begins his answer by stigmatising the evasions and inconsistency of the Arianisers, and describing their conduct at the council, and how they eventually subscribed to the terms now complained of (1-5). He then investigates the meaning of the divine Sonship (6-14), and how its true meaning is brought out by the other titles of the Son (15-17). Coming to the non-scriptural expressions he shews how they were forced upon the council by the evasions of the Arians (18-20), and that they express no sense not to be found in Scripture (21-24). Moreover, they had already been in use in the Church, as is shewn by extracts from Theognostus, the two Dionysii, and Origen (25-27). Lastly (28-32) he discusses the term ἀγέμητος, applied by the Arians (especially Asterius) to the Father, in contrast, not to the creation, but to the Son, who is thereby implied to be γέμητος. He insists on 'Father' not 'ἀγέμητος' as the divine title authorised by Scripture. Lastly he appends, in proof of what he states in §3, the letter of Eusebius to the people of Cæsarea, containing the

creed of the council, which, for reasons there stated, we have inserted above, pp. 73-76.

The interest of the letter is principally three-fold; first on account of its notice of the proceedings at Nicæa (cf. *ad Afr.* 5), one of the few primary sources of our knowledge of what took place there: secondly, on account of its fragments of early writers, especially the Dionysii, of whom more will be said in the introduction to the next tract. With regard to Theognostus, the quotations in this tract and in *Serap.* iv. 9 are important in view of the somewhat damaging accounts of his teaching in the few other writers (Gregory of Nyssa, Photius) who mention him.

Thirdly, the term ἀγέννητος demands attention. It is impossible to give its exact force in idiomatic English: the rendering 'Ingenerate' adopted by Newman is perhaps the most unfortunate one imaginable. 'Uncreated,' a possible substitute, is also open to objection, firstly, as not distinguishing the word from the derivatives of κτίζειν, ποιεῖν, δημιουργεῖν, secondly, as giving it a passive sense, which does not inherently attach to it. For lack of a better word, 'Unoriginate' may perhaps be adopted.

‘That which has not (or cannot) come to be,’ ‘that which is *not* the result of a process,’—‘*das Ungewordene.*’ It was therefore strictly applicable to the Son as well as to the Father. But throughout the earlier stages of the Arian controversy the question was embarrassed by the homophones **γέννητος** and **ἀγέννητος**, generate or begotten, and unbegotten. The confusion of thought due to the resemblance of sound is reflected in the confusion of readings in the mss. Athanasius himself (*Orat.* i. 56) perceives the distinctive sense of **ἀγέννητος**. In the present tract and in *Orat.* i. 30, he has **ἀγέννητος** only in view, the idea of begetting being absent. Here (and cf. *de Syn.* 46, note 5) he is denying that the Father is alone **ἀγέννητος**, uncreated or without a ‘becoming.’ Accordingly although the word **γεννηθήσεται** was consecrated and safeguarded in the Creed of Nicæa (Begotten not made), and although the distinctness of the derivatives of the two verbs was felt by Athanasius, and pointed out by others (Epiph. *Hær.* 64, 8), the use of either group of words was avoided by Catholics as dangerous. A clear distinction of the words and of their respective applicability is made by John Damascene *Fid. Orth.* I. viii.