Christians in Asia before 1500

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NEMBN	Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale et autres bibliothèques
NPNF	A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OCP	Orientalia Christiana Periodica
OLA	Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta
PETSE	Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile
RhWAW.G	Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Düsseldorf. – Vorträge G, Geisteswissenschaften
RM	Die Religionen der Menschheit
SGKAO	Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions
SPAW	Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften
StOR	Studies in Oriental Religions
TP	T'oung Pao
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie
UAJb	Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher
VigChr	Vigiliae Christianae
WHS	Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society
ZAS	Zentralasiatische Studien
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft
ZKG	Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte
ZMR	Zeitschrift für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft
ZRGG	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte

Chapter 1

Introduction

'Christians in Asia *before* 1500!?' This is likely to be the response of most people in the countries long occupied and more recently settled by Europeans. Such a response is not limited to those who have at best a marginal interest in the history of Christianity. It will be found also among many devout Christians and even among those who have undergone some systematic theological education. In part this response has its roots in ignorance – and that is forgivable to a degree. Less open to forgiveness are the various 'imperialisms' which undergird that ignorance. These are of three major types – political, intellectual and Scriptural.

The age of 'Western' imperialism, in terms of colonial empires, has almost passed, whatever may be said about it having been succeeded by forms of economic and ideological colonialism. The vestiges of 'Western' political colonialism to be found in such places as the South Pacific are under close scrutiny by the world community. But the ways of thinking built up over 400 years, since the Portuguese and Spanish began to build such empires in Africa, Asia and the Americas, have not passed out of currency among Europeans and their descendants elsewhere.

There remains ingrained within the consciousness and subconsciousness of such peoples a sense of superiority in things political, moral and technological. As Christianity has been intertwined with European history for well over 1600 years it is not unnatural, although it may be illogical, to extend that sense of primacy for things European to the area of Christianity also. It is assumed that Christianity is as 'Western' in its origins and its normative expressions as is 'Coca-Cola', regardless of where in the world it is found today.

There exists also in the minds of 'Westerners' a form of intellectual imperialism. It is rooted in the dramatic achievements of ancient Graeco-Roman civilization, and in the development of 'Western' scholarship since the Renaissance (14th–16th centuries) and the Enlightenment (17th–18th centuries). There is much here to explain the assumption of the superiority, as well as the distinctiveness of 'Western' intellectual processes and achievements. The legacies of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), René

Descartes (1596–1650), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and Albert Einstein (1879–1955) have included also, for Westerners today, an assumption that their ways of arriving at the truth of a matter are the only valid ways. Businessmen who enter negotiations with the Japanese or Chinese have learned to modify any such assumptions they bring to trade negotiations, if they are to attain their commercial objectives. Western scholars have not yet shown the same readiness to accept the possibility that there may be ways to the truth other than those to which they are accustomed. There is still much to be learned from such a book as that of Hajime Nakamura, entitled *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, first published by East West Center Press in 1964.

Not to be prepared to learn and not uncritically to understand, is to cut oneself off from alternative, and by no means inappropriate ways of arriving at valid conclusions. And it is to subject such Asian peoples to a form of imperialism no less arrogantly presumptuous than was that of the Conquistadors.

If a number of these assumptions lie deep, and are but rarely if ever recognized by 'Westerners' and those who have absorbed such 'Western' attitudes, there is another imperialism that has a particular effect on Christians from such lands. It is not only that, on the whole, they have tended to focus attention on the development of Latin Christianity, in both its Catholic and Protestant expressions, in their awareness of church history. This has been tragic enough in that it has resulted in their being largely ignorant of the great tradition represented by Eastern Orthodoxy, and those age-old Churches which developed outside the boundaries of the ancient Roman Empire.

It goes deeper than that, for it is grounded in, and given normalcy by, the very shape of the New Testament. The list of books accepted as authoritative and which make up the New Testament today (i.e. the canon) was determined in the West over a number of centuries. While the gospels and much of the Acts of the Apostles concern people and events in Palestine, Egypt and Syria and have one reference to Arabia, the bulk of the epistles and the Revelation of St. John are applied primarily to areas west of the 'Middle East' (itself a European convention, as an Australian knows full well, for he must regard the so-called 'Middle East' as the 'Middle North-West', and the 'Far East' as the 'Middle and Far North'). That, and the primacies of the Bishops of Rome in the Latin 'West' and of the Bishops of Constantinople in the Greek 'East', have conspired to give to 'Western' presumptions something of the sanctity of Holy Writ itself. Nothing in the New Testament readings, heard Sunday by Sunday for centuries, has spurred Western Christians to think further east than the River Jordan and the Gadarene area of the Decapolis in their environing of Christianity in the first few centuries of this era.

Of course, when pressed, such Christians will admit quite readily that their religion had its beginnings in Asia among Asians, and this despite the fact that some artists in the West have depicted Jesus as if he were of Nordic origins. They may even admit that Christianity has its roots in Asia as much as does Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism – not to mention Judaism. Not one of the great world religions had its origin in Europe – whatever the influence of European thought and categories etc. upon them. This very fact, in a somewhat paradoxical fashion may help to explain why Westerners want to think that Christianity is in some way 'European' – a sort of religious gamesmanship not unrelated to the desire to have an apostle as the founder of your particular Church.

Linked to the above 'imperialisms' is a consequence of them and the historical development of those forms of Christianity with which Westerners are familiar. There can be no doubt that contemporary expressions of Christianity, Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox, show not only traces of the religion's roots in Judaism but also the strong influence of Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and neo-Platonic thought – and one might add Manichaeism also in the case of that great formative thinker, Augustine of Hippo (d. AD 430). Prime examples of such influences, familiar to all, are the widespread belief of many Christians in the 'immortality of the soul', a belief most commonly associated with Plato, which stands in contrast to the Christian doctrine of the 'resurrection of the body'; the extolling of Stoic virtues as if, per se, they were Christian; the tendency to regard 'ignorance' as a sin more dangerous than 'wilful autonomy'; and the denigration of the 'material world' and the exaltation of 'things spiritual'. Amongst those of the Catholic and Protestant traditions there is evident also the influence of the Roman legal cast of mind. Perhaps this is most obvious in such phenomena as the belief that every 'mystery' of the faith can be and should be defined, even those of the 'how' of the Eucharist, and the ways in which God's grace and human response are related to each other. It appears also in those theories of the atonement which are dependent on the work of Anselm of Canterbury (d. AD 1109) with the consequent difficulty experienced in relating such legalistic theories to the essential 'union symbolism' of the two great sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

That all this has led to a form of syncretism, to varying degrees, in Latin and Greek Christianity is as undeniable as it is inevitable. What is unjustifiable is the conviction held by many from those same traditions that, while their forms of syncretism are not only permissible but also divinely approved, the syncretisms of others put the 'faith once delivered to the saints' in jeopardy. This attitude set at nought the valiant attempts of Matteo Ricci S.J. (d. AD 1610) in China and of Roberto di Nobili S.J. (d. AD 1656) in South India, to provide expressions of Christianity less dependent on the Graeco-Roman heritage and more attuned to those of

Confucianism and of Hinduism respectively. Such efforts were condemned by the Vatican and discontinued at its insistent direction, until greater wisdom prevailed in the latter half of this century.

The fear of non-European syncretism, thus implanted, has been for generations an unwarranted hindrance to the development of valid expressions of Christianity in Asia and elsewhere, expressions which relate more closely to the cultures involved. While it may be superficially comforting for the Western visitor to find Protestants in Japan worshipping and theologizing in ways distinctively European and North American, it is at depth disturbing. Western attitudes and demands have combined with local fears of wandering back into old attitudes from which they have been delivered, to make it difficult to be both authentically Christian and authentically Japanese – a problem with which Japanese Christians are by no means unfamiliar.

Last, in this catalogue of Western 'failures' is the heritage of text-books and teachers who have encouraged generations of children to believe that Vasco da Gama (d. AD 1524) 'discovered' India in 1498. That he found a new way to India via the Cape of Good Hope, and had the help of an Indian pilot for the last leg from the east coast of Africa tends to be glossed over. That India was long known in and traded with by ancient Europe, and that it had a succession of visitors from Europe who wrote of their experiences there up until several decades before da Gama's arrival in 1498 is either unknown or ignored. Yet who has not heard of Marco Polo (d. AD 1324) at least? Such facts have been obscured as thoroughly as has knowledge of the epic Chinese voyages to Africa, and possibly to Australia, in the 14th century. The European sense of supremacy is made uncomfortable by such facts.

No less discomforting is the 'news' that Christianity had reached and been founded in China within a generation of the death of Augustine of Canterbury in AD 604. It seems hard for many to credit that missionaries were on their way east to China at the same time as Augustine was travelling north-west from Rome, passing a number of Irish-founded monasteries, on his way to England; – and all of this some 120 years before Boniface began the evangelisation of Germany. Likewise it is 'news' to most that the first country to adopt Christianity on a national basis was Armenia, about a decade before the religion was granted toleration in the Roman Empire, and almost eighty years before it was established as the official religion of that Empire. As a final straw there may come the shattering revelation that Christians in South India have a long-held claim to the foundation of their Church by the Apostle Thomas, a claim virtually as old and as strong as that of Rome to St. Peter and far better substantiated than those of Scotland and Russia to St. Andrew.

Perhaps the strangeness of all this is best captured by the following passage from D. F. Lach and C. Flaumenhaft, a description which applies

strictly not to the arrival of the first Portuguese fleet under da Gama, but to that of the second fleet in 1500 under Pedro Cabral (d. AD 1526). Nevertheless, its impact and 'the turning on the head' of our usual presuppositions are salutary:

> 'How would Portugal and Europe have reacted in 1498 if they had been "discovered" by Asians? Suppose several strange ships manned by odd-looking foreigners had dropped anchor at Lisbon, and, after a friendly reception by the King, had suddenly bombarded some ships in Lisbon harbour before sailing off with a trio of hostages to some unknown destination.'[1]

Numbers of Western and Asian scholars have been aware for generations that such presumptions as those outlined here are invalid despite the breadth of their currency. Detailed studies of the history, growth and decline, literature and art of Christians across Asia before 1500, have appeared in both scholarly journals and in books which have had limited circulations. The most complete treatment, together with a survey of literature, is to be found in P. Kawerau, *Ostkirchengeschichte*, I: *Das Christentum in Asien und Afrika bis zum Auftreten der Portugiesen im Indischen Ozean*, Louvain 1983 (CSCO.Sub 70). Readers are referred also to a work published in the final stage af the preparation of this volume, viz. S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500*, San Francisco 1992. The authors of this volume are convinced that the time has long since come when Christians outside Asia were made aware of the long history and achievements of those of their faith in that continent before the arrival of da Gama. Equally they are convinced that Christians in Asia today should be aware and proud of the heritage that is theirs, and so be able to cast off once and for all, any necessity to be regarded as 'younger Churches' – a title which carried with it echoes of the paternalism of the 'West'.

But what is meant by 'Asia' in this context? For our purposes it is that land mass and the islands off shore, to the east of the coastline of modern Israel, Lebanon and Syria, and the eastern shores of the Black Sea, to Japan; and south of the 60° N parallel of latitude to include modern Indonesia. The major areas which will concern us will be ancient and medieval Syria and Arabia, Armenia, Georgia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Mongolia and China; with some reference to Tibet, South-East Asia, Indonesia and Japan. Within this are to be found today the world's two most populous nations and by far most of the world's Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. For all that, it is an area all too easily by-passed by Europeans and North Americans in their apprehensions of the world.

It is our hope that this survey will increase awareness among Christians at least, and promote greater understanding.

FURTHER READING

Nakamura, H.: *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples. India, China, Tibet, Japan*, Honolulu 1964 – To read the Introduction would provide useful insights on its own.
Lach, D. F. & Flaumenhaft, C. (eds.): *Asia on the Eve of Europe's Expansion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1965.
Panikkar, K. M.: *Asia and Western Dominance*, 5th impr., London 1959.
Lach, D. F.: *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., Chicago 1971.

Chapter 2

Apostolic Times and Apostolic Traditions

If you were to walk down the Strand in London, leaving Trafalgar Square behind you, until you reached the famed 'oranges and lemons' church of St. Clement's Dane you would have passed Somerset House on your right and be within a few paces of St. Catherine's House. If then you proceeded to Chancery Lane you would find the census records room in the Public Records Office. In any one of these places, the census records office, St. Catherine's House or Somerset House, you will encounter on any week day, dozens of people intent on a quest. In the census records office they stare at the screens of microfilm readers, in a room filled with rows of these machines. At St. Catherine's House they will be poring over large volumes listing births, deaths and marriages. In Somerset House they will be searching for and examining wills and other legal documents related to the estates of those long dead.

You will hear, also, a babel of accents and the ages of the researchers will range from those in the late teens to those of advanced years. There will be cries of exaltation and groans of despair. Some will leave with an air of pleasure and achievement; others will wear looks of frustration and disappointment. All of them are about the task of unearthing their 'roots', by tracing ancestors – *if* they can find them in the records.

Such an interest has increased among many in the West in recent years and genealogy is a growth area, as publishers can testify. Yet it is not something entirely new, for knowing a family tree has been of significance to many, in so far as it applies not only to humans, but also to such as horses, cats and dogs, for example. Nor is it a matter of common concern only for colleges of heralds or family or clan societies in Europe, North America and elsewhere. In a society as different from these as was that of the Pacific Islanders, being able to recite accurately the names of one's ancestors for a large number of generations was commonplace, and this long before that society had committed its languages to writing. The same could be said for non-literate societies elsewhere.

While this activity remains important for a range of people from royalty to greyhound breeders, it has had, also, a deep significance for the

Church. For centuries lists have been kept of the names of bishops of dioceses and of ministers of parishes. If these lists have about them, in earliest times, more of an air of hopeful imagination than of hard fact, this seems to cause little concern despite the fact that much hangs on such succession lists. While on one hand the Roman claim to primacy in the Church rests on the contention that the Bishop of Rome is the successor today of Simon Peter, the chief apostle, others go back one step further and claim to be in 'succession from Christ'. So the secular genealogists have parallels in the ecclesiastical realm.

One of the boons for those who research their own family is that they may find that they have one or more distinguished ancestors. Human nature is such that it finds it as difficult to keep such a distinction quiet as it finds it easy to forget an ancestor whose life or death was one of shame. (The luminosity of the distinguished one is usually enough to put several of the shady ones well into the shadow of oblivion.)

So it should not be difficult for us to understand that an early congregation of Christians revelled in the fact, if it was such, that it had an apostle as the founder of its community. It was on a par with being one of the congregations like Philippi, Thessalonica, Rome, and even Corinth, who had received letters directly from St. Paul. The next best thing was to come from an area like Galatia, or, if such specificity failed, to surround an epistle with no stated address with the tradition that it was directed to the 'Ephesians'. On the other hand there was little to provide comfort if you were one of six out of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 1–3 – as was Ephesus itself (see Revelation 2:1–7).

Of course your cup would be full to overflowing if you had more than one apostle associated with your Church and an apostolic letter directed to you as well – as was the case with Rome. That would allow you to take in your stride the claim of Antioch to Peter as its founder before he ever went to Rome and its claim also to associations with St. Paul. There is no apostolic letter addressed to the Church of Jesus Christ at Antioch, and not one of the apostles is reported to have died there. Jerusalem of course was a special case, but after Jewish revolts it virtually ceased to exist, being replaced by the Roman colony of Aelia, until its fortunes were revived by the interest of Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, early in the 4th century. By that time other claims to primacy had been staked and registered, if not always universally accepted.

The matter of apostolic succession assumed greater significance, both ecclesiastical and political, among those cities which had claims to leadership in the ancient world. The Church in Antioch and that in Rome could each point to St. Peter as its founder. The Alexandrian Church had to be content to claim Mark, an evangelist and close confidant of St. Peter, if only an erstwhile one of St. Paul (Acts 15:37–41). A new necessity arose when in AD 330 Constantine set up a new capital for the Roman Empire

on the site of the ancient town of Byzantium. It was to be 'New' or 'Second' Rome, or, as it was more widely known, Constantinople.

For perfectly understandable reasons old Rome and its bishops were suspicious of this new capital and the ambitions of its bishops. Attempts were made by the rulings of ecumenical councils to bolster the claims of the Bishops of Constantinople to virtual parity with the Bishops of Rome – not that the latter would ever accept and promulgate such rulings in the areas under their direct jurisdiction. While Rome may refuse to accept and so ignore the canons which sought to give Constantinople virtual parity with it, it was not possible to ignore the claim to apostolic foundation of 'New Rome' by St. Andrew, anymore than it would resile from its claim to foundation by St. Peter. (Although Andrew never had the status accorded to his brother, Peter, his membership with James and John and Peter of the inner circle of disciples notwithstanding.)

This case illustrates the power of necessity, as this was understood at the time. Of course it continued to make its impact later and elsewhere, as we find with both the Scots and the Russians claiming associations with the same St. Andrew, the English with St. George of Asia Minor, and the French attempt in the 9th century to associate its patron saint, Denis, with the reputedly apostolic Dionysius (or Denis) the Areopagite. As the last case shows, if the cold hard facts of history were in short supply, much of any deficiency could be made up with a little imagination. The odd vision or two and the writings of later enthusiasts, not unwilling to embroider existing legends or to add one or two of their own – all with the best of intentions of course did the rest. One of the results of such activity was that some apostles seem to have been as omnipresent as was George Washington, to judge from the number of places in which he is supposed to have slept in the United States.

Most of us are well aware of the journeys of St. *Paul* outlined as they are in the Acts of the Apostles. Scripture leaves him in Rome, where tradition has it that, with St. *Peter*, he was executed by Nero in AD 64. The details of Peter's journeys are not as clear, but obviously he covered much of Palestine and Syria, visited Galatia, and by tradition was in Rome. *James*, one of the sons of Zebedee, died a martyr in Jerusalem, although some traditions would have us believe that he preached in Spain, prior to his death. *John*, his brother, spent his later years in Ephesus, and died there, once again according to later tradition, while *Andrew* is said to have preached in Greece and to have been martyred there. (At least that gave some regional association with Constantinople.) It is reported that *Matthew* preached and died in Ethiopia, although some traditions locate his ministry and death in Persia. *Philip* is reputed to have preached in Phrygia and to have died at Herapolis, near Laodicea and Colossae in Asia Minor while nothing is known of the ministries of *James the Less* or of *Matthias* (who replaced Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve, in Acts 1:15–26).

Apart from the rather remote possibility that Matthew had some associations with Persia, none of the above apostles of whom scripture and tradition records anything, ministered in the Asia which concerns us – apart i.e. from Syria itself.

But we are left with four apostles for whom we have not accounted. The two most shadowy of these are *Jude* (or *Thaddeus*) and *Simon the Zealot.* They are linked together in a number of ancient traditions. Simon is said to have first gone to Egypt and Jude to Mesopotamia, but together they are reported to have ministered in Edessa and in Persia. Some accounts say that they were martyred at Sufian in Persia while others point to Edessa as the place of death. Their deaths are remembered on the same day in the calendar within the Roman Catholic Church. At least with these two apostles we have traditions which point strongly to Mesopotamia and to Persia.

Points further east are associated with both the remaining apostles, Bartholomew (or Nathanael) and Thomas. *Bartholomew* is associated in tradition with a number of countries in Asia, most notably with Armenia where he is said to have been flayed alive at Derbend on the Caspian Sea. But there is too an earlier tradition, reported by the 4th century bishop-historian Eusebius of Caesarea and echoed by Jerome, that Bartholomew ministered also in India. To that possibility we shall have to return.

Thomas was reputedly the most travelled of all the apostles for not only are there traditional associations with Edessa, where reputedly his relics were interred until transferred to the West, but also with Parthia, according to the report of Eusebius of Caesarea. However, another tradition linking him both to Edessa and to India and even to China, begins with the so-called *Acts of Thomas,* seen by some as a Gnostic document dating from the 3rd century. Certainly by the 4th century there is a strong tradition that he ministered to both North-West and South India, and that he was martyred at Mylapore near present day Madras. A 7th century source brings much of this traditional material together, but locates the place of death in India at Calamine. While Western scholarship has serious reservations about the substance of these Indian claims, they are not only accepted but are defended fiercely by Christians in South India to this day. To this matter we have to return also in subsequent pages.

We have just referred to the questioning attitude of Western scholarship towards many of these traditional claims. Given the modern canons of historiography which are accepted and used throughout the world today, and given also the lack of contemporary documentary, epigraphical and archaeological evidence to confirm in detail the traditional claims about the apostles, such scholarly doubts are both understandable and defensible. However, they may carry no more ultimate disturbance of those who cling to these ancient traditions than could the doubts and

questions of the Pharisees the convictions of the man born blind but given his sight by Jesus in John 9. Apostolic convictions seem not to be open to demolition by such scholarly scepticism. This raises the interesting question as to which has the greater long term importance – clearly established historical veracity or an ongoing enlivening tradition which has given and continues to give purpose, dignity and significance to the lives of thousands? The authors of this book belong to a scholarly tradition which would incline them to stress historical veracity – but they are aware also of that dynamic inherent in the traditions with which we have been dealing. It may be that for overlong we in the West have given overmuch importance to the conviction that in uncovering the origins of something we reveal also the heart of its significance. Perhaps the ongoing and ever changing influence of a belief outweighs the importance of its origins. This is a tension we will carry with us as we turn to explore the particular areas of Asia and the lives of early Christians there.

FURTHER READING

Consult articles about the 'apostles' in religious encyclopedias such as Cross, F. L. & Livingstone, E. A. (eds.): *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* 2nd ed., London 1974, or any dictionary of the saints and Browning, R.: *The Twelve Apostles,* New York 1974.

'The Acts of Thomas' is available in any edition of the New Testament Apocrypha, e.g. that of M. R. James, Oxford 1924, or E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, vol. 2, London 1965.

Note also the comments on historicity's limits by Williams, H. A.: *Some Day I'll Find You. An Autobiography,* London 1984, pp. 367–371.

Chapter 3

A Necessary Excursus into Theology

This work cannot unfold without reference to the various 'Christianities' which bear such titles as 'Catholic' or 'Orthodox', 'Nestorian', and 'Monophysite' or 'Jacobite'. Then too we have that self-declared form of purified and enlightened Christianity known as '*Manichaeism*' as well as the widely-held understanding of the world and of human existence called '*Gnosticism*'. While it may not be necessary to spell out the details of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Muslim beliefs, it is important that we grasp the essentials of the forms of Christianity or quasi-Christianity which we shall meet. This we will attempt to do as painlessly and clearly as possible.

The earliest Christians faced the problem of holding together the monotheism they inherited from Judaism, the revelation they had in Jesus of Nazareth, and the continuing experience of the presence, guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. On one hand there was a necessary and fundamental stress on the oneness of God. On the other hand an inescapable emphasis on the threeness involved in that revelation.

Various proposals were advanced to overcome this dilemma in the first three centuries of the Christian era, but, on the whole they fell into two classes. Some ascribed the fulness of divinity to God the Father alone, and lesser qualities of divinity to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. This approach was called 'subordinationism' or 'dynamic monarchianism', the latter name referring to the fact that the full power (Greek: *dynamis*) of God was reserved to the one ruler-monarch – God the Father. Foremost among proponents of this approach was Paul of Samosata, who was, until deposed in the mid-third century, Bishop of Antioch, a centre which has importance for our later concerns.

The other class of proposals argued that the one God revealed himself in three distinct forms or 'modes', and from the last term this was called 'modalistic monarchianism'. At no one time was God to be thought of as simultaneously being Father, Son and Spirit under this approach, which was seen to preserve the fulness of the divinity of both the Son and the Spirit. The leading proponent of this view was Sabellius, in the opening

decades of the 3rd century. After gaining early support it was rejected vehemently as being false to the data of revelation.

Matters came to a head early in the 4th century with the subordinationist views of Arius of Alexandria (d. AD 336). The first ecumenical council of the Church, planned initially for Ancyra (Ankara) and eventually held at *Nicea in AD 325* had to add this issue to its agenda. The creeds, referred to as 'ecumenical' were drafted originally in the Greek language and adopted in their Greek forms. Translations into Latin and Syriac, e.g., would work their own subtle changes on the original text, as of course would later translations into English, German, French etc. The resultant Creed of Nicea came out against the Arian view that the Son of God was to be numbered with the creatures, albeit the 'first-born', and described him as 'of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made'. There was no doubt from this about the full divinity of the Son. Nor was there doubt about his essential humanity, for the creed declared also that he 'was incarnate and was made man'.

The Creed of Nicea did not receive whole-hearted support from most in the Greek East at first, because of suspicions that it was tainted with Sabellianism, and also because of the political wheeling and dealing of the followers of Arius, who included, eventually, several of the emperors. However, by the time of the second ecumenical council at *Constantinople in AD 381*, the declarations of Nicea had taken root. Later generations regarded that second council as having expanded the document from Nicea to deal equally with the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He had rated a mere mention in AD 325, but thereafter was described as 'the Lord, and Giver of Life . . . who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified'. This creed also set out to exclude the late 4th century heresy of Apollinarius of Laodicea (d. ca. AD 390), who had held that in Jesus Christ we are met by one with a fully divine soul/mind and a human body (see also p. 40). In the eyes of his critics this left the human soul outside the redemption wrought by the Christ. Despite it having been an early attempt to avoid sundering the divine and the human in Jesus Christ, the view was condemned.

Indeed note must be taken of the fact that the key concern in all these debates was to ensure the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. As was said, in criticism of Apollinarius' view, 'a half human Saviour is only useful for a half-fallen humanity' – and – 'what he did not take he did not redeem'. Whatever the form of words used the ability of Jesus Christ to redeem was tied to the fulness of his divinity, and our involvement in redemption tied to the fulness of his humanity.

The expansion of the creed of Nicea, traced to Constantinople (AD 381) is what is known today as the '*Nicene Creed*'.

So by AD 381 the vast majority of Christians within the Roman Empire, and some outside its boundaries (like those in Persia and India – but not

the Goths who remained committed to Arianism) had accepted the declaration that the Son of God, who took flesh in Jesus the Christ, was truly God, and that the incarnate one was also truly man.

This set up the agenda for the next debate as the Nicene declaration required you to ascribe simultaneously to the one logical subject, Jesus Christ, two natures, one divine and the other human.[1] But this broke the current assumptions of logic in that it was required that for any one logical subject there could be only one nature. This would indicate that if you began with two natures, one divine and the other human, you would need two logical subjects, one for each nature – the Christ for the divine nature and Jesus of Nazareth for the human nature. Alternatively, if you began with Jesus Christ as the one logical subject, logically you could have but one nature. In less precise language something of the same approach could be expressed if you were to affirm that in the incarnate one there was to be found one logical subject '*out of*' two 'natures' rather than '*in*' two 'natures'.

The debate raged for some 70 years before there was an official, but not universally accepted, resolution of it. The controversy was shot through with personal and regional rivalries, not least that between the two great cities of Antioch and Alexandria. The discussions were complicated by the fact that while Antioch's presuppositions were Aristotelian, historical and exegetical, those of Alexandria were Platonic, philosophical and theological, not that such distinctions would have been clearly recognized at the time. With such differences in presuppositions it was inevitable that one would misunderstand the statements of the other, given the political fact that each was anxious to put the other in the worst possible light.

A number of paradoxes resulted. A leader of the Antiochene school, Nestorius (d. AD 451), was dethroned from his bishopric of Constantinople by the third ecumenical council at *Ephesus in AD 431* for supposedly holding to a two nature/two subject view of Christ, a view which was given the name of 'Nestorianism'. (However, it is almost certain that he did not hold to such a view himself.) On the other hand, the views of his main antagonist, Cyril of Alexandria (d. AD 444), were seen as providing the basis for a one subject/one nature view, although again it is more than doubtful that he himself was a 'mono-physite'. Such facts did not prevent the ensuing Nestorian and Monophysite schools from claiming to be following respectively the 'blessed Nestorius' or the 'blessed Cyril'.

Most of this debate was centered in the Greek speaking, eastern half of the Empire, as was most theological formulation for the first five centuries. But by AD 449, as the Alexandrians continued to pursue their Antiochene rivals, the Bishop of Rome, Leo I (d. ca. AD 461), entered the lists with his *Tome*, a theological statement which gave due weight to the two natures without departing from the affirmation of but one logical subject. Such a view triumphed at the fourth ecumenical council at *Chalcedon in AD 451*,

and was expressed in the 'Chalcedonian formula'. This not only re-affirmed what had been said previously (up to Ephesus AD 431) but declared that Jesus Christ was to be acknowledged in two natures, without the natures being fused together or undergoing change into one nature and without them being separated or divided between two logical subjects, i.e. it denied both the so-called Monophysite and Nestorian positions. The council drove home the point by declaring that:

> 'The distinction of the natures, being by no means taken away by the union (in the one subject), but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one subject and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two subjects.'

The council had made a declaration which violated common logical assumptions, but, as it saw it, was faithful to the data of the revelation. And it was this declaration which was regarded as the test of orthodoxy by both Rome and Constantinople. But Chalcedon was paradoxical in that while it praised Cyril of Alexandria it denounced the one-nature Christology which many saw as essential to his position; and while it condemned Nestorius it espoused a two-nature Christology.

For reasons to do with differing theologies, but also with national and cultural antipathies to the Graeco-Roman establishment, two major dissident groups emerged. The vast majority of those who had admired Nestorius and his predecessors at the Antioch school, Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. AD 394) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. AD 428), moved out of Syria into Mesopotamia and Persia. They propounded the views ascribed to Nestorius and were called '*Nestorians*' by their adversaries. By the end of the 5th century they had come to dominate the Church in Persia and became thereafter the great missionaries of their form of Christianity across Asia.

In the Egyptian and Syrian countrysides the viewpoint ascribed to Cyril of Alexandria became known as *Monophysitism*. Spreading south from Egypt into Ethiopia and to points east of Syria in Persia where it competed with Nestorianism for the hearts of the inhabitants, it remained a thorn in the side of the imperial authorities. Fruitlessly they tried both persecution and compromise to overcome such dissidence in one sensitive area on the border with Persia and in the other which was one of the main granaries of the Empire. The Monophysites of Syria and points east took the name of *Jacobites*, from Jacob Baradai (d. AD 578), one of their chief leaders and organizers. Those in Egypt were known in the main, as *Copts* and their form of Church and theology as *Coptic*, this latter name coming from the Greek word for an Egyptian. While the two groups of Monophysites had much in common, they were not without schisms between them from time to time.

Each of the three parties, Orthodox-Catholic-Chalcedonian; Nestorian; and Monophysite-Jacobite-Coptic, accused the others of heresy, despite

the undoubted fact that all three held with enthusiasm to the 'Nicene Creed'. The affirmations of this creed were to be found in widespread areas of Asia, including a 7th–8th-century Sogdian Nestorian version from Central Asia. Similarly there is a Chinese version of the 'Gloria Patri' which comes from 7th–10th century Tunhuang on the eastern end of the famous 'Silk Road' and it too reflects faithfully the form used in the West.

Throughout we should remember that, with the Nestorians (and the Monophysites) rejecting Chalcedon's formulation, we would not expect to see reflections of it in any of their creeds. One might as well try to measure metre distances with an imperial measure ruler! As they all held to the 'Nicene Creed' that is the measure to be used. Indeed is there any Nestorian Creed which spells out an alternative to Chalcedon in explicit terms? Another parallel would be that one will be disappointed if looking for the canon of Chalcedon which raises Constantinople to virtual parity with Rome in any Latin version of the canons authorised by the papacy.

However, the names of the key leaders in their respective traditions were included in liturgies, and traditional opponents were denounced vigorously. In this way, at least, if not in continuing debate among all Church members, the issues were perpetuated. But we may be forgiven for wondering what such references meant to devout worshippers within decades of the schisms, apart from symbols of identification. This the Portuguese discovered when they encountered the Thomas Christians on the Malabar coast of South India in the 16th century.

Christianity, of whatever form did not have a monopoly in the area of offers of eternal salvation, in what was very much a buyers' market. Across Asia Christianity was in competition with ancient faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and occasionally Judaism, each with its distinctive understanding of the ultimate(s) and each with its own way to peace in this world and in any hereafter. In due time it was also to meet the challenge of Islam, the creed which in the end, largely by force of arms under Timur the Lame (d. AD 1405), obliterated it in those areas of Asia in which it was once at its strongest.

However, two other competitors shared not a little with Christianity at least in terminology, but ante-dated Islam. Consequently these two offered challenges of particular power, both inside and outside the Roman Empire.

Gnosticism was the older of these two rivals and there is much debate among scholars as to the time and place of its origins, but Jewish and Jewish-Christian roots are by no means excluded. Certainly the forms considered most dangerous by Christians post-dated the 1st century AD and reached their peaks of influence in the 2nd century. Gnosticism was an eclectic understanding of existence which combined Persian, Egyptian, Stoic, Platonic and Pythagorean emphases with some drawn from Christianity. It included a dualism of spirit and matter, with the former

exalted and the latter decried. One consequence of this was the claim by the Gnostics that Jesus only seemed to be human – a view called 'Docetism' from the Greek word 'to seem'. Salvation from this world and its woes, and the recovery of one's temporarily lost divinity was available through secret knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*). This *gnosis* was only available to initiates, and such initiates were a select band, for not all humans were considered as suitable for salvation or capable or receiving the secret *gnosis*. So to be a Gnostic was to be one of the elite who possessed secrets of eternal value, and to be one who, after passing through a number of stages each with its secret password, would finally reach union with the ultimate. In the overtly Christian forms of this system Jesus has a key role as the divine revealer of the secret *gnosis* but his essential humanity and death on the cross are denied.

Sharing in the spiritual and docetic emphasis of Gnosticism, but not in its cosmological speculation and highly allegorical exegesis was *Marcion* (d. ca. AD 165). The son of a bishop from Asia Minor he saw himself as a reformer, using his understandings of St. Paul to counter growing legalism in 2nd century Christianity. Concern with the problem of evil led him to a dualistic view, in which the Jewish god and the Old Testament itself were regarded as evil. He put forward his own list of authoritative New Testament books, purged of the influence of Judaism. He was a genuine ascetic, and gathered around himself a counter-Church which persisted for some 500 years.

With a willingness even more explicitly to claim to be 'Christianity' in its most refined form, was *Manichaeism*. This movement had as its founder, Mani or Manes, who was born in Babylonia in AD 216. Eventually he died in chains, at the insistence of the Zoroastrian priesthood in AD 277, following a period of some support from the Persian King, Shapur I. Coming out of a Jewish-Christian sect, Mani stressed the sort of dualism of spirit and matter to be found among Gnostics and denied in Christianity, and saw in his own life parallels to that of Jesus. His followers tended to regard him as the promised Holy Spirit, or if they came from a Buddhist background, as Maitreya, the promised Buddha of the future. Avowedly syncretistic his aim was to bring together the valid insights of Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and the former prophets, and with his followers, to liberate the divine light which is imprisoned in matter.

No religion was as adept as this one at adapting itself and its vocabulary to the peoples it met from North-West Africa to China. It used art, fables, parables, hymnody, folklore and science as well as magic and astrology – all with great skill – to present its answers to the problems of existence. Like Gnosticism it had about it an air of elitism in its leadership, but was more open than its predecessor to membership by the masses. It also resembled Gnosticism in its attitude to Jesus whom it honoured as the great healer of mankind, but not as fully human nor as the one who

suffered and died. Interested foremost in the divine message more than in the historical life of Jesus, Mani saw him as 'the Splendour', and the divine light bearer, in whose teaching is to be found redeeming wisdom and knowledge. Yet like Christianity, Manichaeism took sin with great seriousness for to sin against the divine light was to blaspheme. The possibility of external damnation was ever present at every level of the Manichaean community. Persecuted out of overt existence within the Roman Empire, it persisted in Asia, not least in Central Asia, where it was at its peak of influence from the 8th to the 13th centuries, and in South-East China up until the 16th century, when it too suffered eclipse at the hands of the Timurids in Central Asia and at the hands of the Confucians in South China.

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