

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM ?
ELEMENTS FOR AN ECUMENICAL
CHRISTOLOGY TODAY***

~~(Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios)~~

(The Rev. Dr. V.C. Samuel celebrated his 75th birthday in December, 1987. In this article Metropolitan Dr. Paulos Gregorios pays tribute to the outstanding contribution of Father Samuel to Orthodox Christological understanding. Father Samuel's scholarly insights into the classical debates on Christology, especially the Chalcedonian question have immensely helped to advance the theological dialogue of the Oriental Orthodox Churches with the Byzantine Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches in our time. His profound knowledge of the Syrian theological tradition and early church history combined with his transparent openness to other traditions - Christian and non-Christian - makes his theological work extremely interesting and inspiring.) ~~The Star of the East pays homage to the integrity of his Christian vision and his creative work. —Ed.—~~

The Revd. Dr. V. C. Samuel has played a unique and pioneering role in making Oriental Orthodox Christology intelligible as well as acceptable to others. Most of us who came later into the debate about the nature of Christ owe our basic insights to his outstanding work at Yale University in the fifties of our century.

This became very clear as we began the first "Unofficial Consultation between Theologians of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches" held at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, from August 11-15, 1964. In August 1989, we should celebrate the silver jubilee of this historic event in the life of the ecumenical movement.

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Father Samuel's paper on "One Incarnate Nature of God the Word" affirmed that phrase from Cyril of Alexandria (+444 A.D.) as "a most crucial linguistic tool to conserve the Church's faith in the person of Jesus Christ". It made clear to leading Byzantine theologians present like Karmiris, Meyendorff, Florovsky, Romanides, Nissiotis, Konidaris, and Borovoy that the Oriental Orthodox agreed with the Byzantine Orthodox in condemning the teachings of both Eutyches and Nestorius. It was Fr. Samuel's paper which convinced them. There were other dignitaries present like the present Syrian Patriarch of Antioch and Armenian Catholicos of Antelias; it is no exaggeration to say, however, that there was no one on the Oriental Orthodox side who could convince the Byzantine theologians on the basis of historical scholarship that there was no essential disagreement between the Byzantines and the Orientals on the substance of Christological teaching. I had the great privilege of organizing, along with the late Nikos Nissiotis, that first unofficial theological conversation (Aarhus, 1964) as well as the three subsequent ones (Bristol 1967, Geneva, 1970 and Addis Ababa, 1971). I can say without any hesitation that the presence and contributions of Fr. V.C. Samuel were the crucial element in determining the final outcome of these conversations.

Recently (September 1987), the first *official* joint sub-commission met and produced an official statement that is in basic continuity with the four unofficial conversations.

We can summarise the present consensus in the following way :

1. Jesus Christ is fully a human being, of the same nature as fallen humanity, though not sinful like them.
2. Jesus Christ the Second Person of the Trinity, remains fully God, of the same nature (homo-ousios, consubstantial) as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.
3. Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word of God, personalizes humanity in his own hypostasis or person, without ceasing to be God. There is only one hypostasis, the

hypostasis of God the Word. There is no separate Man Jesus with a separate human hypostasis.

4. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God unites in his hypostasis the nature of God and the nature of humanity in one single hypostasis and one united divine-human nature, though the Byzantines prefer to say two natures inseparably united.
5. The Word of God Incarnate is thus one single hypostasis with an inseparably and unconfusedly united divine-human nature. It was the same one who was begotten of the Father before the ages and who was born of the Virgin Mary in the fullness of time.

These fundamental agreements however point to two questions. The first one is, if both sides have always held the doctrines that they now affirm, how come they were divided into two irreconcilable groups, calling each other heretics? The second question is-given this Christological consensus, what ecclesiological imperatives ensue from it for Christian life today?

Both questions have immediate significance to our situation today, and we need to expend a little thought on the response to these questions.

Why church disunity despite doctrinal unity ?

It is an interesting question for deep research. The Byzantine emperors made herculean efforts to resolve the Christological controversy that ensued before and after the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). The schism between the Byzantine Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox came into effect only with the work of Jacob Baradeus at the end of the sixth and beginning of the Seventh centuries. And the churches have remained dis-united for the past thirteen to fourteen centuries.

The sources make it clear that the conflict between the Byzantines (Hellenistic Greeks in present day Turkey and Greece) and the Orientals (Syria, Palestine and Egypt) was less theological and more political-economical and socio-cultural.

Byzantine imperial policy was neither consistent nor reliable. In 449 at the Second Council of Ephesus, it was the conciliatory and pluralistic policy of Emperor Theodosius II (401—450) that allowed Dioscorus of Alexandria to triumph over Hellenistic machinations. His successor Marcian (306—457) was the leader of the Hellenistic movement in the Empire, and when he ascended the throne in 450, after having organized the death of Theodosius by a fall from his horse while hunting, actively persecuted the Syrians and Egyptians and sought to impose Hellenism on them. He used military force to get his proposal accepted at Chalcedon and after Chalcedon. In his desire to repress and destroy the Asian African civilisations of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, he got into an alliance with Pope Leo I (440—461).

It was not the Christological controversy that led to the post-Chalcedonian schism, as much as the revolt of Asia-Africa against a domineering Graeco-Roman civilisation. This was the reason why the most reconciling formulas like the *Henotikon* offered by Emperor Zeno in 482 did not bring peace. The issue was socio-cultural rather than theological. For 200 years Byzantine emperors followed a unifying policy in theology (*henotikē*), which did not succeed simply because the socio-cultural aspect was not adequately taken into account. Even the so-called Fifth Ecumenical Council which tried to correct some of the errors of Hellenistic theology by leaning to the ante-Chalcedonian side failed to pacify the Asians and Africans.

As one of the less perceptive pro-Chalcedonian scholars from Greece put it at the first unofficial conversation “The enforcement of the dogmatic decisions (*horoi*) of Chalcedon, as this was attempted in the year 451—457, resulted in a sharpening of the peril to the unity and integrity of the Empire since a considerable majority of the native population had gone over to the Monophysites” (p. 58). There was of course no “going over to the Monophysites”, because the category “Monophysite” was one artificially created by the Byzantines. The Asians and Africans knew their Christology, and advanced no doctrine of *monē phusis*, which means *only* (one) *nature*, but taught *mia phusis*, which means one single (united) nature. And this teach-

ing of the Asians and the Africans has not varied from then to this day.

What was at stake was a cultural imposition of Hellenism on the Africans and Asians. They saw the Council of Chalcedon as such an imposition, and could not see any sense in the Byzantine insistence of "two natures after the union", except that of cultural domination.

Today the situation is similar when the Western Church, both Protestant and Catholic, seeks to impose a terminology and framework born in the internal conflicts of Europe on the Oriental Churches. We are grateful that the Byzantine Orthodox have woken up to the nature of this cultural imposition by the Latins and West Europeans on the Eastern churches, but they are as yet insensitive to the fact that the domineering spirit of Hellenism still plays a very negative role in keeping the Orthodox together. Most of Christian Asia and Africa fell to Islam, in reaction against this European domination. We in Oriental Orthodox Churches have survived in a decimated form, but we have also a natural resistance to western categories of thought and action being imposed on us. This constitutes a major ecumenical problem today, even for the unity of the Asian or African churches, Culture has so much to do with autonomy and identity, that it becomes a factor much more powerful in dividing or uniting churches.

The Ecumenical Movement as a whole is now so dominated by western culture that non-westerners who have not been initiated and trained in western culture feel ill at ease in the movement. The question of the disunity of the churches cannot be adequately studied without taking into account the domineering role played by western culture in the present ecumenical movement. Culture can help unite or divide—in a big way.

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The more important single question, then as today, is the one Christ himself asked: "who do you say that I am?" (Lk. 9:20). If we answer in the words of Peter in St. Luke's Gospel,

i.e. "The Messiah of God", we still need to answer the questions "Who is God? What does His Messiah do?".

On those two questions there are dozens of answers prof-fered in the churches. But these answers, though divergent in each church, do not directly lead to schism today. Why is it that a minor difference in Christology led to a schism in the fifth and sixth centuries, while much more substantial divergences today can be contained in the same Church? Could it be that we do not take Christology as seriously as the ancients did?

For the Oriental Orthodox, the two questions are integral to each other. It is because God is He who is revealed to be the Messiah that the Messiah does what he does. "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me"; as the Johannine Christ says (John 7:16). "I seek not to please myself, but him who sent me" (John 5:30).

The difficulty of some modern Christologies is that they start with a prior conception of what the Messiah should be doing, and then read that Messianic conception back to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. If yesterday salvation from eternal damnation was what we wanted, we made out the Messiah to be a "Personal Saviour". If political-economic liberation is what we want today, then we make the Messiah a political-economic liberator. We even develop theories about all previous theologies and biblical exegeses having been expressions of the dominant class, and thereby absolve ourselves from the need to know the Tradition. We become free to liberate theology from its bondage to class interests, and free to create a new liberation theology according to our own pre-conceptions of what God should be doing.

The real task of Christology today is a formidable one. The avenue that scholars have been exploring-in search of the historical Jesus- has turned out to be a blind avenue. Even the historical method cannot yield for us a completely accurate Moses or Jesus, Alexander or Napoleon. All personalities have their historical existence only in terms of *what other people understood about them.*

The classical Christian position has been that Christians accept Jesus Christ as the Apostles understood them; that seems to be the meaning of the adjective 'apostolic' qualifying the Church. But is that not too narrow an interpretation? The Apostles knew Jesus Christ at first hand, in a way in which subsequent generations could not know him. They also received the direct revelation of the Spirit after Pentecost. But the doctrine that the Revelation of the Holy Spirit ceased with the death of the last Apostle seems to have little theological warrant.

The Spirit of God leading us into all Truth was not a process that ceased in the first century and goes on till the last day and perhaps beyond.

Even going by the Apostolic testimony recorded in the New Testament, there are three dimensions of Christology which we have to keep in some balance today.

In the first place there is the oikonomic-ecclesiological relation of Christ to the members of his Body the Church—a relation initiated by faith, Baptism and Chrismation, and sustained by the great mysteries of the Church, principally the Eucharist. This is, at least in theory, an intimate, personal, communitarian, material-spiritual or "Sacramentally sealed relationship which is unique to the members of the Body, the Church. To extend this relationship to "nominal Christians", "latent Christians" and so on is quite unnecessary and pointless.

But the second relationship of Christ is to all humanity. It was not Christian humanity that the Son of God assumed. As a human person Jesus Christ is consubstantial with all human beings—whether they be Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Marxist or Buddhist. It is the whole of humanity that has been sanctified by the Incarnate Body of Christ. Jesus Christ is the saviour of humanity—not just of Christians. He is Saviour of the world—(*ho Soter tou kosmou, vere Salvator mundi* (1 Jn 4:14; Jn. 4:42). He is the saviour of all human beings (*Soter panton anthropon*—1 Tim. 4:10), though especially of believers. He is also the "Saviour of the Body" (Eph. 5:23), our Saviour (Jude 25, 2 Pet. 1:1,11;3:18, Titus 1:3,4; 2:10,13; 2:4,6 etc, etc.)

We will have to use our imagination to see how Christ can be the Saviour of all human beings. I suspect, however, that the best we can imagine in this matter, would still be wrong. But let us leave wide open that possibility that Christ is the Saviour of all human beings, with whom He is consubstantial and whose body he has assumed.

There is a third relationship which we should not overlook, which is already implied in the expression: "Saviour of the world". The relation of Christ to the universe as a whole is often overlooked or underplayed in many Christological treatises. And yet the Apostolic testimony is clear.

"In him the universe was made
Nothing made was made without him" (Jn. 1:3)
"The mystery of His will... to bring all things
In heaven or earth together under one head even Christ"
(Eph. 1:10)

"In him were all things created
Those in the heavens and on earth
Things visible and invisible.....
all things were created through him and for him
He is before all things, in him all things hold together
For it was God's good pleasure that in him should dwell all
plenitude
And through him to reconcile all things to himself".
(Col. 1:16-20)

"The Creation itself shall be set free
From its present bondage to corruptibility
And made to share in the glorious freedom of the
children of God" (Romans 8:21)

It is thus the central teaching of the Apostolic tradition that Christ is a three-fold Saviour—Saviour of the Church, Saviour of all humanity, and Saviour of the whole universe in all its dimension—those open to our senses and those that are not.

Liberation theologies can write this off as ruling class

ideology if they wish. But for those committed to the apostolic tradition, there is no escape from the truth. Only when we can develop a Christology which does justice to all three dimensions in the same stroke can we have a truly Christian Christology. Christ's work in the three dimensions are different, but related to each other—in the Church, in humanity, and in the cosmos. All three dimensions have to be related not merely to the Incarnation or the saving economy of Christ's earthly ministry, but also to the other two aspects—Christ as Creator and Christ as Final Reconciler. Only a Christology that holds together the three aspects—creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment can be an adequate Christology.

It is in this context of three-dimensional, three-aspect Christology that we can find the ultimate meaning of the hypostatic union of the divine and the human in Christ. For whatever we say about Christ as redeemer or final fulfiller applies not simply to God, as Barthianism implied. It is Christ the divine human person who is the Redeemer and Saviour of the Church, of humanity and of the cosmos. And any understanding of what it means to be a Christian should make plain the significance of Christ being a divine human person, and our full consubstantiality and participation in Him.

This means that no "secular" Christology, which deals only with the world open to our senses, and no "other-worldly" Christology that sees Christ as only Saviour of souls, would do. But the integrated treatment of the three dimensions and the three aspects (for Christ the Incarnate divine—human person is also Creator) should make clear the distinctions as well as the relations among Christ's work in Church, humanity and Cosmos. This would mean interpretation of Christ's relation to all Church activity, human activity and cosmic (including nature, environment, but also much more) activity. Such a Christology should do justice to science/technology, political economy and culture/environment. But it must do more. It must also penetrate beyond the veil to that invisible realm where Christ the divine-human person is now seated on the throne of authority "at the right hand of the Father". Most current Christologies fail at this point—either due to an obsession with the political economy or

to an undue reverence to the critical canons of a European Enlightenment rationality which cannot penetrate beyond the veil.

One more point should be mentioned, but not developed here. There is no authentic Christology that is not integrally related to the Triune God and particularly to the operations of the Holy Spirit. An adequate pneumatology also should deal with the three dimensions and the three aspects of Christ's work, parallel to and inseparable from it. The Spirit is Creator, Redeemer, and Fulfiller. The Holy Spirit works in the Church, in humanity and in the cosmos. Only a proper understanding of the larger work of the holy Spirit in giving form and significance to everything, in creating life and sustaining it, in leading all things to perfection, in pouring out love, power and wisdom can make Christology authentic and alive.

The Spirit is at work in a special way in the Church, the community of faith, the Body of Christ. But the Spirit is also at work in the human environment, in agriculture, in industry, in services, in communications, in science and technology, in the political economy, in art and culture, in creating meaning and significance, identity and community. The Spirit also operates in a divine-human way, and Her work in the Church should not be separated from Her work in humanity and the Cosmos.

Fr. Samuel's brilliant work lays the foundation for this. Much work, however, still needs to be done to make Christology and Pneumatology truly life-giving and unity-creating.