

# THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE NON-CHALCEDONIAN

## CHURCHES

(~~P. Paul Verghese~~)

The Monophysite Churches are five in number today: the Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch, the newly (1959) established Patriarchate of Ethiopia, the Catholicates of Armenia and India. The total number of Christians in these five churches may be estimated at a little less than 17 million. They are all in communion with each other, but none of these churches is in communion with the Churches of Byzantine Christendom.

What is it that divides them from Byzantine Orthodoxy? Historically, the barriers have existed for some fifteen centuries now, beginning at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The centuries that have intervened have only driven the prejudices on both sides deeper into the social subconsciousness.

Are the barriers insuperable today? It is the present writer's sincere conviction that they are not. But we cannot jump over them too lightly. We must first examine the rationale of the barriers. If they serve no essential purpose today, then they should be destroyed, not skipped over. Two things are necessary before we can be sure that the barrier is not meant to protect something very valuable in the faith: a critical examination of the historical record, and a frank expression of the views on both sides. This paper is an attempt to scratch the surface. The real spadework will have to be done by scholars of greater competence.

### Events Leading up to Chalcedon

At the beginning of the fifth century the four great Primatial Sees of Christendom were vying with one another for prominence. Alexandria, who had given to the Church that great Champion of Orthodoxy, Athanasius, to whom we owe in a considerable measure the defeat of Arianism; Rome, centre of the world, bastion of orthodoxy,

hallowed by the martyrdom of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul; Constantinople, the new Rome, seat of the Emperor, glorified by the prestige of two illustrious prelates, both stars in the firmament of life-giving oratory, St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom; and Antioch, whence the Apostles went out into the world, home of St. Ignatius, the Prince of Martyrs.

Alexandria was further noted for a succession of three powerful and ruthless prelates whose lot it was to do battle with the Patriarchs of Constantinople: Theophilus (385-412) who so wounded the feelings of Asians by deposing St. John Chrysostom (398-407) that the latter were for long unable to forgive the Church of Alexandria; St. Cyril (412-444), nephew of Theophilus, who deposed Nestorius Patriarch of Constantinople (428-431); and Dioscurus (444-454) who succeeded in deposing Flavian, (Patriarch of Constantinople, 446-449).

But how could these victories be won on Asian soil by these strangers from Alexandria? One can only hazard a guess in reply, an inference not unsubstantiated by facts. Monastic life had already mushroomed in Asia Minor and Syria by this time. There were several monasteries in and around Constantinople and Antioch, with hundreds of monks in each. Egypt was the spiritual home of the monks. The See of Alexandria, for these monks at least, borrowed from the glory of St. Antony, St. Pachomius and St. Macarius of Egypt. Besides, for monasticism in the East at least, Arianism is the major demonic element in thought. The denial of the complete deity of Christ is the ultimate purpose of the Devil, and Arianism is his tool. The monks were always afraid that the Antiochene Christology, in its eagerness to affirm the full humanity of Christ against the teachings of Apollinaris, was in danger of either Arianism or Nestorianism. And they generally found the Alexandrine Christology, with

its emphasis on the flesh as assumed by the Logos, the Logos remaining always the subject of the actions of Christ, much more safe. And this is the teaching of the two illustrious Alexandrians, St. Athanasius and St. Cyril.

This general affinity between eastern monasticism and Alexandrine Christology was to play a large part in the ecclesiastical wrangles of 449-451 and in the sequel. The monks were a very influential group, because of their 'holier' life<sup>1</sup>. The Archimandrites around Constantinople had great prestige and had free access to the Imperial Palace<sup>2</sup>.

70-year old Archimandrite Eutyches was no more of a theologian than his ex-patriarch Nestorius, and they were both as inoffensive as they were muddle-headed. But he was an important man in Constantinople, known to the Emperor and to the great Patriarchs of the Church. Domnus, Patriarch of Antioch, had written to the Emperor accusing Eutyches of Apollinarianism. Eutyches had written to Leo, Pope of Rome, defending himself against such charges. The Great St. Cyril himself had sent word to Eutyches requesting his good offices with the Emperor against Nestorius.

Since the old monk wrote no book, we do not definitely know what he had taught in his monastery. Pope Leo quotes him as having said: "I confess that our Lord was of two natures before .

Union, but after the Union I confess one nature."<sup>3</sup> The Pope is astonished, he says to Flavian in the letter which has now come to be known as the Tome of Leo, that "so absurd and perverse a profession of his was not rebuked by a censure on the part of any of his judges" - an obvious slur on the theological efficiency of the Primate of Byzantium.

Leo apparently could not be sensitive enough to the distinction between Latin <sup>natur</sup> ~~nature~~ and Greek... <sup>physis</sup>.... Further, it would appear that he took the preposition ex- in the sense of in. However foolish Eutyches might have been, he could hardly have said that the Incarnate Lord existed in two separate natures before the Incarnation. Neither is there any reason to believe that Eutyches actually held that the divine nature absorbed the human nature and caused it to disappear. This was the pope's misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

The local Council convened by Flavian at Constantinople was frustrated and irritated first by Eutyches's refusal to appear before it, and when he did appear, his unwillingness to subscribe to the formula "in two natures after the Incarnation". In any case they deposed Eutyches, more for insubordination than for heresy.

Pope Leo, on the other hand, had other plans. He keenly resented Alexandria's attempts to take away the primacy which

Rome claimed to be hers. Eutyches was a friend of Alexandria. Flavian of Constantinople a weak and peace-loving man, could not challenge the Egyptian Church, even though he shared in the general view that the Alexandrians "are more delighted with tumult than any other people; and if they can find a pretext, they will break into the most intolerable excesses; nor is it scarcely possible to check their impetuosity until there has been much bloodshed"<sup>4</sup>. So Leo takes upon himself the task of reasserting the authority of his See.

The opportunity for this offers itself to Leo when Eutyches appeals to the Pope against his unjust excommunication, and besides the Emperor himself writes to him about what was done in the Imperial City to a prominent Abbot. Flavian, on the other hand, considered the matter settled, and did not find it necessary to do anything further about it. Leo writes to Flavian in a very patronising tone: "We do not understand as yet with what justice he has been excommunicated. But we desire to hear your account of what has been done, and to have the whole matter laid before us, since we, who would have the decisions of God's priests maturely arrived at, can form no judgment for either side, till we have heard a true statement of all the proceedings"<sup>5</sup>. The whole letter tacitly assumes that Flavian ought to have reported the matter to Leo, and that the final decision in the matter is to be made by the Pope, This was on February 18, 449.

Flavian meekly replies, but is careful to point out that it was just as much his own duty to prevent the perversion of the faith as it was Leo's. He sends Leo the proceedings of the Council which deposed Eutyches. He then asks Leo to give his "concurrence in the vote by which he has been canonically deposed." That is all that is required to prevent a general council which can have disastrous consequences, according to Flavian.

Leo is promptly surprised at "the tardiness of your letter", and writes the famous tome which was later to be canonised by the Council of Chalcedon.

Leo is determined not to miss the opportunity to use the Eutyches affair as a test case. But Dioscurus of Alexandria is also determined to see that Leo would not be able to get away with it.

The Emperors convoked a Council on the 1st of August 449 at Ephesus. All the patriarchs were asked to come with ten Metropolitans and ten other bishops each. The Archimandrite Barsumas<sup>6</sup> is also invited, with full voting privileges, to represent the monasteries. Emperor Theodosius II "following the rule of the holy Fathers" nominated Dioscurus to preside in the synod.

Dioscurus took full advantage of his position. Eutyches was exonerated and reinstated. Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, was excommunicated on the charge of innovation on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Leo's Tome in which he elaborated the claims of the Petrine See, was conveniently ignored and not even read in the Council. Even Domnus of Antioch was deposed by the Council, even though he had signed in favour of Flavian's deposition. Dioscurus had won a crushing victory in the first round.

Leo was irate. He wrote to the Empress Pulcheria denouncing the Synod as a 'Council of Robbers and not of judges', and the west has subsequently made the name Latrocinium stick. He appealed to Emperors Theodosius and Valentinian, and to several other members of the Imperial families in East and West, to convoke another council. But Theodosius, who was to make the final decision, refused the appeals of the other members of his family. He felt that the matter had been settled at Ephesus, and had no desire to reopen the issue. Anatolius, who succeeded Flavian at Constantinople, agreed with the Emperor. Leo sent a delegation to the Imperial city to persuade the Patriarch.

If Theodosius had not in the meantime fallen from his horse and died, the whole East would probably have remained Monophysite<sup>7</sup>, in the sense in which this doctrine is understood by the non-Chalcedonian churches.

The new regime in Constantinople was determined to reverse the policy of the previous Emperor. Dioscurus was no longer in favour at the Court. Theodoret of Cyrus, an outspoken Dyophysite now becomes the favoured prelate. Anatolius and the bishops at Constantinople are now forced to accept the Tome of Leo, and to anathematize Eutyches.

The Emperor and Empress are now anxious to build up the Patriarchate of Constantinople as the chief See of the Empire, and so Leo's plans to hold a general council in Italy get no support from them.

So the Council was held in the East - at Chalcedon, just outside of Constantinople, in 451. An impartial historian would be willing to see that even although three times as many bishops were present at Chalcedon as at the so-called Robber Synod, the proceedings were no more dignified. Obviously, and to the utter discredit of the Church, many of the Bishops who were present in both councils, sided simply with what they understood to be the Imperial will. Dioscurus

found himself abandoned by most of his former supporters at Ephesus, who were all now confessing to the Imperial Commissioners pitifully: "we have all failed". Only the bishops of Palestine, Illyricum and Egypt stayed with him.

In the third session, the Imperial Commissioners absented themselves, and gave the Council over to the presidency of the Papal legate, Paschasinus. The case of Dioscurus was singled out for discussion at this session. He refused to make his defence without the presence of the Imperial Commissioners, fearing violence. But the Papal legate went ahead with the charges, and pronounced judgment without much ado: "Leo, through us and the present holy Synod, together with St. Peter.....who is the Lock of the Church and the foundation of the true faith, deprives him of his episcopal office and of all priestly dignity"<sup>8</sup>. One-hundred and eightyfive of the bishops present (out of a total between 500 and 600) recorded their endorsement of the papal decision. When Rome had thus done the dirty work for the Emperor and Empress, the Imperial Commissioners seem to have returned. They now insisted on a new 'definition' being drawn up, indicating the true faith, to which most of the Bishops objected. Anatolius of Constantinople resumed the chair for this session. But since the first draft prepared did not contain direct mention of 'two natures', the papal legates objected again. The Commissioners feared a division of East and West, for the majority were against any mention of the two natures. So a special commission is appointed under the chairmanship of Anatolius of Constantinople to find a compromise formula. But the majority objected again, and insisted on approving the formula without mention of 'two natures'. Anatolius himself stoutly

opposed the 'two natures' formula.

The Imperial Commissioners were sorely perplexed and sought counsel from the Emperor. The Emperor replied, offering three alternative courses of action: a) leave it to a special commission to draft a new definition with the 'two natures' formula; (b) ask each bishop to submit a draft, and the Council decide in plenary on the definition; (c) hold another Council in the west. Many of the erstwhile timid bishops now seem to have got back their tongue. They defy the Emperor and cry out; "Let the formula stand, or we depart; these are Nestorians; let them be off to Rome".

The Commissioners now use their authority much the same way as Dioscurus had done at Ephesus. The issue was put to them in such a way as to leave no doubt as to the kind of reply the Imperial Commissioners required. A committee was appointed, and they retired with the commissioners and the papal delegates, to come out with a new definition, "We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ.....or and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged on (if) two natures, without confusion, without conversion, without division, never to be separated,...."<sup>9</sup> The four adverbs were safeguards against Nestorianism and against Eutychianism as generally understood.

Emperor Marcian attended the sixth session of the Council in state, and gave his approval to the formula. There remained only the further need to squelch the see of Egypt and to exalt the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Canon xxviii saw to that. Against the protests of Rome, numerous bishoprics were added to the jurisdiction of Constantinople, and her position as second in rank was finally affirmed. Leo's subsequent cavils that Constantinople was not an

Apostolic See were of no avail. The Emperor had triumphed, or at least he thought he had. Rome's challenge of Chalcedon was hardly effective. But the people of Egypt and Syria, almost with one voice, rose up in protest against this, 'Graecising, Nestorianising Council'. The Bishops returning from Chalcedon to Egypt and Syria were regarded as traitors by the people, and in many cases subjected to violence.

### A Contemporary Analysis

But what is it that present-day Monophysites object to in the definitions of Chalcedon?

As a personal view the present writer would submit four criticisms of the definition.

1. The document as it stands at present appears selfcontradictory. The first part, ending with the words \_\_\_\_\_<sup>10</sup> seems to have been taken from the first draft prepared with the hearty approval of the whole council, and is fully acceptable to us. The second part, beginning with the words: But forasmuch as, to the end, appears to be the work of the special committee appointed by the Imperial Commissioners, and explicitly contradicts the first part in both tone and content. The first part reads like a devout ecclesiastical document; in the second part, the personal animosities and ambitions of some of the parties present at the sitting of the committee are ostensibly present. It cites the two documents which are now to be approved, that of Cyril against Nestorianism, and that of Leo, against Eutyches. Cyril is referred to as "the blessed Cyril, pastor of the Church of Alexandria", while Leo is spoken of as "the Ruler of the greatest and elder Rome, the most blessed and most holy Archbishop Leo". The Tome itself "agrees with the confession of the great Peter,

and is a common monument erected against heretics"; the document goes on lavishing praises on the Tome, which is in marked contrast with the brevity with which the Epistles of St. Cyril (which were actually much more enthusiastically received by the Council than the Tome) are commended

The self-contradiction itself appears in that while the document insists that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is the unalterable symbol of the Orthodox faith, it goes on to find another formula for confession of faith. This, to us seems an objectionable innovation, neither permissible nor necessary.

We are prepared to condemn any heresy that teaches that Our Lord is not fully divine and fully human; we can anathematise Eutyches, on the understanding that he taught that our Lord's flesh was not consubstantial with ours; but we see no need for a new formula.

2. If a clear statement of right Christological teaching is necessary, then it should be in the form of an elaboration and not in the form of a definition. The mystery of the Incarnation, we feel, is no more illumined by the Chalcedonian definition than by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan symbol. As an elaboration it is thoroughly inadequate, inasmuch as it has no clear mention of the hypostatic or prosopic union, which is the orthodox teaching of both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches.

3. While 'of two natures' is orthodox doctrine and is acceptable to us 'in two natures' is heretical and erroneous teaching,<sup>11</sup> if by this is meant that the human and divine natures of Christ remain ~~distinct~~ <sup>disjunct</sup> and separate, in such a way that some of Christ's activities can be ascribed to His divine nature and some to His human nature. If there is union between the two natures, and not merely conjunction as the Nestorians

taught, then what is united is one, and it is a divine-human nature. A mere doctrine of communicatio idiomata is inadequate to describe the fact that God has become Man and not merely indwelt in Man.

4. We are prepared to accept the notion of the two distinct natures as objects of thought, provided the one Incarnate nature of the Logos made Man by hypostatic union is first acknowledged.

All this has the further implication that the Tome of Leo cannot have the status of a canonical definitive document. It ~~er~~rs in 'dividing' the nature of Christ, which is the substance of the Nestorian heresy. As St. Cyril says in his third letter to Nestorius: "To one Person (Prosopon), therefore, must be attributed all the expressions used in the Gospels, the one incarnate hypostasis of the Logos (for the Lord Jesus Christ is one according to the Scriptures." This is also the point of the third and fourth anathemas appended to this letter.

In general we hold unhesitatingly to the views of St. Cyril: One Prosopon, one Hypostasis; but if we have to speak of Phusis, we would again use the phrase of St. Cyril, "after the union, no division; union in nature, not by conjunction"<sup>12</sup> or "one Son even by nature" (

But we find it difficult to accept the Chalcedonian definition for two simple reasons: It is heretical and it is inadequate. The prejudice against Chalcedon amongst us is very deep-rooted, and has found its way into our formularies of sacerdotal ordination. We are offended when the Chalcedonian churches regard us as heretical. For our Fathers who opposed Chalcedon stoutly, namely Timothy Aelurus of Alexandria (d. 477), Severus of Antioch (d. c. 539) and Philoxenos of Mabbugh (d. 523) were not considered heretics by the Chalcedonian churches. On the other hand these Fathers regarded Chalcedon as a heretical council, though they would not denounce all the Churches of the Patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople as heretical.

I have not been able to trace the history of the attitude of the Chalcedonian churches towards the non-chalcedonian churches, but I shall not be surprised at all if such an enquiry would reveal it as a fact that it is only after the aggressive evangelism of the Portugese and Spanish missionaries began that the general view that the Monophysites were heretics gained ground in the West. In England the idea probably goes little farther than the time of the Post-Reformation controversies. More careful scholarship in the west dates from Assemani (1687-1768), but it is interesting to listen to the judgment of William Palmer: "Although some of the Monophysites in later times have expressed themselves in terms that seem to render the difference in doctrine but inconsiderable, there seem

to be no reason to suppose that they form a portion of the catholic church, having been originally excluded from that church as well by its decree as by their own separation from us: nor have they ever ceased to treat the doctrine of the church as heretical, styling us Chalcedonians, and reckoning us among the heretics to this day"15.

Opinion in the west has not generally moved much further from Assemani and Palmer ; in fact it seems to have regressed in some cases.

But today, do we not have to look at the problem afresh? Has not our situation changed and the unity of the Church become an imperative call from God? Conversation in an atmosphere of friendliness has become easier today. We know a little more about the semantic subtleties and differences of of nuance in the terms substantia, personal, natura, hypostasis, prospon, physis etc. Our knowledge of history has become more accurate.

It is the present writer's sincere conviction that, given patience and understanding on both sides, the accumulate prejudice of fifteen centuries should not continue to be an insuperable barrier against the Byzantine and Monophysite churches finding their unity in the Eucharist in the very near future. Ut omnes unum sint!

## NOTES

1. See e.g. Socrates Eccl: Hist: iv:23ff
2. See Hefele, A History of the Councils of the Church, Eng. Tr. Edin. 1883. Vol. iii pp 134, 187.
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4. This is the personal judgment of the famous church historian of Constantinople, Socrates (380-450) H.E. vii: 13.
5. Leo to Flavian, Ep. 23.
6. of Syria, now a saint for the Monophysites.
7. See R.V. Sellers, The Council of Chalcedon, London, 1953 pp. 96-97 Sellers, who cannot be accused of being partial to the East in general or to the Monophysites in particular, remarks "Assuming that each side had remained adamant, East and West, it is reasonable to suppose, would have gone their separate way the East, upholding what had been determined at Nicea and confirmed at Ephesus, and speaking of the 'one nature' (=one person) of Jesus Christ, the west continuing to preserve its traditional doctrine, first defined by Tertullian, that Jesus Christ is one person, and that in Him are the two natures of Godhead and manhood. But the unexpected happened, and the history of Christian doctrine followed a course which at that time none could have anticipated".
8. Mansi, vi. 1048. Dioscurus had already excommunicated Leo on his way to Chalcedon.
9.  

The question of which preposition appeared in the final draft or , is still disputed. The latin has in, which is understandable, since this was Leo's view. Some greek texts that have come down to us have ; but if this was actually used, it is difficult to see how the Monophysites could have objected to it so vehemently.
10. in the English translation, with the words, to those who accept it faithfully it sets forth in addition the Incarnation of the Lord.
11. see Gregory Nazianzen: Ep. ad Cleonidum 101. Migne PG 37:177 Oratio 37:2 also cf. St. Cyril of Alexandria 3rd ep. to Nestorius para viii.

12. See 3rd anathema. 3rd ep. to Nestorius.
13. ibid 5th anathema.
14. See the judgment of Sellers, op. cit. p. 269: "In the first place, it should be understood that the Monophysite theologians were not heretics; nor were they regarded as such by leading Chalcedonians or again, "Had the leaders of the Monophysites been unsound in the faith, the task facing the upholders of 'two natures after the union' would have been easier. But the latter had to deal with teachers-not 'heretics'".
15. William Palmer: Treatise on the Church 3rd ed. London. 1842  
Vol. i. p. 322.
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