

5-4-2023

## One Subject, Two Natures, Three Modes of Predication

Andrenique Rolle

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, arolle001@csbsju.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rolle, Andrenique. 2023. One Subject, Two Natures, Three Modes of Predication. *Obsculta* 16, (1) : 206-212. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol16/iss1/19>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

**ABSTRACT:**

This article is on the development of language about Jesus' humanity and divinity while describing the historical progression of the church through the first four ecumenical councils.

# One Subject, Two Natures, Three Modes of Predication

*by Andrenique Rolle*

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ was the beginning of the worldly understanding of the divine. Understanding the consubstantial nature of Christ is particularly confusing if one tries to comprehend it through a historical or scientific lens. Human nature can be studied scientifically and historically. However, studying divinity necessitates a faith-based approach. In testing a hypothesis, a scientist will first create an alternative hypothesis before they collect the data needed to perform a statistical analysis. This analysis allows for the rejection or the failure to reject the alternative hypothesis,



after that step the scientist can then present their findings. The alternative hypothesis is the null of the original; this hypothesis says what it is not. In talking about the natures of Christ, it is easy to say what Christ is not, therefore it is easy to reject the null hypothesis. The questions lie in how one can describe or comprehend who Christ truly is.

The first four ecumenical councils brought awareness to the nature of Jesus Christ, denying false narratives of what his nature is and, in a sense, proving what is true. These councils may have not been able to explain everything about who Jesus was, but these councils could ‘reject’ the hypothesis of who he was not. The First Council of Nicaea gave us a creed which is the basis of Christian orthodoxy today. This council came to be because of the alternative views of Arius, who believed that Jesus was not God. Many people believed the teachings of Arius which led to the spread of Arianism.<sup>1</sup> In Arius’ letter to Alexander of Alexandria he states, “We know one God—alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone without beginning, alone true...alone master, Judge of all...” He also states that the son “was not before He was begotten” and that he is not everlasting with the Father.<sup>2</sup> These beliefs were seen as a heresy because it denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. After Arius’ letter Alexander of Alexandria wrote a letter to Alexander of Thessalonica expressing how Arius and Achilles were “slandering Christ and us.”<sup>3</sup> The response to this was to hold an ecumenical council in Nicaea, the Bishops gathered and determined that Arius’ claims were heresy, and they emphasized the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ. To paraphrase the creed of the council of Nicaea, the Bishops stated as follows; there was the belief that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God begotten and not made, homoousias with the Father. To save man, Jesus Christ came down, was incarnate, suffered, died, and was buried, yet he rose on the third day and ascended into heaven, and he will come back to judge the living and the dead. Those who disagreed were declared separated from the church. This council was the first step in establishing the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine regarding the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and establishing unity in Christology.

---

1 Henri Leclercq, *The First Council of Nicaea* (New York: Robert Appleton, 2021).

2 William Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2013), 25.

3 Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 26.

The First Council of Constantinople further developed the argument of who Jesus is, how he saved, and why his nature is so closely related to salvation. This council can be compared to the data collection part of hypothesis testing, as this council asked questions that would answer why the words of the Nicene creed were so important. What was meant by homoousias? What exactly did Christians believe? How was it that Christians believed this and what support is there for what they believe in? To answer these broader questions four queries were developed for the council to answer.

The first query was the aspect of salvation and how salvation requires Christians to believe in the consubstantial nature of Jesus Christ. For salvation to be effective, Jesus must be both truly human and truly divine.<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus further develops this notion as he explains the reason why the union of divinity and humanity are important for salvation. He explains, “If a human being had not overcome the enemy of humanity, the enemy would not have been rightly overcome. On the other hand, if it had not been God to give us salvation, we would not have received it permanently.”<sup>5</sup> Salvation paved the way for revelation; once people were able to see salvation in action, they saw Jesus’ true divinity. St Basil of Caesarea’s position on the role of the strength of Christ’s humanity was that, “If the Lord did not come in our flesh, then the ransom did not pay the fine due to death on our behalf, nor did he destroy through himself the reign of death. For if the Lord did not assume that over which death reigned, death would not have been stopped from effecting his purpose... We who were dead in Adam would not have been restored in Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus posited that the way for sin to be washed from humans had to be done by someone who was wholly man and at the same time God.<sup>7</sup> Many Christian writers of this period supported this idea of Jesus’ consubstantial nature. This support influenced the Christian teaching regarding Jesus Christ as well as strengthened their faith.

---

4 O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013), 159.

5 O’Collins, *Christology*, 160.

6 O’Collins, *Christology*, 161.

7 O’Collins, *Christology*, 162.

The second query regards the interpretation of scripture and the third query is the context of Scripture with regard to the doctrine of the Incarnation. During this time, some people developed what would later be understood as heretical interpretations of Jesus. Maricon held the belief that the God of the Old Testament was not the same God in the New Testament, and therefore he rejected the teachings of Old Testament while accepting only one gospel and a few letters of Paul.<sup>8</sup> It was because of this position that he was labeled a heretic and became one of the factors in Irenaeus revitalizing monotheism. Gnosticism, Apollinarianism, and Arianism created challenges in the interpretation and context of scripture on Christ's nature as their beliefs were laced with misinterpretations of His true nature. Tertullian coined the term *tertium quid*, "a third something." This was an explanation for Christ's nature, explaining that Christ had to be understood as both fully consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit as the Son and fully consubstantial with humanity, or this would create a "third something;" a mix of a human person and the Divine. This exemplified the Incarnation's importance to salvation. Apollinarius argued that Jesus was a "normal" human but had a divine mind that replaced the human soul.<sup>9</sup> This argument essentially was in opposition to the Trinity, since it meant that both humanity and divinity could not exist simultaneously. Origen, like Tertullian, used his writings to prove that the Son was not 'less than' the Father and that Christ was always in existence. He helped with the understanding of the transcendental nature of Christ.<sup>10</sup> This added to the affirmations of the Council of Nicaea and included the development of Trinitarianism; Christ's humanity was just as significant as his divinity.

As time passed, there had to be clarification on the natures of Jesus Christ. The misinterpretation of Christ's duality created a problem with Christian scholars, as they wanted to further develop theories on the nature of Christ. Nestorius, for example, did not align historic events of Jesus' life with his theological approach. He did not illuminate the distinction of Christ's two natures and refused to "attribute the word of

---

8 O'Collins, *Christology*, 163.

9 O'Collins, *Christology*, 186.

10 O'Collins, *Christology*, 177.

God to the events of Jesus' human life; in particular his human birth from Mary."<sup>11</sup> His distinction created a divide in the natures of Jesus. The Council of Ephesus came to be and proclaimed the Christ was one person, '*hypostasis*,' to refute the teachings of Nestorius. Cyril of Alexandria also counters Nestorius by emphasizing the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ and that the two should not be separated. The Council of Ephesus reiterated the Council of Nicaea while emphasizing the union of the *logos* with the rational soul, this union being in one person. The Council of Chalcedon confirmed the teachings of the Council of Ephesus. However, this council arose due to the question of how distinguishable and united these two natures were.<sup>12</sup> This concluding council added an essential part of Christianity's declaration of Jesus Christ; "One and the same Son and only begotten God, the Word, Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> This helped to solidify and develop the beliefs introduced earlier by the Council of Nicaea. This council was the last of the first four ecumenical councils, but it did not answer all the questions that could arise. More councils followed to provide clarification and answer new questions, as there is always room for new discoveries.

These councils are to be understood collectively and were convened so that there could be further analysis of the Christological and the soteriological nature of Christ's divinity and humanity. These councils answered questions, disproved certain theories, and created room for more discussion. To understand the nature of Jesus Christ could not have been an easy task, as these individuals had to open-minded in the sense that there was more to be discovered and explained, but also close minded to avoid supporting heresies. The councils were both educational and confusing; they stimulated questions that led to some answers but also required discernment in coming to know which answers were the correct ones. Unlike science, there was no way to use experiments with reproducibility; there was no way to measure the accuracy of the content

---

11 O'Collins, *Christology*, 193.

12 O'Collins, *Christology*, 188.

13 O'Collins, *Christology*, 189.

that was being established and supported. Faith played an important role in clarifying the identity and nature of Christ; these councils were prime examples of, in the terms of Anselm of Canterbury, *fides quaerens intellectum*.<sup>14</sup>



---

14 Stanley Kane, "Fides Quarens Intellectum in Anselm's Thought", 1.

## Bibliography

- Kane, G. Stanley. "Fides Quaerens Intellectum in Anselm's Thought." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26, no. 1 (1973): 40–62. doi:10.1017/S0036930600033068.
- Leclercq, Henri. "The First Council of Nicaea." CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: First Council of Nicaea. Vol 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 2021. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm>.
- O'Collins, Gerald. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Rusch, William G. "Arius' Letter to Alexander of Alexandria." Chapter. In *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 25–26. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.