

Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and the Faith Choice

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Introduction

In this paper I compare and contrast the Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies, which I argue are each logically flawed, as was the Church's solution to the dispute between the two schools given at the Council of Chalcedon. I maintain that Christ's dual nature is *the* fundamental religious tension, and being logically irreconcilable, serves as a natural precursor to faith, which is a mystery amenable only to tangentially apprehended truth: the allegory, mysticism and Platonic dialectic of the Alexandrians, who won the battle but lost the war at Chalcedon, and not to reason, logic, or even scriptural interpretation. Finally, I argue that such faith is on the decline in the modern era despite powerful practical incentives to believe, that the Alexandrian position is resurging, and that the authority and power of the Church is correspondingly waning, due at least in part to its history of arbitrary and heavy-handed edicts like the one given at Chalcedon.

The Two Schools

The Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies were radically opposed in their conception of the person of Christ.¹ While both schools used a variety of exegetical methods to support their theological conclusions, Alexandrians, drawing heavily from Neoplatonism,² largely employed allegory and mysticism to advocate for the union of the human and divine in Christ.³ Antiochenes used a more literal, historical approach, arguing for a sharp and almost total distinction between human and divine, and for the predominance of Christ's humanity on earth.⁴ Consequently, Antiochenes tended to see salvation as eschatological (the full benefits of salvation will only be realized in the final state), while Alexandrians saw it as present in the living Church.⁵

Christ's dual nature represents perhaps *the* fundamental religious tension because the human and the divine are logically irreconcilable in one entity.

Human beings are "culture-bearing primates classified in the genus *Homo*, especially the species *Homo sapiens*, anatomically similar and related to the great apes (orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas) but distinguished by a more highly developed brain that allows for the capacity for articulate speech and abstract reasoning."⁶

¹ Brian E. Daley, SJ, 'Antioch and Alexandria: Christology as Reflection on God's Presence in History', *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 15 Feb. 2018), accessed 31 Oct. 2024.

² Andrew Sibley, "Origen, Origins, and Allegory," *Creation.com*, last modified 2019, accessed October 31, 2024.

³ "School of Antioch," *Wikipedia.org* (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., August 24, 2004), last modified August 24, 2004, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁴ Brian E. Daley, SJ, 'Antioch and Alexandria: Christology as Reflection on God's Presence in History', *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 15 Feb. 2018), accessed 31 Oct. 2024.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "What Is a Human Being? | Britannica," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified 2024, accessed October 31, 2024.

Divine means as “relating to or coming from God or a god” i.e. “divine will/law/love/inspiration.”⁷ Thus, God may be defined as “the proposition that there is a supreme *supernatural* or *preternatural* being that is the creator or sustainer or ruler of the universe and all things in it, including human beings.”⁸

God is typically “conceived as perfect and unfathomable by humans, as all-powerful and all-knowing (omnipotent and omniscient), and as the source and ultimate ground of morality.”⁹

The concept/definition of God is therefore diametrically opposed to the concept/definition of human. Zero cannot equal one. In strictly logical terms, neither the Alexandrian nor Antiochene model was valid, as each admitted to some (even if infinitesimal) divine/human nature in earthly Christ, which violates the dialectic/binary model. Logic requires that an all-or-nothing choice be made between the two states of human and divine.

This was obviously unacceptable to, well, everyone in the early Church, so at the Council of Chalcedon in CE 451, the religious dispute over the nature of the person of Christ was ‘resolved’ with the irrational declaration that Jesus Christ was “perfect in deity and perfect in humanity.”¹⁰ The Council further stated that Jesus is like humans in all ways, except for sin,¹¹ reasoning that because of his perfect humanity He was capable of being tempted like any other human, but due to his divinity, he *could not* sin. According to the Council, Jesus experienced the “full force of temptation without succumbing to it,” which is essentially a parroting of Hebrews 4:15 (Jesus was “tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin”).¹² This was of course circular reasoning. Jesus isn’t “perfectly human” if He cannot sin, and what is the point of even considering the temptation of Christ if His divinity precluded the free will necessary either to indulge or abstain? The very word/concept of temptation is rendered a nullity when choice is taken out of the equation. In other words, if Jesus did not have the *power* to sin, then who cares that he was tempted, and what does that say about his omnipotence?

Thus the Council of Chalcedon resolved a *political* dispute, not a logical one, and it resolved that dispute in a way that benefited itself, by favoring Antiochenes more literal, historical approach, by imposing a sharp, almost arbitrary, nonsensical rule that did little except increase its power and authority to speak *ex cathedra* at the *next* dispute, with even less regard to reason or scriptural authority. The Alexandrians thus ‘won the battle but lost the war,’ as their mystical, allegorical, and dialectical approach to the apprehension of what is fundamentally a mystery of

⁷ “Divine Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary.” @Britannica. Last modified 2024. Accessed October 29, 2024.

⁸ “Existence of God | History, Philosophy, & Arguments,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified June 18, 2020, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “What Happened at the Council of Chalcedon?” Zondervan Academic, last modified 2018, accessed November 1, 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Theological Traditions of Alexandria and Antioch - Gerald Bray |,” Biblicaltraining.org, last modified 2024, accessed November 1, 2024.

faith was replaced by an arbitrary, irrational edict of the Church, establishing a pattern that is only now being broken.

Christ's dual nature is not amenable to logic or reason or even scriptural interpretation. It is *the* fundamental mystery of faith, and may be understood only tangentially, like Calculus, or a Buddhist koan, via the allegory, mysticism and Platonic dialectic advocated by the Alexandrians, all of which were crushed at Chalcedon. Faith is fundamentally an emotional state, not a rational one.

The Church grew despite its heavy-handedness because faith, the choice to believe in the divinity of Christ, has been the easy favorite on the *utilitarian* scale, not the *deontological* one.

First, there is the practical selfish logic of Pascal's wager. "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."¹³

Faith also provides individuals an opportunity to acquire socioeconomic and political power. For example, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in CE 70 and contemporary persecution by the Romans triggered and/or greatly accelerated the early Church's separation from Judaism, requiring the development of a distinct Christian identity and apostolic structure. Early Christians naturally reached out to the Gentiles to build support, expanding the Church's influence in Jerusalem and eventually throughout the Roman Empire.

However, what should be an easy choice to believe is made less and less frequently in the modern era. For example:

A dramatic shift away from religion has taken place among the American public. From 1981 to 2007, the United States ranked as one of the world's more religious countries, with religiosity levels changing very little. Since then, the United States has shown one of the largest moves away from religion of any country for which we have data. Near the end of the initial period studied, Americans' mean rating of the importance of God in their lives was 8.2 on a ten-point scale. In the most recent U.S. survey, from 2017, the figure had dropped to 7.0. For years, the United States had been the key case demonstrating that economic modernization need not produce secularization. By this measure, the United States now ranks as the 32nd least religious country for which we have data.¹⁴

Moreover, socioeconomic status was recently *negatively* correlated with a belief in the divine.¹⁵

There are several possible explanations. First as Ronald Inglehart notes, "societies develop, survival becomes more secure: starvation, once pervasive, becomes uncommon; life expectancy increases; murder and other forms of violence diminish. And as this level of security rises, people tend to become less religious."¹⁶ The opposite is also true. The collapse of both communism and

¹³ "Pascal's Wager | Definition, Description, Criticisms, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified April 20, 2009, accessed November 1, 2024.

¹⁴ Ronald Inglehart, "Giving up on God," Foreign Affairs, last modified August 11, 2020, accessed November 1, 2024.

¹⁵ S. Schieman, "Socioeconomic Status and Beliefs about God's Influence in Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 1 (February 10, 2010): 25–51, accessed October 29, 2024.

¹⁶ Ronald Inglehart, "Giving up on God," Foreign Affairs, last modified August 11, 2020, accessed November 1, 2024.

the Soviet Union left an ideological vacuum filled by Orthodox Christianity in the post-Soviet states, which further proves this point.¹⁷

Moreover, the political and socio-economic power achieved by faith, or rather, choosing to join the Church, has been itself used by the Church in oppressive ways, continuing the cycle started by the Romans in CE 70, eroding the Church's spiritual and actual authority, and instigating a resurgence toward the Alexandrian's emphasis on a tangential, Eastern approach to the mystery of Christ's dual nature, over arbitrarily-imposed political power in the form of nonsensical *ex cathedra* Church *dicta* that serve only the institution of the Church and not the human need to understand and believe from the heart and soul and not the mind.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Zeev Maoz and Errol A Henderson, *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics*, University of Michigan Press EBooks (University of Michigan Press, 2019), accessed October 29, 2024.