

JESUS WARS

How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors
Decided What Christians Would Believe
for the Next 1,500 Years

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(The following excerpt consists of the final segment of Chapter 2,
“The War of Two Natures,” as published on pages 62 through 73.)

Slogans and Stereotypes

The debates that raged over Christ’s nature involved highly technical distinctions. Surely ordinary believers, men and women in the street or the village, did not really appreciate the subtle differences between *ousia* and *hypostasis* or what such terminology implied for the shape of the church? Did the mobs baying for or against the Monophysite or Nestorian causes have the slightest idea of the theologies at stake? Some writers suggest they might have. In the 380s St. Gregory of Nyssa was appalled by the spread of theological discourse to every Constantinople shopkeeper:

Every part of the city is filled with such talk; the alleys, the crossroads, the squares, the avenues. It comes from those who sell clothes, moneychangers, grocers. If you ask a money changer what the exchange rate is, he will reply with a dissertation on the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you enquire about the quality and the price of bread, the baker will reply: “The Father is greatest and the Son subject to him.” When you ask at the baths whether the water is ready, the manager will declare that “the Son came forth from nothing.”

Popular enthusiasm was just as obvious in the mid-fifth century, although the substance of debate would have moved on from the Trinity to Christology.

People knew the slogans, but did they really understand them? Actually, an excellent case can be made that such distinctions were beyond the reach not just of ordinary believers but of many church leaders. And understanding how they responded to debate offers some depressing lessons about the character of religious argument in other faith traditions and in other historical periods, including our own.

Historian Ramsay MacMullen rightly says that the theological texts of the time are often marked by “complicated thought, strange vocabulary, drawn out proofs, the multiplication of provisos and conditions.” To take an example almost at random, this passage is from the third letter of Cyril of Alexandria to Nestorius, a critical document in the controversy leading up to the First Council of Ephesus:

Besides what the Gospels say our Savior said of himself, we do not divide between two *hypostases* or persons. For neither is he, the one and only Christ, to be thought of as double, although of two (*ek duo*) and they diverse, yet he has joined them in an indivisible union, just as everyone knows a man is not double although made up of soul and body, but is one of both. ... Therefore all the words which are read in the Gospels are to be applied to One Person, to One hypostasis of the Word Incarnate.

This is dense stuff in translation, and it accurately conveys the convoluted structure of the Greek. That is anything but an extreme example of its kind. Such texts became a verbal minefield for contemporaries, who had to be desperately careful not to confound words with very similar meanings. Cities fell apart in violent conflicts over a single letter: was Christ of the same being with the Father, or of like being, homoousios or homoiousios? Was he from two natures (*ek duo*), or in two (*en duo*)?

Such language is seriously off-putting for most modern readers, including many educated Christians. And it uses so many technical terms that almost seem to the uninitiated like secret codes. Person? Subsistence? Nature? A critic could be forgiven for comparing the straightforward words of Jesus, with all the everyday analogies and images — sheep and harvests, the sparrows and the lilies of the field, the erring brother and the widow’s penny — to the arcane philosophical language used here. Jesus spoke of love; his church spoke in riddles. I may not be the only modern reader who hears the language of Chalcedon —

two but not one — and finds his thoughts occasionally straying to the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. A monk offers instructions for the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch, in a deliberate parody of the Athanasian Creed:

First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin, then shalt thou count to three, no more, no less. Three shalt be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three. Four shalt thou not count, nor either count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out.

Now, the fact that ancient christological ideas are complex does not mean that the authors were dealing in empty verbiage. Theologians at the time were trying to explore and express difficult and daring ideas as precisely as possible, avoiding possible ambiguity, and the results could be brilliantly concise and effective. But the writings were often inaccessible to lesser minds than Cyril's, which meant most of his contemporaries.

Worse, words shifted their meanings quite rapidly over time. A modern reader might feel abashed at not understanding a term as *hypostasis*, which was so readily thrown around in the fifth-century debates; but a hundred years earlier, even that weighty word had nothing of the same significance that it did in Cyril's time. In the religious struggles of the 320s, some informed scholars used the word *ousia* (being) interchangeably with *hypostasis*. By the 420s, such a confusion could at a minimum provoke fistfights between clergy and conceivably could attract an official persecution, at least in some parts of the world: the Latin West was much less sensitive to these nuances. St. Augustine himself claimed to see no real distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*.

As the theological debate continued, participants created and reinterpreted words for new purposes, to the utter confusion of the uninitiated. To use a modern parallel, Christian theological language was developing rather like cultural theory and postmodern literary criticism have in the last few decades, with the constant invention of puzzling new words like *othering* and *in-betweenness*, *phallocratic* and *scopophilic*. Bemused observers readily mock such PoMo-speak, especially when scholars invent or reshape words for their own idiosyncratic purposes; but that is close to what some of the greatest church fathers were doing in the christological debates.

Just as nonspecialists find such modern terms baffling, so many of those drawn into the religious wars of the fifth century had at best a shaky grip on the issues involved. That is worth stressing, as we might otherwise assume that Christians of this era operated at a stratospheric intellectual or philosophical level many leagues above what later generations

might achieve. We need not be so pessimistic. Some of the fifth-century participants were authentically brilliant, and they boldly pursued the implications of their insights for church life and doctrine. Yet some of the best known champions on the various sides often found themselves out of their depth. Even friendly critics suggested that Nestorius himself had very little idea of the theological swamp he was entering when he first became engaged in christological controversy, and his later writings make it clear that he simply was not a “Nestorian” in the sense in which that term emerged. A far greater intellectual figure was Pope Leo the Great, whose Tome made him the primary shaper of Chalcedonian thought. Yet modern scholarship suggests that at the time of Chalcedon he was confused about what Nestorius had actually argued and that only some years afterward did he really grasp what the different sides were contending.

If the bishops of Rome and Constantinople could go so wrong, what hope was there for ordinary clerics, and still less for humble believers? How could they judge the merits of the arguments put forward? Neither did such conflicts have any necessary ending in that all would ultimately agree that the church had arrived at a definitively correct answer. Theology is not and never has been a science in the sense that it forms testable hypotheses. Ancient audiences would have disagreed radically with that statement, as they believed that theological orientation had practical consequences for state and society. A state that practiced an incorrect form of Christianity would be punished in the form of invasions, plague, or famine. But if we do not accept that providential view, we really have no way of knowing which theological approach was closer to expressing and understanding the divine reality.

So if they did not understand the issues, how did people decide which side to support, which cause to see as God’s? Issues of identity and culture played a major role. Egyptians (for instance) followed the kind of religious approach that was familiar and customary in their church, which found a face in successive patriarchs of Alexandria. Rather than thinking through the implications of the theology, they followed personalities and names; they were of Cyril’s party, or Dioscuros’s. Theological ideas were commonly presented in packages epitomized by simple phrases or slogans, and arguments revolved around such buzzwords. We will not divide Christ! God the Word died! Mary is the *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer! Christ is God! That, probably, was the level at which the baker and the money changer carried on their debates.

In the most literal sense, too, participants also operated in highly theatrical ways. Although Christians despised and feared drama and theater, they lived in a society thoroughly accustomed to the styles and conventions of the theater, which shaped their behavior. Bishops appealed to crowds through dramatic oratory, and supporters applauded or booed according to their sympathies. Significantly, the two great religious factions, the Blues and the Greens, traced their origins to rival theatrical cliques as well as circus fans. Church debates became a matter of dueling slogans, phrases shouted at councils and synods, or recited antiphonally in a precursor of modern rap, in order to drown out opponents. The church's battles continued through slogan, symbol, and stereotype rather than through any kind of convincing intellectual discourse.

But if they did not fully understand the theology they believed, Christians knew passionately the kinds of religious thought that they loathed. They knew what they were against. Much of the debate at the time consisted of identifying sets of theological ideas and giving them the name of some unpopular leader, so that believers could unite against a despised and demonized ism. And once something was an ism, it presumably represented that person's twisted and peculiar view of church teaching, rather than the pure serene of authentic Christianity. Whatever he actually preached, Nestorius became the central figure in Nestorianism, a theological trend that supposedly divided Christ's natures. Once this stereotype was established, it could be used to taint any theological approach with which the speaker disagreed.

Theological debate became a game of guilty by association. Reading the denunciations of the time, we need to remember that each faction tended to caricature and exaggerate the positions of its enemies. After Chalcedon had issued its diplomatic and elaborately considered analysis of the divinity, some critics returned to their Palestinian homeland with the alarming news that the Nestorians had triumphed, so that now believers would be required to worship two Christs and two Sons. Furious listeners launched a bloody revolt against the triumph of the Two Nature heresy, Dyophysitism. On the other side of the conflict, Christians knew that Apollinarius had taught the single nature in Christ, so that any later belief that erred too far in the direction of stressing the One Nature must be Apollinarian, however significant the distinctions with that older creed. The commonest reason to denounce doctrine X was that it could somehow be linked to doctrine Y.

Understanding the war of isms also helps us trace the course of theological development through these centuries, as each great movement emerged as a reaction, and commonly an overreaction, to some earlier trend that had found itself dismissed as heresy. In the fourth

century, the Arian movement preached a less than fully divine Christ, driving Apollinarius to stress Christ's absolute unity with the Father. Reacting against that idea led Nestorius to teach a separation of the natures. And angry rejection of Nestorius encouraged the belief in the dominance of one divine nature of Christ, a belief that others denounced as the Monophysite heresy. In each case, advocates were reacting as much to the stereotype of the enemy movement prevailing at the time rather than to any rational analysis of its teachings.

It would be cheering to think that all these struggling contraries culminated in a harmonious and balanced synthesis that we know as orthodoxy, which Chalcedon declared to the world. But Chalcedon itself became for millions of Christians a nightmare stereotype in its own right, a symbol of the enforcement of false and anti-Christian teaching by an evil secular regime.

Appendix to Chapter Two: Some Early Interpretations of Christ

During the first centuries of Christianity, various thinkers tried to explain the role of Christ and the relationship between his human and divine natures. Some leaned toward a One Nature approach, emphasizing his divinity. Others stressed that his humanity existed alongside his divinity: this view can be categorized as a Two Nature approach. Some key movements and thinkers included:

- Adoptionists* A Two Nature approach that saw Christ as a man filled with the spirit of God, but that divinity descended on him only at a moment during or after his earthly lifetime. Human and divine natures existed separately.
- Apollinarius* A fourth-century bishop, Apollinarius stressed Christ's divinity so absolutely that he denied the presence of any rational human soul in Christ. In his view, Christ had a single nature, and it was divine. The First Council of Constantinople (381) condemned his views as heretical.
- Arians* Arians denied the full equality of God the Son with the Father and thus denied the Trinity.
- Basilides* Gnostic Christian thinker of the second century, active in Egypt. He taught a complex mythology, in which Christ came to liberate the forces of light from the material realm of ignorance and evil. Christ was the Mind (*nous*) of God, who descended upon Jesus at his baptism.
- Cerinthus* Gnostic Christian thinker (c.100) who argued that the spiritual being of Christ descended on the man Jesus during his baptism in the Jordan; this was an early (and radical) form of Two Nature Christology.
- Chalcedonian* The position that became the orthodoxy of the mainstream church after the Council of Chalcedon (451). This approach holds that Two Natures are united in the one person of Christ, without confusion, change, division, or separation. Christ exists in two Natures.
- Docetists* Early belief that Christ represented only an illusory shape taken by a purely divine being: he had no real human nature. Christ's sufferings on the cross were illusory.

<i>Ebionites</i>	Early Jewish-Christian movement following Christ as a human being, the son of Joseph and Mary; although he was the Messiah, he had no divine nature.
<i>Eutyches</i>	A Monophysite thinker active in the 440s, Eutyches saw Christ as a fusion of divine and human elements, but critics believed he left little room for Christ's human identity.
<i>Gnostics</i>	Gnostics saw Christ as a divine being come to redeem believers from the evil and contaminated material world. Christ's true identity or nature was always divine, and while on earth, he occupied a supernatural body quite distinct from humanity.
<i>Manicheans</i>	Originating in the third century, this movement became an independent world religion. Its founder, Mani, taught an absolute and eternal war between forces of light and darkness. Christ was a liberator come to redeem the elements of light trapped in the material world. He was thus a purely supernatural or divine being and any human or material elements must be illusory. This view overlaps closely with <i>Gnostic</i> and <i>Docetic</i> ideas.
<i>Marcion</i>	(c. 85–160). Important early Christian thinker who argued for a radical distinction between the flawed God of the Old Testament and the true God of the New. Jesus Christ was the Son and representative of this greater God, who sent him to save the world from the old spiritual regime. Marcion was condemned for heresy.
<i>Melkites</i>	Originally an insulting term for those followers of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy who lived in regions dominated by Monophysites. As they followed the religion of the king or emperor, they were called “King's Men.”
<i>Miaphysites</i>	A form of One Nature Christology associated particularly with Cyril of Alexandria and his successors. In this view, the incarnate Christ has one Nature, although that is made up of both a divine and a human Nature and still comprises all the features of both. Christ is <i>from</i> two Natures.
<i>Modalists</i>	See Sabellius.

- Monophysites* Believers in One Nature Christology. The term is often used generically to cover other less extreme approaches, including Miaphysitism.
- Monotheletes* In the seventh century, the Roman Empire tried to overcome the long war between One and Two Nature approaches to Christ. Instead, the empire and church leaders argued that Christ had a single Will. Critics called this view the Monothelete (One Will) heresy, and it was eventually condemned as such.
- Nestorians* Nestorius was accused of teaching that two Natures coexist within Christ but in a conjunction that falls short of a true union. Mary was thus the Mother of Christ, but could not be called Mother of God. Later scholarship tends to see Nestorius as much closer to mainstream orthodoxy than this description would suggest and not therefore a “Nestorian.”
- Paul of Samosata* A third-century bishop of Antioch, Paul believed that the man Jesus became divine at the time of his baptism. This was condemned as a form of Two Nature heresy or Adoptionism.
- Sabellius* Sabellius taught in Rome in the early third century. He believed that Christ had a human body but was identical to God in his nature: he had no real human nature. In this view, Father, Son, and Spirit are not persons, but modes of one divine being. Christ was one with the Father to the extent that it was the Father who suffered on the cross. This was an extreme form of One Nature belief.
- Valentinus* A second-century Egyptian thinker, Valentinus taught a classic form of Gnostic Christology in which the divine Christ came to redeem the evil world, but he had no true human nature, and his body was always supernatural rather than truly human.
- Word/Flesh Christology* Theologians believed that God’s Word, the *Logos*, became flesh (*Sarx*), so the *Logos* was the principle guiding Christ’s flesh or body. This *Logos/Sarx* approach tended to see Christ as a representative of humanity rather than, necessarily, a fully developed individual in his own right.
- Word/Man Christology* In this *Logos/Anthropos* approach, God’s Word, the *Logos*, became human in the form of the man (*Anthropos*) Jesus Christ. Christ was not just a generic representative of humanity, but a fully individual human being.