

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

One Church yet many churches (plus others)

1. Early Christian heterodox groups

Heterodox From the Gk. “hetero” = different, therefore “those groups that hold different beliefs”. As opposed to Orthodox; from the Gk. “ortho” = straight, right, correct, therefore “those groups that hold correct belief” or “the group that holds...”

Over the centuries, **Orthodox**, with a capital O, comes to refer to the Eastern family of churches (“(generally) in communion with Byzantium”). As opposed to Catholic (meaning “universal”), which comes to refer to the Western church. After the 16th century Reformation in the Western church, the term Catholic comes to be limited to “those in communion with the Pope of Rome”, hence Roman Catholic, as opposed to the family of churches that are not, called variously Reformed, Evangelical, Protestant, Free etc.

Terminology:

The Church, the one worldwide Christian community (the Christian *umma*). In 20th Century, this becomes defined as “the members of the World Council of Churches plus the Roman Catholic Church”, i.e. they have to subscribe to a basic set of doctrines, e.g. Trinitarian. This excludes Unitarians, and other modern heterodox groups, some of which would not be called Christians by Mainstream Christianity, e.g. The Unification Church (Moonies), The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses etc.

Mainstream Christianity. I use this term to denote the historical Orthodox and Catholic families (Eastern and Western churches), that are Trinitarian, accept the finality and uniqueness of Christ, the Canon of Scripture (books of the Bible), and the early Great Ecumenical Councils.

Ecumenical. Literally: “universal or world-wide”. Classically used of the universal or general Councils of the Church. Also used of the Patriarch (Chief Bishop) of Byzantium, who takes the title Ecumenical Patriarch to distinguish from the Pope (Chief Bishop) of Rome and yet claims a world-wide seniority amongst the self-standing, often national (Autocephalous) Eastern Orthodox Churches, e.g. Romanian, Russian, Syrian etc.

Moving towards a Mainstream position

It takes about 400 years for the Church to set out and define its orthodox position. Most of the early disputes were about Christology (the theology of who Christ was). The procedure is to call together the bishops and leading theologians of the Church into a formal meeting or Council. The most

important of these were known as the Great Ecumenical Councils. After debate and discussion, they define their position on various questions “before God”, i.e. in conscience as they know and believe. This generally means that other (heterodox) positions are condemned as not being orthodox. The theological principle at work is one of *consensus fidelium* (“the consensus of the faithful”, *ijma*, based on the principle that the Church will never ultimately agree on an error through the power/presence of God (Holy Spirit) at work within the believers and the believing community).

When working through these groups, it is important to remember that we are dealing with theological positions not “attempts to describe reality” as the essence of God lies beyond our knowledge. What was being defined was an agreed code of theological discourse to avoid positions that lead to error.

Arians

The followers of Arius (b. c250 in Alexandria). Arius maintained that the Son of God was not eternal but created by God from nothing as an instrument for the creation of the world. This meant that Jesus Christ was not divine by nature but that this was a dignity bestowed on him by God. God had foreknowledge of the excellence of his character and so dignified him in advance. It meant that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist.

An Ecumenical Council was called by the Emperor Constantine to meet at Nicea in 325 and resolve the question. The orthodox position was defined against the Arians, who were condemned. The classical terms used in defining orthodoxy were: coeternal, coequal, and consubstantial. The Arians rallied again and were finally condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The Arian faith continued to be widespread and dominant amongst the Germanic tribes who had colonised North Africa, Spain, Gaul and parts of northern Italy. The Franks were converted to orthodox Christianity from 496, which saw the Arian faith begin its ultimate decline. Its last bastions were in North Africa and Spain.

Docetists

A tendency rather than a defined group in the early centuries that considered the humanity and sufferings of Jesus Christ as apparent rather than real (the name comes from the Gk. “to seem”, so Jesus only “seemed” human but was actually a divine being inside an apparently human body (“the ghost in the machine”). They held that God removed Jesus before his ignominious death by crucifixion and substituted him with someone, e.g. Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene. It would be part of and strongly influenced by the Gnostic traditions. The tendency recurs at various times and in various ways in Christian history over the early centuries by those who deny the reality of the incarnation and those who see a strong dichotomy between spirit and body.

Donatists

This was a break-away group from Mainstream Christianity beginning in 311 when they disputed the validity of a bishop in North Africa. This bishop had been ordained by another bishop who had renounced his Christian faith under the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian. The Donatists refused to accept his repentance and regarded any sacrament celebrated by him as invalid. They were rigorous in their interpretation of faith and held that the Christian community and its ministers must be holy and not grave sinners; they gave a high value to martyrdom. They were condemned by the orthodox theologians who said that the sinfulness of the minister did not affect the validity of the sacraments that he celebrated. They remained reasonably strong in North Africa until the rise of the Islamic Empire.

Gnostics

Gnosticism has its origins in various pre-Christian religions, especially those, e.g. the Greeks, who held a strong dualism between spirit and matter. Elect human beings were endowed with a “spark of the Divine Being”, which enabled them to receive *gnosis* (revealed knowledge), which would liberate their spirit from the confines of the material body. Jesus Christ was a “bringer of *gnosis* from the Divine Being” and as such was a spirit being who either inhabited the body of the earthly Jesus or “took on human form” but without human substance. They denied therefore the suffering and death of Jesus. One group strongly influenced by these doctrines was the **Manichaeans**, who taught a doctrine of light being liberated from darkness by key religious figures like Jesus. They were present in North Africa, Turkmenistan and influenced many other groups in the West. Their ideas are seen in the **Mandaeans** of Iraq to the present day.

Monophysites

This group held that in the incarnate Christ there was a single divine nature and not a double, human and divine, nature as held by the orthodox. They arose in the fifth century after the declaration of the dual nature was defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. There are many variations and shades of meaning. This becomes broadly the position of the Christian churches in Egypt (the Copts) and Abyssinia, some of the Syrians (the Jacobites), and the Armenians.

Nestorians

The followers of Nestorius (d. c451) of Antioch (and Constantinople). They hold that there are two separate “persons” in the incarnate Christ, one human and one divine. The orthodox position was defined as one “person” who was both divine and human. The doctrine of two “persons” leads to a potential to separate out the divine “Son of God” from the human Jesus. This was expressed in the refusal of the Nestorians to acknowledge the title for Mary “Theotokos” (The God-bearer) as she was held to be the mother of the human Jesus only. There is thus the potential to speak of Jesus as being “adopted” as

“Son of God” by God, and of the Word of God merely inhabiting his earthly body without his being divine. They begin to call themselves “The Church of the East” and their leading bishop took the title of “Catholicos”. Their strongholds were in Persia and later Iraq, with Baghdad becoming their principal seat. They were heavily committed to mission towards the east into India and especially Central Asia and China. There is a long tradition of their interaction with Islam.

Towards clarifying the terms

As an initial starting position, it might help to think of “person” as a substantive or subject. In Greek, the terms used are *prosopon* (the mask through which the actor speaks) and *hypostasis* (a self-subsistent reality). Nature can be thought of as a set of attributes possessed by a person.

2. Timeline

6 BCE	Probable date for birth of Jesus
30 CE	Probable date for death of Jesus
66	Jews revolt against Romans; many Christians leave Jerusalem.
70	Jewish Temple destroyed and Jews sent into exile
300	Christmas first celebrated (moved to 25 th December in 352)
312	Constantine begins to recognise Christianity
321	Sunday becomes a public holiday in Rome
325	Council of Nicea condemns Arius
337	Constantine baptised on his deathbed
392	Jerome begins to publish the Bible in Latin, the popular (Lat. <i>vulgar</i>) language, therefore called the Vulgate
410	Visigoths sack Rome
431	Council of Ephesus condemns Nestorians
451	Council of Chalcedon proclaims Jesus Christ “all that it is to be God and all that it is to be Man” with two natures “unconfused, unchanging, inseparable and indivisible”
562	Cassiodorus calculates and implements the AD system of dating
596	Pope Gregory sends Augustine and his party of monks to convert the Anglo-Saxons on Britain
1054	Great Schism between Eastern (aka Orthodox [right belief]) Churches and Western Church (aka Catholic [universal]). Byzantium (aka Constantinople and Istanbul) becomes “Second Rome” in 330 (Moscow later known as “Third Rome”). Politics and theology combined. The “universal primacy of Rome” vs.

- the self-standing Patriarchs of the East with Byzantium as “Ecumenical Patriarch”. Mutual excommunications.
- 1074 Clerical celibacy imposed on the Western Church
- 1095 First Crusade launched by Pope Urban II

Spain

- 1127 Translation school established in Toledo
- 1143 Qur’an translated into Latin
- 1269 Translation schools in Seville and Murcia

Spanish Inquisition

- 1478 Spanish Inquisition established to persuade nominal converts to Christianity from Judaism and Islam (Moriscos) to become “true believers”. Spread to Portugal 1536, Goa 1560, Peru 1570 and Mexico 1571. Abolished 1834

Western European Reformation

- 1483-1546 Martin Luther (1517 Wittenberg “95 Thesis”)
- 1484-1531 Huldrych Zwingli (Swiss reformation from 1523)
- 1509-1564 John Calvin (Geneva reformation from 1541)
- 1514-1572 John Knox (Scottish reformation from 1558)
- 1489-1525 Thomas Müntzer (the Anabaptists)
- 1496-1561 Menno Simons (Anabaptist later the Mennonites)
- 1545-1563 Council of Trent and the Catholic Reformation
- 1547-1648 The Wars of Religion in mainland Europe
- 1555 “cuius religio, eius regio” “the ruler determines the religion”
- 1618-1648 The Thirty-years War in Germany, ends with the Peace of Westphalia and “religious toleration”

England

- 1330-1384 John Wycliffe begins translation of the Bible into English
- 1488-1569 Miles Coverdale translates Bible into English
- 1494-1536 William Tyndale translates Bible into English
- 1509-1547 Henry VIII
- 1521 Henry names Defender of the Faith by Pope Leo X vs. Lutherans
- 1533 Henry divorced and remarried
- 1535 Henry names “Supreme Governor of the Church in England”
- 1553-1558 Reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, reintroduces Catholic faith in England and persecutes Protestants as heretics
- 1558 Elizabeth I becomes queen and reintroduces Protestant religion and persecutes Catholics as heretics

- 1550-1633 Robert Browne, founder of the English Independents, first church in Norwich 1580
- 1605 Guy Fawkes plot to blow up parliament (Nov. 5th)
- 1611 King James (Authorised) version of the Bible in English published
- 1612 First Baptist Church in England
- 1620 The Mayflower sails to America with English Congregationalists (Puritans) “The Pilgrim Fathers”. Land at Plymouth.
- 1624-1691 George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in 1647
- 1633 Particular (Calvinist) Baptists founded in London “believers’ baptism by immersion”
- 1639 Scottish Church becomes Presbyterian
- 1609 Beginning of the “Plantation of Ulster” by Scots Presbyterians
- 1647 The Westminster Confession establishes Christian Presbyterian doctrine for the British Isles
- 1649 King Charles I executed. The Commonwealth.
- 1655 Jews allowed to return to England by Cromwell after expulsion in 1290
- 1660 End of Commonwealth. King Charles II
- 1664 “Non-Conformists” (i.e. those who are not members of the Church of England) are suppressed
- 1673 The “Test Act” by which Catholics are forbidden from holding public office
- 1685-1688 Reign of last catholic king, James II, flees to France
- 1688 William of Orange lands in Britain, “William and Mary” the Protestant succession is ensured
- 1689 Toleration Act by which Non-Conformists are allowed freedom of worship in England
- 1529 and 1638 “Turks at the Gates of Vienna”
- 1701 Act of Settlement; Catholics banned from the throne
- 1703-1791 John Wesley (Methodists: 1735)
- 1707 Act of Union of Scotland and England
- 1707-1791 Countess of Huntingdon (Calvinist Methodists: 1783)
- 1733-1804 Joseph Priestley, English Presbyterian becomes a leading Unitarian
- 1791 Roman Catholic Relief Act; most restrictions against Catholics lifted provided oath of loyalty to crown
- 1730 The first “Great Awakening” in America
- 1801 The second “Great Awakening”. The start of American Evangelicalism, expansion of Methodists and Baptists

- 1801 Act of Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland
- 1805-1844 Joseph Smith (Mormons: 1830)
- 1811 Primitive Methodist Church formed
- 1821-1910 Mary Baker Eddy (Christian Scientists: 1879)

- 1828 Test Act repealed: being a communicant member of the Church of England no longer mandatory for civil and military officers
- 1829-1912 William Booth (Salvation Army: 1865)

- 1829 Catholic Emancipation; allowed to vote and take public office
- 1830 Catholic Relief Act; almost all laws repealed and Catholics allowed to sit in Parliament
- 1831 William Miller forms the Adventists (end of world predicted for 1843 and 1844) then Seventh-Day Adventists
- 1843 Free Church of Scotland formed
- 1846 Southern Baptists formed in America
- 1858 Lionel de Rothschild becomes the first Jew to sit in the House of Commons
- 1897 Pentecostal Church of God in Christ formed in America