

The Deification of Jesus

by Jack McLean

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Despite the growing numbers of encounters in recent years of the World religions in forums of exchange Christianity continues to set itself apart through a firm belief in the uniqueness of its founder, Jesus Christ. While individual Christians may acknowledge the inspirational nature of the non-Christian founders of religions, adherents of the major branches of Christianity are united in the belief that Christ has no equal. This conviction in the uniqueness of Jesus has become the unassailable fortress of Christian belief.

Such a belief is the product of historical and theological developments in the early church. Through a series of creeds based on theological speculation Jesus the Son was declared to be the very essence of Divinity walking upon the earth, the Godhead Itself united with a deified Holy Spirit in a Trinitarian theology. These creeds, far from descending upon the church fathers as divine revelation, underwent a long historical development that was not uncontested. They were finally elaborated in their present form after four centuries of acrimonious theological quarreling that necessitated four world councils of the church—those of Nicaea, Ephesus, Constantinople, and Chalcedon—that brought in their wake bloody warfare among Christian factions. These Christological controversies resulted in the fragmentation of the churches of Asia Minor from those of Greek Orthodox Constantinople, a fragmentation that has continued to this day.

The writings of the Apostle Paul were a great factor in this deification of Jesus. Paul's interpretation of the Christ figure bears the unmistakable stamp of a savior figure of the Greek mystery religions into whose form Jesus was cast. The statements of Jesus Himself, however, do not support His exaltation to the Godhead. As the Son, Christ clearly saw Himself in a role subordinate to that of the Father.

In this paper I offer a three-dimensional study of the historical, doctrinal, and comparative aspects of the deification of Jesus. I will first examine Paul's interpretation of Jesus to Gentile Christians together with a contrasting interpretation set forth by Christ Himself. I will also include the Gnostic Jesus, which touches indirectly on the Christological question. Third, I will review two major Christological controversies: (1) the schism of Arius and the development

of the notion of trinity; and (2) the God-man debate at Cyril and Nestorius. These movements spanned a four-hundred year period. In my comparative study I will present a Bahá'í perspective on the deification of Jesus and, where possible, make comparisons with the Bahá'í Faith on relevant issues.

Bahá'í-Christian studies are by no means new in the literature of the Bahá'í Faith. They promise, however, to be of continuing interest as the Christian world comes to grips with the serious claims made by Bahá'u'lláh to the followers of the Gospel.

St. Paul and the Deification of Jesus¹

IN CHRISTIANITY the writings of Paul have had a determining role in transmitting a characteristic understanding of Christ. With the gradual demise of the Jewish wing of Christianity Paul's Christology came to the forefront in the Christian understanding of Jesus. His glorification of Christ's divinity has played a major role in the deification of Jesus. If Christ taught the kingdom, it is true to say Paul taught Christ.

While generally enjoying widespread acclaim among Christians, Paul has not escaped being a subject of great controversy, both for his contemporaries and ours. His missionary journeys to Greece and Asia Minor, coupled with a sizeable corpus of theological writings, have earned him the adulations of some Christians as "the second founder of Christianity."² Other more critical theologians have been less enthusiastic in their acclamation of Paul.³ Basing his

¹ This section was written before the discussion that has emerged in *World Order* on the role of St. Paul in the early church. (See "A Forum: Concerning St. Paul," *World Order*, 13, No. 4 [Summer 1979], 5-12; letter from Juan Ricardo Cole, *World Order*, 13, No. 2 [Winter 1978-79], 7-8; and book review by William S. Hatcher, "The Quest for the Metaphysical Jesus," *World Order*, 12, No. 4 [Summer 1978], 35-42.) I have no purpose in promoting or discouraging the view that Paul was either a "usurper" or in some sense the breaker of a Christian covenant. My primary purpose is to elucidate Paul's special brand of Christology, which contributed in large measure to the fixation of Christ as God. It does touch incidentally on the differences that Paul had with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. That these differences occurred Paul himself admits (Gal.2); they are also set forth in Acts 15 in a differing version. Thus they are a matter of historical record. Aside from that, since both the New Testament and Bahá'í sources are equivocal on the matter, I do not see how anyone can seriously argue from a strictly partisan point of view.

² Quoted in John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 620. Fully five of the fourteen epistles are not Paul's according to New Testament textual exegesis (Ephesians, Hebrews I and II, Timothy, and Tirus). Colossians is also questioned. Howard Clark Kee, Franklin W. Young, Karlfried Froelich, *Understanding the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957), pp. 164-66.

³ Udo Schaefer and Huschmand Sabet refer to the following theologians, all of whom have been critical of Paul's special brand of Christianity: Albert Schweitzer, Hans Joachim Schoeps, Karl-Heinz Deschner, Wilhelm Nestle, E. Meyer Schonfield, Steinheim E. Grimm, These men are not obscure by any means and have made some of most outstanding contributions in the field of theology and comparative religion. See Udo Schaefer, *The Light Shineth in Darkness: Five Studies in Revelation after Christ*, trans. Héléne

view an a study of Paul’s epistles, one comparative religionist has referred to him as “The problem figure of primitive Christianity” who became embroiled with the pillars of the mother church at Jerusalem-Peter, James the Lord’s brother, and John-over the teaching and admission of the Gentile Christians into the new faith.⁴ The first council of the primitive church, the Jerusalem Council, was convened in the holy city (A.D. 49) to resolve the controversy.⁵

The writings of the Apostle Paul effected a great transformation of Jesus from the Jesus of the synoptic gospels and of non-Pauline epistles in the New Testament. Paul recast Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah of Israel, into a deified Lord bearing all the traces of a savior-god of a Greek mystery cult. Styling himself Apostle “among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:16; Acts 9:15), Paul determined to adapt his presentation of Jesus to the Greek Gentile world in which he lived, a radically different religious milieu from the Jewish one. What is often overlooked, however, in Paul’s claim to mission to the Gentiles is that Peter claimed precisely this mission for himself at the Jerusalem Council, a mission he states he had “in the early days.”⁶

For Paul to have preached Christ as the Jewish Messiah to the Greek-speaking Gentiles would have been futile. The messiahship was a virtually meaningless concept to the Gentile world that Paul determined to evangelize. To them there was no long-standing tradition of a Davidic kingship that promised an anointed of God who would rise up and vindicate Israel. Furthermore, certain of the Ebionite Christians, who were dominant in the apostolic church until Romano-Pauline Christianity emerged, reconciled their faith in Christ with temple worship as well as with circumcision and dietary and purification laws.⁷ Accordingly, he preached “another

Momtaz Neri and Oliver Colburn (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977) and Huschmand Sabet, *The Heavens Are Cleft Asunder* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1975). Christopher Buck notes that the following theologians endorse primitive Ebionite Christianity as opposed to the Gentile Christianity of St. Paul: Harris Hirschberg, Shlomo Pines, David Flusser, James Dunn, Cardinal Danielou, and Gilles Quispel. See “A Forum: Concerning St. Paul,” *World Order*, 13, No. 4 (Summer 1979), 9.

⁴ S. G. F. Brandon, “Saint Paul, the Problem Figure of Primitive Christianity,” in *Religion in Ancient History: Studies in Ideas, Men and Events* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), pp: 310-23.

⁵ The point at dispute was the observance of Mosaic law by Gentile converts. Acts 15:29 states that Paul with his party and the Jerusalem church agreed on exhorting Gentile converts to abstain from unchastity, food offered to idols, blood, and strangled animals. In a differing account of the same incident Paul states that he reached no compromise with the Jerusalem elders: “to them we did not yield even for a moment” (Gal. 2:5). Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

⁶ The complete verse by Peter reads; “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7). Paul claimed that he was converted to Christianity by a vision of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. During this experience, Christ commissioned him to teach the Gentiles. Paul, however, mentions nowhere in his letters that Peter also made the same claim at the Jerusalem Conference, a conference he attended.

⁷ Along with the Nazarenes they are the earliest of Jewish Christian communities. The Ebionites were the Jerusalem Christians, brought into the Faith by Christ Himself and the Apostles. Before the destruction of

Jesus,” one whom those living in the Greek-Gentile world could understand and to whom they could relate.⁸

The Jesus that Paul preached was a deified savior, One Who could rescue a hapless humanity from the power of sin. It was precisely this presentation of Jesus as redeemer of men’s sins and purveyor of immortality to those who accepted Him in a personalized faith that has prevailed in western Christendom ever since.

The religious background of the Gentiles explains why Paul’s approach was so successful. The Greek-speaking Gentiles whom Paul addressed held that the flesh was a degraded form of spirit, a “tomb” as Plato had taught, from which the spirit longed to escape. Its liberation was only final and complete with death, and there the prospects of Hades were dark and terrifying.⁹ The Gentiles, then, had bleak prospects for the future life and longed for deliverance from sinful corporeal existence. In search of solace they had turned to the Greek mystery cults that promised them a means of escape. The mystery religions held that by choosing and worshiping a personalized deity, a savior, a man could escape death and win eternal life.¹⁰ The personalized worship of a savior was accompanied by sacramental rituals that bear striking resemblances to Christian sacraments.¹¹ Through such savior worship and sacramental observances the devotee could be Lat, *renatus* ‘born again’ into a new spiritual existence. Thus, like the mystery religions, Pauline Christianity offered itself as a religion of bondage and

Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they emigrated to the Gentile town of Pella east of the Jordan River, where they survived until the third century (some date their survival to the fifth century). Their Christology, which resembles in some ways Bahá’í prophetology, is discussed later in this section.

⁸ The phrase is from Paul himself (2 Cor. 11:4). In this chapter Paul speaks of his “divine jealousy” for the Corinthian community. Brandon (*Religion in Ancient History*, p. 315) thinks that his warnings to the Corinthians of “another Jesus” and “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6) are veiled references to the Jerusalem apostles, Peter, James, and John, with whom he had fundamental differences.

⁹ During the life of Christ Hellenistic ideas about life after death were in flux. The common people mostly believed in Hades, although it held little promise for a better life. Hope for a blessed life after death developed among the religious sect of Orpheus, who looked for their reward in the Elysian fields of the West. The mysteries also promised a hereafter.

¹⁰ The Hellenistic-Roman period of Christ’s lifetime was a period of great spiritual curiosity very much like that of today. The mysteries had to compete with various schools of Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, magic, and astrology to quench the people’s spiritual restlessness.

¹¹ The cult of Mithra, the Persian god of light, also mentioned by Shoghi Effendi (*The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, 2d rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974], p. 184), had an eucharistic style communal meal. The cult of Attis had an animal blood baptism and celebrated the god’s resurrection on 25 March. The cult of Isis, the Egyptian mother-goddess, used holy water from the Nile and held processions and litanies. The mysteries also used altar-pieces and cult images. One statue of Isis depicts her nursing holy child, not unlike the statues of the Virgin with the baby Jesus.

liberation, through a deified savior. As such it thoroughly satisfied the Gentile penchant for personal religion.

The presentation of Christ to the Gentiles as the redeemer of their sins and purveyor of immortality was one of Paul's central themes, a theme known otherwise as "vicarious atonement" (at-one-ment), man's reconciliation with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25). Paul's writings are thoroughly imbued with the consciousness of men's sins, a concern that occupies the opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. Although St. Augustine fully elaborated the doctrine, Paul's understanding of the Genesis account of the fall of Adam (Gen. 3) qualifies him as the originator of the doctrine of original sin (Rom. 5:12-21). Whatever one may think of Paul's other doctrines, his preoccupation with sin has, in my view, stamped Christianity with much of the morbidity that is sometimes found in it

In a bold departure from Judaism Paul taught that faith in Christ's sacrificial death freed the believer from the constraints of Jewish law (Rom. 7:6). Paul, however, was inconsistent in his stand on the law. At the request of James he observed the rites of purification in the temple as a proof of his Jewish orthodoxy to the Jewish-Christians of Jerusalem (Acts 21:21-26). The Acts version of the Jerusalem Council also states that Paul agreed to Jewish dietary laws. However, in a differing account Paul states that he reached a compromise with the Jerusalem elders only on the point of maintaining contributions to the mother church in Jerusalem. To a more orthodox group at Jerusalem, probably the Judaizers, Paul levels the charge of "false brethren" and states that "to them we did not yield submission even for a moment" (Gal. 2:5).

Paul's teaching of the bodily resurrection of Jesus also paralleled the mystery cults. Like the resurrected saviors, Isis, Attis, or Mithra, Paul taught Christ's bodily resurrection mystery as a proof of His deity. Mystical union with Jesus was offered to the believer through the ritual of immersion baptism, from which the neophyte Christian emerged a new spiritual being, as Christ had emerged immortal from the grave (Rom. 6:1-11).

Paul's interpretation of Christ to the Gentiles contained another radical departure from Israelite religion. This was his presentation of Christ as God. Paul presents Christ as God through two main modes: by blurring the distinction between Christ and God, and by conferring upon Jesus attributes normally reserved for God alone.

In the Greek version of the Torah, the Septuagint, the most common name for God was *kyrios* 'Lord'. The mystery cults also called their saviors "Lord." Paul, in his epistles, freely

applies the term to Jesus. For example, the promise of the Jewish prophet Joel that “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:32) Paul transposes and applies to Jesus (Rom. 10:9). For Paul Christ’s prophetic station not only eclipsed that of Moses, “Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses” (Heb. 3:3), but it took on a cosmological function reserved for God alone, that of creation itself. Christ was the one in whom “all things were created, in heaven and in earth . . . all things were created through and for him” (Col.1:16).

Paul more clearly identified Christ with God through his teaching of the incarnate sonship, the belief that God the Father became incarnate in Christ the Son: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9, cf. 2 Cor. 5:19 and Col. 1:15). The term “Son of God” was not new to the Jews. The term had an ancient usage that was applied to Israel’s sacral king, the Messiah (Ps. 2:7).¹² In applying it to Christ Paul did not use the term primarily in its Judaic sense but rather in its mythological Hellenistic sense of the Son of God as an incarnation of the Deity.

In spite of Paul’s preferred usage of the term “Son of God” this was not the term with which Christ primarily designated Himself. Christ most often refers to Himself as Heb. *ber nasha* ‘Son of Man’, a title that not only designates Christ’s perfect humanity, a standard interpretation, but primarily the Heavenly Man, a divine adamic prototype, created at the beginning of time, who would usher in a spiritual rather than a political kingdom.¹³ Such a description fits Jesus. Christ rarely refers to Himself as “Son of God,” in all probability because His Jewish opponents interpreted this designation in the mythological sense that Yahweh had generated offspring. In any case, to them it signified a blasphemous identification with God worthy of His condemnation and death (John 5:18). But of the two terms, “Son of Man” is charged more fully with potency and significance.

What is so extraordinary about the affirmations of Christ’s deity made in the writings of Paul and the creeds is how little account such declarations take of the pronouncements of Jesus about Himself. A careful examination of certain passages impels us to make a serious reevaluation of what is stated in the Trinitarian theology of the creeds and the writings of Paul. While certain statements of Jesus clearly indicate that their author regarded Himself as a Divine Manifestation revealing the Will of the Father (John 10:30; cf. John 8:19, 14:7), taken as a whole, they reveal that Christ clearly subordinated Himself to the essence of Divinity.

Paul’s assertion that “Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses” (Heb. 3:3) has led Christians to uphold a radical discontinuity between Christ and the Prophets of Israel and Judah. Though Christians assent to Christ’s own declaration that He fulfilled the

¹² Oscar Cullmann gives a complete discussion of this Christological title in *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 270-305.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Jewish law (Matt. 5:17), they insist that, on the basis of Christ's divinity, He is disqualified even to assume the title of prophet.

Not only did Christ refer to Himself as a "prophet" on occasion, but He did so in the context of linking His own suffering and rejection with that of the prophetic figures of Israel and Judah. After His rejection by fellow Galileans at Nazareth, He remarked that "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4). Christ further established His prophetic function by linking His own coming to the prophecy of Moses, the greatest of His Hebrew predecessors, that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you" (Deut. 18:15). Christ indicated that He was the prophet promised by Moses (John 5:45-47).

Christ's identification of Himself as the "Prophet" promised by Moses was precisely the Christological understanding held by the earliest group of Jewish Christians, the Ebionites. The Ebionite understanding of Jesus as the "Prophet" or the "True Prophet" is contained in "The Preaching of Peter" (Kerygmata Petrov), which forms a part of the uncanonical "Pseudo-Clementine Novel." True-prophet Christology is also found in the apocryphal "Gospel of the Hebrews," which was used by the Nazarene Christians. St. Jerome wrote that they regarded it as the original Aramaic Matthew. The parallels between the Jewish-Christian belief in Christ as the "True Prophet" Who appeared at the end of an Adamic cycle of prophetic figures and the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation show basic similarities. The Jews who awaited the "True Prophet" believed in a cycle of prophetic figures beginning with Adam Who would appear until a period of great decay had set in. At that time the "True Prophet," the great Teacher culminating the cycle would appear and inaugurate a spiritual kingdom.

At the first and second ecumenical councils of the church at Nicaea and Constantinople, it had been laid down that Christ was of the same essence with the Father and that the Godhead consisted of three divine persons. St Paul, with his doctrine of incarnate sonship, also put forth the notion of the coequality of Christ with the Father. As to the Nicene affirmation of His being of one essence with the Father, Christ was silent on that particular issue. The terms "essence" and "substance" were concepts borrowed from Greek philosophy and not biblical. Eusebius of Caesarea and other conservatives had opposed the Nicene creed on that account. As far as Trinitarian theology is concerned, Christ declared to a scribe who had come to question Him that the belief in the divine unity was the greatest of the commandments: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' " (Mark 12:29). By His affirmation that there was only one Lord—that is, God—Christ was lending His approval to the Jewish declaration of faith, the *Shema*, the belief that God is one. Jesus also referred to His Father as "the only true God" (John 17:3). Jesus indirectly repudiated the incarnation theology that God could take human form by declaring that "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and that "His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen" (John 5:37). Furthermore, Christ's coequality with God, which was also

affirmed at Constantinople, was something that he had emphatically denied on several occasions in His encounters with the Jews.

In an exchange with the Pharisees in which He established His station of Sonship Christ declared that both His mission and genesis were the Father's doing, not His, thereby clearly dispelling any notion that He was equal in power with the Father: "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say?" (John 8:42-43). He revealed His dependence on the Father in another context. This occurred at a time when Christ's fame as a healer had spread throughout Palestine. Since He had healed on the Sabbath, the Pharisees had accused Him of breaking Mosaic law. The Jews understood Christ's reference to God as His Father in a mythological sense that implied identification with The Godhead. Such an identification caused the monotheistic Jews to level the charge of blasphemy against Christ. His response was: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). Christ clarified His dependency on Divine Omnipotence in other passages: "I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30). Shortly before His arrest, Jesus spoke these words to Judas, the brother of James (not Iscariot), in reference to His return: "You hear me say to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28).

By His own admission, Christ established His relationship to the Father as that of Servant, a qualification that Bahá'u'lláh also applied on occasion to His own Station: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him" (John 13:16). Christ even went so far as to eschew Himself as a model of moral perfection in order to illustrate the sanctified nature of the Divinity: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18). Not only did Christ indicate that the Father was more perfect and more powerful than He but that the Divinity possessed a knowledge He did not fully share. This is reflected in one of Christ's statements on the second coming: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36).

The Gnostic Jesus

AT THE SAME TIME that St. Paul was elaborating his exalted and mystical notions of Jesus, there were other Christians who held obscure beliefs of Christ and who were finally pronounced unorthodox by the Fathers of the Church. These were the Gnostics.¹⁴ Gnosticism was one of

¹⁴ Gnosticism is strictly speaking a doctrinal, not a Christological heresy. Since the movement is mentioned in Bahá'í literature, and since Gnostics had their own, albeit imperfect, understanding of Jesus, I have included it as a matter of interest.

those “popular cults” and “fashionable and evasive philosophies” mentioned by Shoghi Effendi as one of a group of hybrid religions and philosophies in the Roman Empire that threatened to engulf infant Christianity.¹⁵ Entire Christian communities on occasion adopted Gnosticism as their creed.¹⁶ The Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and especially Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, arose to combat it fiercely in their writings.¹⁷

Gnostic Christians compromised the unique soteriological role of Jesus with their indiscriminate belief in a host of savior figures (Gk. *Soter* ‘savior’). Christ was in fact often placed below other saviors and lesser divinities (Gk. *aeons*). This was the case for the Gnostic churches of Tarsus, Paul’s native city, which worshiped the supernatural powers of the Greek hero Heracles in an annual ceremony celebrating his death and resurrection. Gnostic Christians also compromised Christ’s soteriology in another way. For those Christians who accepted Christ alone as Lord, salvation was a matter of faith in Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Gnostic held that salvation was won through gnosis (Gk. ‘knowledge, insight’), which was viewed to be a higher state than faith. Their own form of gnosis was esoteric enough, sometimes held to be a secret knowledge transmitted by Christ to the Apostles and in turn to the leaders of Gnostic cults.¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi’s description of Gnosticism as “evasive” indicates that the Gnostic community never held to fixed tenets of belief.¹⁹

Lacking a widely circulated scripture, the church at Rome formulated the first of the creeds, an orthodox doctrinal statement, to combat the Gnostic heresy (Gk. *hairesis* ‘party, school’). The Apostles’ Creed, composed between A.D. 150-75, alluded to the uniqueness of

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi, “The Unfoldment of World Civilization.” *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 184. Gnosticism was one of the more widely spread syncretistic religions in the Hellenistic-Roman period. Its complex origins have been traced to Irán (Manichaeism, Mandaeism), to Syria and Egypt, and to ancient Greece (Orphism, Platonism). Gnosticism was religious philosophy of the nature and destiny of man. As such, it aimed at explaining the origin of evil in the world and man’s deliverance from it. Its conflicting sects proffered contending mythologies by way of explanation. Gnosticism’s conceptual framework paralleled in some ways Judaeo-Christian thought. It contained creation myths, an account of the fall of a primal man, and his redemption through a savior figure. Philosophically, it was markedly dualistic.

¹⁶ The churches at Corinth and Collasae had both been rent by Gnostic heresies. At Corinth a spiritual aristocracy had developed that prided itself on esoteric knowledge. The church at Callasae wanted to amalgamate Christianity with the mystery cults and heterodox Judaism (Col. 2:8-23 and 1 Cor. 18-31; 1 Cor. 2:6-13).

¹⁷ Irenaeus’ best work was titled *Refutation and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely So-Called*, more commonly known as *Against Heresies*. See *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.), I, 315-58.

¹⁸ Simon the Magician was one of the Gnostic cult leaders. He received the condemnation of St. Peter by attempting to buy his spiritual powers from the Apostles (Acts 8:9-25). The Egyptian Basilides and Valentinus of Rome, although closer to orthodox Christianity, founded docetic (Gk. *dokeisis* ‘illusion’) Gnostic heresies that exalted Christ’s spirituality to the point that they denied His physical reality.

¹⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 184.

Jesus as the “only Son, our Lord,” to counteract Gnosticism’s submerging of Jesus in a host of other deities.²⁰ To combat further the evasive teaching of esoteric Gnostic leaders, the Church Fathers recognized as authoritative teaching only the New Testament, which had derived directly from apostolic teaching.²¹

The Christological Controversies

The Schism of Arius and the Development of the Trinity. By the end of the second century the force of the Gnostic movement with its competing savior figures was well-nigh spent. In the second, third, and fourth centuries Christology continued to occupy the central place in the writings of the Fathers. But Christological writing at this stage was characterized by greater controversy than in earlier generations, controversy that finally escalated into open warfare between sectarians.

In the second and third centuries the church experienced dissension over the Monarchian controversy. Although this Christological controversy provoked great debate, it did not seriously disturb Christian unity and died quietly toward the end of the third century.²²

The fourth century, however, witnessed a shock wave of major proportions that was felt throughout Christendom. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has referred to its disastrous effects on the unity of the Christian faith:

Even after Christ, Arius, the well-known patriarch, was the cause of a widespread schism in the

Cause of God and intense agitation among the believers. His followers numbered even three

million, and he as well as his successors exerted the utmost effort in order to produce a split and

a widespread commotion in the religion of God.²³

²⁰ Later tradition attributes this creed to the Apostles. It was composed not only to combat the Gnostic heresy but was used primarily as a summary statement of questions and answers, requisite knowledge of catechumens prior to their being baptized. Helmer Ringgren and Ake V. Strom, *The Religions of Mankind: Today and Yesterday*, ed. J. C. G. Greig, trans. Niels L. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 149.

²¹ The Gnostics put forth their mythologies in literature of their own. “The Gospel of Truth” and “Book of Baruch” are among their works.

²² Monarchianism was a theological controversy arising out of concern for maintaining the “monarchia” or divine unity. It expressed this concern in two movements that were fundamentally different. “Adoptionism” wished to stress the divine unity to the point that it taught that Christ was only an inspired man. Christ was, so to speak, adopted by God’s Spirit. The other movement, “modalism,” stressed Christ’s divinity to the extent that it did not distinguish Him in any way from the Godhead.

Aside from naming Arius as a violator of Christianity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly indicates that Arius essentially used a theological pretext for achieving power, a connivance common to violators in all dispensations.²⁴

Arius was a learned priest from Alexandria who quarreled with his bishop, Alexander. The disputation began with Arius’ assertion that the Son, even as the Logos, the Divine Word, was inferior to the Father. He held that Christ, like other beings, was created ex nihilo by God and was, therefore, a created and finite being. He also argued that Christ had a beginning whereas the Father was eternal: “We are persecuted because we say the Sun has a beginning whereas God is without beginning.”²⁵ Alexander took issue with Arius, holding to the orthodox belief that the Son as Logos was eternal, uncreated, and of the same essence or substance as God. The most serious offense of Arius’ teaching in orthodox eyes was its debasing subordination of Jesus. Arius argued that Christ was liable to change in regard to His divine nature and even to sin. The appellation “Son of God” was for the Arians a courtesy title rather than an indication of Christ’s divine origin.

Alexander summoned a provincial synod and had Arius excommunicated in A.D. 321. The banished Arius refused to submit and won a large following in Palestine. His supporters spread the controversy from Palestine all over the eastern Greek episcopates (bishoprics). Constantine, the newly converted Christian king, anxious to preserve the Empire from schism, summoned the first ecumenical council of the church at Nicaea, across the Bosphorus from Constantinople.²⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on Constantine speaks favorably of his great spirituality and administrative skill: “He spared no efforts, dedicating his life to the promotion of the principles of the Gospel, and he solidly established the Roman government, which in reality had been nothing but a system of unrelieved oppression, on moderation and justice.”²⁷ ‘Abdu’l-

²³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “ ‘The Covenant of God shall remain stable and secure’: Recent Tablet to Roy C. Wilhelm,” in *Star of the West*, 10 (5 June 1919), 95. In the same passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures Mr. Wilhelm that the Bahá’í covenant will remain inviolate.

²⁴ Nicolas Zernov quotes church historian Socrates Scholastic (d. A.D. 450), who said that “from love at controversy” Arius opposed his bishop in the discussion. See *Eastern Christendom: A Study of the Origin and Development of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (New York: Putnam’s. 1961), p. 45n.

²⁵ Arius, quoted in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), p. 228. This passage on Arius’ teaching has been gleaned from pp. 226-31.

²⁶ Constantine was converted to Christianity by a vision of the cross superimposed on the midday sun. The accompanying message read, “By this sign conquer.” Against all odds and good judgment Constantine made a rapid invasion of Italy and defeated his rival, Maxentius, at the battle of the Milvian Bridge at Rome (A.D. 312).

²⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail and Ali-Kuli Khan, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 85. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement is borne out by the full weight of history. Constantine systematically altered the legislation of the Empire to accord it with Gospel teaching. He punished sexual offenders; no longer penalized celibates; lightened divorce laws; facilitated the

Bahá's favorable assessment of Constantine is not shared by all historians, some of whom view his intervention in spiritual matters as a means of gaining ascendancy over his political opponents.²⁸

The point at issue at Nicaea was whether Christ was simply like the Father, much in the same way as an image would resemble its perfect archetype, or whether He was of the same essence or substance as God, the very matter of Divinity. The 220 delegate bishops were separated quite literally by a mere letter of the Greek alphabet (Gk. *homoousios* 'of the same substance'; *homoiousios* 'of like substance'). Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria and his party defended Christ's full divinity and coequality with the Father, a position deriving from Logos theology. Eusebius of Caesarea, "father of church history," stood by the dictum "Sola Scriptura" and argued for the *homoiousios* since *ousia* (Gk. 'substance, essence') was not a biblical term at all but one drawn from Greek philosophy.²⁹ Eusebius argued further that favoring the *homoousios* would risk compromising the sovereignty of God and his oneness.

Constantine took his stand against the Arians at Nicaea and argued forcefully in favor of the *homoousios*. The creed was adopted almost universally (only four bishops refused to sign it) and with great jubilation. The Jesus of Nazareth who had begun His Christological journey in the mind of the early church as the "suffering servant" messiah-figure of Deutero-Isaiah emerged from Nicaea as a deified being, consubstantial with God.³⁰

The promulgation of the Nicene Creed, far from bringing the spiritual peace that Constantine had sought, inaugurated a second stage of vitriolic struggle between Nicenes and Arians that was to rage for the next half century.³¹ During this second phase of the contest, the Arian party witnessed a momentary victory. By a series of skillful diplomatic maneuvers, Arian bishops were able to win the support of Constantius I, Constantine's son and ruler of the eastern States, who abandoned his father's policy of standing behind the Nicene Creed. At the Synod of

liberation of slaves; protected prisoners, widows, and orphans; and gave bishops certain magisterial powers.

²⁸ Among these historians are Gibbon, Burckhardt, Schwartz, and Harnack. See Zernov, *Eastern Christendom*, p. 39n.

²⁹ John Courtney Murray, S.J., *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 47.

³⁰ Oscar Cullmann believes that the most ancient Christological title applied to Jesus was that of the "servant." Acts 3:26 and 4:30 ascribe its usage to St. Peter, who was greatly impressed by the suffering of his beloved Master. Peter protested when warned by Christ of His impending death (Mark 8:32). Isaiah's prophecy speaks of the coming servant's suffering as a propitiatory death: "when he makes himself an offering for sin" (53:10). *Christology of the New Testament*, p. 74.

³¹ When the Arian bishop, Macedonius, was returned to office in Constantinople, over three thousand people lost their lives in the fighting. More Christians were slain by fellow Christians in this one contest alone than had died during the last terrible persecution of Roman emperor Diocletian (311).

Constantinople in A.D. 360, held during the dedication of the Hagia Sophia, the Nicene Creed was abrogated and replaced with an Arian creed, declaring the Son to be simply “like the Father, as the Holy Scriptures call Him and teach.”³² It seemed that Christendom had gone Arian.

During this second phase of the Arian controversy a third force along with the Father and Son was introduced into the debate. This was the Holy Spirit. The turn of the century was destined to witness not only the destruction of the Arian party but also the formulation in church council of Christendom’s most central doctrine, the trinity.

The sources for the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit are Judaic. In the Bible the dynamic spirit of God (Heb. *ruach Yahweh*) was active especially at creation (Gen. 2:7) but was also evident in the mission of the Hebrew prophets who were sustained through God’s spirit and spoke through the authority of His Word: “Thus says the Lord.”

In early Christian literature this understanding was reflected in the writings of the apologist Justin Martyr who referred to the Holy Spirit as the “prophetic spirit.”³³ The Fathers, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons; Tertullian of Carthage; and Origen of Alexandria had given place in their writings to the Holy Spirit in reference to the Godhead. By the fourth century a movement had been gradually building to deify the Holy Spirit. The writings of Hilary of Poitiers and especially those of the fourth-century Cappadocian fathers, St. Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus, were instrumental in winning support for the teaching of a deified Holy Spirit. Augustine, building on a Trinitarian tradition four centuries old, gave final expression to the doctrine by writing, over a twenty-year period, *De Trinitate*, a work setting forth arguments and analogies to explain the mystery of the trinity.³⁴

Judaism, however, was rigidly monotheistic. For the triune expression at the Godhead one must look to ancient Egypt. From the time of the Old Kingdom (2770—2270 B.C.) until Christian times, Osiris, one of the “Ennead” or Nine of the Egyptian pantheon of gods, was worshiped alternatively as three gods and as one. In his triune form, Osiris was worshiped as Serapis; Isis, the wife of Osiris; and Horus, their son. In a papyrus dating from the time of Alexander the Great the Trinitarian formula, “Thus from one god I became three gods,” is recorded as Horus’ self-description.³⁵ Tertullian of Carthage, also writing from North Africa, produced almost identical wording in his own formulation of the Christian trinity with his

³² Quoted in Noss, *Man’s Religions*, p. 637n. This Arian creed is sometimes referred to as the “Dated Creed.” It was later abrogated at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) when the church returned to Nicene theology.

³³ Justin Martyr, quoted in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 102.

³⁴ St. Augustine, “On Trinity,” *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886-90).

³⁵ Francis Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.* (New York: University Books, 1964), I, 88.

celebrated phrase “All three are one.”³⁶ Coincidentally, the strongest supporters of Trinitarian theology, Athanasius and Cyril, were both bishops of Alexandria, the breeding ground of Egyptian tritheism. It is to this “Alexandrian cult” of the worship of the triune Osiris that Shoghi Effendi refers in his discussion of those movements that threatened the early church.³⁷

That the doctrine of the trinity itself underwent a historical development is readily apparent. It was to appear early in the writings of the Church Fathers and apologists, but its exegesis was by no means uniform. It was cautiously circumscribed in its early stages by a respect for Jewish monotheism but witnessed the gradual development of three divine and consubstantial persons within the Godhead. Justin Martyr, referred to earlier, formulated a triad of God, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. He wrote of the Word as being “another God” beside God.³⁸ The Logos (Word) in time came to be superseded by the Son.

A contemporary of Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, was the first to use the word “triad” in his writings in relationship to the Godhead. Theophilus’ triad had a novel twist in that the Holy Spirit was replaced by Wisdom, to consist of Father, Son, and Wisdom.³⁹ Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, reaffirmed the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching that the Son (Word) was in eternal generation and was, therefore, coexistent with the Father. Since He shared God’s eternity, Irenaeus argued that the Son was also God: “The Father is God and the Son is God, for whatsoever is begotten by God is God.”⁴⁰ Hippolytus of Rome first used the word *persona* (Latin for ‘mask,’ as used in Greco-Roman theater; hence ‘appearance, manifestation, aspect’) in relation to the three aspects of the Godhead and taught that, although single, God was multiple in respect to His fourfold attributes of Word, Wisdom, Power, and Counsel.⁴¹ Tertullian of Carthage coined the famous “three in one” formula referred to above and was also the first to use the word *trinitas* in his writings, thereby giving impetus to the independent subsistence of the three divine persons.⁴²

The writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian constitute a watershed in the development of the trinity. It is in their writings that the first tensions appear between the unity of the divine monarchia and the independent subsistence of the three persons. Overall, however,

³⁶ Henry Chadwick, “The Early Church,” in *The Pelican History of the Church*, ed. O. Chadwick (Harmondsworth, England; Penguin, 1967), I, 89.

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184.

³⁸ Chadwick, “The Early Church,” p. 85.

³⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. p. 104.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107. In one analogy of the trinity Irenaeus used a word that is very familiar to Bahá'ís. He spoke of the Son and the Spirit as God's “hands,” for him the vehicles or forms of His self-revelation.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the ascendancy was given to the Divine Unity with the three persons being “manifestations” (Lat. *species*) or “aspects” (Lat. *formae*) of the Godhead, a theology called “economic Trinitarianism.” because it wished to stress the paucity of the three persons compared with the *monarchia* ‘Divine Unity.’⁴³ The major contribution of this theology was its vocabulary. The words *persona* and *trinitas* became standard for future discussions and took on meanings that were not originally intended by their authors.

This second phase of the Arian crisis, complicated by disputes over emerging Trinitarian theology, necessitated the second ecumenical council of the church, held at Constantinople in A.D. 381. It was presided over by Emperor Theodosius I, a solid supporter of the Nicene Creed. At Constantinople Trinitarian theology was formally canonized. It was laid down that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all of the same substance but manifest themselves in three divine persons.⁴⁴

Following the Council of Constantinople, the Arian party, now divided into contending sects, collapsed with astonishing speed. As for Arius, fate was to decree that he would not live to see the momentary victory of his party. He died quite suddenly, in misery and obscurity, in the streets of Constantinople, possibly a victim of poisoning, having been discarded by his own party who had gone on to quarrel with the Nicenes:

He had been left out in the cold, almost forgotten. At length, sick and old, he had pleaded with

Constantine to allow him the benefits of the sacraments before he died, sadly complaining that

his powerful friends like Eusebius of Nicomedia could no longer be bothered to do anything for

him.⁴⁵

To the circumstances of Arius’ unhappy ending an ominous ring is lent by the following comment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that serves as warning to those who divide the religion of God for

⁴³ Ibid., p. 108. The term “economy” or “Divine Economy” is also used by Irenaeus. Shoghi Effendi’s use at the same term (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 19, 20, 22, 24, 61) would appear to coincide exactly with its early Christian usage. His usage of “Divine Economy” had nothing to do with Bahá’í teachings on economics but rather indicated the Divine Plan or redemptive World Order, a parallel with early Christian usage of the term. (See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 110 -11.)

⁴⁴ It was the Council of Constantinople rather than Nicaea that proclaimed Trinitarian theology. The creed proclaimed in 381 is called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed since it incorporated elements of the two councils.

⁴⁵ Chadwick, “The Early Church,” p. 136.

personal gain, regardless of their theologies: “But eventually the power of Christ exterminated and utterly destroyed them all to the extent that no trace (of them) has been left.”⁴⁶

The God-Man Debate—Cyril and Nestorius. Like the hydra of Greek mythology that grew a new head for each of its severed ones, the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople generated rather than silenced further controversy about the person of Jesus. Scarcely had the canonization of Trinitarian theology taken place at the council of Constantinople when a new issue in the Christological debate plunged the church deeper into dissension. This was the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus.

Not only did this new phase of the Christological battle prove to be by far the most bloody, but it also had fatal consequences for the unity of the Byzantine Empire. A new and divisive force was added to the dimensions of the theological quarreling—the expression of nascent nationalism. The aspiration toward national autonomy in Syria and Egypt found expression in theological creeds that were used as a tool to throw off the imperial mantle of Constantinople. These potent movements of religious nationalism spelled permanent schism for the church, and the dislocation of a once proud Empire, making it easy for the Muslim conqueror in the seventh century to overrun. The quasi-miraculous preservation of church unity that had prevailed during the Arian crisis finally failed under the onslaught of these new separatist forces.

The quarrel flared up initially between two patriarchs of great rival sees, Nestorius of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria. Both men had proved to be unduly harsh in their treatment of dissident groups, and their confrontation had disastrous effects for the church.⁴⁷

Nestorius had been called by Theodosius II from his native see of Antioch to serve as preacher to the court of Constantinople. Nestorius’ Christology is sometimes referred to as “duophysitism” or two-natured Christology (Gk. *physis* ‘nature’) since he believed that the divine and human natures of Jesus operated in a loosely knit unity or “conjunction,” as he wrote.⁴⁸ But as a learned exponent of antiochene theology Nestorius laid emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, a long-standing tradition reflective of its Judaic origins. For Nestorius Christ’s humanity was crucial to his soteriological role. To win the salvation of men Christ had made use of His free will and the power of His rational soul, attributes He shared with other men.

⁴⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “ ‘The Covenant of God shall remain stable and secure,’ ” p. 95.

⁴⁷ Cyril’s intolerance had led to the murder of Hypatia, “a virtuous and clever woman” who had taught Neo-platonism Alexandria (Chadwick, “The Early Church,” p. 194). Kelly (*Early Christian Doctrines*, p, 318) justifies Cyril’s character with the remark that “he was also inspired by motives of a purely theological character.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

His sacrifice was not compelled. Christ wanted to show the ordinary believer that salvation could be won only by willingly accepting God's will, as He Himself had willingly accepted the cross.

At the heart of the controversy between Cyril and Nestorius was the philosophical problem of reconciling duality with oneness. Any talk of a two natured Jesus was unsettling to Cyril and his Alexandrian school. Nestorius' emphasis on the humanity of Jesus led Cyril to charge him with denying the divinity of Christ. Nestorius' too careful distinctions between the divinity and manhood of Jesus led Cyril to charge that Nestorius had in a sense mutilated the unity of Christ's person that had been fused through the Logos.⁴⁹ Cyril's teaching is usually referred to as "Monophysite" since it stressed one nature in Jesus, His divinity. For Cyril there was no such thing as Christ's humanity in the ordinary sense. All His human attributes were divine, since they served as vehicles for the Logos, Christ's eternal divinity. Cyril carried the implications of his beliefs to the extreme. The baby Jesus was nothing less than God in the flesh and Mary the Gk. *theotokos* 'mother of God,' a notion that was for him sacrosanct.⁵⁰ Unlike Nestorius, who argued that the humanity and divinity of Jesus were distinct, Cyril argued that they formed a "hypostatic union," a God-Man union, not unlike the platonic unity of body and soul, "the single unique Christ out of two different natures."⁵¹ Cyril's teaching contributed in large measure to the theology of the incarnation.

The distinctions between the two theologies were, indeed, dubious. As often happens in confrontations, ironically, the disputants seemed to be saying exactly the same thing, "one out of both," for Cyril, and "twofold in his being God and man," for Nestorius.⁵² It was hair-splitting theology at its worst, suiting perfectly Christ's characterization of pharisaic discussions as "straining at a gnat" and "swallowing a camel" (Math 23:24). There were clearly other motives at work than a sheer concern for theological truth.

The quarrel escalated with an exchange of pastoral letters between the patriarchs. Having won the support of Pope Celestine and convinced that he would be vindicated at a general council of the church, Cyril used his influence on Emperor Theodosius II to summon the third world council of the church at Ephesus in A.D. 431.⁵³ While inclement weather delayed the

⁴⁹ These dualistic differences Nestorius would emphasize when he taught, for example, that it was the man Jesus that wept and died but that it was the God Jesus that stilled the storm (Chadwick, "The Early Church," p. 197).

⁵⁰ Nestorius with his antiochene theology was offended by the term "Mother of God," which he felt to be degrading. He caused a riot among the monks of Constantinople by daring to suggest that the term be discontinued and replaced with "Christ bearer."

⁵¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 322, 320.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 314.

⁵³ Ephesus, on the Asian side of the Aegean sea is in ruins today. A great harbor city in its day, the silting up of its port gradually rendered it useless.

arrival of Nestorius' delegation, Cyril and sixty Alexandrian bishops went ahead and unilaterally excommunicated Nestorius, "the new Judas."⁵⁴ A tragicomedy ensued. Upon arriving four days later Nestorius and his delegation held their own rival synod and excommunicated Cyril and his ally, Memnon, the Bishop of Ephesus. The exasperated emperor confirmed the excommunications of the rival councils and ordered both Cyril and Nestorius out of office.

In a turnabout Nestorius' Oriental bishops withdrew their support after learning of his excommunication, something he must have felt as a cruel betrayal. Banished to the Egyptian desert, Nestorius died a solitary and tragic figure in A.D. 450. Cyril, through bribery at the court, retained his bishopric until his death in AD. 444. It was Cyril's theology that was ultimately declared canonic at Ephesus.

The successors to both parties persisted in their fanaticism, thus necessitating a second council at Ephesus in A.D. 449, dubbed "The Robber Synod" by Pope Leo I. Here the princes of the Monophysite Egyptian church resorted to murder to vindicate their theology. The Nestorian patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, was arbitrarily condemned, dragged from the altar by a group of Alexandrian monks, and beaten so badly that he died within days. The same church councils that the fathers had insisted were inspired by the breaths of the Holy Spirit had now become the arena for the murder of a patriarch."⁵⁵ His crime was that he had subscribed to a different theology.

The murder of Flavian threatened not only the unity of the church but the Byzantine Empire itself. In a last-ditch attempt to preserve the church-state from schism, the fourth ecumenical council was convened at Chalcedon, near Constantinople, in A.D. 451. Its aim was to produce a universal Christological statement that would weld together the Egyptian Monophysite and Nestorian theologies of the church thereby subduing the flames of separatism that threatened to disrupt the Empire. Subsequent history revealed, however, that the factions were unwilling to compromise.

The theological formula produced at Chalcedon was that of divine incarnation. It stated in its basic outline that Christ was both perfect God and perfect man, made known in two distinct natures in a hypostatic union without confusion or admixture. Of necessity the Chalcedon formula had to be a compromise mosaic of the theologies of Antioch and Alexandria. Statements of Roman theology were also written in.

⁵⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 327.

⁵⁵ Dioscorus, the Monophysite chairman at this "Robber Synod," railroaded the proceedings. He gave Flavian no chance of self-defense. At the close of the council the Monophysite victors shouted: "Those who contradict Dioscorus blaspheme against God. God has spoken through our Patriarch; the Holy Spirit has inspired him. All who keep silence are heretics." (Zernov, *Eastern Christendom*, p. 62).

As a compromise, however, Chalcedon failed to please the churches either of Egypt or Syria. Monophysite Egypt rejected Chalcedon. Adopting “one nature” as her new creed, the church of Egypt, after a series of bloody revolts, broke with Constantinople in A.D. 575 and formed a separate church, now known as the Coptic Church. In Syria imperial forces from Constantinople restored order only after a bloody battle with armed Monophysite monks. Jacob Baradaeus founded the Syrian Jacobite church by traveling around the country disguised as a beggar and ordaining Monophysite bishops.⁵⁶ The followers of Nestorius later migrated to Persia, from where they sent missionaries to India, Ceylon, and even as far as China.

The alienation had grown so great between Copt and Greek orthodox that the Christians of Egypt threw open the gates of their cities to the Muslim invaders in A.D. 641, welcoming them as liberators from the sway of Constantinople. Like the blowing sands of the Arabian desert from which it was borne, Islám quietly buried the religious war waged between the Greek Orthodox anti Egyptian Monophysite Christians.⁵⁷

A Bahá'í Perspective on the Deification of Jesus

I DO NOT INTEND that the foregoing should be taken merely as a lesson in the contortions of early Christian theology. Along with the specifics of the deity of Jesus, about which more shall be said, the Christological controversies lead us to a greater understanding of the problems of a growing religion.

The early church fell into disharmony and ultimately warfare over the person of Jesus because of three closely related factors: (1) the lack of a unified system of belief; (2) the lack of a clearly authorized interpretation of doctrine; and (3) the lack of clearly defined roles in the administration of the churches. It might prove of interest to compare these Christian developments with parallel elements in the Bahá'í Faith.

During the first century, Christians had no canonical scripture. The Old Testament in the Septuagint version continued to be used as the only authorized Holy Writ. The teachings of Jesus circulated in diverse oral traditions throughout the communities. The church recognized the necessity of a fixed New Testament canon to combat the Gnostic heresies, but no order of books was agreed upon until the end of the second century.⁵⁸ Even with the tentative fixing of the canon the Arian crisis raised once more the question of authoritative doctrine. Without a clearly designated interpreter of Christ's teachings, individual bishops put forth their own interpretations of Christological questions as inspired by the Holy Spirit and made their teachings binding upon

⁵⁶ It was not only the Syrian Jacobite and Egyptian Monophysite churches that broke with Greek Orthodox Constantinople. The Ethiopian and Armenian churches also rejected the Chalcedon formula.

⁵⁷ The analogy is partially borrowed from Zernov, *Eastern Christendom*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ A council in Rome under Pope Damasus drew up the first canonical list of books in A.D. 382.

the faithful in their care, bringing about confrontations between bishops.⁵⁹ Another complicating factor was the role of philosophy. By the time of the Arian schism philosophy was in the mainstream of the intellectual life of the church. The fathers used philosophical concepts and schemes to elucidate and buttress theological argument. This naturally involved a great deal of speculation and individual interpretation that ultimately fostered heresy. The key word in the Nicene Creed *homoousios* was borrowed from philosophy. How different from the earlier days of the church when only New Testament teaching had been the rule, as it was in the struggle with the Gnostics, who had proven themselves masters in “esoterica.”

The excessive decentralization of the church only exacerbated the fragmentation over doctrinal issues. Until the time that Pope Leo I (440-61) asserted the primacy of Rome over other sees, bishops were on an equal footing as sole rulers of their congregations. When Nestorius and Cyril waged theological warfare, the whole congregations of Constantinople and Alexandria were perforce brought into the fray, and no supreme head was able to compose differences. The Bahá’í Faith, on the contrary, has been fortunate enough, by virtue of its written covenants, to have had only one clearly designated leader at any given time in its history as well as, from the very beginnings of the Revelation, a written body of scripture that was universally accepted. Its administrative order strives to strike the balance between the excesses of over centralization and decentralization.⁶⁰ Generally speaking, in the Bahá’í Faith, institutional expansion has followed in an orderly fashion the transmission of the Revelation.⁶¹ In the early Christian church the institutions were being expanded while doctrinal and scriptural questions were being completed in the midst of major schism. In the Bahá’í Faith “Unity of doctrine” was maintained from the very beginning by authentic texts of scripture as well as their authorized interpretation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. “Unity of administration” is assured by the Universal House of Justice.⁶²

The Christological controversies reveal the tragedy of religious controversy. Contrived beliefs in the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit in church council justified fratricidal warfare waged on fellow Christians because they did not share the same theology. One is also struck by the gap between Christian morality and theology, between virtue and learning. How different from Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching in which the teacher’s divine wisdom can only be reflected to the

⁵⁹ This was the claim made for the Monophysite bishop of Alexandria at the second council of Ephesus in A.D. 449 (see n. 55).

⁶⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932*, 7th rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 142.

⁶¹ Under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi the institutions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order were developed from 1922 until 1936. Systematic prosecution of ‘Abdu’l Bahá’s Divine Plan began with the Seven Year Plan (1937).

⁶² The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968*, 1st rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 53.

degree that he practices the spiritual virtues recommended by the Manifestation.⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh has warned of the destructive force in religious dissension: “Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench.”⁶⁴ Even the mighty Constantine could not still the mating flames of the Arian schism. The fatal consequences of the God-man debate for the Byzantine Empire have already been alluded to. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh reminds us of the essential purpose of religion so denatured by religious strife: “Oh people of the world! The religion of God is to create love and unity; do not make it the cause of enmity and discord.”⁶⁵ Further, in “The First Glad Tidings,” Bahá'u'lláh specifically abolishes religious warfare, which had been accepted in previous dispensations.⁶⁶ In the “Tablet of the World” Bahá'u'lláh abrogates what He calls the “four words,” all of which figured in the Christological controversies: (1) “Destroying men’s lives”; (2) “Burning the Books”; (3) “Shunning other nations”; and (4) “Exterminating other communities.”⁶⁷

Bahá'u'lláh’s prohibition of religious discord and His exhortations to fellowship are not only for the purposes of maintaining the social peace. They have a much deeper impact on the epistemological implications of mankind’s intellectual life. As I see it, harmony and unity in religion are the preconditions that will lead man to the discovery of new spiritual truths. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written: “The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is essential if we would reach Truth, for Truth is one.”⁶⁸ This quotation suggests a plurality of meanings in any theological construct or dialogue.

The other lesson to be gained from the Christological controversies is that man must recognize the limitations of his own knowledge. Christians allowed themselves to tamper with highly abstract, speculative theological issues that were clearly beyond their capacity to comprehend. The first four ecumenical councils of the church necessitated by the controversies reveal a deep-seated preoccupation with definition and analysis as a solution to doctrinal issues. Where the requisite spiritual attributes are lacking, this approach is clearly not a means of solution. The leaders of the church passed beyond the bounds of “intellectual honesty and humility” and put forth doctrines that reflected their own imperfect understanding as perfect

⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh, in Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The First Tajalli,” *Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 188.

⁶⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 288.

⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, in Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Kitáb-i-‘Ahd,” *Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 209.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

⁶⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era: An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith*, 4th rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980), p.201.

reflections at the will of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹ Bahá'ís have also been warned about the same dangers: “In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God’s revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding . . . to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary.”⁷⁰

Christian affirmations about the divinity of Jesus would warrant several observations. First, it seems clear that the deification of Jesus belies the oft-repeated Christian affirmation that revelation is static. The deification issue evolved as a historical process, both biblically and in the creeds. New Testament exegesis of Christ’s earliest Christological titles as the “Suffering Servant” and the “True Prophet” contrasted with later incarnation theology clearly indicates this. The Apostles’ Creed, the first of the extrabiblical creeds, devised by the church of Rome as a reaction to Gnosticism, in no way even hints at Christ’s identification with the Godhead. The deification itself did not occur until Nicaea in A.D. 325, the doctrine being later ratified as Trinitarian theology at Constantinople in A. D. 381.

Though it would be quite wrong in Bahá'í terms to subordinate Christ to other mythological redeemers as the Gnostic heresy had done, one can still clearly discern how much of the Gnostic theological substratum Paul used in his own presentation of Christ. Paul’s thematic presentation of the fall of man and his enslavement to the evil powers, “rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:8), and his victorious redemption by the Christ savior, all reveal feature; of a cosmic drama that is quite Gnostic.⁷¹

It was the Arian schism, however, that brought the whole question of Christ’s divinity into the forefront of the debate. It is tempting for Bahá'ís to see in Arius an ally of the Bahá'í view that basically subordinates the prophetic figure to God. Upon closer examination, however, Arius’ subordinationist Christology reveals itself to be at variance with Bahá'í teaching. Unlike Arius who taught that Christ was properly a phenomenon, a created and finite Being, Bahá'í theology teaches that the Divine Manifestations are eternal in their station of the Logos—that is, pre-existent to their human condition.⁷² Naturally, the physical vehicle is phenomenal like that of other men. Bahá'í teaching also holds to the “essential sinlessness” of the Divine

⁶⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 87.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁷¹ Brandon in “The Gnostic Problem in Early Christianity” states that by the phrase “rulers of this age” Paul does not intend the temporal authorities but demonic beings who had control of the lives of men. He also discusses other Gnostic influences in Paul. *Religion in Ancient History*, pp. 324-36.

⁷² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Lama Clifford Barney, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1964), p. 174. Orthodox theology of the early church also taught the preexistence of the Logos.

Manifestation, whereas Arius indicated that Christ was liable not to change alone but also to sin.⁷³

The three major councils of the church-Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon-that evolved successively the deification, Trinitarian, and incarnation aspects of Christian doctrine all have the common and objectionable feature of compromising the Divine Unity. The Divine Unity is one of the “major beliefs” of the Bahá’í Faith, “the integrity of which,” Shoghi Effendi states, “no one of its followers should allow to be compromised.”⁷⁴ All of these creeds tampered with the Divine Unity by recasting Christ’s relationship to the Father in its pagan mythological meaning, which was that God had generated offspring. The wording of the creeds, as well as Cyril’s pantheistic *theotokos* (mother of God) clearly indicate this.⁷⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, however, specifically rejects the belief that the Manifestation of God can somehow share in God’s essence as the *homoousios* of Nicaea held, or co-inhabit the Divine essence in a triune Godhead as the Constantinopolitan doctrine of trinity maintained: “If any be set up by His side as peers, if they be regarded as identical with His Person, how can it, then, be maintained that the Divine Being is One and Incomparable, that *His Essence is indivisible and peerless*” (my emphasis)?⁷⁶ As for the incarnation, first outlined in Paul’s theology and canonized at Chalcedon, it has been qualified by Shoghi Effendi as a “crude and fantastic” “theory.”⁷⁷

The question then is raised. If Christ is not all these things, what in the Bahá’í understanding is He? Only the briefest outline can be offered here; but the answer, I believe, is clearly in complete harmony both with Gospel teaching and with much Christian scholarship. Paul’s writings do not constitute divine revelation for a Bahá’í. This, of course, would meet with major objections from Christians who believe that all scripture is divinely inspired (2 Tim. 3:16).

The Bahá’í writings indicate that each Divine Manifestation is “known by a different name” and “fulfills a definite mission.”⁷⁸ Bahá’í recognition of Christ’s sonship would apply equally to “Son of Man,” the more common of the titles used by Christ, and to the term “Son of God.” As I pointed out earlier, Christ is “Son of God” not in any mythological sense as in a sharing of God’s divine essence but in terms of His messiahship or spiritual kingship. Christians have fastened almost exclusively upon the mythological meaning of the term, that Christ is God’s offspring, and have ignored the counterpart implied in the term, that the “Son” is one who

⁷³ Ibid., p. 197.

⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 114.

⁷⁵ The Nicene Creed reads, for example: “begotten from the Father . . . true God from true God . . . from the substance of the father.” Kelly. *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 232, passim.

⁷⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 70.

⁷⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 112.

⁷⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 52.

above all shows obedience and humility to the Father—that is, the “Son” does the Father’s will. The term “Son of Man” contains paradoxical assertions that the Christ figure would achieve the redemption of mankind by suffering a humiliating death and yet at the same time indicates a cosmological figure of paramount importance who would usher in a spiritual kingdom promised from the beginning of the world.⁷⁹ The Bahá’í writings are in harmony with these views since they recognize the sacrificial death of Jesus “as a ransom for the sins and iniquities of all of the peoples of the earth” and His having ushered in a spiritual kingdom.⁸⁰

The later Christian obsession with Christ as God, due mainly to the theology of Paul and the councils, is belied by the New Testament itself, which reveals a variety of Christological titles. The Christ figure of the New Testament, notwithstanding the preeminence of the title of sonship, is depicted as a mosaic of Christological images, each with its own history rooted in a different tradition. For early Christians Christ was the True Prophet, the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah (Heb. *ebed Yahweh* ‘the Righteous One’). There are also traditions of Jesus as the High Priest, Jesus as Lord, and so on.⁸¹ Such a mosaic is consistent with Bahá’u’lláh’s explanation that the prophetic figure reveals a wide range of spiritual attributes, from the state of servitude at one end of the scale, “a servitude the like of which no man can possibly attain,” and covering successively the stages of Apostleship, Guardianship, Messengership, Prophethood, Lordship, reaching ultimately to Divinity, “the Call of God Himself.”⁸²

In addition to this prophetic mission, Bahá’í teaching points to the preexistent or metaphysical reality of Christ. However, rather than restricting this preexistent reality to Jesus alone, Bahá’í scripture attributes it to all of the Founders of the world’s great religions. This is the reality of the Divine Word (Logos) or Divine Manifestation: “Therefore the reality of prophethood, which is the Word of God and the perfect state of manifestation, did not have any beginning, and will not have any end. . .”⁸³ Not only does Bahá’í teaching accord with the pre-existence of the Word as stated in the prologue to St. John’s Gospel (John 1), but also Christian

⁷⁹ Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, pp. 158, 142.

⁸⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 76. In view of this text of Bahá’u’lláh I feel that it is proper for a Bahá’í to speak of the blood sacrifice of Jesus. However, a Bahá’í would not link this notion to a belief in original sin as it is in Christian theology. The church’s aggregate condemnation of the whole human race prior to Christ’s coming has been qualified as “superstitious” by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*The Reality of Man: Excerpts from Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1962]), p. 47. Bahá’u’lláh reminds us, though, that there are limits to the intellectual understanding of the mystery of sacrifice. See *Gleanings*, p. 76; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 129.

⁸¹ See Cullman, *Christology of the New Testament*.

⁸² Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 55.

⁸³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 174.

scholarship has interpreted the passage to mean that the Logos means God's self-revelation, a view that coincides perfectly with Bahá'í teaching.⁸⁴

Further, the Hellenistic notions of the term, which are implicit in John's usage, are also pertinent to the comparative aspects of the two religions. For the pre-Socratics and the Stoics as well as the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, the Logos was an intermediary between God and man. As we have already seen, St. Paul depicts the very act of creation as being ascribed to the Logos, that is, to the Christ as the Word of God. (Col. 1:16). While God in Baha'i teaching is clearly the Creator,⁸⁵ we find here a perfect parallel to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Logos as God's agent of creation. For Bahá'u'lláh also declares: "Verily, the Word of God is the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world - a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times. Immeasurably exalted is the God of Wisdom who hath raised this sublime structure."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Cullman, *Christology of the New Testament*, pp. 265-66. Because of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's endorsement of Logos theology, I cannot concur with those who look to Ebionite Christology as being closer to the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation. It is in some ways; however, the Johannine Logos that is endorsed in the Bahá'í Faith and that is also used by Paul was rejected by the Ebionites. Ebionites also rejected the virgin birth, which is espoused in the Bahá'í Faith.

⁸⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 103.

⁸⁶ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 141.