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A Story of Identity in the Christian East

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A STORY OF IDENTITY IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and Seminary of
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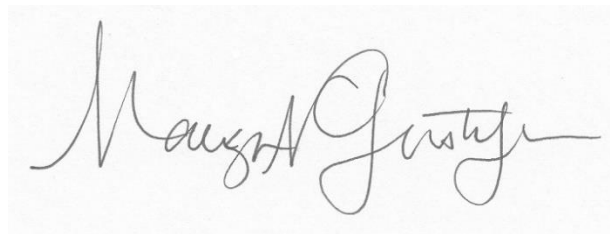
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A STORY OF IDENTITY IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST

Description: A survey of the division of the Christian Church in the East which also led ultimately to schism with the Church in the West. Supplying a context by introduction of the two biblical interpretive schools of Alexandria and Antioch, the essay frames the reconstruction of Christian identity in the territories of the East catalyzed by conflict between the leading ecclesial figures of St. Cyril and Nestorius, and traces efforts to negotiate unity. A closing reflection on possible lessons from the struggle considers how historical objective, interpretive consensus, right relationships, or recognition of present unity may assist the work to find a form of meta-identity that may honor Christian diversity yet also disambiguate to a place of meaningful solidarity today.

This paper may be duplicated.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Justice". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

A Story of Identity in the Christian East

M a n y a N . G u s t a f s o n

“One day you’re in, the next, you’re out.” So goes the cautionary mantra repeated weekly by supermodel Heidi Klum, host of the long-running American reality show “Project Runway,” as she warns competing designers about how fickle the fashion industry can be; one puckering hemline on a rack of gowns and it’s back to altering prom dresses in the old hometown. On their way to selection as the next Versace or Chanel, the glamour devotees become a sequestered community of likeminded contenders, each receiving the same instruction for what is required to win the next challenge (or at least, be safe) in order to move on to the next round. Each week, a fellow contestant gets picked off. Each week, millions of viewers are treated to an edited digital transmission of human angst, dramatized reflection of their own relatable experiences, as they witness the hope, uncertainty, striving, alliances, misunderstandings, spats, reconciliations, and innumerable layers of human negotiation which unfold in shared quarters and the community of a workroom. By the time a victor emerges, s/he may have been in the top and in the bottom – even kicked off and brought back – by consensus of the judges’ panel at least a dozen or more times. It’s a roller coaster ride. And even though each one is confident in their identity as a creative top-gun, each experiences rejection and doubt along the way.

It may seem trivializing to rig an example of 21st-century entertainment as springboard to launch a discussion of fifth-century church history, but perhaps a ridiculous comparison helps to highlight how the distance from sacred to profane is sometimes a hair’s breadth. What is the comparison? It is to say that for the span of roughly 400 A.D. to 500 A.D. (give or take decades), the reality drama for the eastern Christian churches was also a roller coaster ride, filled with hope,

uncertainty, striving, alliances, misunderstandings, spats, reconciliations, and innumerable layers of human negotiation which unfolded in neighboring territories and in the wider community of a catholic church. Leaders of the Christian East were in and out (and maybe in or out again) at a dizzying pace. Seemingly, faith could be as fickle as fashion, but with more existential implications. It was a sober game, where prevailing meant holding title to identity as “the” true Christian Orthodox. There were contenders, judges, rounds, rules, wins, and losses. But, it may be argued, there is still no victor. The course of events between the major sees of the East, and between the East and West of the church in the mid-fifth century ultimately yielded “consequences for ecclesiastical unity that are still with us today.”¹ Indeed, the harvest was schism. It is observable that the institutional body of Christ is deprived of an outward unity, ironically, over dispute about how to imagine and describe the body and unity of Christ.²

It would be overstating the matter to suggest that the doctrine of Christ’s unity, as though bare and plucked from a vacuum, was the cause of what erupted, in and of itself. There is never a solitary factor at work in the crucible of conflict, in this case a clarifying process of communal identity, nor ever a simple product. Even less can the Christological problem be credited for the present state of affairs, having mainly retired to the dogmatic shadows during intervening centuries, giving way to other dissensions and disagreements. However, for the Christian East at that time, the doctrinal question, “who is Jesus Christ?” was part and parcel of defining who they were as faithful individuals and community. It was a kind of litmus by which to size up who is “us” and who is “not us,” from which to draw boundaries of inclusion or exclusion. “Religious identities do not have an objective existence that naturally arises out of an essential and distinct

¹ Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 59.

² St. Augustine reminds us that the church is a mysteriously composed unity, beyond institution, an understanding also apprehended in *Lumen Gentium* as “mystery of communion.”

package of religious traits. Rather they result from boundaries that are constructed by human actors, who choose to identify themselves with some people and differentiate themselves from others.”³ So when Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople in 428 C.E., challenged use of the title Θεοτόκος (God-Bearer) for Mary, he animated a host of human actors, led chiefly by St. Cyril of Alexandria, to a process of differentiation. What ensued re-configured the East’s religious identity forever.

The aim of this essay is to survey a story that will be characterized as a search for identity, manifest in religious community and clarified in the crucible of conflict, which led to schism among the eastern Christian churches. The task is to frame a context of shared yet disparate identities, and to notice subjective variables present in the milieu of struggle, behind otherwise neutral facts or concepts, variables which invariably agitated conflict and frustrated conciliation; namely, politics and personalities. The historical players were more than ghostly avatars known to us mainly by first names. They were living, breathing, flawed, ambitious, searching human beings engaged in the sweaty, and sometimes bloody, work of spiritual formation. This survey will endeavor to sound a tone of acceptance, remaining aware that personal imperatives were intrinsic and unavoidable, even necessary. Rather than supplying unembodied data by which to judge or lever the past for partisan ends, such an approach should instead spark recognition, and a curiosity about one’s own quest for identity in faith community, no matter which denomination, and may promote a more hopeful mindset for dialogue around religious identity and association.

We begin by drawing a historical outline, followed by a sketch of Alexandrian and Antiochene interpretive dispositions, which were contexts of identity for eastern Christians. Next we will paint a bit of the story through a lens of human actors, central in the fight for Orthodox

³ Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

identity, and finally there will be reflection on implications from the story to the search for unified identity today.

Background and Situation

A full tracing of the history of the churches up to the crux of this survey is obviously out of the question. To be thorough, it would need to start with the earliest records, such as the song of Miriam, the Exodus narrative, and the whole Torah, those traditions which began sowing seeds of identity among the Hebrew people. It is, after all, in the textual soil of the Israelites that the story of God's plan of salvation germinates and is cultivated through time into a flowering of prophetic fulfillment and the bloom of a new form, the *ekklesia*, who would be nourished in a communion of identity with the Lord as His very body. And as we will see, the wonder of Jesus' being and body is ground zero for division within the church from the fourth to fifth centuries.

Thinking of orthodoxy as an unbroken harmony of Christians from the first to fifth century is, of course, wrong. The fact is that followers of Jesus have had, and continue to have, debates over Jesus' teachings, passion, and resurrection from the start until now. The gospels, acts and letters contain ample evidence contra the notion of just one, undisturbed, nascent Christian community – as Sandwell says, 'no essential package' – sharing unchallenged consensus or well-defined identity. Paul operated rather independently of the first apostles and crafted a Christian theology that was not in lock-step with them, though his ministry did occasion an early example of consensus-building, at the Council of Jerusalem. It was in Antioch, aptly, where Paul scolded Peter, and it was his displeasure with John-Mark that compelled a temporary breach in cooperation with Barnabas. As well, Paul presciently warned the Ephesians about the inevitability of schismatic leaders, "Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the

disciples to follow them.”⁴ From the earliest, evidence suggests that church unity was not embodied as a homogenized outward model, and it was even expected that such a unity would surely be disrupted.

“Who do people say that I am?” elicited an assortment of answers about Jesus’ identity; John the Baptist, Elijah, a risen prophet, or yes, the Messiah.⁵ Indeed, Jesus’ messianic identity was crucial to the apostles, key to convincing fellow Jews and then Gentiles that Jesus was the promise of the Old Testament and the mode of salvation, fulfillment of the divine plan of God. This makes easy an acknowledgement that, in the beginning, Jewish identity and christian identity were entangled. The [minority] Jesus followers were “attached to the Jewish synagogues in the Mediterranean world, but tensions rising with the majority groups following from the exalted praise the Christians gave to Jesus as Son and Wisdom of God, led soon enough to regular schisms among the Judaeo-Christian settlements, and already by the time of the Gospel of John (which reflects the tension in its text). . . Christians were finding themselves increasingly ‘separate’ and learning to affirm their distinct identity.”⁶ Really, it might be better to say ‘identities within an identity.’ And the heritage of Jewish identity is a strand that remained, welcome or not, with the Church as it advanced through time.

The Gospel of John played a vital role in the development of ‘identities within identity’ among early Christianity and for the East in the fifth century because of its unique contribution to the Christological concept that Jesus was actually pre-existent God, in the flesh. From the prologue: “Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. . . καὶ ὁ λόγος

⁴ Acts 20:30, *New Revised Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013). Note: All scripture references will be NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Luke 9:18.

⁶ John McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church, An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2011), 9.

σὰρξ ἐγένετο, καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν” (in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .and the Word became flesh and lived among us).⁷ This passage would be interpreted and levered by rival exegetes, influencing various Christian communities to propose alternate expressions of Jesus’ united divinity and humanity, according to their subjective contexts and manner of expressing the “truth.” Long before the break among the eastern churches, the available Christological readings of the Fourth Gospel had sown schism. Johannine scholar Raymond Brown details the existence of an original group of Christians who constituted the Johannine community of the first century. According to Brown, the community was joined by “other” believers, whose Christological ideas likely had the effect of “raising” a more human sense of Jesus as Davidic Messiah to one which emphasized His divinity, a progression which Brown argued contributed to a break in that community, compelling members either to join an emerging orthodox organization or to join heterodox and increasingly gnostic fellowships.⁸

Arguments about Jesus’ nature grew in the heightening tension between those who we now identify as orthodox and the more gnostic-leaning believers, all of whom used and relied upon the circulating gospel texts, and all of whom accepted Jesus as Savior. Bishops such as Ignatius and Irenaeus would need to counter the so-called Gnostics in the second century, particularly the dehumanizing of Jesus drawn in part from the possibly gnosticizing hermeneutic of the Gospel of John. The finalizing and then canonization of the Fourth Gospel with the Bible in the early 300’s was part of the Orthodox engineering of a *regula fidei*, intended to fix a textual authority (superior to that of the likes of Marcion, who was intent on defining Jesus as an unnatural human apparition), and set boundaries for what was truly Christian and what was not; for who would be in and who

⁷ John 1:1, 14.

⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 166-170.

would be out. The scripture would be an anchor, along with tradition, for location of the Orthodox identity.⁹

Christianity's good fortune at the fourth century was the happy circumstance of Emperor Constantine's conversion. For a time, the Church would enjoy relatively unhindered growth under the favor of empire. The fourth century was not free of internal conflict, but generally represents a time of consolidation and systematizing within the now self-identifying catholic, ecumenical, churches in the West and East of the Roman territories. The struggle to articulate Jesus' nature and saving work culminated in a formulation of official Creed by consensus at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.

Nevertheless as Paul predicted, "there would be some" with competing doctrines, and the Church's greatest dangers were from within. During the 300's (having left gnostic trends mainly behind), a major threat to Church unity was Arianism, which protested the innovation of *homoousian* which made Jesus substantially equal to the Father. The Arians' conservative Christology rejected the new formula of Nicea. In this conflict were embedded factors that would contribute to the divisions in the East in the next century; for example, the Alexandrian see's perception of itself as a major player in the repulsion of the Arians and therefore protector of Orthodox identity, plus the fact that Arianism (though Arius himself was from Alexandria) was extant in the Antiochene territory of the Syrian East. Moreover, the Christological conclusions out of Syria would seem too close to a predominantly human Christ for the comfort of their Alexandrian brothers in Egypt.

⁹ See Francis Watson's chapter "The West: Towards Consensus" in *Gospel Writing* for discussion on the concept of the fourfold gospel put to use in refutation against the likes of Marcion (a target of Irenaeus, whose exegesis promoted an early form of the rule of faith). See also Watson's chapter "Limiting Plurality" on Eusebius' boundary-making with the four gospels for the canon.

But why would a “too human” Jesus be uncomfortable? Or on the other hand, what is the problem with a mainly divine Jesus, barely touching incarnation? Some answers are discerned in the two broadly-classified biblical interpretive schools in the East, the Alexandrian and the Antiochene, so-named for their geographical and ecclesiastical seats.¹⁰ The sense of “self,” that is, of the self as a human being is tethered to an ontological identity, which leads to a soteriological proposal fitting that identity. This is an abridged logical phrase intended to introduce the fact that the discomfort of the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools with each other’s Christological emphases was pinned to fundamentally different reference points, ontologically. Therefore, the means to salvation, the Savior, must function either to equip the human to be re-deified in the Alexandrian view, or to be re-united with God in the Antiochene view. These are two nuanced visions of a return to whole self, pure identity.

Following the defeat of Arianism, the remaining and unavoidable tension between the sees of Alexandria and Antioch by virtue of these distinct views of “self” comes into focus, their mutual frenemies no longer serving as a buffer of common cause. But it was the Constantinopolitan see and its bishop Nestorius which catalyzed St. Cyril of Alexandria to tip the dominos in a sequence of events that semi-concluded in the schism. In the first place, the 381 C.E. Council of Constantinople had granted primacy to Constantinople, the see of the “New Rome,” above Alexandria, a threat to Alexandrian ambition for supremacy in the East.¹¹ For Cyril, the exacerbating rub was that an Antiochene, Nestorius, was the empowered bishop of Constantinople and in a set of sermons rejecting the innovative title of *Theotokos* for Mary, Nestorius dialed up the burner making it too hot for Cyril to sit still. It is at this juncture, in 428 C.E., where the rival

¹⁰ “School” is used in the sense of a method of teaching, rather than referring to a physical school, though there was an actual school in the city of Alexandria.

¹¹ R.V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 4.

interpretive schools' simmering animosity bubbled into a fiery boil. The crucible of conflict was about to clarify who was in and who was out.

Biblical Interpretation

By the fifth century, the biblical texts were shaping a discourse “giving identity, morality and meaning to a new Christian culture.”¹² Christians were implicitly defining themselves as beneficiaries of a vibrant scriptural heritage. “Christians. . .self-identified as a ‘people’ with ancient traditions enshrined in a body of literature which they studied to find truth and the right way of life . . . they saw themselves as the rightful heirs of the promises of scripture . . . Scripture and issues of identity were intertwined.”¹³ As Roland Boer has said, “A group of people will form around the texts that gather people together. You have interpreters and people who try to organize their lives in terms of these texts.”¹⁴

Eastern Christianity is generally understood to have organized its identity around the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools of biblical exegesis which, though sharing the same corpus and essential presupposition that the canon is God’s revelation, deployed distinct hermeneutical approaches instrumental to the split of the church in the East. Here, we begin to see the way in which events would reflect not simply the search for a catholic church self, but the material consequences of complex subjective priorities realized through the influence of individual biblical interpreters and their adherents, all of whom were personally invested in the search for identity assisted by scripture. The geography of the two exegetical schools starts to equip one with a sense

¹² Frances Young, opening epigraph in *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹³ Frances Young, “Interpretation of Scripture,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies, Oxford Handbooks Online*, (September 2009): 4, accessed September 29, 2015, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199271566.003.0042].

¹⁴ Roland Boer, “What Has Marxism to Do with Religion?” lecture, University of Auckland, (September 9, 2015): video, accessed September 19, 2015 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOmT5nRSCeE] (at video time mark 6:10).

of how each received and handled the texts. As Frances Young notes, the interpreters did not study in isolation from the life, culture, and intellectual world in which they lived.¹⁵

As a major city of the imperial East, Antioch's position in Syria meant that the Christian church there was embedded in "the most intellectual portion of early Christendom."¹⁶ While the city was thoroughly Greek in its life and culture, it nevertheless was a "Greek island in a Semitic sea."¹⁷ According to Robert Sellers, there were more Jews in and around Antioch than in any other city of the "Dispersion," which logically suggests a native doctrinal tradition favorable to the historical and literal meanings of the scripture.¹⁸ Self-identification for Jews rested in their history as a people, as attested in the Hebrew texts, and Jews were pipeline Christians. To the extent that a number of Jews accepted Jesus as messiah and became Christian, they brought with them a self-sense derived from their Judaic roots, as well as a heritage in the holy texts through which all Christians had also come to the faith.

In Antioch, along with gentile Christians, there were both Jewish Christians and Judaizing Christians, a mix that presented no small distress, for example, to John Chrysostom. By his time, the Christian Church had an ecclesiological identity, rituals and practice, which were distinct from their Jewish cousins. However, some Christians were choosing to participate in Jewish observance and, for Chrysostom, Christians needed to choose between the Church and the synagogue.¹⁹ The Church leadership followed an impulse to distinguish its practice and observance, to construct an independent identity from Judaism. But this should not be taken as cause to doubt the particular Jewish influence on the Antiochene school of interpretation. It was intrinsic. "Christianity, which

¹⁵ Young, "Interpretation of Scripture," 4.

¹⁶ Cardinal John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 284.

¹⁷ Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 4.

¹⁸ Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, 158.

¹⁹ Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, 78.

emerged as a religious movement distinct from Judaism. . . never completely severed its ties with the religion that had given it birth.”²⁰ Even though Chrysostom and the Church were keen to resist a conflation of identity with Judaism, the theological heritage bound up in the Antiochene scriptural interpretation belies at least an ongoing co-identification, and colors its interpretation and defense of a Christology expressed as “two natures.”

Not surprisingly then, the Antiochene interpreters appreciated the narrative, or story of the scripture, and valued the historical bases contained therein. It is not a stretch to assert that the sense of self in the Antiochene school was informed by Jewish creation theology, which identifies God as Creator and man as creature. The self, man or woman, was not a being imbued with the divine spark, as the Alexandrians imagined, but was created “other” from God. Such an ontological identity demanded a Messiah of like nature, one who came into his own (worthwhile) creation as a creature, fully human, in order to bridge the gap and make re-union with God possible. Furthermore the distinction between God and human must always be clear, since the creature and the Creator are by nature separate.

The “Interpreter,” Theodore of Mopsuestia, is the Syrian bishop known for best articulating the biblical interpretation of the Antiochene school, and his theological influence was a painful thorn in the Alexandrian limbs of the ecclesial body. To follow how the Antiochenes identified as human beings, and what that meant to a concept of Jesus as a Savior, consider Theodore’s interpretive conclusion.

“It is well known that the one who is eternal and the one whose existence has a beginning are greatly separated from each other, and the gulf found between them is unbridgeable.”²¹

²⁰ Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, 68.

²¹ Rowan Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Westminster: The Faith Press, 1961), 18.

Theodore held a high doctrine of God as Creator, so he “saw man as primarily a creature,” which led him to “draw the line between *genetos-agenetos* very heavily. Man’s salvation, therefore, was not to be described as his divinization, but rather as the fulfilment of the community of man and God that was man’s by virtue of creation. This fulfilment was thought of as being brought about by Christ, the perfect image of God.”²² For Theodore’s student, Nestorius, the consequence of this sense of self meant holding a theology of the Savior as not “one,” but “two natures,” keeping the divine always separate, characterizing the incarnation as an assumption rather than indwelling. Under such a model, the idea of a human woman, Mary, bearing the divine was impossible since creature cannot bear Creator. For the Alexandrians, whose emphasis was the “one” unity from two natures, this amounted to a heretical division of Christ, a heresy in need of elimination.

Alexandria was not without its own robust and long-present Jewish population and influence. But the slant of the interpretive school in Egypt reflects a self-identification aligned more with Platonic presuppositions of the Hellenistic age. “In its popular form this philosophy led men to hold that man was an immortal soul in a mortal body, that man’s problem was essentially his imprisonment in matter, and that man’s destiny was to escape his body and have his soul released so as to be reunified with the divine stuff from which it had proceeded.”²³ This, of course, was a kind of dualism that fueled the elitist pursuit of a gnostic savior by those who had, by the fifth century, been squeezed out of the orthodoxy.²⁴ But the sense of self as a human infused with divine spark residually continued to illumine an Alexandrian lens on scripture, alternative to the

²² Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 19.

²³ Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 13.

²⁴ A study of the Alexandrian school cannot avoid revealing very close and even overlapping ideas between orthodox Christian allegory and gnosticism. For this reason some Christian interpreters in this tradition were suspected, either during or after their lives, of aberrant orthodoxy.

Antiochene view of a separate Creator and creature. With such a lens, the Christology favored a “one” nature expression, emphasizing divine unity over separateness.

Interestingly, it was Philo, a Jew, who prepared the way for the Alexandrian Christians’ interpretive angle. “From the Stoics Philo had learned to divide allegorization into two classes and interpreted scripture, in part, according to those classifications (physical and ethical allegory).²⁵ “In [Philo’s] mind many of the insights of Judaism, properly understood, do not differ from the highest insights of Greek philosophy. God revealed himself . . . in no radically different way from the way in which he revealed himself to the Greeks. And therefore Philo finds it necessary to explain [scripture] in favor of a philosopher’s God and a Hellenistic man’s internationalism.”²⁶

One of the appeals of an allegorical method of interpretation was that it provided a way to cope with difficult passages. If a story or scripture is fantastical, impossible, senseless, or contradictory, the allegorical method encourages the exegete to use one or more “senses” to deal with it: historical, doctrinal, prophetic, philosophical, or mystical.²⁷ Armed with such a spread of options, difficulties turn into opportunities. The trouble, though, with such flexibility is the possibility for a narrative to be robbed of its historical ground, rendering certain premises invalid; for instance, if the story of the Garden of Eden can be made allegory instead of history, its evacuation as a real event precipitating the Fall of man neutralizes the need for a savior, an argument used by Theodore of Mopsuestia to demonstrate a defect of the allegorical method. For an Alexandrian, the sense of self as a creature is not determinative, rather the perception of the divine in humanity cultivated a preference for the unity of Jesus’ divinity with his body.

²⁵ Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 52-53.

²⁶ Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 54.

²⁷ Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 56.

While scholars hasten to clarify that both schools of interpretation were grounded and surrounded in both Jewish theology and Hellenistic philosophy, it was a matter of emphasis in one or the other direction that brought them to divergent ways of imagining Jesus' being. "In considering Christian exegesis, it is necessary to realize that in great measure that exegesis was determined by Jewish ideas on the subject. . . considered under two headings. First, the Palestinian Jews interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures largely in terms of the Law. Second, the Alexandrian Jews were more directly influenced by such Hellenistic phenomena as Stoic allegorization of Homer."²⁸ Emphasis then, emerges as the essential (and powerful) difference between the Antiochenes and the Alexandrians, and this because of how their interpretative contexts shaped who they thought they were to begin with, their sense of self, and therefore, who or what Jesus must be in order to bring them back to themselves. In the case of the Antiochenes, an identity contoured by a distinct Jewish theology of Creation preferred to emphasize Jesus' humanity and keep the divine separate, whereas their Alexandrian brothers' identity, infused more by philosophy, mitigated the importance of His humanity and focused on the divine destiny once known and now held back by the flesh.

Beyond Interpretation, People and Politics

So, the fundamental context of what happens in the mid-fifth century is a theological sense of self which informs the different brethren of the East, distinct identities within the Christian identity, derived from the emphases of their respective biblical interpretations. Who and what are we? Are we divine souls transiently obfuscated by the material burden of flesh, or are we human creatures uncoupled by sin from God, anticipating a re-union with the Divine? Furthermore, who else is like us, with whom we can identify and work together on our way to restoration? But to

²⁸ Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 86. Note: The Antiochene school is here understood to be more closely aligned with the Palestinian Jews' interpretive emphasis.

understand the fact that the two schools of thought were abiding together in one catholic community is to understand that there was at least as much in common as not, apart from initiatives of uniformity that would force dissociation, which is what finally unfolded. And some scholars caution against viewing the opposing interpretive proposals as more definitive than they actually may have been in the division. This leads one to consider who or what other factors, in addition to interpretive contexts, stoked the fires of the crucible. Since the Church had managed to co-exist and cooperate with variant theological identities within its catholicity for so long, left alone it might have maintained unity indefinitely.

But theological identities were conjoined (to pun) with political identities. In a manner of thinking, the theological resides in the community as largely conceptual. The political is concrete mobilization, when the human actors act to advance, explain, challenge, defend, and ostensibly embody the concepts held true. For the Christian East, the men and women with political power may be seen as the “active ingredient” of the discordant potion, however sincerely the cause was thought to be doctrine, as the doctrine is inert without the people.²⁹ These human actors, as Sandwell names them, were the agents of change, constructing new boundaries and choosing to identify with some and differentiate from others.

The competing Christologies, then, were given form and voice by their leaders, who being human, were prone to subjective agendas. In Nestorius’ stand and Cyril’s reaction, the East meets East – Antioch counters Alexandria, and Alexandria is quickened to response. The debate is centered narrowly on the viability of *Theotokos*, but more broadly on settling who Jesus was as the Savior. For about a century, it was enough to have universal and dedicated consensus around the Nicene Creed “with nothing added,” to sustain a shared identity. But when the bishops of

²⁹ Today it is admitted that practically speaking, though still ‘politically’ divided, the churches have essentially the same theologies.

Constantinople and Alexandria came to loggerheads, the political priorities and personalities ensured a volatile encounter well out of the relatively safe bounds of the creedal economy.

Cyril was not a pure Alexandrian defender, having even repudiated Origen, the epitome of Alexandrian thought.³⁰ Young notes that Cyril's exegetical practice was eclectic, and closer in practice to the Antiochenes than one would assume. The clash, then, was as much personal as it was doctrinal, and it may be said that personal and political identity are of a piece, particularly as situated behind ecclesial ambition. The unavoidably personal agendas become visible through the actions and writings of the subjects.

Already mentioned as the catalyzing flashpoint is Nestorius' bold and unapologetic rejection of the term *Theotokos*, and insistence on Jesus' two natures, human and divine. As an Antiochene, a theological motivation for Nestorius was the need to keep Jesus' humanity separate from His divinity as Creator. But his newfound political juice as bishop of the imperial city was undoubtedly a stimulating intoxicant. By all accounts, he was no shrinking violet and lost little time after his appointment in making promises and making enemies. In his inaugural sermon before the Emperor he puffed, "Give me, O Emperor, the earth purged of heretics, and I will give you heaven in return."³¹ Within days of his enthronement, he went zealously to a program of persecution and harassment against Arians, Macedonians and Quartodecimans. Probably more hazardous to Nestorius' prospects for his tenure, however, was his clumsy alienation of the monastic party of Constantinople and the royal Augusta Pulcheria.³² No amount of doctrinal

³⁰ Lionel Wickham, trans. and ed., *Cyril of Alexandria Select Letters, Oxford Early Christian Texts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press *Cyril of Alexandria Select Letters*, 1983), xv.

³¹ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 31.

³² Phillip Andrew Dancy, "Nestorius and the rejection of Theotokos: his political and social condemnation." *Fides Et Historia* 37-38, no. 2-1 (2005): 151-163. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 13, 2016).

integrity could have burnished such a dull political acumen. That was his downfall, perhaps more so than whether his theology was orthodox or heretical. Cyril, the more politically savvy of the two rivals, was able to exploit the consequences of Nestorius' political miscalculations.

Cyril had wrestled for the orthodox identity before, but he must have found Nestorius especially inflammatory (all the more for having the powerful role that he did). "The difference in tone between Cyril's writings against the Arians and those against Nestorius is striking. The latter are altogether more vehement and expressed in much more personal terms. With the appearance of Nestorius, Cyril felt himself challenged at the vital core of his faith, and not by a heretic on the margins of the catholic Church but by the bishop of the imperial city itself whose views inevitably commanded a wide audience."³³ "Cyril's energies were predominantly directed against [Nestorius] and his school of thought. . .the controversy itself was perhaps unavoidable. . .[and] was determined by matters of personality and Church politics."³⁴

For his part, Nestorius is said to have blamed the political ambitions both of local Constantinopolitan pretenders and of the see of Alexandria (Cyril) for blowing a local matter up into an ecumenical disaster. As Wickham says, "That the dispute was not simply of local importance was to be proved by subsequent events."³⁵ In the lead up to the 431 Council of Ephesus, Cyril masterfully orchestrated a political scheme that included securing support from the monks, rousing allies to action, writing treatises and circulating appeals to the royal court and to the see of Rome, as well as bribing all who were taking and who could help his cause, which was "God's cause." It was a "powerful bid for supremacy."³⁶ It worked. Nestorius got the boot (though Cyril suffered his own temporary kick, possibly enough of a close call to encourage his later diplomatic

³³ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 31.

³⁴ Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria Select Letters*, xix.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, 3-5.

engagement with Antioch). But the polemical manner in which events at Ephesus were handled, rather than settling matters for the Orthodox identity, initiated the schism.³⁷

In the subsequent crucible of councils and synods at Ephesus, Constantinople, and Chalcedon between 431 C.E. to 451 C.E., depositions, appointments, excommunications, exiles, re-installations, and even homicide rolled out for the sake of the Truth, whether the Alexandrian proposal of a “one nature” or the Antiochene proposal of “two.” Holy men accused, confessed, changed sides, yelled, connived, and were in and out of position repeatedly over the course of the twenty years following Nestorius’ ill-conceived challenge of *Theotokos*. But there was always some kind of agreement. Each trial that was convened in the effort to clarify the orthodox identity wound up with some kind of consensus, however coerced or temporary it may have been. It scarcely escapes a disinterested reader of the correspondence that much of the time, the players were actually in violent agreement but could not perceive or admit this to be the case, preferring instead to demand linguistic uniformity or anathematization or, when those could not be achieved, declare another round.

The wisdom goes, “when war fails, try diplomacy.” The deposition of Nestorius had only partly satisfied Cyril and his party, who really would not be happy until all of Nestorius’ peers had explicitly denounced and anathematized him. Part of the resistance from Syria was the outrage over Cyril’s *Twelve Chapters*, a document of propositions that were “deliberately phrased in uncompromising terms” to “force” Nestorius into compliance or out himself as a heretic.³⁸ The document was a polemical political device that would, regrettably, obstruct repairs to Church unity in the following years, and Cyril was compelled to pen explanations of the *Chapters* in order to

³⁷ Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, 11.

³⁸ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 175.

smooth the way for shorter-term diplomacy with Antioch (without recanting it on risk of undoing the undoing of Nestorius).³⁹

Attempts to reclaim the “peace of the Church” were relieved, briefly, in the negotiation between Cyril and the bishop John of Antioch. As John moved to accept the term *Theotokos*, citing the pivotal chapter one of John’s Gospel, Cyril was moved to accept a formula that accommodated the two natures. In 433 C.E., the Formulary of Reunion became a working peace treaty for the feuding parties. Here is an excerpt:

“A union of two natures has been effected and therefore we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord. By virtue of this understanding of the union which involves no merging, we acknowledge the holy Virgin to be ‘Mother of God’ because God the Word was ‘made flesh’ and ‘became man’ and united to himself the temple he took from her as a result of her conception. As for the terms used about the Lord in the Gospels and apostolic writings, we recognize that theologians treat some as shared because they refer to one person, some they refer separately to two natures. . .”⁴⁰

In the Formula, Cyril won the *Theotokos*, and the Antiochenes won codification of a two-nature expression. The personal and political wills of these two key bishops had forged what moderns call a “win-win.” Critics, though, were not hesitant to point out what in today’s political rhetoric would be called Cyril’s flip flop, asserting that his acceptance of the Formula amounted

³⁹ The *Chapters* may have been a political miscalculation on Cyril’s part, who may not have anticipated that the *Chapters* would be shared and then widely circulated, appended as they were to his third letter to Nestorius. They caused what we call today “unintended consequences.”

⁴⁰ Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria Select Letters*, appendix.

to a contradiction of his own *Twelve Chapters*.⁴¹ The Formula itself was a middle-way effort to resolve the breach, and was used as the basis of the formal confession of faith in the Chalcedonian Definition, which would also finally prove insufficient to prop unity in the East.

Peace had been grasped, but it was an uneasy peace. Cyril's expansive political maneuvers had ignited a fuel that would not readily be snuffed. The problem was that the extreme elements upon whom he relied for enthusiastic support to depose Nestorius refused to be calmed or cajoled into what they perceived as a compromise harking back to a Nestorian platform.⁴² While Cyril was willing to permit the *Twelve Chapters* to slide quietly into a face-saving background, the text had provided a rallying standard of resistance for one-nature hardliners. Cyril and John of Antioch's repair to a teetering Eastern construction of identity would not hold.

If Cyril had been the "disturber of the peace," it was his successor, Dioscorus whom we might say shredded it, being the Alexandrian politico who was "ready to fling moderation to the winds, to destroy root and branch the doctrine of two natures."⁴³ The scope of this essay precludes detailing the series of confrontations under Dioscorus' leadership, which drew out the snagged yarn of peace to unravel common identity in the East. Cyril's *Twelve Chapters* and *mia physis* slogan had become popular footings for a new construction of identity being built among intransigent "Cyrillians" in support of the one-nature doctrine. Following the archimandrite Eutyches' (exemplar of monophysitism) trials of 448 and 449, and the ungainly death of the Emperor by a fall from his horse in 450, a pivotal council to salvage Eastern unity was convened at Chalcedon in 451, under the new political priorities of the royals Pulcheria and Marcian.

⁴¹ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 54.

⁴² To be sure, two-nature "irreconcilables" on the other side of the aisle eagerly continued with their own agendas.

⁴³ Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, 29.

The Council was large and ecumenically representative but, to oversimplify, only satisfied the moderate Antiochenes, moderate Alexandrians, and Rome. It produced a *Definitio Fidei*, the “Definition” of Christ as one person or hypostasis ‘made known in two natures’ without confusion or change, a “skillful synthesis of the traditions of both East and West, but it lacked popular appeal and was widely seen as a betrayal of Cyril.”⁴⁴ Naturally, disputes and unrest continued. In Alexandria, the Cyrillian majority were in conflict with those who accepted Chalcedon and in 482 the Emperor Zeno attempted a fix through an edict known as the *Henotikon*. Though it went farther than similar precedents by including the *Twelve Chapters* and enjoyed an initially favorable reception in the East, it did not achieve its purpose. “Not only did it provoke a schism with Rome – the prelude as Grillmeier has called it, of the *status schismatis* between East and West – but it failed to reconcile the monophysite extremists in both Egypt and Palestine.”⁴⁵ The stream of initiatives over the next number of decades intended to keep it all together were already on the downslope of the arc toward schism. The die was cast. In 543, Jacob Baradaeus was made bishop of Edessa and established a secessionist church with its own hierarchy, known as the ‘Jacobites’ or ‘Monophysites’ (Miaphysites).

Norman Russell nicely summarizes what the crucible of conflict, warmed in the context of shared but disparate theological identities articulated by the two interpretive schools, then fired in the scorching heat of political human activity, clarified; namely, a differentiated orthodox identity, nuanced identities within Christian identity.

“Most Eastern Christian communities defined themselves in relation to Cyril’s teaching. The more strict Antiochenes,

⁴⁴ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 61.

⁴⁵ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 62. Note: the investment of the West in unity, seen by the contribution of the Tome of Leo, was a major factor in Chalcedon, but was ignored in the *Henotikon*.

who...could not accept the Formulary of Reunion, flourished on the eastern borders of the empire and in Persian territory, calling themselves the Church of the East. Those who were able to interpret Chalcedon in a Cyrillian manner remained in communion with the Imperial Church and were known as Melchites. The narrower Cyrillians, however, who regarded Chalcedon as incompatible with the *Twelve Chapters*...were lost permanently to the Imperial Church in the sixth century and survive today as the Oriental Orthodox Churches.”⁴⁶

To have embraced the Nicene Creed, as all parties claimed to do since its promulgation, was insufficient in the end because the Creed was itself only an “outward verbal expression of an inwardly existing Faith, and Faith is a spiritual energy which sympathetically welcomes a revealed Truth.”⁴⁷ The *Theotokos* confrontation exposed where some of the Church inwardly were not in sympathy with others on what was revealed Truth. The spiritual energy of Faith was manifestly variant (some may argue not “variant,” BUT that some were either “in” the right Faith or simply without it), as witnessed not only by alternate biblical interpretations, but particularly through political human action. “And one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”⁴⁸

So, it was a kind of organic and inevitable deconstruction of one religious identity which, at the same time, was also a construction of new identities. Construction as metaphor may not be the most sensitive, however, since the catholicity of community was never completely disassembled, and the new forms were not entirely new edifices. It may be better to think of the

⁴⁶ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 63.

⁴⁷ T.H. Bindley, preface to *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1925).

⁴⁸ Matthew 10:36.

human actors as engineering transformation, rather than bulldozing or building whole structures. Nevertheless, to recall Sandwell's phrasing, the Eastern Church did re-configure boundaries, choosing to identify themselves and differentiate themselves from, not the total "other," but *one another*. Had Nestorius been more measured in his exercise of power, and had Cyril not lobbied so successfully to push Nestorius out, or at least if Cyril had not gone so far as composing the documents of *Twelve Chapters* and advancing his *mia physis*, the East may have fared better. We cannot know. Hypothetical rearrangements after the fact are pragmatically moot, and as things go, the same division might have simply unfolded at the hands of other politicians on a different timeline. Their transformative process did repeat and compound throughout the balance of Christian experience, as the West encountered its own turbulent renovations as well.

Reflections and Conclusion

The thousands of identities within Christian identity in the world of the 21st-century betray a need to contemplate whether there are lessons from what happened in the East during the fifth century, which may suggest paths to finding some form of meta-identity capable of honoring the diversity yet possibly disambiguate to a place of meaningful solidarity. For some, appealing to history may seem useless. Of such Newman reports, "To seek in history the matter of that Revelation which has been vouchsafed to mankind; that they cannot be historical Christians if they would. They say. . . 'There are popes against popes, councils against councils, some fathers against others, the same fathers against themselves, a consent of fathers of one age against a consent of fathers of another age, the Church of one age against the Church of another age' – Hence they are forced. . . to fall back upon the Bible as the sole source of Revelation, and upon their own personal private judgement as the sole expounder of its doctrine."⁴⁹ If by appealing to history we are

⁴⁹ Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6.

asserting that the point is to be “historical” Christians, then it does seem of limited value. In this objection to a historical appeal there is, perhaps, a lesson of its own. When appeal to history is for the sake of resetting to an ancient embodiment of Christian identity, it is precisely then that the historical is bound to fall short as help for the present, not of its own fault but because it is an anachronistic objective. Setting aside a less than relevant goal, however, liberates the history to freely inform more current circumstances and needs.

To the notion that our lesson might be somehow in the Bible as source of Revelation, and a fall back to it in some way, George Lindbeck has proposed a return to what he calls “classic” biblical interpretation in order to recover religious community.⁵⁰ He appears to imagine something reminiscent of an Antiochene emphasis, giving preference to the texts as narrative, over and against modern critical methods which may tend to obscure the “mind” of scripture. It is an ideal, but possibly implausible for a number of reasons, not least that it amounts to a redux of debates left unreconciled for sixteen hundred years. It is a forgivable conceit to believe that modern actors will somehow reach a new destination by re-trekking a worn path. The path of “consensus on interpretation” will mostly stop short, in part because it targets an objective which itself is not universally stipulated and is also inherently improbable since it demands the sustained alignment of subjective imperatives across a spectrum of fluid, politically-mediated agendas. Besides this, it is imprecise to think of a modern solution as “classic,” since “anything we produce today, even if it is produced by contact with old ideas, ‘would be something new.’”⁵¹ “We can admit today that objectivity in the interpretation of any work of the human spirit is an elusive aim; the interpreter

⁵⁰ George Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” *This world*. Vol. 23, (1988): 5 -24.

⁵¹ Mark Kelly, “Foucault, Subjectivity, and Technologies of the Self,” *A Companion to Foucault*, (Blackwell, 2013), 510-525, accessed November 21, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/4267297/Foucault_Subjectivity_and_Technologies_of_the_Self] 521.

always reads something of his own thought into what he interprets.”⁵² On contemplating the catholicity of the East regardless of their different hermeneutical emphases for centuries, and on admitting that any work of interpretation is by nature not subjective but variable, one could argue that a call to reclaim a uniform method of biblical interpretation is little more than fancy, especially since there has never been a single, “classic” method anyway.⁵³

On reflection, next to any sound reading of scripture, what we might discern from a survey of the Eastern schism is a need for right relationships. This is not a fresh insight, and is rather obvious upon review of the (ancient and modern) narratives detailing the “ins” and “outs” of people negotiating religious identity. The importance of relationships is acknowledged and discussed ad nauseum in efforts to think about and act toward unity. Such acknowledgement is critical and has surely helped, but talk and task forces will likely continue to reach caps on progress as long as unity is persistently characterized as something yet to be achieved. Perhaps unity already is. To take the lessons reflection a level deeper, then, beyond right readings or relationships, there is a need for *recognition* of something that may be right under our noses.

St. Benedict spoke of “listening with the ear of the heart.” Maybe it is worth adding that we learn also to “see with eyes of the heart.” At the moment, there continues to be fervor around the work of “achieving unity,” and healing divisions, and bridging gaps. The core assumption common to all is that everyone sees, or perceives, disunity, woundedness, and separateness. Nothing is truer than “what you see is what you get.” This does not to diminish or discount the real events of harm and hardship that have transformed religious identities through discord and differentiation. But it is a challenge to the conventional wisdom about how things are, or maybe

⁵² Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 61.

⁵³ Pope John Paul II, “Orientale Lumen,” sec. 5, para. 1. “In the study of revealed truth East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and confessing divine things.” The Pope considered this complementary, not problematic.

are not. John Paul II alludes to this concept while recounting the historical drift of the Christian West and East, “it was a progressive estrangement, so that the other’s diversity was no longer *perceived* as a common treasure but as incompatibility.”⁵⁴ There was a time when different did not mean division. That time is also now, if we are willing to recognize it. From the Eastern spiritual heritage of the *Way of the Pilgrim*, the monk Nikitas Stithatos is quoted, “The person who has attained true prayer and love does not differentiate things”⁵⁵ The implication of this is that, in actuality, unity already exists and needs only to be recognized, realized in this case through spiritual practice.

Einstein wrote, “A human being. . .experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.”⁵⁶ This begs the question of whether in continuing to characterize themselves as disunified, the religious are not in fact, nourishing a delusion that, if recognized and released, could lead to a peace of mind (or peace of the Church). Again, John Paul senses this in tone of acknowledgement, “it appears that true union is possible...without claiming that the whole array of uses and customs in the Latin Church is more complete or better...and again, that this union must be preceded by an *awareness* of communion.”⁵⁷ He is short of explicitly saying that there already is unity, but the essence of his statement betrays at least a tacit recognition. As it goes with ecclesiastical pronouncements on this

⁵⁴ John Paul, II, “Orientale Lumen,” sec 18, para. 2. (italics were added for emphasis)

⁵⁵ Aleksei Pentkovsky, ed., *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 122.

⁵⁶ Albert Einstein, letter to Robert S. Marcus, February 12, 1950, Albert Einstein Archives, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, archive call number 61-225, accessed December 11, 2015, [<http://alberteinstein.info/vufind1/Record/EAR000025409>].

⁵⁷ John Paul, II, “Orientale Lumen,” sec. 20, para. 3. (italics were added for emphasis)

kind of difficulty, he follows with “unity will be achieved how and when the Lord desires.”⁵⁸ Here again, it is phrased “unity *will be* achieved.” For all who are in the Lord, in Christ, can it not be recognized that unity already is? Why do we insist on calling it future because of our own blindness and need for human forms as proof?

If a recognition of the already present kingdom and unity achieved by Jesus in His body can dawn on Christians everywhere, then maybe the burden of “achieving” unity through human effort can be lightened.⁵⁹ Human councils and committees may no longer need to do for Christ what He has done Himself, though they may promote recognition of it widely and gladly. Luke 9:49 records the identification with Jesus and use of his name by some who were not among the core disciples, but who must have also been believers on some level: “ ‘Master, we saw some casting out demons in your name. . . Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.””

The story of the Christian East, and all Christians, continues to be written in the search for identity, for the desire of a whole “self.” The humanity of the search ensures there will be conflict, and constructions of identification and differentiation will undoubtedly bring more transformations as human actors choose religious identities. Nestorius, Cyril and the scores of other holy men and women of the fifth century were bound to act subjectively and politically. How else can humans act? Then, as now, it may have been that the unity of Christ, of the Church, was not lost in the sense of doctrine or hierarchical dissociation, but rather became obfuscated by the blindness that accompanies a need for more and more outward assurances, thinking of uniformity as the same as unity. In turning back to the inner truth, to open the eyes of the heart, there is a possibility of recognizing the unity that has always been, is, and forever will be – the unity is the Lord. It may

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Matthew 11:28.

only be a matter of recognition, which on seeing, frees all spiritual energy (Faith) to find new work.

There is a world full of need for new applications of that Faith.

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