

John Owen's Use of Athanasius: Finding the Pedigree of Puritan Theology in the Early Church Fathers

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The theme of this essay is the use made by John Owen of quotations from the early church fathers, with a particular focus on Athanasius, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria.¹ Wide reference to a range of contemporary and ancient authors is common to many Puritan divines in a manner that by no means undermines their clear commitment to the unique authority of Scripture as the basis of faith and practice. It is clear that, for them, a pledge to *sola Scriptura* was not a reliance on *nuda Scriptura* in the context of exposition and debate.²

Owen's View of the Primacy of Scripture and the Auxiliary Role of Other Authorities

It can be shown from many passages in his writings that Owen found unique authority for statements about God and the only basis for a true understanding of the Christian faith in his view of Scripture as the Word of God. As he put it in a sermon from 1675, "Now, the holy scripture of the Old and New Testament, is that which we profess to own as the rule of our faith and life, in relation to our future glory."³

More specifically, Owen believed in the self-attesting authority of Scripture, independent of other sources of knowledge of the truth. In *The Reason of Faith* (1677), he writes,

1. There are twenty-six references to Athanasius in Goold's indices (actually twenty-seven, but the index reference to 17.283 is an error, as this refers to Athanasius Kircher). The author can provide a summary analysis of the twenty-six instances on request.

2. See Anthony N. Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making sense of a Post-Reformation slogan," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, eds. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–327.

3. Sermon 14 in *Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 8:497.

It is or may be inquired, wherefore we believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, or that God is one in nature, subsisting in three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; I answer, It is because God himself, the first truth, who cannot lie, hath revealed and declared these things so to be, and he who is our all requireth us so to believe. If it be asked how, wherein, or whereby God hath revealed or declared these things so to be, or what is that revelation which God hath made hereof; I answer, It is the Scripture and that only. And if it be asked how I know this Scripture to be a divine revelation, to be the word of God; I answer... I believe it so to be with faith divine and supernatural, resting on and resolved into the authority and veracity of God himself, evidencing themselves unto my mind, my soul, and conscience, by this revelation itself, and not otherwise.⁴

This sets Owen against those who would base their understanding of Scripture on the authority of the church, or on rational or scientific grounds that justify scriptural teaching, or on ideas of knowledge derived directly from nature or supposed revelation separate from Scripture itself. For Owen, it is clear that Scripture alone, by its own God-given nature, has authority over the Christian soul, and that certainty in the truth of Scripture is part of faith, which is “the graced response to revelation.”⁵

Yet in the same work, Owen made clear that other sources of information and understanding have a role in the life of the believer and the work of the theologian. He gives a place to philosophical arguments as “previous inducements unto believing” (whence they have a role in apologetics) and “concomitant means of strengthening faith in them that do believe.”⁶ Moreover, “wherever there is occasion from objections, oppositions, or temptations,”⁷ arguments taken from extra-scriptural sources can be used to overcome such opposition. Such lines of defense “are left unto us as consequential unto our believing, to plead with others in behalf of what we profess, and for the justification of it unto the world.”⁸ Owen is clear that reasoning of this kind can never provide “the ground and reason whereon

4. *Works*, 4:70.

5. This phrase comes from Sebastian Rehnmann's discussion of Owen's *The Reason of Faith*. “John Owen on Faith and Reason,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 31–48. The following paragraph owes much to Rehnmann's article.

6. *Works*, 4:71.

7. *Works*, 4:72.

8. *Works*, 4:48.

we believe”—faith is grounded in divine revelation or supernatural evidence; it is a grace or free gift of God, not an exercise of ungraced reason. Yet the role of reason as an adjunct to faith is part of Owen’s armory in theological discourse.

Owen’s Caution in Using the Fathers

In *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* (1654), Owen notices favorably a work of Jean Daillé, a French Huguenot minister who lived from 1594 to 1670. His writings include the treatise *Du vrai emploi des Pères* (1631), translated into English by Thomas Smith as *A Treatise concerning the right use of the Fathers* (1651),⁹ of which Owen writes approvingly, “I suppose all farther labour in that kind may well be spared.”¹⁰

Much of Daillé’s thesis surrounds the dangers associated with using the Fathers: too little survives from the earliest centuries; many are inherently obscure because of language, idiom, and choice of expression; the attribution of works to certain fathers is unsure; the texts have been corrupted (sometimes deliberately, sometimes through accident); their own opinions change and develop with time and controversy; they contradict each other; their debates were on quite other matters from present day religious controversies; it is difficult to know whether the church accepted their teachings in whole or in part; and, as the Fathers themselves were at pains to point out, their teaching is not the ground of authority for the faith of the church. However, Daillé in his final chapter points to the positive use that can be made of the Fathers’ writings: they are worth reading (as are many other writers) for their piety and learning; they exhort believers to a life of holiness and they provide many strong proofs for the fundamentals of the Christian faith; and they can rightly be used as historical witnesses to refute those who seek to innovate in doctrine or church practice because their testimonies can show that there is no historical precedent for certain false ideas—where the primitive church did not adopt a practice there is no ground for innovation. Daillé illustrates all of these points and others in

9. Jean Daillé, *Use of the Fathers*, trans. Thomas Smith (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856), <https://archive.org/details/treatiseonright00dailuoft>. *Bibliotheca Oweniana*, which purports to be the sale catalogue of Owen’s library after his death, includes a 1651 edition of this work—see *Bibliotheca Oweniana, Sive Catalogus Librorum ... Bibliothecæ ... Joan. Oweni. Quorum Auctio Habebitur 26 Maii, 1684, per E. Millingtonum* (London, 1684), 2.4.43

10. *Works*, 11:24.

considerable depth with extensive quotation from a large number of writers of the early centuries of the church.¹¹

A general statement of Owen's view of the force to be given to quotations from the early church fathers, very much in line with Daillé, can be found in *Causes, Ways and Means for Understanding the Mind of God* (1678). Owen comes in the later chapters to the work of the Holy Spirit in the minds of people through Scripture.¹² This includes consideration of the spiritual, academic, and ecclesiastical aids to interpretation of the Bible that are available to believers. Owen, in considering the topic of biblical exegesis, assesses what he terms "the joint consent of the Fathers,"¹³ to which some have sought to give what he considers to be an unwarranted value. He points to the impossibility of the Fathers being considered "a rule of Scripture interpretation" because of their disagreements over articles of faith and in exposition of Scripture. He acknowledges that the "piety and ability" of the Fathers is undeniable but denies that their writings can provide a "determining authority."

The need for similar care in the use of the Fathers is at the forefront of Owen's mind in *Christologia* (1667). By way of introductory remark, Owen wishes to establish the responsibility of all Christian believers under God to develop and maintain a right understanding of the teaching of Scripture. "The defence of the truth, from the beginning, was left in charge unto, and managed by, the guides and rulers of the church in their several capacities," a duty given also to private believers.¹⁴

But, he explains, in the midst of dispute and controversy in the fourth century, the need was felt for "General Councils, armed with a mixed power, partly civil and partly ecclesiastical," a coming together of emperor and bishops. He points especially to the "Council of Nice [i.e. Nicaea, 325], wherein, although there was a determination of the doctrine concerning the person of Christ... according to the truth, yet sundry evils and inconveniences ensued thereon. For thenceforth the faith of Christians began to be resolved

11. Daillé, trans. Smith, *Use of the Fathers* (1856): too little survives 26, 30–32, obscure language 101–106, 117–27, unsure attributions 36–60, corrupted texts 61–69, changes in opinions 156–62, contradictions between Fathers 327–40, debates on other topics from modern day 32–34, whether the church accepted their opinions 184–90, Fathers not the ground of authority 247–49, 252ff, 269, worth reading 403, exhortations to holiness and proofs of Christian fundamentals 404–405, historical witness against innovation 407–11.

12. *Works*, 4:199–234.

13. *Works*, 4:227.

14. *Works*, 1:9.

into the authority of men.” He refers to the difficulties encountered when explaining “their conceptions of the divine nature of Christ in words not used in the Scripture, or whose signification unto that purpose was not determined therein,” with the result that “occasion was given unto endless contentions about them.”¹⁵ Owen alludes then to the advantage taken by Arians in regard to this variety of terms and the uncertainty that it bred. He observes the fallibility of the Fathers and the councils: “...it cannot be denied, but that some of the principal persons and assemblies who adhered unto the truth did, in the heat of opposition unto the heresies of other men, fall into unjustifiable excess themselves.”¹⁶

Owen’s own practice is set then within this broad context of caution about how the Fathers can be profitably used to support accurate statements of theology and Scriptural interpretation. Moreover, he shows care on several occasions to consider his readership and the appropriateness of detailed citation in support of his arguments.

We see Owen engaging with the Socinian John Biddle in *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655) and with the Roman Catholic Vincent Canes in *Animadversions on “Fiat Lux”* (1662) and *Vindication of Animadversions* (1664), in disputes with an academic and politico-ecclesiastical audience. The *Epistle Dedicatory to Vindiciae*¹⁷ is addressed to “the Heads and Governors of the Colleges and Halls, with all other students in Divinity, or of the truth which is after godliness, in the famous University of Oxford.” At the same time, *The Preface to the Reader* addresses “those that labour in the word and doctrine in these nations of England, Scotland and Ireland, with all that call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁸ In this context of a highly academic readership, Owen’s references to patristic authors set his level of argument at a fitting intellectual height. In the *Animadversions* and *Vindication of Animadversions*, Owen alludes to Athanasius six times; in *Vindiciae* there are three such references.

On the other hand, there are times when Owen has in view the general Christian reader. Then, he may choose to deploy references to the Fathers with discretion. Owen is aware that not all readers will find these references helpful or easy to understand and that they could become a burden to the book he is writing. Therefore, he separates them away from the main text

15. *Works*, 1:10.

16. *Works*, 1:10.

17. *Works*, 12:6.

18. *Works*, 12:11.

into prefaces in *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654)¹⁹ and *Christologia* (1667)²⁰ and relegates them to an appendix in his early work on *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647).²¹ At the start of the preface to *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, Owen makes this point explicitly:

If thy inquiry be only after the *substance* of the truth in the ensuing treatise contended for, I desire thee not to stay at all upon this preliminary discourse, but to proceed thither where it is expressly handled from the Scriptures, without the intermixture of any human testimonies or other less necessary circumstances... That which I now intend and aim at is, to give an account to the *learned* reader of some things nearly related to the doctrine...and what entertainment it hath formerly found and received in the church, and among the saints of God.²²

We can see Owen's use of the early church fathers, then, as part of his careful and critical deployment of extra-scriptural resources in defense of his interpretation of Scripture, with an awareness of the needs and perceptions of his various readerships. We will see that the use of patristic writers has a particular role in establishing the pedigree of Owen's positions and that this has especial force within the context of some of the disputes in which he was engaged.

Owen's Use of Athanasius

Athanasius, deacon to the bishop of Alexandria at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and then bishop himself from 328 to his death in 373, provided a rich source of reference for Owen, as they shared polemical concerns in Christological and Trinitarian matters, and lived in times of exacerbated theological controversy.²³ The writings of Athanasius are dominated by his defense of the Nicene formulae against Arian opponents and others whom Athanasius identified as sharing common errors with Arians. Owen's use of Athanasius, in works spanning 1646 to 1681,²⁴ is by no means restricted

19. *Works* 11:24–67.

20. *Works*, 1:6–27.

21. *Works*, 10:422–24.

22. *Works*, 11:19.

23. John Piper provides an overview of Athanasius's life and draws parallels between Owen, Athanasius, and Gresham Machen. *Contending for Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2006).

24. The earliest reference is an allusion to Athanasius's life in *A Country Essay for the*

to these themes, but his opposition to Socinian teaching in his day brought him to deal with many of the same issues that Athanasius had faced.

The Texts of Athanasius Used by Owen

There are considerable difficulties in following up the references made by Owen to the Fathers. The accuracy of citations in the text of Owen is distinctly variable; this may be the result of Owen quoting from memory, using *florilegia* or books of quotations from the Fathers and other writers that contained mistakes,²⁵ or the use of a text now improved upon by modern textual scholarship. However, there is also the possibility that the printed edition of Owen's writing does not convey what he intended in his manuscript submitted to the press. Goold, in his 1850 General Preface to his edition of the Works of John Owen, comments that he has sought to improve the text and references throughout, but that "Perhaps the works of Owen have suffered most injustice in regard to his quotations from the Greek and Latin Fathers."²⁶ He refers to printing errors that Owen did not have time to correct and suggests that he may have left such a task to others.²⁷

A starting point for identifying the copies of Athanasius that were available to Owen is the catalogue *Bibliotheca Oweniana*, the auction list for what purports to be the sale of Owen's library after his death.²⁸ There must be caution in using this catalogue, given the reputation of the bookseller

Practice of Church Government, an annex to a sermon preached before the House of Commons entitled *A Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy*. Works, 8:65–66. The latest reference is a citation in *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*. Works, 15.354. Both, as it happens, are discussions of aspects of ecclesiology.

25. Richard Snoddy has shown examples of Owen uncritically deriving citations from other authors. "A Display of Learning? Citations and Shortcuts in John Owen's *Display of Arminianisme* (1643)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 82, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 319–35.

26. Works, 1: xiv–xv.

27. The citation of "Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:22" in *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* may be a case of Owen giving an unchecked reference. *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews with Preliminary Exercitations*, ed. William H. Goold (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1854), 2:423. The reference to Socrates does not support Owen's argument about the change of the day of sacred rest from the last day of the week (the Jewish Sabbath) to the first day of the week, although Socrates does refer to the day of Christian gatherings in this place. Owen's discussion alludes to an incident in Athanasius's life that is actually recorded in Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:27.

28. See a discussion of this catalogue in Crawford Gribben, "John Owen, Renaissance Man? The Evidence of Edward Millington's *Bibliotheca Oweniana* (1684)" in *The Ashgate*

Edward Millington, who may have used Owen's fame to sell off unrelated stock by association with the great man's name. Moreover, even if a considerable percentage of the catalogue was owned by Owen this is not evidence that he read or used these texts. Even more significantly, we cannot know what volumes Owen owned, used, and then gave away or what books went missing from his personal collection in other ways.

Bibliotheca Oweniana contains many volumes of works by the early church fathers. Editions of Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Basil, Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, and others are to be found. Several of these are "Omnia opera" editions. Yet in the main lists of theological books in the catalogue, there is no edition of Athanasius. In the section headed "*Manuscripta varia Latina, Graeca etc.*" there are two works of gathered citations from the Fathers: "*Pat. Junii Collectanea e S.Patribus, & stricturae in varios locos sacra Scripturae*" and "*Collectanea Graeca (ex vetustiss. Manuscriptis) Pat. Junii 4to.*" Both of these are manuscripts by the early seventeenth-century Scottish scholar Patrick Young (Patricius Junius), who died in 1652. Furthermore, there is a document listed as "*Manuscript. Graecum S.Athanasii pars translata in Ling Lat altera scripta per P.Junium.*"²⁹ That Owen may have acquired these by direct contact with Young is an intriguing possibility, but the inaccessibility of these manuscripts today does not aid our search.

However, we would be wrong to deduce from the absence of volumes of Athanasius from the *Bibliotheca* that Owen did not have access to such texts. He may have possessed such volumes and made gifts of them to others. Moreover, when working in Oxford he would have had access to college libraries and to the recently re-founded Bodleian Library. In later years, we can presume that he had access to the libraries of others who were sympathetic to the Independent cause.³⁰ The *Bibliotheca* does contain volumes of church historians under the entries "*Eusebii, Ruffini, Socratis, Theodor-*

Research Companion to John Owen's Theology, eds. Kerry M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 97–112.

29. These items in *Bibliotheca Oweniana* are located in the order referred to at 1.32.3, 1.32.22, and 1.32.6.

30. The Bodleian Library's copies of *Bibliotheca Oweniana* are bound together with other book sale catalogues. The presence of editions of Athanasius in the libraries of Owen's contemporaries is evident. The Bodleian volume with reference "Johnson d. 739" contains catalogues spanning the years 1680–1702, many under the auspices of Edward Millington, including, for example, the sale catalogues of the libraries of Richard Davies (with a Paris 1581 edition of Athanasius), of Matthew Smallwood (Paris 1627 edition), and of John Lloyd (Basel 1556 edition).

eti, Sozomeni, &c Histor. Ecclesiast. edit. Grynei Bas. 1587” and “[Eusebii] Historia Ecclesiastica, & Socratis, Sozomeni, Theodoreti, Evagri gr.lat. amplissimis Annotationibus Hen. Valesii 3 vol (lettred) Mog. 1672.”³¹ The works of Socrates and Sozomen in particular are important sources for events in the life of Athanasius.

Owen quotes from Athanasius in both Greek and Latin; this may begin to provide some further clues as to which texts he had access to. All early modern published editions of Athanasius prior to 1600 were Latin translations rather than the Greek text of Athanasius, and this was also true of some seventeenth-century editions. The 1600 Heidelberg and the 1627 Paris editions of the Greek text included Latin translations.³²

While not giving us certainty, a few examples may point us in the right direction. In the preface to his *Christologia* (1667), Owen discusses the historical background of some of the terminology used in Christological and Trinitarian discussion. He refers to Athanasius in these terms: “The Grecians themselves could not for a long season agree among themselves whether οὐσία and ὑποστάσις were of the same signification or no, (both of them denoting essence and substance,) or whether they differed in their signification, or if they did, wherein that difference lay. Athanasius at first affirmed them to be the same: “Orat. v. con. Arian., and Epist. ad African.”³³

The reference to *Oration 5 Against the Arians* is of note. There are four discourses with this title in Migne’s edition of Athanasius in the *Patrologia Graeca* series.³⁴ However, according to Migne,³⁵ the 1627 Paris edition of the works of Athanasius has five orations—the *Epistula ad Episcopos Aegyptii et Lybiae* is oration 1, while orations 1–4 are numbered 2–5. In what is now given as oration 4, Athanasius states in the first section, “And as there is one Beginning and therefore one God, so one is that Essence (οὐσία) and Subsistence (ὑποστάσις) which indeed and truly and really is.”³⁶ This would appear to be the quotation that Owen has in mind.

31. *Bibliotheca Oweniana*, 1.4.139, 1.4.144.

32. A brief summary of early modern editions of Athanasius can be found in Archibald Robertson, *Prolegomena*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (NPNF)*, Second Series, Volume IV, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Oxford and London: Christian Literature Company: Parker, 1892), xi–xii.

33. *Works*, 1:10.

34. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* tom. 26 (Paris 1857), col. 11–526.

35. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* tom. 28 (Paris 1857), col. 1645.

36. *Oratio contra Arianos IV.1* in *NPNE*, 4:433.

In his *Preliminary Exercitations* (1668) to his commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews, Owen discusses the question of the epistle's canonical authority. In doing so, he twice quotes Athanasius in Latin. First, he writes, "Moreover, as the Scripture, upon the accounts mentioned, is, by way of eminency, said to be *canonical*, so there is also a *canon* or *rule* determining what books in *particular* do belong unto the holy Scripture, and to be on that account *canonical*." So Athanasius tells us that by the Holy Scripture he intends "*libros certo canone comprehensos*,"—the books contained in the assured canon of it."³⁷

This is footnoted as a reference to "*Athanas. in Synops.*" The quotation of the Latin points to the 1600 edition published in Heidelberg that, for the treatise known as *Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae* (spuriously attributed to Athanasius), had, in parallel to the Greek text, the Latin translation given here by Owen.³⁸

A few pages later Owen discusses the inclusion as canonical, by various writers and particularly by the Third Council of Carthage (397), of books that "...might be read in the church; which privilege they grant also to the stories of the sufferings of the martyrs, which yet none thought to be properly canonical." "*Non sunt canonici, sed leguntur catechumenis*," saith Athanasius;—"They are not canonical, but are only read to the *catechumeni*."³⁹

The footnote reference for Athanasius is again "*Athanas. in Synops.*" The Latin is once more that of the translation in the Heidelberg 1600 edition of *Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae*.⁴⁰

In *Pneumatologia* (1674), Owen discusses the work of the Holy Spirit in regard to Christ's human nature: "First, The *framing, forming, and miraculous conception of the body of Christ in the womb of the blessed Virgin* was the peculiar and especial work of the Holy Ghost." To this statement is footnoted a Latin quotation and the reference "*Athanas. de Fid. Un. et Trin.*"⁴¹ The ancient text referred to (*de Fide Unitatis et Trinitatis, Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*—*Concerning Faith in the Unity and Trinity of the Father, Son*

37. Owen, *Hebrews*, 1:28.

38. *Operum Sancti Patris Nostri Athanasii Archiepiscopi Alexandrini*, t. II, ed. P. Felckmann (Heidelberg 1600), 61, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=pxBnAAAAcAAJ&redir_esc=y.

39. *Hebrews*, 1:21.

40. *Operum Sancti*, 63.

41. *Works*, 3:162.

and Holy Spirit) is now classed among Athanasian *spuria*. However, it was included in the Heidelberg 1600 and Paris 1627 editions.⁴²

These arguments are by no means decisive, but it seems reasonable to suppose that Owen may at times have been working with 1600 and 1627 editions of Athanasius, copies of the church historians Socrates and Sozomen, as well as, perhaps, handy sourcebooks of quotations such as Junius's manuscripts.

Owen's Polemic Defense Against the Charge of Singularity

It was important to Owen to be able to demonstrate that his interpretation of Scripture provided an unchanged message from the days of the apostles. To the early modern, pre-Enlightenment mind, the power of ancient authority as a tool of argument was significant. Conal Condren has explored this habit of mind, also noting some exceptions in appeals to natural rights and the world of scientific learning, in regard to the field of political discourse, whose controversies and language were inseparable from the legal and theological. As he states in his concluding paragraphs, "In religion, then, a rhetoric of tradition and conservation was nearly always co-opted; a rhetoric of innovation and upstart or false tradition was to be distributed [i.e., attributed to opponents], much as was the currency of tyranny, arbitrariness and rebellion."⁴³ Despite the cautions raised by Daillé's work noted above, Owen's deployment of the Fathers is therefore in part a strategic move typical of his age. In the midst of a period of immense societal, political, and ecclesiastical ferment, and in the increasingly embattled position in which as a declared Independent he found himself, Owen offered the assurance of teaching that was not novel but could be traced from Scripture through the earliest ages of the church.

He makes this point succinctly in the final paragraph of his appendix to *The Reason of Faith* (1677). After giving a number of quotations from across church history to support his view of the ground of faith, he states, "These few testimonies have I produced amongst the many that might be urged to the same purpose, not to confirm the truth which we have pleaded for, which stands on far surer foundations, but only to obviate prejudices in the minds of some, who, being not much conversant in things of this

42. See discussion in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* tom. 28 (Paris 1857) col. 1435–1436 and col. 1648.

43. See Conal Condren, *The Language of Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 33–40, 70, 158. Condren shows the inter-connection of politics and theology, pp. 33–40, and their shared language, p. 70; the quotation is from p. 158.

nature, are ready to charge what hath been delivered unto this purpose with singularity."⁴⁴

The avoidance of the charge of *singularity*, or innovation, looms large in Owen's motivation for seeking the support of ancient Christian authors. This works most effectively in his disputatious works and when the topics under discussion are the Christological and Trinitarian topics that the Fathers were also engaged with.

First, in many instances, Owen simply uses a quotation or allusion as a straightforward confirmation of agreement to show the historical pedigree of his own theology.

In *Pneumatologia*, (1674) he writes,

I say, then,—1. That all *divine operations* are usually ascribed unto God *absolutely*. So it is said that God made all things; and so of all other works, whether in nature or in grace. And the reason hereof is, because the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence.

To the phrase ending *divine operations* Owen footnotes a Greek quotation and the reference: "*Athanas. Epistol. [i.31] ad Serapionem.*"⁴⁵ The Greek means, "For surely the operation of the Trinity is shown from these words to be one. For the apostle does not mean that the things which are given are given differently and separately by each person, but that these gifts are given in the Trinity and that all are from one God."⁴⁶

Athanasius wrote a series of *Letters to Serapion*, a bishop who had encountered teaching that the Holy Spirit was a creature, different from the angels only in degree. In the place cited, Athanasius has just quoted 2 Corinthians 13:14 (at the end of 1.30) and is now explaining the significance of the text: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." Owen and Athanasius are of one mind in seeing that grace, love, and fellowship are not separate works

44. *Works*, 4:115.

45. *Works*, 3:93.

46. Present author's translation. See also C. R. B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 142.

belonging each solely to one specific member of the Trinity to give to believers, but that all are the work of one God.

Similarly, in *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), Owen is combatting the Socinian writings of John Biddle. This is done at length with detailed rebuttal of Biddle's *Two-fold Catechism*. In chapter 19, Owen states, "It is the deity of Christ, then, which is the fundamental, formal cause and reason, and the proper object, of our worship; for that being granted, though we had no other reason or argument for it, yet we ought to worship him; and that being denied, all other reasons and motives whatever would not be a sufficient cause or warrant for any such proceeding." At the semicolon is appended a footnote with the reference: "*Athan. Ep. ad Adelp. Episc.*"⁴⁷ and a Greek quotation that means, "Let them know that in worshipping the Lord in the flesh, we do not worship a creature but the Creator Who has put on the created body."⁴⁸

This letter was written by Athanasius around 370 to Adelpsius, bishop of Onuphis, and is designed to assist him in combatting heresy that Athanasius classes as Arian. The letter concerns worship, as it appears that these anti-Nicene thinkers had challenged Adelpsius as to the consequences of the orthodox view that Jesus is to be worshipped—if He is a human being, then how can He be worshipped? In the same way, Owen in *Vindiciae* is countering the consequences of the Socinian denial of the full divinity of Jesus Christ. The words of Athanasius are apt in that, although they are dealing with different opponents, a shared theological standpoint equips Owen with the same arguments against error.

Canonicity is another topic that by its nature lends itself to discussion of historical pedigree. The definition of canonicity that Owen gives in his *Preliminary Exercitations* to his commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews makes this point: "The Scripture, upon the accounts mentioned, is, by way of eminency, said to be *canonical*, so there is also a *canon* or *rule* determining what books in particular do belong unto the holy Scripture, and to be on that account *canonical*."⁴⁹ The references, given previously, to an Athanasian text and other fathers in regard to the place of the epistle to the Hebrews in the canon and also to the nature of the Apocrypha are therefore historical foundations for the position that Owen adopts.

47. *Works*, 12:389.

48. Letter 60.6 in *NPNE*, 4:577.

49. *Hebrews*, 1:28.

In his *Theologoumena Pantodapa* (1661), we find an example of the way in which Owen can refer to the general thrust of patristic theology, showing the broad agreement of his theology with the past. In chapter 7 of book 1, Owen has been discussing the knowledge of God that may be acquired from the nature of mankind and the universe, and he has come now to consider the limitations of knowledge acquired in this way:

We have demonstrably proved that some kind of knowledge of God flourished amongst the heathen nations who were without the light of God's word. This knowledge flowed from that double spring of which we have spoken, namely from the natural internal light and from that revelation of God which has been made through his works. Josephus, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Theophilus of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Eusebius, Theodoret, Tertullian, Lactantius, Arnobius, Augustine, and others of the ancients have long ago made plain that the outcome corresponded to those sources of knowledge—they have done this from the testimonies of learned men written amongst the pagans and gathered together by them from all around.⁵⁰

Owen then goes on to refer to writers “of later ages” from Thomas Aquinas to Grotius who make the same point. He further lists a range of ancient pagan authors whose writings embody this basic knowledge of God.

Although Owen gives no specific reference, this is very much the theme of Athanasius's *contra Gentes*, which is recapped in *de Incarnatione*, chapters 11 and 12. For example, in *de Incarnatione*, chapter 12, Athanasius writes, “The grace of being in the image [that is, created in God's image] was sufficient for one to know God the Word and through him the Father. But because God knew the weakness of men he anticipated their negligence, so that if they failed to recognise God by themselves, through the works of creation they might be able to know the creator.”⁵¹

Owen's allusion to Athanasius here fits well with the ancient bishop's arguments concerning the knowledge of God at different times within the historical dispensations of God's dealings with mankind. The theological language and terminology have changed; where Owen speaks of an “internal light,” Athanasius tends to refer to human beings as endowed with grace by God in their natural state because they are made “according to the image”

50. *Works*, 17:78, present author's translation.

51. Robert W. Thomson, ed. and trans., *Athanasius, Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon 1971), ad loc.

of God. Yet the weight of support to prove the pedigree of Owen's theology is established.

There is one (but only one) egregious example of Owen misappropriating a quotation from Athanasius in a manner that may suggest consultation of some other source than a full text of the work cited.⁵² In the appendix to *Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), Owen sought to compile a brief list of testimonies from various ancient writers and councils to support his doctrine of limited atonement. Sixth in the list is this: "So also doth another of them make it manifest in what sense they use the word *all*. VI. ATHANASIUS of the incarnation of the Word of God:—Οὗτος ἐστὶν ἡ παντῶν ζωῆ, καὶ ὡς προβατὸν ὑπὲρ τῆς παντῶν σωτηρίας ἀντιψυχὸν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σῶμα εἰς θάνατον παραδούς—'He is the life of *all*, and as a sheep he delivered his body a price for the souls of *all*, that they might be saved.' *All* in both places can be none other but the elect."⁵³

The words here are from Athanasius's work *de Incarnatione*, chapter 37. The context of Athanasius's writing is a section of his treatise on the nature of Christ as God and man that is directed against the objections to Christianity by contemporary Jews. He is specifically demonstrating the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in comparison with Old Testament figures, with particular reference to the manner and purpose of His death. A longer quotation (with the section quoted by Owen given in italics) will show that Athanasius's use of the word *all* here clearly does not have the meaning that Owen attributes to it:

He was born in Judaea, and the Persians came to worship him. He it is who even before his bodily manifestation won victory over the opposing demons and trophies over idolatry. So all Gentiles everywhere, rejecting the customs of their fathers and the impiety of idols, are henceforth placing their hope in Christ and dedicating themselves to him, as one can see with one's own eyes. For at no other time did the impiety of the Egyptians cease, save when the Lord of all, as it were riding on a cloud, went down there in the body, destroyed the error of the idols, and brought all men to himself, and through himself to

52. Of the twenty-six references to Athanasius in Owen's *Works*, this is the only one that is clearly a misuse of Athanasius's meaning. Where Owen gives specific references to one of Athanasius's works, the vast majority are directly apt quotations. Footnote 26 above points to a confused reference in *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, and I discuss below a reference to the desert monk Antony in *Works*, 8:183 that elaborates an argument by implication rather than from the explicit words of Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*.

53. *Works*, 10:423.

the Father. He it is who was crucified, with as witnesses the sun and creation and those who inflicted death on him; by his death salvation was effected for all and all creation was saved. *He it is who is the life of all, and who like a sheep delivered his own body to death as a ransom for the salvation of all, even if the Jews do not believe.*⁵⁴

Athanasius is demonstrating, in response to Jewish denial, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as one whose death has saving significance for people of all nations within God's creation. Therefore, Athanasius's use of *all* in context appears to refer to the universal impact of the death of Christ for people of all nations.

It is notable that in this last example Owen is in breach of the idea that he alluded to in the preface to *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654),⁵⁵ that we cannot expect fully fledged statements of doctrine from writers whose focus was on other controversies and whose views on this topic had not been tried in the fires of debate. It is unhelpful to look in Athanasius for a clear statement on the extent of Christ's atonement as this was not, in his day, an issue under discussion in the terms of later centuries.

Second, Owen frequently summons patristic support in situations where he wishes to contradict an opponent and establish who has the better pedigree of argument. Here the deployment of patristic reference becomes a significant weapon in his polemic armory. Indeed, some of Owen's arguments are distinctly *ad hominem* in the context of the opponent with whom he is debating. He is seeking to defeat on their own ground opponents who give weight to the evidence of the Fathers.

In *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), as we have seen, Owen is dealing with Socinian teaching, which received learned backing from thinkers such as Grotius. Owen, with an academic audience in mind, finds powerful support on Christological issues from Athanasius and seems to relish demonstrating that the new teaching of his opponent is contrary to the testimony of the church over the ages, as well as being contrary to Scripture. In one instance, Owen argues against Grotius's view of Romans 9:5 by asserting not only that earlier writers disagree with his interpretation but that Grotius's view of the original Greek text is not supported by the quotations of the same text by Athanasius and others. In his discussion of John 20:28 and Romans 9:5, Owen states,

54. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, ad loc.

55. *Works*, 11:25.

The learned Grotius is pitifully entangled about the last two places urged by our catechists...but coming to expound that place [Romans 9:5], he finds that shift will not serve the turn, it being not any Christians calling him God that there is mentioned, but the blessed apostle plainly affirming that he is "God over all, blessed for ever;" and therefore, forgetting what he had said before, he falls upon a worse and more desperate evasion, affirming that the word $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ought not to be in the text, because Erasmus had observed that Cyprian and Hilary, citing this text did not name the word! And this he rests upon, although he knew that all original copies whatever, constantly, without any exception, do read it, and that Beza had manifested, against Erasmus, that Cyprian adver. Judaeos, lib. ii cap. vi., and Hilary ad Ps. xii., do both cite this place to prove that Christ is called God, though they do not express the text to the full; and it is known how Athanasius used it against the Arians, without any hesitation as to the corruption of the text.⁵⁶

Athanasius quotes Romans 9:5, for example, in his *First Oration against the Arians*.⁵⁷ He gives the verse as, "Of whom as concerning the flesh is Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever," thus showing no hesitation about the text. Athanasius sees the scriptural reference as one of many decisive statements (in the same paragraph, he cites John 1:1, Revelation 4:1, and Romans 1:20) of the eternal deity of God the Son, as would Owen.

In his *Animadversions* and *Vindication of Animadversions*, Owen found an opponent in Vincent Canes, a Franciscan defender of Roman Catholicism, which Owen was not alone in seeing as a resurgent challenge to the established Protestant church in Restoration England. Therefore, he is ready to challenge ideas such as papal infallibility and authority on the basis of historical arguments from the fourth century, and also to assert a lack of historical pedigree on such issues as the use of images in Christian worship.⁵⁸ Owen is in no doubt that, on these issues in combat with an advocate of the claims of the papacy, the weight of history is on his side of the argument.

In the opening chapter of *Animadversions*, Owen sets out some of the principles that Canes has advanced to argue for a return of England to the Church of Rome. Among these are ideas such as: "That we, in these nations,

56. *Works*, 12:307.

57. Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, 1:11, in *NPNF*, 4:312.

58. *Works*, 14:234, 14:384, 14:437, 14:478.

first received the Christian religion from Rome," and, "That whence and from whom we first received our religion, there and with them we ought to abide."⁵⁹ Such arguments naturally lead to an historical rebuttal; arguments that can show that Protestant doctrine and practice is in line with that of the early church Fathers will have strong *ad hominem* force against an opponent whose appeal is to the authority of historical precedence.

When discussing Canes's assertions concerning the infallibility of the pope, Owen brings forward various examples that he thinks demonstrate errors made by popes over the centuries. "What think you of Liberius? Did he not subscribe to *Arianism*? Sozomen tells you expressly that he did so, lib. Iv cap. 15; and so doth Athanasius, Epist. Ad Solitarios, giving the reason why he did so,—namely, out of fear; and so doth Jerome, both in Script. Ecclesiast. Fortunat. and in Euseb. Chron."⁶⁰

The Athanasian reference is to the *History of the Arians*, which is often given the extra title of *ad Monachos*. In this treatise (especially paragraphs 35 to 41) Athanasius details the various persecutions that he and other opponents of the Arians suffered and the involvement of Liberius, bishop of Rome from 352 to 366, in at first defending Athanasius and so suffering exile, but later subscribing to a statement provided by Athanasius's opponents:

But Liberius after he had been in banishment two years gave way, and from fear of death subscribed. Yet even this only shews their violent conduct, and the hatred of Liberius against the heresy, and his support of Athanasius so long as he was suffered to exercise a free choice. For that which men are forced by torture to contrary to their first judgment, ought not to be considered the willing deed of those who are in fear, but rather of their tormentors.⁶¹

Owen also alludes to the church historian Sozomen, who was writing in the fifth century: "Not long after these events, the emperor returned to Sirmium from Rome; on receiving a deputation from the Western bishops, he recalled Liberius from Beroea. Constantius urged him, in the presence of the deputies of the Eastern bishops, and of the other priests who were at the camp, to confess that the Son is not of the same substance as the Father.... Liberius [and others] were induced to assent to this document."⁶²

59. *Works*, 14:17ff.

60. *Works*, 14:234.

61. Athanasius, *History of the Arians*, 41, in *NPNF*, 4:284.

62. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4:15, trans. Chester D. Hartranft, *NPNF*, Second

It is notable that Athanasius, while acknowledging Liberius's lapse, is keen to demonstrate his sympathy for him and to affirm that he sees Liberius as in reality a lover of the truth. It would be hard to pick this up from the more aggressive tone of Owen's reference to the pope in the midst of his controversy with Canes. However, Owen's citations and argument would resonate with a readership concerned with the political and ecclesiastical issues involved in the restored Stuart monarchy's relationship with Roman Catholicism.

In his late work *Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, Owen is defending the practice of the non-conformist community against Edward Stillingfleet's opposition in his 1680 work *The Unreasonableness of Separation*. Taking on his opponent on his own academic ground, Owen refers to "those who pretend a reverence unto antiquity in those things wherein they suppose countenance to be given unto their interest."⁶³

In chapter 11 of that work, *Of conformity and communion in parochial assemblies*, Owen discusses the question of whether it is right to be in communion in a church where "great, notorious, provoking sins do abound among" those in attendance. In this context he refers to the evidence of "the discipline of the primitive churches" and states his view clearly: "Who knows not with what diligence they watched over the walkings and conversations of all that were admitted among them, and with what severity they animadverted on all that fell into scandalous sins?" Regarding early church practice, he gives a number of references and concludes, "If the example of the primitive churches had been esteemed of any value or authority in these things, much of our present differences would have been prevented."⁶⁴

One of his references is "*Athanas. Epist. Ad Solit.*," which here seems to mean the *Second Letter to the Monks*, where Athanasius writes,

Whereas there are certain who, while they affirm that they do not hold with Arius, yet compromise themselves and worship with his party; I have been compelled, at the instance of certain most sincere brethren, to write at once in order that keeping faithfully and without guile the pious faith which God's grace works in you, you may not give occasion of scandal to the brethren. For when any sees you, the faithful in

Series, Volume II, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York: Oxford and London: Christian Literature Company: Parker, 1886), 309.

63. *Works*, 15:353.

64. *Works*, 15:354.

Christ, associate and communicate with such people, certainly they will think it a matter of indifference and will fall into the mire of irreligion. Lest, then, this should happen, be pleased, beloved, to shun those who hold the impiety [of Arius], and moreover to avoid those who, while they pretend not to hold with Arius, yet worship with the impious.⁶⁵

As final examples, we should note that Owen's use of ancient witness extends to debates within the Puritan community, such as those on matters of church polity. On two occasions we find him preaching before the House of Commons at highly dramatic times in the life of the country—the end of the first civil war in 1646 and the day after Charles I's execution in 1649.⁶⁶ The tracts that he appends to the published sermons are designed to guide the political decision-making then afoot regarding ecclesiastical matters. In particular, Owen advocates a broad toleration of Reformed Protestant positions in regard to church government. He disapproves of the idea of the use of civil power unless it is necessary for the security and sound religion of the nation and would seem to be drawing a distinction between the magistrate's just intervention with things, such as banning false forms of worship, and the unjust interference with the lives and liberty of persons.⁶⁷ Such ideas could well be seen, in the context of recent English and European history from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, to be a departure from the precedents to which his audiences are accustomed, and in this matter Owen found himself separated from other Puritan thinkers, including many Presbyterians.

Owen published *A Discourse on Toleration* alongside his sermon *Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection* (1649), preached after the execution of Charles I. Owen argues that the church does not need civil intervention to protect the truth. "For three hundred years the church had no assistance from any magistrate against heretics; and yet in all that space there was not one long-lived or far-spreading heresy, in comparison to those that followed. As the disease is spiritual, so was the remedy that in those days was applied; and the Lord Jesus Christ made it effectual."⁶⁸

65. Letter 53, in *NPNF*, 4:564.

66. *Works*, 8:5–69, 8:129–206. References to Athanasius are at 8:65, 8:66, and 8:183.

67. See John Coffey, "John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy, 1646–59," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2012), 227–248.

68. *Works*, 8:183.

He quotes from Polycarp, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian to show that, while they denounced heretics sharply and believed in excommunication, they never mention corporal action against heretics. He comes then to give this as an example: "Antonius the hermit leaves testimony when he was dying 'that he never had peaceable conference with them all his days,' Vita Anton. inter Oper. Athan. Surely had these men perceived the mind of God for their bodily punishment, they would not have failed to signify their minds therein; but truly their expressions hold out rather quite the contrary."⁶⁹

It is not clear that Owen is quoting exactly from Athanasius's *Life of Antony* here, but the reference may be to paragraph 91. This is toward the end of the *Life of Antony* where Athanasius is quoting from Antony's final advice from his deathbed to monks who lived with him in the desert: "Have no fellowship with the schismatics, nor any dealings at all with the heretical Arians. For you know how I shunned them on account of their hostility to Christ, and the strange doctrines of their heresy."⁷⁰

In the *Life of Antony*, the hermit is shown at times speaking against Arians and others (for example in paragraph 69), but more generally his whole manner of life was as an ascetic seeking solitude. While neither Antony nor Athanasius explicitly make Owen's point about not using the civil power to punish heresy, Antony's example and advice can support the view that false teaching is countered by preaching and by non-communion. Here, it is the historical example rather than the explicit formulation of a point of view that Owen finds as the support for his proposals to Parliament and for regulating church affairs. As the Puritan leadership stood on the brink of shaping the church polity of the nation, Owen points to the course that he believes that the precedent of key figures in the early history of Christianity would map out for them.

Conclusion

Our starting point for understanding John Owen's theology is always to recognize his underlying commitment to the unique authority of Scripture. However, we have seen that Owen recognizes the use of a wide range of legitimate means at the disposal of a theologian in the work of defending and explaining the positions adopted. To this end, the deployment of patristic writings can elucidate and support the expression of theology. He

69. *Works*, 8:183.

70. *Life of Antony*, 91, in *NPNF*, 4:220.

is aware of the dangers involved in using the Fathers, both in terms of their own variety and perceived inaccuracies of expression and doctrine, and in regard to the inappropriateness for some readers of deploying academic material of this kind. In using a display of the learning of his day (usually with apt citations, but with at least one notable misappropriation), Owen earns himself a hearing with academic audiences as he shows that his theology has an historical pedigree stretching back to the early centuries of the church. Furthermore, this learning yields a significant polemic impact when Owen is able to turn the tools of his opponents against them. In debates where his adversaries—whether Roman Catholic, members of the established Church of England, or fellow Puritans—give particular recognition to the testimony of the Fathers, Owen is confident that he is able to show that the weight of history is on the side of the truth that he is committed to defending.