

Pages 1 through 37 of *JESUS WARS: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* by Philip Jenkins. New York: HarperOne, 2010.

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The Heart of the Matter

May those who divide Christ be divided with the sword, may they be hewn in pieces, may they be burned alive!

Second Council of Ephesus, 449

In 449, the leading Fathers of the Christian church met in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, to debate pressing theological issues. At a critical moment, a band of monks and soldiers took control of the meeting hall, forcing bishops to sign a blank paper on which the winning side later filled in its own favored statement. The document targeted the patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, one of the three or four greatest clerics in the Christian world. Yelling “Slaughter him!” a mob of monks attacked Flavian, beating him so badly that he died a few days later. So outrageous was the intimidation that the ultimate winners in the conflict invalidated this whole council. They repudiated it as a *Latrocinium* — loosely, a Gangster Synod.

From later history, we know of many episodes when Christians would resort to violence, especially against members of other faiths, but in this instance, the different sides agreed on so much. Both factions accepted the same Scriptures and the same view of the church and the hierarchy, and both agreed that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Where they disagreed so violently was over the nature of Christ. Flavian’s enemies, and their monkish militia, believed that Christ existed in a single nature in which the divine dominated. They felt that by failing to proclaim this truth, by advocating a Christ in Two Natures, Flavian’s party had betrayed the core of Christianity. Literally, they thought, Flavian had divided Christ.

From a modern point of view, we are baffled to see such extraordinary violence unleashed over what might appear to be a trivial philosophical row. Surely, we might think, these debates involved overfine distinctions quite as trivial as the proverbial disputes over the number of angels who could sit on the head of a pin. Just what could have caused such bitter hatred? In fact, the conflict involves a paradox that is quite central to the Christian faith. Christians must believe that God is wholly human and wholly divine, but it is easy for a believer to stray too far in one direction or the other. Either we might think of Christ purely as God, in which case he is no longer human, has no share in our human experience, and becomes a divinity in the sky like Zeus or Thor; or else, in contrast, we focus so much on his humanity that we underplay the divine element and deny the Incarnation. We would preach a Christ of two natures and two minds, literally a schizophrenic being. According to his enemies — unfairly and inaccurately — that was Flavian's sin, and brutal violence was the only appropriate response to his gross insult to the Son of God.

The violence was unforgivable, and so were all the acts of persecution and forced conformity. But in one sense, ancient Christians were exactly right to be so passionate about their causes, if not the means by which they pursued them. Far from being philosophical niceties, the central themes in the religious debates really were critical to the definition of Christianity and to the ways in which the faith would develop over the coming centuries. The Christ controversies did, and do, have immense consequences, for culture and politics as much as for religion.

Jesus Wars

In the early centuries of Christianity, very strong forces were pulling Christ Godward and heavenward. Across the religious spectrum, early prophets and founders usually are exalted over time. In his last words, the Buddha commanded his followers to rely on no external savior, but within centuries, Buddha had himself become a divine transworldly being whose worldly relics were cherished and all but worshipped in their own right. Within Christianity, too, the persistent temptation has always been to make Christ a divine figure free of any human element. Whenever Christianity has been a confident faith that dominated empires, believers have commonly imagined a fearsome heavenly judge or cosmic ruler, the *pantokrator* or All-Ruler who glared down from the dome of a mighty basilica and whose human status was hard to accept.

In more recent times, fictional portrayals of a too-human Christ ignite furious responses from those reluctant to imagine a figure too involved in worldly concerns. In the 1980s, the image of a Jesus married with a family stirred worldwide cries of blasphemy against the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. So many bristled at any suggestion that the founder of the faith might have experienced any human passions or weaknesses, any doubts or qualms about his mission. Human sexuality apparently represents a stain that can in no way be associated with a purely divine being. Christ moves among humanity like a divine tourist.

And yet, through the centuries, other Christians have fought to preserve the human face of Jesus, placing him firmly on earthly soil and in human society. Partly, the idea arises from the common human need for an accessible divinity, a figure who shares our experience and can hear our prayers. Even the societies that pushed so far from human reach created a substitute in the form of the loving Mary, virgin and mother. But the concept of a human Jesus is vividly present in the New Testament. Believers have never forgotten the image of the Galilean who suffered physical agony, new doubt and temptation, who was the brother and exemplar of suffering humans. They knew that Jesus wept.

Over the last two thousand years, Christians have repeatedly struggled to resolve this perpetual tension between Christologies above and from below, yet never was the debate more central to Christianity than during the councils of the fifth century. For some decades it seemed almost inevitable that the church might all but abandon its belief in the human nature of Christ and describe him overwhelmingly as a divine being.

The main outline of the story is quickly told. Underlying all the intellectual debates were profound rivalries between the church's patriarchates, with Alexandria on the one hand and Antioch on the other, and with Constantinople as the primary battlefield. Antioch stressed the reality of Christ's human nature; Alexandria fought any statement that would separate human and divine. During 420s, the monk Nestorius brought his Antiochene teachings with him when he was appointed archbishop of Constantinople, and disaster followed. At the First Council of Ephesus in 431, Nestorius was condemned for teaching a doctrine of Two Natures, of separating the divine and human. (See appendix to this chapter: The Church's General Councils.)

Once Nestorius was crushed, believers in One Nature pushed ever harder to establish their teachings, supported by the juggernaut power of the patriarchs of Alexandria. In 449, the One Nature party managed an effective coup at the Second Council of Ephesus — the Gangster Synod — proclaiming their own doctrine and all but breaking links with the

papacy in Rome. Over the next two the Orthodox/Catholic made a dazzling comeback. They organized around one text above all, the letter of Pope Leo that ne known as the Tome. Their political resurrection culminated in the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which accepted the Tome as the definitive guide to Christology. Very gradually — over the next century or so — Chalcedon became the touchstone of imperial orthodoxy.

Some decades after the council, a writer in the Latin West summarized Chalcedon’s conclusions in a series of theological propositions, with an unnerving conclusion. After listing Chalcedon’s edicts in agonizing detail, the so-called Athanasian Creed (which actually had nothing to do with the venerated saint Athanasius) proclaims that “This is the catholic faith, which, except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.” Quite literally, your eternal salvation depends on holding a precisely correct faith, which meant the definition laid down in 451. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1 **THE ATHANASIAN CREED**

Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.

God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.

Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.

Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.

Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God.

One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;

... This is the catholic faith, which, except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

SOURCE: J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

Between them, First Ephesus and Chalcedon shaped Christian theology right up to the present day, teaching that no complete vision of Christ could omit either the divine or human aspects. Christ did not just come *from* two natures; he existed *in* two natures. As Pope Leo wrote, it was clearly human to be hungry and thirsty, to be weary, and to sleep; but Christ was just as evidently divine when he fed the five thousand, walked on the water, and ordered the storm to cease. The human Jesus mourned his friend Lazarus; the divine Christ spoke words that raised that same friend from the dead. Leo concluded, “For His manhood, which is less than the Father, comes from our side: His Godhead, which is equal to the Father, comes from the Father.” We are so used to the triumph of Chalcedon that the phrasing of the Tome seems like a straightforward and even anodyne expression of Christian belief. Yet for all its apparent striving to be fair and balanced, the Tome met fierce opposition throughout the oldest centers of Christian faith.

What If God Was One of Us?

The battle of the Natures shapes one’s fundamental views of the world. Someone who thinks of Christ as wholly divine is hard-pressed to see any goodness in the material world and tends to set a wholly good spiritual world against a totally depraved material creation. In contrast, those who believe in a human Christ are more likely to accept the potential goodness of the material world. Although (they hold) that world may now be plunged into sin, then at least it can be redeemed. Belief in the Incarnation leads to a sacramental vision. For Leo, denying the Two Natures led to even worse theological errors: “their blindness leads them into such an abyss that they have no sure footing in the reality either of the Lord’s Passion or His Resurrection. Both are discredited in the Savior, if our fleshly nature is not believed in Him.” Material acts redeemed a material world.

Ultimately, the fifth-century controversies focused on the issue of atonement, and without that idea, Christianity would have developed quite differently. Christian believers have long argued over the meaning of Christ’s death, but whatever their disagreements, most churches preach that Christ shared humanity, and that fact allowed him to redeem humanity through his sacrificial death. In order for redemptive doctrine to make any sense, Christ would have to be fully human, in the sense of having a body made of flesh, but also of having a human will and mind. As church father Gregory Nazianzus wrote, “If anyone has put his trust in Christ as a Man without a human mind, *he* is really bereft of mind, and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which Christ has not assumed, He has not healed.”

Yet this association with humanity was precisely what troubled the believers in One Nature. Unless Christ were fully divine, they argued, his death could not save us. Christ, moreover, had come to offer not just salvation, but deification, which remains a potent idea in some Eastern churches, including the Orthodox. As the great Alexandrian bishop Athanasius declared in the fourth century, the Son of God became man so that we might become God, and only a truly divine Christ could offer his followers that divinity. That was a heady promise.

The quality of Christ's humanity also affected the ethical lessons that believers took from his life and suffering. At one extreme, a one Nature believer like Apollinarius presented Christ as a kind of automaton controlled by a Logos from above, so that he could not in any real sense face temptation: he could not wrestle with moral dilemmas or overcome the seductions of evil. *Of course*, implies Apollinarius, God can withstand temptation and resist sin, but what good is that to us? If Apollinarius was right, we can respond only by worshipping the divine superhero who came to rescue us from the dark forces holding the world in bondage. But authentic Two Nature adherents, like the third-century Christian Paul of Samosata, had a very different message. They taught that the man Jesus became Christ when the Spirit of God descended on him, so that the purity and sanctity of his life was a major factor in letting him become divine. Paul taught that ordinary believers could and must emulate Jesus.

This ethical component was strongly marked in theologians of the school of Antioch, who would be on the front lines of the Jesus Wars. Although they rejected any crude ideas of the separation of the natures, they fought to retain the notion of a human will in Christ. In their view, Christ actively resisted temptations and did good until he atoned for sin both through his death and by the example of his good works. By so doing, he showed ordinary people the way of salvation and offered the potential for human nature to be raised to the level of the divine. To use the title of one of the most famous Christian texts ever written, the *Imitation of Christ* is not just possible but demanded. When modern liberal theologians protest that the exalted divine image of Jesus places his ethical teachings beyond attainable reach, they are reviving one of the oldest debates in Christendom.

Theology apart, the debates had powerful outcomes for what we term the real world — although theologians of the time would undoubtedly have argued that such a title could only be applied to the heavenly realm and not this transient life. The memory of a human Jesus has throughout Western history repeatedly driven men and women to imitate him,

through social activism and political reform, not to mention the mystical quest and the arts. In recent times, liberation theologies have portrayed a Jesus who so utterly empties himself of his divine privileges and honor that he walks the earth as one of the very poorest and most marginalized. He is at once an exemplar for the poor and their leader in struggles for justice. As Charles Sheldon famously argued in his 1897 novel of sweeping urban reform, *In His Steps*, Christians must always ask, "What would Jesus do?" Of course, myriad blunders in the history of the churches prove they have not always asked that question, or produced an appropriate answer. But at least the aspiration never died.

To raise another ethical issue, how do we know how much weight to attach to the words of Christ recorded in the New Testament? Just who do we hear speaking? Assume for the sake of argument that the scriptural text accurately records Jesus' sayings, which, of course, it may not always do. When Jesus tells a parable or utters a pronouncement, do those words come directly and literally from the mind of God, or are they the thoughts of an individual bound by the constraints of his time and place? To take a specific example, if Jesus really was speaking with divine authority, then believers need to take very seriously the radical division that he proclaims between light and darkness, together with a literal belief in the devil and demons. To assert Christ's humanity is not to undervalue or ignore his teachings, but it must make later believers think more carefully about the authority those words carry and how they can be applied to modern circumstances.

Christ the divine, or Christ as divine-and-human? The best way of understanding the two approaches is to think what each side thought it would lose if its opponents triumphed. For each, the central idea of the faith was the title Emmanuel, *God with us*. Each in its way feared any theology that would impair human access to the fullness of the divine, but each viewed the solution in quite different ways. For Antiochenes, a One Nature creed that made Christ thoroughly divine uprooted him from humanity and removed him from any sense of human identification. Such a statement also raised the monstrous absurdity of God the Creator suffering and dying, of being "passible," in theological terms. One Nature believers, in contrast, wanted to guarantee the intimate solidarity linking God to humanity. This linkage must be a total union, rather than just a action or association. They feared weakening the image of Christ so that he became anything less than a manifestation of God within us. Aspiring to the same goal, the two sides chose very different roads.

Living Christ

In other ways, too, preserving the human aspects of Christ prevented the divine withdrawing to an alien and unimaginable supernatural realm. If Christ was the human Jesus, he was born in a specific time and place and was a Jew. Even Leo, who so despised Jews and Judaism, stressed that Jesus was absolutely rooted in his Hebrew ancestry and in the world of the Old Testament. The genealogies quoted in the Gospels, those long lists of begats that send modern readers to sleep, decisively proclaimed Christ's human status. Chalcedon wrecks any attempt to de-Judaize Jesus.

Each side, likewise, offered a different way of reading the Bible. Alexandrians worked from a Greek philosophical tradition and used scriptural text to illustrate their conclusions. Every word and line of the Bible became an allegory bearing a spiritual truth, which might or might not have any connection with actual historical events in first-century Palestine. Nestorius, in contrast, had his roots in Antioch, which read the scriptural text in terms of historical events, to be expounded and commented upon. When you read the Gospels that way, it is hard to avoid the idea of a human Christ, the man who wept. The definitions of Chalcedon reasserted the real rather than symbolic nature of biblical truth.

Just as central to the story is the struggle to preserve the feminine face of the divine. Driving much of the fifth-century controversy is the astonishing rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary and the boast that she was literally Mother of God. Pagans mocked these claims to create a new goddess, but many Christians, too, were offended. Some thought that the concept of Mother of God was absurd — as Nestorius asked, shockingly, was God really present in the world as a two-month-old infant? — while others rejected any attempt to undercut the deity of Christ at any stage of his earthly life. On this point at least, One Nature believers agreed wholeheartedly with the Orthodox/Catholic church, and Marian devotions flourished. Egyptians especially had a potent devotion to the Mother of God, who is the subject of a magnificent tradition in early art, and the Coptic Monophysite church has had a long love affair with Mary.

Stressing the human Jesus also permitted the development and growth of Christian visual art, and thereby of much of Western culture. We easily forget just what an extraordinary phenomenon this visual tradition was. Monotheistic religions are often deeply suspicious of visual art, whether of sacred figures or of the human form as such. Partly, this reflects a fear of idolatry, but it also shows reluctance even to attempt to reproduce holy forms. Although that restraint is not universal — at various times in history, both devout Muslims and Jews

happily painted human beings — it is widespread. Christianity could certainly have followed a similar path, and various movements through the centuries have practiced iconoclasm, the smashing of images. Yet Christian visual art survived, with the overwhelmingly rich depictions of Christ's humanity, all the images of the child with his mother, of the teacher, and of the crucified victim.

Losing Half the World

The way these councils are remembered tells us a great deal about how Christian history is written and, by extension, the history of other great causes or movements. We often hear the complaint that winners write history, but the situation is in fact worse than that. In practice, historians write retroactively from the point of view of those who would win at some later point, even if that victory was nowhere in sight at the time they are describing. That is certainly what happens when we identify Chalcedon as the final triumph of orthodoxy.

Accounts of early Christianity make the year 451 a decisive break, a vital transition from the ancient origins of the faith to its medieval millennium. But such an account ignores the century or so after Chalcedon when that particular school of thought might easily have been reversed. Between 451 and the 540s, Chalcedonians and their enemies rose and fell in their power at the Roman court, and there were periods of several decades when Monophysites controlled not just the empire but most of the main bishoprics and patriarchates. Focusing on 451 misses the long centuries after Chalcedon had secured recognition as the empire's official creed, but when in many lands — in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine — Chalcedonians were at best a suspect minority. Debates over the nature(s) of Christ were still vividly active in 650 or 800. And in much of the world, those battles ended in crushing victory for Chalcedon's foes. The result wasn't even close.

Despite the theological slogans of the time, Christ was not divided; but the Christian world certainly was, irreparably. Now, Christian divisions as such were not new. At least since the apostles left Jerusalem, at no point in Christian history has one single church plausibly claimed the loyalty of all believers to the exclusion of rival institutions. In the mid-fourth century, perhaps half of all Christians belonged to some group that the Great Church regarded as heretical or schismatic, and new splits continued to form. Viewed historically, a denominationally divided world is not an exceptional circumstance for Christians, but the conventional norm. Dilemmas of interchurch conflict and cooperation go back literally to the foundation of the faith.

But post-Chalcedonian splits were on an unprecedented scale. Sustained resistance to official doctrine spawned two vast and enduring movements that the winning party would call heretical, respectively the Nestorians and Monophysites, and each has left remnants up to the present day. In terms of historical tradition and continuity, those churches have a far better claim to a connection with the ancient sources of the faith — in terms of geography, culture, and language, not to mention ethnicity — than do the upstart communities headquartered in Rome and Constantinople. Within a century or so after Chalcedon, the Christian world fragmented into several great transcontinental divisions — Orthodox/Catholic, Monophysite, Nestorian, and Arian. Although each church agreed fully with its neighbors in essentials, each declared itself to be the one and only true church and did not acknowledge the credentials of other bodies or share communion with them. Already by 550, Christendom was quite as divided as it would be during the great early-modern split between Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox.

Back to the Catacombs

The history of these dissident Eastern churches makes us rethink what we assume about the political trajectory of Christianity. According to a familiar cliché, Christianity changed utterly after it made its great alliance with the Roman Empire under Constantine, the devil's bargain in which the church sacrificed principles for earthly power and wealth. But in fact, Chalcedon forced the historic mainstream core of the church to forsake that Roman alliance, and it rapidly reverted to the antistate opposition that is perhaps the natural state of Christianity. After the twin shocks of 431 and 451, much of the most advanced and sophisticated Christian thought and culture in the East went underground politically.

Egypt illustrates this story. Alexandria — and the realm of Egypt beyond it had an excellent claim to a dominant role in Christian life and thought, as the source of much of the faith's intellectual strength and growth. It would be quite feasible to write an Egypt-centered history of the first five or six hundred years of Christianity. Christians there lived under a hostile state apparatus from apostolic times until the grant of toleration in the fourth century, and they shared state power from 312 until the 450s. But the Monophysite majority coexisted peacefully with Roman regimes only sporadically over the next century or so, and imperial Christian forces often persecuted them. Those Christians who followed Chalcedon were slightly dismissed as Melkites or Emperor's Men, apostates and time-servers. And although Egypt's churches enjoyed peace from the seventh

century, that was only within the constraints of a Muslim-dominated state. At no point over the last fourteen centuries has Egypt's Coptic Church enjoyed much more than grudging toleration.

Looking back at its long history, Egypt's Christians only knew state favor for a fleeting interval, and a similar story could be told of Syria, that other ancient center of the faith. From 542 to 578, the greatest leader of the Monophysite church was Jacobus Baradaeus, whose nickname refers to the rags he wore to escape the attention of imperial authorities constantly on the watch for this notorious dissident. Translating his name as "Hobo Jake" would not be far off the mark. Instead of living in a bishop's palace, he remained ever on the move, wandering from city to city. He roamed between Egypt and Persia, ordaining bishops and priests for the swelling underground church. His career, in other words, looked far more like that of an early apostle than a medieval prelate, and there were many others like him. Numerically, Jake won far more converts than Paul of Tarsus, and he covered more ground. The heart of the Christian church never left the catacombs, or if it did, it was not for long.

That story tells us a great deal about the nature of Christian loyalties in the centuries after the Roman Empire's conversion. If your emperor or king was formally Christian, then self-preservation alone dictated following his lead, so that we need not think that church members actually had any high degree of knowledge or belief in the new faith. But if the church was itself in deadly opposition to the state, and faced actual persecution, then people had no vested interest whatever in belonging to it — quite the contrary. Why risk your life by following Hobo Jake? Through most of the Middle East, and for long centuries after Constantine's time, then, people followed these dissident churches for exactly the same reasons that their ancestors would have adhered to the beliefs of the earliest Christian communities. They followed because they thought they would obtain healing in this world and salvation in the next; because they wanted signs and wonders; and because the ascetic lives of church leaders gave these figures a potent aura of holiness and charisma. Ordinary Christians followed not because they were told, but because they believed.

Winning New Worlds

Besides its religious significance, the fifth-century crisis changed the shape of global political history. Chalcedon gave an enormous boost to the power and prestige of those growing parts of the church in new and emerging areas — roughly speaking, in Europe

— at the cost of the older heartlands of faith. A new emerging Christian world broke away from an older Christendom, the two separated by what critics saw as troubling theological innovations. Modern observers might draw parallels to the contemporary movement of the Christian center of gravity from Europe and North America to the global South.

The ancient geographical shift dramatically increased the power and prestige of the popes of Rome, slowing efforts to raise other centers to equal or greater status. Chalcedon and its aftermath consecrated the power of the Roman church, crippling potential rivals elsewhere, above all at Alexandria. Chalcedon, in fact, marks the real beginning of the medieval papacy.

The political victory of faith made-in-Rome meant that Europe's emerging Christianity would develop in intimate alliance with the Roman Empire and with the Western successor states, rather than (as in the East) returning to the catacombs. In consequence, Europe's churches kept alive the vision of a Christian empire, an intimate church-state alliance. This would be a political manifestation of the City of God, which they repeatedly tried to recreate in practice. So wedded were Westerners to the vision of a Christian empire that, when the real Roman Empire lost influence, the popes invented a whole new structure in the form of Charlemagne's Frankish regime. Europeans had to live with the consequences of that decision for a thousand years.

The split within ancient Christianity prepared the way for outside powers who would exploit intra-Christian divisions — first the Persians, and eventually the Muslims. Without the great split, the rise of Islam would have been unthinkable. Without the religious crisis, Islam could not have stormed into the political near-vacuum it found in the seventh century, into an empire where most Eastern subjects — Monophysite and Nestorian — rejected their Orthodox/Catholic emperors. So alienated were the Christian dissidents that few were prepared to resist Muslim invaders, who promised (and practiced) tolerance for the diverse Christian sects. In its earliest phases, the new faith offered a clean break from the historic cycle of violence and persecution that had so disfigured late-antique Christianity. Islam, in contrast, offered toleration, peace, and an enviable separation of church and state.

A modern observer might see in this process a warning about the dangers of mixing church and state. The Christian world could only know peace when government was definitively removed from the business of making and enforcing religious orthodoxy, after which competing churches could coexist happily under a regime that despised its subjects impartially. Yet dissident churches ultimately paid a catastrophically high price for their freedom from

Orthodox Christian control. Whatever dissident Christians thought initially, the new Muslim power had its own very different values and objectives and worked effectively to implement them.

Although the process took centuries, Christianity ultimately faded in the lands that fell under Muslim power. To illustrate the scale of the ruin that overcame the ancient churches, we recall that the fifth century struggles involved a war for dominance between the sees of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople, and that war had clear winners and losers. Yet today the last three of those cities are now in countries overwhelmingly Muslim in population and tradition, with Christian minorities barely hanging on. Ephesus itself now stands in the western portion of the Muslim land we call Turkey, which is almost Christian free. Chalcedon and its aftermath so divided the Christian East that its ruin was inevitable.

Modern believers should take from this historical experience quite different lessons, and certainly not simplistic alarms about the supposed threat from Islam. Communities should not become so obsessively focused on their internal feuds that they forget what they have in common and fall prey to far more substantial external dangers that they have been too blinkered to notice.

Imagining Other Worlds

What ultimately became accepted as Christian orthodoxy was hammered out in a process that was painfully slow, gradual, and often bloody. This conflict was marked by repeated struggles, coups, and open warfare spread over centuries. It is easy to imagine another outcome in which the so-called Orthodox would have been scorned as heretics, with incalculable consequences for mainstream political history, not to mention all later Christian thought and devotion.

We might even say that the later history of Christianity depended not just on any one person, but on one horse, the one that stumbled in 450, causing the death of the pro-Monophysite emperor Theodosius II. Only forty-nine at the time of his death, he could easily have reigned for another twenty years. That “might have been” is intriguing because, had he lived, the history of the world would have been quite different. If Theodosius had not died, there would have been no Chalcedon, and in that case, the Western, European, Catholic part of the empire might have been the one to slide into secession over the following century. That was the direction in which events so often seemed to be moving.

We can imagine a counterfactual universe in which the schism between Rome and the East occurred in the fifth century, not the eleventh, and papal Rome never recovered from subjection to successive waves of barbarian occupiers. By 450, much of the old Western empire was under the political control of barbarian warlords who were overwhelmingly Arian Christians, rather than Catholics. Perhaps the papacy might have survived in the face of Arian persecution and cultural pressure, perhaps not. In the East, meanwhile, the Monophysite Roman Empire would have held on to its rock-solid foundations in a faithfully united Eastern realm that stretched from Egypt to the Caucasus, from Syria to the Balkans. This solid Christendom would have struggled mightily against Muslim newcomers, and conceivably, they would have held the frontiers.

Later Christian scholars would know the fundamental languages of the faith — Greek, Coptic, and Syriac — and they would have free access to the vast treasures surviving in each of those tongues. Latin works, however, would be available only to a handful of daring researchers willing to explore that marginal language with its puzzling alphabet. Only those bold Latinists would recall such marginal figures of Christian antiquity as Saints Augustine and Patrick. In contrast, every educated person would know those champions of the mainstream Christian story, Severus of Antioch and Egypt's Aba Shenoute. In this alternate world, the decisive turning point in church history would have been not Chalcedon, but Second Ephesus, which we today remember as the Gangster Synod, the Council That Never Was. And the One Nature would have triumphed over the noxious errors of the Dyophysites, the Two Nature heretics.

If only because of the other paths that could so easily have been taken, these debates give the mid-fifth century an excellent claim to be counted as the most formative period in the whole history of Christianity. Much recent writing stresses the earlier Council of Nicea (325) as the critical moment in defining the beliefs of that faith, the critical dividing line between early and medieval Christianity. In reality, the struggle even to define core belief raged for centuries beyond this time and involved several other great gatherings, any one of which could have turned out very differently.

In many modern accounts, too, the church's history is portrayed as a steady move toward the otherworldly aspects of faith, toward seeing Christ as a heavenly redeemer rather than a prophet or a mystically minded social teacher. For Elaine Pagels, for instance, part of this process involved replacing the cryptic gospel of Thomas with the incarnational text of John ("In the beginning"). Thomas, she suggests, is for seekers and mystical inquirers, while John is for the devoutly unquestioning faithful. Meanwhile, some think, the canon

of the New Testament became more rigidly defined in order to support Jesus' steady ascent to Godhood. In this scholarly vision, the democratic, egalitarian, and Spirit-filled Jesus movement of the earliest times atrophied into the repressive, bureaucratic Catholic Church of the Middle Ages: Christ *pantokrator* overwhelmed the human Jesus. For many writers, Nicea marks the tragic end of a glorious phase in the history of Christianity and the commencement of something grimmer.

The more we look at the two hundred years or so *after* Nicea, I hough, the shakier this perception must become. Arguably, fourth-century councils like Nicea marked the point *When Jesus Became God*, to quote scholar Richard Rubenstein — but that was the easy part. The fifth and sixth centuries had to tackle the far more stressful task of preventing Jesus from becoming entirely God. Many lives would be lost in the process, and at least one empire.

By What Authority?

The Jesus Wars tell us much about how Christianity has developed over time and, by extension, how other world religions evolve as they confront new circumstances. Many of the issues are perennial, not least the enduring question of how churches determine the acceptable limits of Christian belief.

Assuming that people disagree over matters that seem essential, just how do they decide which side is right, which is closer to the mind of God? How does the church make up its own, all-too-human mind? Societies change, circumstances change, ideologies change, especially within a global church that contains so many separate cultures and political traditions and which is in daily contact with other faiths. It's natural for a church living in a particular society to accept the standards prevailing in the wider community, whether these involve issues of gender and sexuality, property and slavery, war and peace, religious tolerance or bigotry. Christian teaching in one part of the world evolves according to the standards of the wider society, while believers elsewhere fear that the faith is being compromised beyond recognition. Over time, churches in different nations and continents inevitably draw apart.

So how does a church ensure conformity, at least to the extent that each regional entity acknowledges the full Christian credentials of its counterparts elsewhere? This kind of question remains very much alive in modern-day disputes over gender and sexuality within

various denominations, in the global Anglican Communion, but also among Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians.

For a modern audience, used to centuries of religious diversity and toleration, the stress on maintaining conformity seems unnecessary. Today it seems obvious that when different sides are thoroughly estranged, they should agree on an amicable separation. They should form their own denominations, agreeing to differ peaceably, and live in mutual respect. Yet that option was just not available in the early church, and not simply because Christians then were in any sense morally inferior to their descendants. Central to Christian thought — Catholic, Monophysite, or Nestorian — was the concept of the church as the undivided body of Christ. If a body was not united, then it was deformed, mutilated, and imperfect, and such terms surely could not be applied to the body of Christ.

The Eucharist was the material symbol or sacrament of this united body. However much worship practices differed around the world — and the differences were spectacular — one could only share communion with fellow Christians who held a correct view of Christ and the core of theological truth. If colleagues deviated from that, then they suffered anathema or condemnation, followed by excommunication. The word *anathema* was very potent, and it even had violent implications. Greek translations of the Old Testament use this term to describe the total condemnation or annihilation of a city, such as Jericho, where God commands the Israelites to massacre “everything that breathes.” A person under anathema was equally cut off from both the church and civil society.

To be “in communion” meant sharing a basic core of assumptions that drew the line between being a true member of the body of Christ, and *not* being. This issue resurfaces regularly today, when many liberal Christians see no problem in taking communion in other churches as a sign of good will and fellowship but are dismayed by the rigidity of some churches. This kind of restriction is a running source of grievance at Catholic funerals, where liberal priests will invite all comers to participate fully in communion, to the horror of more orthodox believers. But in this matter, it is the harder-line churches who reflect the views of the ancient church, with their exalted view of communion as the symbol of belonging and unity. You are who you eat bread with.

The Church's Mind

Pressures toward uniformity grew after the empire officially accepted Christianity in the fourth century. Just as all limbs and organs formed one human body, so there must be one organic church, one hierarchy, with its different regions operating in harmony and sharing communion — or so ran the theory. Over time, though, disputes and new questions arose within the Great Church, and doctrine needed to develop and advance in such a way that different factions did not condemn one another for forsaking the faith.

No one individual or group had the power to settle such disagreements: no single church leader or patriarch held universal authority. Conflicts rending large sections of the Christian community had to be resolved by general statements of the whole body of the church, in the form of councils, an idea that first appears in the Jerusalem gathering of the apostles described in the book of Acts. If the church was a body, then these councils served, however imperfectly, as its rational mind.

Through the early Christian centuries, local councils met regularly at diocesan and regional levels, but by the fourth century we see the first gatherings that sought to be universal or ecumenical. The idea presented many challenges. In the very earliest days of the church, it might just have been possible to gather all Christian believers together in one setting to decide an issue, but that option was simply not feasible when Christians ran into the millions. Instead, there had to be an assembly of some broadly representative gathering of bishops and higher clergy, drawn from as wide a sampling of the Christian world as was feasible. That has something in common with the principle of a modern opinion poll or survey, although with a supernatural justification. Councils represented the voice of the church as guided by the Holy Spirit, and once an assembly had spoken definitively on given issues, its pronouncements claimed absolute authority.

In reality, councils rarely bore much resemblance to the intended pattern of collective holiness and usually looked more like the very worst of American political-party conventions. In studying the church councils of this era, certain themes come to mind, including Christian charity; restraint; common human decency; a willingness to forgive old injuries, to turn the other cheek. None of these featured in any of the main debates. Instead, the councils were marked by name-calling and backstabbing (both figurative and literal), by ruthless plotting and backstairs cabals, and by a pervasive threat of intimidation.

Human sinfulness apart, several specific reasons ensured that the councils would be so messy, so violent, and, ultimately, so divisive. One structural problem was that no commonly accepted principle determined who should or should not appeal at councils, no guideline that gave a right of attendance to Bishop X or Bishop Y. Even if such a plan existed, it would have been made almost useless by the infrequency with which councils met and the rapidly changing circumstances within the empire that made some areas more or less powerful over time. Between 325 and 680, only six councils were acknowledged as ecumenical, or possessing worldwide authority, far too few and infrequent for any individual or group to develop any kind of institutional memory.

A council should be large in the sense of at least some hundreds of participants — 318 bishops reputedly attended Nicea — but no written constitution specified a minimum number of participants, or how they should be chosen. Nobody even knew how many bishops held power at any given time. A common guesstimate in the 440s was that the Roman Empire contained 1,200 bishops, a number that usually surfaced rhetorically in a sentence such as, “How dare you, one man, set yourself against 1,200?” But as some regions, particularly North Africa, massively overproduced bishops in terms of the overall population, that rough figure was an underestimate. Nor did it include bishops from beyond the Roman realms, for instance from Ethiopia or Persia. So was a council legitimate if it had 200 members? 150? What about 50? No official quorum existed. Did the council have to include representation from every region of the Christian world, or just those for whom travel was geographically feasible? That last factor really mattered in an age when the roads and sea routes were playgrounds for barbarian raiders, for Huns, Vandals, and Goths.

Nor did any established plan explain just how the Holy Spirit would make his or her intentions known through the voices of the gathered bishops. The idea of voting and claiming a majority was as familiar an idea in the fifth century as it is today, but voting commonly took the form of acclamation. Groups of participants shouted for particular causes, probably with slogans and chants prearranged in caucuses. No definite lines separated a church council from a street demonstration. Moreover, it was never clear whether Christology was to be settled on the basis of a simple majority or some kind of supermajority. Even after a decisive vote was taken, the council still had to seek ratification from the emperor, which introduced splendid new opportunities for lobbying and influence peddling.

This infuriating lack of precision explains the generally chaotic nature of proceedings, when respective parties mobilized large numbers of their own followers, while disqualifying rival delegations. Even if a council voted in a particular way, dissidents were quite capable of establishing a rival minority council of their own, voting as they thought fit, and sending that decision to the emperor for approval. Decisions generally involved condemning rivals or subjecting them to anathemas, and after some councils — especially First Ephesus — an observer needed flash cards to trace who exactly had excommunicated or deposed whom.

That process — or rather, lack of process—gave quite as much power to the imperial family and to imperial officials as to patriarchs or bishops. Any account of the Jesus Wars would begin with the great patriarchs, with pivotal church figures such as Leo of Rome or Cyril of Alexandria and their counterparts at Antioch and Constantinople; but making the final decisions were the emperors, Theodosius II and Marcian. And besides them, at least as important would be the empresses and princesses of the day. This meant, above all, the empress Pulcheria, whose alliance with a succession of barbarian generals gave her effective control of the Eastern Empire for thirty years, while Galla Placidia long dominated the West. Hardly less significant was Eudocia, a poet and rhetorical genius in her own right and the sponsor of the Monophysite movement after its defeat at Chalcedon. Without these and other royal women, neither side could have long existed or competed. Pulcheria, above all, was vital to defining what became Christian orthodoxy. Without her personal and constant intervention, the struggles at First Ephesus and Chalcedon would certainly have taken different courses. The church was giving her no more than her due when it proclaimed her a saint. On the other side, the freestanding Monophysite church could not have survived without the patronage of the sixth-century empress Theodora.

All the theological rows had immense political consequences. All the great councils involved a confrontation between the great patriarchal sees, each represented by a prelate who went on to become either a great saint and father of the church, or a condemned heretic. Several of these church leaders, also, represented a particular tradition of political power, and indeed of monarchy. As the Roman Empire crumbled, older patterns reasserted themselves, so that Alexandrian patriarchs like Cyril thought of themselves and acted like — literally — ancient pharaohs or Ptolemaic god-kings. Leo and the Roman popes saw themselves as successors of the ancient Roman emperors, the patriarchs of Constantinople as leaders of a Christian theocracy. The theological rows make no sense except in terms of this clash of self-images, as the shades of monarchies past and future tried to secure their

supremacy as the legitimate successors of a fading regime. Ephesus and Chalcedon were battles for the political future as much as a war for eternal truth.

Violent Faith

Bishops debated theological points in the incense-filled back rooms of the councils, but their decisions had a deadly impact in the streets and villages, where ordinary laypeople were convinced that the essential core of Christian belief was at stake. What might to us seem like philosophical niceties drove ordinary people to the point of wishing to kill, torture, or expel their neighbors. The potential for violence and persecution existed at a far earlier stage of Christian development than many believe, certainly in the time of the early church rather than the Middle Ages. The councils led to outrageous violence in many parts of the empire — to popular risings and coups d'état, to massacres and persecutions. Only with difficulty did imperial forces maintain their hold on whole regions of the empire, especially such prosperous but disaffected territories as Egypt and Syria.

Nor was violence confined to intra-Christian struggles. Historians have often commented on the growth of intolerance in the church after it achieved official status within the empire, how it became ever more hostile toward heretics, pagans, and Jews. But it is especially in the years of the great councils, between 410 and 460, that the level of intolerance rises frighteningly. This story is both a direct outcome of the theological debates, and its natural outcome. Pulcheria, who saved orthodoxy in 451, was also the driving force in a violent campaign against Jews, which foreshadows the anti-Semitic persecutions of the European Middle Ages. Adding to the “medieval” feel of some of these events — the religious violence and bigotry, the anti-Semitism and fanaticism — the ruling dynasty through the era of Ephesus and Chalcedon, including Pulcheria herself, was of Spanish origin. While no one would suggest any kind of ethnic determinism, it is curiously appropriate that the Christian world of the fifth century looks so much like the time of Torquemada, the notorious Grand Inquisitor.

When historian Edward Gibbon described the turbulent response to the Council of Chalcedon, he expressed astonishment that such savagery could erupt “in the pursuit of a metaphysical quarrel.” But powerfully justifying violence was a factor that moderns often ignore and which goes far beyond mere metaphysics. It also makes nonsense of attempts to distinguish religious from non-religious motivations. The vast majority of people at this time, educated and ignorant, believed in providential views of the world. They believed that wrong conduct or heretical belief stirred God to anger, and that such anger would be

expressed in highly material terms, in earthquake and fire, invasion and military defeat, famine and pestilence. Unless evildoers or wrong-believers were suppressed, society might perish altogether. In order to destroy those malevolent groups, activists took steps that look worldly, political, and cynical, but we can never truly separate these political acts from their compelling underlying motivation, which was supernatural. However historians may use the term, no “secular world” existed independent of church and religion, and the Roman state, pagan or Christian, never was secular in any recognizable modern sense. Nor was there any such thing as “just politics.”

The Monopoly of Violence

But even if religious believers are outraged by some deviant creed, then or now, that does not of itself mean that violence will ensue. Rather, violence occurs when the state has neither the will nor the ability to restrain highly motivated private groups. This condition might arise from extreme state weakness and the breakdown of public institutions, but state agencies might consciously decide to ally with private groups. In either case, the state loses what sociologist Max Weber famously described as its monopoly of violence, and the consequences for political stability can be dreadful. Violence breeds violence, without any external forces to bring it to an end.

This is what happened in the fifth century, when the forces of church and empire were still unsure about the appropriate limits of each other’s power. Yes, the empire was Christian, and church leaders should be accorded all due prestige and favor. But where exactly did their power end in terms of suppressing paganism or fighting religious rivals? By 400, emperors gave very mixed signals about just how far they were prepared to let church authorities go in terms of serving as agencies of government, with the powers of coercion and enforcement that this involved. However hard dedicated civil officials tried to keep the peace at councils, they faced a losing battle when the imperial court failed to back their decisions.

Meanwhile, radical new religious currents transformed ideas of the basis of power, giving vast authority to charismatic religious leaders. In the new Christian vision, the rejection of sexuality and the material world led God to grant amazing supernatural power to his chosen followers, and these gifts were best manifested in visions and healing miracles. Potentially, this strength outmatched any amount of force that the secular world could

deploy against it. The thousands who abandoned worldly society — the monks and hermits — became the heroes and role models for those who could not bear to make the full sacrifice. And far from challenging this alternative world of spiritual power, with its parallel hierarchies, worldly leaders sought rather to imitate it. Even the imperial family now aspired to goals of world rejection and celibacy, and they listened carefully to the pronouncements of saints and visionaries.

By the fifth century, bishops and other Christian leaders could mobilize an impressive amount of muscle to promote their causes, making them powerful independent political actors. The church became not so much a state within a state, as a parallel state mechanism. Bishops commanded the absolute loyalty of their faithful clergy and other followers, much as secular lords and patricians could rely on their clients. Monks especially served as private militias, holy head-breakers whom charismatic bishops could turn out at will to sack pagan temples, rough up or kill opponents, and overawe rival theologians. These were not rogue monks or clergy gone bad, but faithful followers of the church, doing exactly what was expected of them over and above their disciplines of prayer, meditation, and healing. When cities or regions divided along lines of theology or faith, rival bishops and monks literally fought for domination in the hills and on the streets.

Driving extremism was the concept of honor. Throughout the centuries, ideas of honor have often served as an underappreciated component of religious conflict, and not just within Christianity. Looking at the conduct of some church institutions in these years, it is tempting to draw half-joking parallels to modern criminal or terrorist organizations — at times, the patriarchate of Alexandria did behave like the Sopranos. But such a comparison is more plausible than it may appear, in that both in ancient and modern times, Mediterranean societies were cemented together by certain cultural themes: clientage and patronage, honor and revenge, devotion to family and clan. Honor and family dominated social relations in different regions of the Roman Empire, and in extreme circumstances these had to be defended by force. Much of everyday life revolved around a constant series of honor challenges, ripostes, and one-upmanship. People struggled to assert the honor of their group and, hardly less important, inflict shame upon rivals. If we do not underhand the ritualized forms of blood feud and vendetta, we stand no chance of comprehending Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, whether in the fifth century or the twenty-first.

Although monks and clergy pledged to renounce those ideas of personal honor as meaningless vanity, they easily transferred these loyalties to institutions. This might mean a new loyalty to the church as a whole, or to a particular see or monastery, and clergy fought for that church or religious house with all the zeal they might earlier have applied to defending the honor of a city or a clan. Defeated rivals had to be shamed formally, with all the ritual symbolism of degradation and submission available to church and empire. We can hardly comprehend the astonishing venom that marked the long battle between the great churches of Antioch and Alexandria unless we realize that we are dealing here with a quite literal blood feud that spanned a century or more. In later eras, the idea of satisfying aggrieved honor even became central to Western theology. Around 1100, the monk Anselm depicted Christ as the only sacrifice meritorious enough to pay the debt of honor to God, which he did through his death on the cross. This theory of the atonement became standard for both Catholic and Protestant churches.

Lay people, too, joined in the battles through mobs and organized gangs, as religion served as a cultural badge in struggles for political power. As a later parallel, we might compare the religious factions with the gang structures of nineteenth-century urban America, as commemorated by Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*. Constantinople — New Rome — worked in very similar ways. Street gangs mobilized the masses, but not just for mindless intertribal violence. These gangs overlapped with political factions and government, and the keenest struggles raged over official influence and patronage. Regional rivalries also featured, as ordinary people came to identify particular leaders, particular schools of thought, with their own cities and homelands.

Religious passions even extended to the two great sports factions in the Hippodrome, adopting the flag of the Orthodox (Blue) or Monophysite (Green). To imagine a modern parallel, we would have to suppose that current debates within the Anglican Communion were fought out at international soccer matches, between tens of thousands of football hooligans, representing the churches of (for instance) England and Nigeria. Each side would be heavily armed with knives and Molotov cocktails; each would have its distinctive colors, slogans, and banners — placards, for instance, bearing the likeness of England's Rowan Williams on one side, of Nigerian primate Peter Akinola on the other. Nigerian mobs would yell for scriptural inerrancy, the English for interpreting the Bible in the light of reason and evolving standards of decency. At the end of the day, each side would tally its dead and maimed.

Christianity and Islam

Out-of-control clergy, religious demagogues with their consecrated militias, religious parties usurping the functions of the state ... It all sounds like the worst stereotypes of contemporary radical Islam, in Iran and Somalia, Iraq and Lebanon. And then, as now, the problem lay not in any characteristics of the religion itself, of its doctrines or Scriptures, but in the state's inability to control private violence. Just a century after the conversion of the Roman empire, Christian churches were acting precisely on the lines of the most extreme Islamic mullahs today. This in itself suggests that none of the violence or intolerance commonly seen in modern day Islam is, so to speak, in the DNA of that religion but just reflects particular social and political circumstances.

An event that occurred in Constantinople around the year 511 suggests the parallels. The church of the day had a beloved hymn, the Trisagion or Thrice Holy, which praised, "Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal" (Orthodox churches sing it to this day). But the emperor, Anastasius, wanted to revise it in the Monophysite fashion, by lauding this God "Who was crucified for our sakes." The new formula proclaimed that it was God alone who walked the soil of Palestine in the first century and suffered on the cross, a view that ignores the human reality of Jesus. So angry were the capital's residents that they launched a bloody riot:

Persons of rank and station were brought into extreme danger, and many principal parts of the city were set on fire. In the house of Marinus the Syrian, the populace found a monk from the country. They cut off his head, saying that the clause had been added at his instigation; and having fixed it upon a pole, jeeringly exclaimed: "See the plotter against the Trinity!"⁴²

We can imagine the response if, in the twenty-first century, a Muslim mob beheaded a dissident theologian and paraded the grisly trophy around the streets. Not only would the crime be (properly) denounced, but Westerners would assume that such behavior was part of the fundamental character of that religion — a bloodthirsty, warlike intolerance that could be traced back to the sternest passages of the Quran. The beheading would be seen as a trademark of Islamic fanaticism. Surely, we would say, Christians would never act like that. But they assuredly did.

While it is tempting to dismiss the religious politics of the fifth century as just a matter of faction and conventional partisanship, we also need to recall the special concepts of authority driving religious politics. Charismatic hierarchs claim guardianship of holy

truths; prophets and visionaries seek to redirect history according to the personal instructions of the divine; religious orders bypass the secular state in order to create theocracy; and a cult of martyrdom sustains an escalating cycle of violence. Again, the better we understand the contemporary politics of the Islamic Middle East, the more intelligible becomes the Christian past; and vice versa. Constantinople or Alexandria then; Baghdad and Mogadishu today. Although the kind of weaponry involved is different, the ancient armies of obstreperous monks can easily be compared to the Shi'ite forces supporting Muqtada al-Sadr in contemporary Baghdad and Basra. The Christ Army predated the Mahdi Army by some 1,600 years.

Watching how church factions in the age of the councils appropriated spiritual authority so often recalls the modern Muslim world. For centuries, Muslim *fatwas* or religious decrees were issued only by accredited institutions of scholars and lawyers, and these texts carried real weight around the Islamic world. During the twentieth century, though, different factions and even individuals arrogated to themselves the right to issue such fatwas, generally with the goal of justifying extremist or violent actions. Today, as in the fifth century, radical clerics not only denounce more moderate enemies, but officially read them out of the faith. A fatwa might declare that however X describes himself in religious terms, he is in fact no longer a member of the Muslim community and is thus a suitable target for violence. In other words, they subject them to anathemas, just as Christians did in the fifth century. Radical Islamists even have a direct modern equivalent of the Christian anathema, in the form of *takfir*, the act of declaring a Muslim person or even a state to be *kaffir*, or infidel. The notion of *takfir* is fundamental to the extremist Islam that produced Osama bin Laden.

Other analogies also unite ancient and modern extremists. As in late Roman times, a providential view of the world drives political action today. Islamist radicals believe that only by purifying the faith can the Muslim world regain God's favor and reverse its long modern history of defeats and disasters. And ideas of honor still stir violence in societies shaped by notions of personal and family pride. Just as early Christian monks fought for the honor of their church, so modern Islamic protesters defend the honor of the Prophet, most passionately when his image is demeaned in cartoons or novels. The concept of blasphemy is meaningless except in the context of ideas of honor and shame.

When we think of the history of Christianity, we picture certain key individuals and objects. We think of medieval cathedrals, of superb paintings and sculptures of the crucifixion or the Madonna, and generally, of some of the glories of European culture — together, of course, with some of the nightmare aspects of that story, the intolerance and fanaticism. But we think above all of a Christianity rooted in Europe and one unafraid to explore the image of the human face of Christ. We know a medieval Christian world with its spiritual and intellectual cores in Rome and Paris, not Alexandria and Antioch. At every stage, then, we are thinking of a world shaped by the outcome of those almost forgotten struggles of the fifth century, which occurred in a world of empires and states that have all faded into ruin. But these conflicts left an impact that survives into the present day. The gatherings at Ephesus and Chalcedon remade a faith.

Appendix to Chapter One: The Church's General Councils

Through the centuries, the church called many councils and gatherings at regional and local levels, but a few great events were recognized as having special authority for the whole Christian world. These were general or universal (ecumenical) in nature. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches agree on accepting the first seven of these general councils as authoritative. Although these councils dealt with many miscellaneous items of belief and practice, each focused chiefly on an issue or debate that was particularly divisive at the time. Each council proclaimed a set of views that became established orthodoxy for much of the church, although in each case, the defeated party did not simply cease to exist overnight.

The first seven councils were:

- I. *First Council of Nicea (325)* The church was divided over Christ's divinity. Followers of Arius believed that, as a created being, Christ was inferior to God the Father. Their opponents, led by Athanasius of Alexandria, taught that all three persons of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — were fully equal. The Council of Nicea resulted in a decisive victory for the Trinitarian party over the Arians. Athanasius went on to become bishop of Alexandria.
- II. *First Council of Constantinople (381)* The emperor Theodosius I called this council mainly to settle continuing debates concerning the Trinity. Arianism remained powerful long after the Council of Nicea, while some groups denied the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Constantinople tried to resolve these issues, and it defined the role of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. This council created an expanded version of the creed originally declared at Nicea, and when later generations use the so-called Nicene Creed, they are in fact using the form accepted at Constantinople in 381.
- III. *Council of Ephesus (431)* With Trinitarian issues largely settled, the main focus of debate now turned to Christology, that is, the proper understanding of the character of Christ and the relationship between his human and divine natures. Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, was accused of dividing the two natures in a way that made the Virgin Mary the mother of Christ, but not of God. His leading opponent, the patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, taught the full unity of Christ's natures. Cyril's

views triumphed, with the support of the Roman pope, and the Nestorian party was condemned. It remains open to debate whether Nestorius did in fact hold the views attributed to him.

[Second Council of Ephesus (449) Although later generations refused to recognize the credentials of this council, it was called in much the same way as its predecessors. The church of Constantinople was deeply split, with a strong party emphasising Christ's single divine nature. Constantinople's bishop Flavian condemned these views as extreme and heretical. Under pressure from the Alexandrian patriarch Dioscuros, a council met to investigate and condemn Flavian and to support One Nature teachings. The council degenerated into a mob scene, in which Flavian suffered mortal wounds. This gathering was subsequently rejected as a "Gangster Synod" and not a true council.]

- IV. *Council of Chalcedon (451)* The fourth council was called to reverse the disastrous results of the recent Gangster Synod. The council condemned the actions of Dioscuros of Alexandria and his allies. After intense debate, it also formulated a definition of Christ's being that presented him as both fully divine and fully human. This historic Chalcedonian definition owed much to the thought of the Roman pope Leo I.
- V. *Second Council of Constantinople (553)* In the century following Chalcedon, the church continued to be severely split over christological issues, with many regions continuing to stress Christ's One Nature (the Monophysite movement). Partly in order to reconcile these dissidents, the emperor Justinian called a council that would condemn the writings of some long-dead theologians whom the Monophysites regarded as gravely heretical. The Second Council of Constantinople did condemn the controversial writings — the so-called Three Chapters — but at the cost of creating new disagreements. Only after some years as a prisoner of the empire could the Roman pope Vigilius be bullied into accepting the council's decisions.
- VI. *Third Council of Constantinople (680–81)* In a last-ditch attempt to settle the christological wars, the Byzantine emperors had tried to establish that, whatever people thought about Christ's natures, at least they could all agree that he had a single will. Unfortunately the compromise pleased nobody, and many attacked this imperial policy as a Monothelete (One Will) heresy. The Third Council condemned Monotheletism, proclaiming instead the belief that Christ was of two wills as well as of two natures.

VII. *Second Council of Nicea (787)* From the 720s, the Byzantine Empire split violently over the question of icons and images, with some activists arguing that such pictures should be prohibited as idolatrous. The Second Council of Nicea declared that such images were legitimate, provided they were venerated as opposed to being worshipped in their own right.