

The Making of Europe
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The Rise of Western Christendom

Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000

SECOND EDITION

Peter Brown

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nople. Each sought to discredit the bishop set up by the other. Each attempted, at different times, to bring the bishop of Rome into the struggle on their side. Last but not least, the emperors thought of themselves as “Romans” in a very real sense. They governed through standing for a wider world than that of their Greek subjects alone. In an overwhelmingly Greek-speaking world, Latin nonetheless remained the language of the law and was even spoken at court (much as Spanish continued to be used at the Habsburg court of Vienna). The emperors of “New Rome” had not forgotten the West. Indeed, they were positively anxious to invoke the safely distant prestige of the Latin bishop of Rome, as the imagined guardian of the faith of Saint Peter, as a counterweight to the all too present, ever-insistent claims of the Greek bishops of Antioch and Alexandria.⁴⁶

If, in Leo’s eyes, *ambitio*, hard-driving politics, was the besetting sin of the Gallic bishops, the *ambitio* of his eastern colleagues (and especially of the bishops of Alexandria) took place at the very highest level and on a scale which made the activities of a Hilary of Arles seem trivial. The patriarchs of Alexandria were very much the heirs of the unruly Athanasius. And they were a whole century richer. On one diplomatic mission to Constantinople alone, Cyril of Alexandria (412–444) was believed to have distributed to the officials of the imperial court bribes to the value of 2,500 pounds of gold – enough, that is, to feed 45,000 poor persons for one year, and 25 times as much money as a bishop such as Caesarius of Arles had ever been able to raise for the ransom of captives in Gaul.⁴⁷

The councils of the Eastern Church, also, struck Leo as thoroughly “balkanized.” The pope’s representative to a Church council presided over by Cyril’s successor, the heavy-handed Dioscorus of Alexandria, in 449, arrived back in Rome shocked by the violence he had witnessed. He had been forced to flee for safety to the sanctuary of the church in which the council took place, shouting in Latin, to no effect, *Contradicitor*, “I object,” as a mob of riotous oriental monks closed in upon him. He later set up in the Lateran baptistry an *ex-voto* plaque to celebrate his deliverance from the violence of eastern bishops!⁴⁸

* *Emmanuel: “God with Us”: Christological Controversy in the Eastern Empire*

The grand maneuvers set in hand by men such as Cyril and Dioscorus exacerbated and exploited what had become a burning theological problem. The Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) were successors to Constantine’s grandiose experiment at Nicaea. In them, the emperors

hoped to obtain the consent of the entire Christian Church to a formula which would resolve a hotly contested issue: how close to man had God drawn near, in the person of Jesus Christ?

On this issue, fifth-century Christians felt that they had entered exciting new territory. The ancient imaginative model of the universe (to which we referred in the last chapter) no longer helped them. This model had stressed the chasm between the higher and the lower reaches of the universe. It gave the human soul a steep upward glimpse, very much from the bottom up, of the hierarchy which it must ascend in order to reach a distant God. The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, by contrast, brought the top of this universe down to the very bottom. It placed the ancient model of the universe on its head. As pope Leo said: “It is far less amazing that human beings should progress upwards towards God than that God should have come down to the human level.”⁴⁹ What mattered less, now, was not how to get from the lowest to the highest, from man to God. The issue was how to understand the unique manner in which God had come down to man – how the highest had been joined to the lowest in the person of Christ. Faced by the person of Jesus, a human figure whose actions and utterances were known in detail from the narratives of the Gospels, the believer had to decide in what way God had been present in Jesus the man and how Jesus the man had been linked to God.

This was far from being a merely theoretical issue, debated only by expert theologians. Large Christian congregations needed to know the answer. They needed to feel that God was with them on ground level, as it were. It was not enough that God should make his will known to a distant human race through a series of special representatives. This was a weakness in previous Christian theology which Athanasius had already spotted and exploited with unrelenting, narrow clarity, in his conflict with the supporters of Arius. Christ was not simply a privileged messenger of God, as Arius seemed to suggest. He was not to be seen only as “a kind of Prefect of the Supreme Sovereign,” governing the material universe on behalf of a still distant High God.⁵⁰ Rather, Athanasius had insisted, God in person had come down to earth in human form.

Views which thought of Christ as no more than a privileged “representative” of God, and not God himself, had seemed natural to thinkers of the age of Constantine, such as the learned Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (263–340), the historian of the Church and the biographer and panegyrist of Constantine.⁵¹ To a man such as Eusebius, it seemed as if the victory of monotheism had, indeed, been the victory of a High God, who had reached down to earth, to make his commands plain through a series of privileged representatives of his will, of which Christ had been the greatest and Constantine, on a lesser plane, the most recent.

Eusebius’ view had remained dominant for much of the fourth century. But

those who supported it made a fatal mistake. It made of God a remote monarch, who acted through agents who were, by definition, different from himself. Emperors were like that. But God did not have to be so distant. In attacking Arius and views associated with men such as Eusebius, Athanasius realized that the Christian people needed to be able to say *Emmanuel*, “God is with us.” Christ’s life on earth, he had insisted, had not been like “an official governmental visit from on high”; it had been the “blazing forth on earth of God Himself.”⁵²

Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, the patriarchs of Alexandria, the master-politician Cyril (412–444) and the fatefully over-confident Dioscorus (444–451), rode the tide whose strength, in Christian piety, Athanasius had already sensed.⁵³ Because Christ had come down to earth among men, it was that much more easy to turn directly to him. The intermediate powers of the *mundus* did not have to be invoked for help in earthly matters. In regions such as Egypt, monotheism became real, not through denying the reality of the lower powers – not through stripping the universe of its shimmering layers of angelic and demonic beings – but through pushing them to one side. All powers were subject to Christ; and Christ, because he had become a human being, was present to his worshippers on all levels of experience.

The unspoken barrier was lifted which had separated spiritual salvation and the afterlife – those high, unearthly things with which Christ, as God, had always been associated – from the humdrum, earthbound concerns of the average Christian. It was possible to call on the name of Jesus in all situations, knowing that, through his incarnation, he had come to know every danger and every temptation, that he had overcome them all, and that his power was still immediately available to help the believer to do the same. In the words of Shenoute of Atripe (385–466), the great abbot of the White Monastery at Sohag in Middle Egypt:

Try to attain to the full measure of this Name, and you will find it on your mouth and on the mouth of your children. When you make high festival and when you rejoice, cry Jesus. When anxious and in pain, cry Jesus. When little boys and girls are laughing, let them cry Jesus. And those who flee before barbarians, cry Jesus. And those who go down to the Nile, cry Jesus. . . . And those whose trial has been corrupted and who receive injustice, let them cry the Name of Jesus.⁵⁴

Backed by such passions, it is not surprising that the great patriarchs of Alexandria acted with such high-handed confidence. Neither is it surprising that each side feared the worst in its opponents. For this worst was nothing less than the fear that God and man would drift apart again, separated by the unbridgeable gulf between heaven and earth implied in the ancient model of the universe.

For Nestorius, who was patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431, the Alexandrian solution was repugnant. It seemed to bring God so close to humanity as to implicate an all-powerful and deathless being in the dishonor of suffering. Christ, rather, must be thought of as a man who was uniquely linked to God by a bond of the same quality, though of infinitely greater intensity and permanence, as that which had linked God to any other of his prophets. God’s power and majesty were not affected by the Crucifixion of Christ: for it was his chosen human Son and servant, not God himself, who had suffered on the Cross.

When his views were condemned at the Council of Ephesus, Nestorius observed bitterly that the ignorant populace of Constantinople danced around bonfires, chanting, “God has been crucified. God is dead.” To join God to human suffering in this manner was a blasphemy which God would not forgive. It came as no surprise to the supporters of Nestorius that, a few years after the condemnation of his views at Ephesus, the Huns flooded into Thrace, looting up to the walls of Constantinople.⁵⁵

The Alexandrians saw the matter very differently. It was vital for them that the Incarnation had made of God and man a single, indissoluble whole – a single “nature.” For this reason, the intransigent followers of the theology of Cyril came to be known as Monophysites (from *monos*, single, and *physis*, nature), on account of the manner in which they presented Christ as a unique being, in which humanity and divinity had come together to form a distinctive and undivided whole. “Monophysite” was not a title which they chose for themselves. But it sums up the intensity with which they defended the idea that Christ was a unique being, in which divine and human were joined without so much as the hint of a fissure between them.⁵⁶

Ultimately, no single formula was able to do justice to the very real issue which was at stake. For what counted for those who supported the theology of Cyril against that of Nestorius was an urgent matter. They wished to guarantee the solidarity of God with humankind. This was a real and intimate link, not a mere touching of two eternally distinct spheres – the human and the divine. In Christ, God had, indeed, shared in human suffering. To speak of God as having been, indeed, crucified, in the person of Jesus, was to remind him of the shared suffering which bound him indissolubly, almost organically, to the human race. He could not forget those with whom he had once shared the universal taste of death.

Thus, in the 470s, the “Monophysite” patriarch of Antioch deliberately added to the current form of the litany, “Holy Powerful One, Holy Deathless One,” the *risqué* phrase, “Who was crucified for us.” He did so at a time of crisis. It was an addition which summed up an entire view of the world. In the main courtyard of the Great Church of Antioch, sympathetic crowds

gathered round a street-artist who had trained his parrot to squawk the litany, with the all-important “Crucified for us” at its end. In a time of affliction, no matter how cruelly distant God might seem to be, Monophysites believed that God could be summoned by these words, that spoke to him of his own sufferings as a human being.⁵⁷

The cult of the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*, as “she who gave birth to God,” was pushed to the fore in an atmosphere that demanded one thing of God: that his relations with mankind should rest not on a mere partnership with mankind but on the tender, wordless kinship of shared flesh. The formula adopted by the Council of Ephesus was chosen so as to exclude the views of Nestorius. “The bond of the womb” was the strongest tie of all between human beings. Pleas for mercy to the powerful, at this time, stressed the fact that even the most miserable and undeserving East Roman was a fellow human being, some mother’s son, cradled in a human womb and suckled at human breasts. As a result, Mary came to be shown, in the art of the late fifth and sixth centuries, as holding Christ enthroned on her lap, as if he were still tied to her womb. Christ was spoken of, in hymns sung by whole congregations, as drawing his human flesh from sucking the breasts of Mary. For a mother’s milk, to ancient persons, was interchangeable with her blood: it was liquid flesh, transferred to the child by suckling. Christ must listen to those who prayed to his mother; for it was she who had rendered him fully human. Only she could remind him, with the authority of a mother, of what he shared with the afflicted human flesh of those who turned to him.⁵⁸

These issues came to divide the Christians of the East in a manner that no emperor could hope to solve. But it was not for lack of trying. The Council of Chalcedon was summoned by the emperor Marcian in 451, immediately after the death of Theodosius II. It was the greatest council ever assembled. Over 600 bishops met at Chalcedon, modern Kadıköy, just across the water from Constantinople. The assembly took place under the watchful eyes of members of the Senate. The emperor was taking no chances. But, unlike his predecessor, Theodosius II, Marcian was a newly installed, military man. Like most monarchs who find themselves in a weak position, as a newcomer to power, Marcian needed to show, as soon as possible, that he could do something decisive and spectacular.

Marcian did not wait for a consensus to emerge among the eastern bishops. Instead, he opted heavily for a theological statement drawn up by pope Leo. Leo’s famous *Tome* was presented to the council by the pope’s representatives and was accepted by the bishops at Marcian’s urging. It was a careful document. Later legend (circulated in Constantinople by none other than pope Gregory the Great) liked to believe that Leo had placed his *Tome*

upon the tomb of Saint Peter himself, to have it proofread by the saint.⁵⁹ To Latin theologians, it was a perfect statement of the faith. It gave due weight both to the divine and to the human elements in the person and life of Christ. But this was precisely what was wrong with it. To the Egyptian followers of Cyril of Alexandria, Leo’s careful balancing of the divine and the human in the person of Christ seemed to suggest that, in Christ, the divine and the human could be separated in the first place. It seemed to lead straight back to Nestorius. It threatened to open, once again, a crevasse between the divine and the human. The opponents of Leo insisted that divine and human had been joined in Christ in such a way that the human person of Christ was totally transfused with divine power. Even the touch of Christ’s fingers had been sufficient to bring healing to the sick.⁶⁰ In Egypt, in much of Syria, and for many thinking persons elsewhere, the Council of Chalcedon, summoned so as to be the council to end all councils, came to be known as “the Great Prevarication.” In their opinion, the council had divided the human and the divine in Christ and had thereby destroyed the solidarity between God and human beings.⁶¹

Much as modern European Christianity has taken centuries to transcend the issues raised, 300 years ago, at the Reformation, so late antique Christianity remained locked in the issues brought together and, fatefully, left unresolved at the Council of Chalcedon. For the controversy was not caused only by the fine-spun zeal of theologians. The entire quality of a post-polytheist civilization was at stake. The Christians had ousted the gods who had once joined heaven and earth with such ease. They had exalted one God at the cost of making him seem very distant indeed from humankind. They were left to struggle with the manner in which this High God had joined humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Only by resolving this conundrum could they bring heaven and earth back together again.

These issues spilled out across the frontiers of the eastern empire, to trouble Christians everywhere. Up to as late as the end of the seventh century, the Christological debates which took place in the eastern Churches were constantly discussed in Rome. But they were also known in northern Gaul and even in Britain. In this respect, western Europe had by no means become a separate zone, soundproof to the troubles of the East. As we shall see in chapter 16, verses written in an Anglo-Saxon poem in northern Britain, in around A.D. 700, refer to such controversies – as did a petition of eastern Christian monks addressed to the emperor of China in A.D. 635 (as we shall see in chapter 12).

In the West, however, there would no longer be a Roman empire within which such debates would echo loudly, as they continued to do in the eastern Mediterranean. In 476, the last western Roman emperor, Romulus

Augustulus, was pushed aside. Barbarian kings became the rulers of Italy. It was not until 536, in very different circumstances, that the troops of the East Roman emperor Justinian entered Rome, making it once again an “imperial” city. By that time, however, the Roman empire had become little more than a memory along the frontiers of the West. And these frontiers themselves would soon become the centers of new forms of power, linked to new forms of Christianity. It is to the rapid changes in that crucial frontier zone, which lay at many weeks’ journey to the north of Marseilles and Rome, that we must now turn.

On the Frontiers: Noricum, Ireland, and Francia

A Saint of the Open Frontier: Severinus of Noricum

Throughout Western Europe, in the fifth century, the military frontier of the Roman empire came to an end. The life of a holy man, Severinus, who arrived in the province of Noricum (largely in modern Austria) in 454 and died in 482, provides a series of vivid close-ups of how this process happened in one area, along the banks of the Danube.

At the time when the Roman empire was still in existence, the soldiers of many towns were supported by public money to guard the frontier. When this arrangement ceased, the military formations were dissolved and the frontier vanished. The garrison of Passau, however, still held out. Some of the men had gone to Italy to fetch for their comrades their last payment. But nobody knew that they were killed by barbarians on the way. One day, when saint Severinus was reading in his cell, he suddenly closed the book and began to sigh . . . The river [he said] was now red with human blood. And at that moment, the news arrived that the bodies of the soldiers had been washed ashore by the current.¹

Severinus was a saint of the open frontier. A mysterious stranger, he came to Noricum as a hermit in around A.D. 454. Some thought he was a fugitive slave; but he spoke the good Latin of an upper-class *Romanus*. Until his death, in 482, he moved along the Danube, from one small walled town to another, preaching collective penance, organizing tithes for the relief of the poor, denouncing grain-hoarders in times of shortage.²

Along the Danube, the *Romani* sheltered behind their city walls. These were small towns, with small Christian congregations. The church at Lorch, for instance, held some 200 worshippers – it was only a fifth of the size of a Gallic cathedral.³ For the townspeople, the Roman empire had already become a