

## UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

### 23: The Church of the Councils

*(The First Six: from Constantine to the rise of Islam)*

The fourth century saw the triumph of the Christian Church. At its start Christians were still persecuted; by the end the adoption by an Emperor of any other religion was unthinkable. Armenia became the first Christian state in 303 and the Roman Empire followed in 337. The Emperor Julian the Apostate briefly disestablished and disavowed Christianity but failed to revive the ancient Mediterranean religions.

In the late Roman and Medieval eras the difference between Church and State was increasingly a difference of emphasis, not of aim. “Both Church and Empire wanted Christian unity and the establishment of the Kingdom of God, but while the Church thought unity could best be attained by purely religious means, emperors thought that God could best be worshipped by means of a united Empire.” (“A History of Medieval Europe” by R. H. C. Davis – published by Longman in 1970, page 19).

#### **The Church in the Reign of Constantine the Great (313-337)**

Constantine decided to mobilise the Christians against his fellow Caesar Maxentius, even before he emerged as absolute ruler from the chaos of civil war. In return he championed the cause of the persecuted Church. This decision constitutes one of the turning points of history.

After his victory over Maxentius at the Pons Milvius, the Emperor proclaimed the celebrated edict of Tolerance in Milan (probably in 313). This gave the churches civil status and the same privileges as the state religious institutions. Toleration, however, was soon followed by open support: the monogram of Christ appeared on imperial standards and

upon some coins. With Constantine the Great began the outward Christianisation of the Roman Empire. Inevitably, this was accompanied by state interference in ecclesiastical affairs – two developments of which the repercussions can still be felt today. Slowly but surely the Church of the Martyrs became, outwardly at least, the established church of the Roman/Byzantine state.

### **St Antony the Great (d. 356)**

Those Christians within the Roman Empire who aspired to a truly Christian ‘testimony’ chose the ‘desert’ against the ‘city’, the way of the ascetic. This austere lifestyle was originally lived far from the corrupt cities - now inhabited by multitudes who were Christian in name alone. Imitators of St Antony initially moved far from imperial officials and the church hierarchs who were increasingly caught up in ever more bitter disputes about what constituted orthodoxy or heresy.

Originally a hermit, St Antony the Great founded the first ‘mone’ or monastic community. This was a centre in the desert for anchorites living alone in caves and cells and only coming together for the Divine Liturgy. He was following the earlier St Paul of Thebes but with this innovation in favour of community are to be found the beginnings of the Christian monastic movement. In 386 St Augustine heard in Milan how officials of the Imperial Court (at Trier, Germany) had retired from the world after reading the ‘Life of St Antony’ by St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria, a foundational text for subsequent monasticism..

The founder of the ‘communal life’ or coenobitic monasticism proper, was another Egyptian, St Pachomios. First a soldier, then baptised, and the disciple of an anchorite, he founded the first walled monastery at Tabennisi opposite Dendera in 320. When he died, in 346, thousands were living in monasteries. Economically speaking these were collective enterprises (basket weaving, agriculture) but what really filled the lives of the monastics

was prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and the practice of asceticism. This was bodily mortification through hard work, vigil and fasting.

### **The 'Wanderings of the Barbarians'**

The fifth century was a period of crisis for the Roman Empire and of a series of disasters in the West. In 404 the Rhine frontier collapsed and endless hordes of barbarians swarmed into the defenceless provinces of Belgica and Gaul, overwhelming most towns and estates. Ignoring the glittering capital Ravenna, where Honorius kept his court between the coastal marshes and the Adriatic Sea, Alaric reached Rome. After eight centuries the old imperial capital was plundered: 'it seemed as though the world were decapitated'. Alaric having made off with the booty, perished in Calabria and the Goths moved on. Nevertheless, all knew that the old order had vanished forever.

Struck by this sudden proof of the finiteness of the 'eternal' city, St Augustine of Hippo was inspired to write his 'City of God'. Fifty years later Africa and Gaul were occupied by the Franks, Visigoths, Vandals and Alans. They took over the Roman administration but, being Arians, they persecuted the Orthodox, especially in Africa. The Orthodox of the West (always preferring the term 'Catholic') began to pin their hopes upon the Byzantine Emperor, and 'Catholic' became synonymous with 'Romanitas' or being Roman.

### **The Age of Justinian and Theodora**

Justinian I, Byzantine Emperor between 527 and 565, restored the Empire almost to its former dimensions, with the exception of Gaul, Britain and the northern part of Spain. He drove out the Ostrogoths from Italy and uprooted the Vandals from Africa. An energetic and gifted ruler and a sincerely religious man, he was also a person of great initiative and daring. He built imposing castles, bridges and towers. He re-founded cities ruined by the barbarian migrations, planned new towns, churches and fortified monasteries – including

the imposing monastery of Mount Sinai (in the 550s). Justinian dedicated the 'Great Church' of Constantinople – dedicated to Christ as Holy Wisdom and dominating the Bosphorus. Otherwise known as Santa Sophia, it was built between 532 and 537 after the Nika revolt and consecrated in 562. The architects Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletos were both Greeks of Ionia (now Aegean provinces of Turkey).

His religious policy, however, was a colossal failure, both in his dealings with the Popes in Rome and with entire populations in West Asia. Despite the patronage of the Empress Theodora, important national communities of the Eastern provinces became increasingly restive and disaffected with rule from Constantinople. These included the Copts, Armenians and the Syriac speaking Christians of the Syrian/Assyrian/Chaldaeian regions (modern Syria and Iraq). In the Eastern provinces resentment of both Greeks and Latins (popularly lumped together as 'Melchites' or 'the Royal party') prevented dialogue between Christians of diverging traditions. Justinian, of Albanian extraction – and now revered as a Saint in Romania, and his court resorted to ever more unpopular and harsher methods against dissidents of all shades. Ultimately, the most serious fissures in Eastern Christianity were transformed into great chasms in this period.

Great monuments were constructed everywhere but the Christian East was falling apart and military campaigns in the West (under Belisarius and Narses) were both destructive and weakened the Empire.

The days of a Mediterranean world united by Christianity were drawing to a close. "In the matter of great churches, Syria could be proud of a glorious past, for this was the cradle of the faith. In Palestine multitudes flocked to venerate the Holy Places and to witness the distinct liturgy of Jerusalem, which gave rise to many a striking motif, artistic and otherwise. Egypt was the cradle and home of monasticism: anyone wishing to visit its original source journeyed to the desert on either side of the Nile. In Africa Christian Latin literature had its first flowering. It was a land made holy by the memorials of countless martyrs and there,

about the year 400, shone the light of St Augustine. Yet all this venerable and fertile ground, once harvested, was lost wholly or in part both to the Empire and to Christianity". ('Atlas of the Early Christian World' by F. Van Der Meer and Christine Mohrmann – published by Nelson in 1958, page 100).

### **Church Life (fourth century onwards)**

The early Church lived from the Scriptures. At every Divine Liturgy the faithful listened to extracts from the Sacred Books, as, for that matter, did the non-Christians and catechumens who were admitted only to the 'service of the catechumens'. They sang the Psalms and frequently knew both them and the Gospels by heart. The bishop's preaching generally consisted of a commentary on the passages of Scriptures which had been read aloud (homily). It was only in the fourth century that the panegyrics delivered after 313 in memory of the martyrs, notably in the East, and the custom of singing metrical hymns (St Ambrose set the example in Milan) began to penetrate into the strictly Scriptural liturgy which had remained rather conservative.

The Eucharist was a mystery, always mentioned with reserve and celebrated with sobriety (according to St Augustine). It was deliberately explained, from the fourth century onwards, in a 'mystagogical' instruction given, at their first communion, to the newly baptised who stood near the altar in their white robes and beheld the Eucharistic act for the first time. They themselves, could now take part in it and thus their initiation was complete.

Hierarchs occupied an exalted position but did not always live in great style. The example set by Eusebius of Vercellae, who lived with his priests and deacons in an austere monastic community was followed immediately by St Ambrose of Milan, then by St Augustine of Hippo and others. In East and West alike monks were increasingly chosen as bishops, eventually to the exclusion of secular clergy. Their great reputation for impartiality,

selflessness and devotion appears from the fact that when, during the reign of Constantine, the bishops received the power to administer justice even in civil matters, Christians and non-Christians alike deserted the civil tribunals and flocked to ecclesiastical courts. However, some bishops emerged as 'ethnarchs' or national leaders, like the Popes of Alexandria who relied particularly on native monks for support against all outsiders. Elsewhere, it was the bishops who were the real bulwark against the barbarian invaders and who championed their town and flock in everything. We think of Pope Leo, journeying to meet Attila the Hun, and forcing him to a compromise, Maruthas of Martyropolis, Pope Gregory the Great and so many others.

### **Heresies and the Orthodox/Heterodox divide**

After Gnosticism, **Arianism** represented the most pervasive challenge to the Orthodox Churches. Based in Alexandria, Arius (d. 336) meditated on Jesus being 'begotten' and posed the question whether the Son is a created being. He was a student of the martyred St Lucian of Antioch and clearly echoed the latter. However, as all extant written materials were composed by opponents of the movement it is now difficult to establish exactly what Arius taught. A Council in Alexandria in 321 condemned this school of thought and expelled Arius. Nevertheless, the popularity of his views forced the imperial authorities to convene the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325. At Nicaea there was a clear emphasis on the Divinity of Christ and the teaching of 'consubstantiality' was established as Orthodox. The final form of this creed was achieved at the Second Ecumenical Council (the first at Constantinople) in 382 when the clause concerning the Holy Spirit was expanded.

A Council in Tyre, Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), in 335 represented an Arian revival and resulted in the condemnation of the Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius the Great. Often enjoying Byzantine Imperial patronage, three Arian Schools contended with the legacy of Nicaea and disputed with the Orthodox. One group taught that Christ was 'homoiousios' or alike in substance to the Father, another that Christ was 'homoios' or like

the Father, and yet another taught that Father and Son are 'anhomoios' or unlike each other. This dispute shattered Church unity forcing major Councils to be held to condemn Arianism at Sardica (modern Bulgaria) in 343, Sirmium (modern Serbia) in 358 and Seleucia (modern Turkey) in 359. Between 340 and 360 fourteen Church Councils sought to refute the Arians.

Now we must remember that Arianism was popular across the Mediterranean and beyond – being taken up not least by the Goths and the Germanic peoples (following the mission of the saintly Ulfilas from Constantinople to areas beyond the river Danube). Also that the Nicene position of 'homoousios' had already been condemned in Antioch back in 269. Furthermore, groups of Arians were still active in Syria up to the Crusades when it appears that they were reconciled to the Latins.

The **Nestorians** represented a strand within the School of Antioch. They are named after Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (386-451) who was uncomfortable with the term 'Theotokos' for Mary and taught that the correct title should be 'Christotokos'. He argued that Mary is the Mother of Jesus but not of the pre-existing Logos/Word of the Trinity. Nestorius immediately came under attack from St Cyril of Alexandria (d.444) who supported the use of the title 'Theotokos' and accused Nestorius of denying the Incarnation. Nestorius was condemned (without a fair hearing) at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 and again at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. However, the tradition that he represented was consolidated amongst the Assyrians (northern Iraq) and the Church of the East (including the Chaldaeans before union with Rome in the seventeenth century).

**Monophysitism** is the controversial term for a movement in the Eastern Churches – originally emanating from monastic circles in Constantinople. The term is derived from the Greek for 'one/alone' and 'nature'. Monophysites held that Christ has only one nature as the human elements were subsumed or evolved into the divine. This view was actually a

logical progression of tendencies emerging both from polemics against the Arians/Nestorians and from the theological tradition of Alexandria.

A notable proponent was Eutyches, an archimandrite in Constantinople who taught that the potentially separate human and divine natures in Christ were actually perfectly fused into one, new single nature. He proclaimed that 'Christ's human nature was dissolved into his divine nature like a drop of water falling into the sea'. In 448 he was accused of heresy. He was reinstated in 449 at the Second ("Robber") Council of Ephesus (not Ecumenical) and finally condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

There were Monophysites who held more extreme views. These included Apollinarius who taught that Christ indeed possessed a human body and a human 'living principle' but that the Divine Logos/Word had taken the place of the nous/mind and thinking principle.

**Miaphysitism** or **Henophysitism** are terms preferred by those Oriental Churches who separated from Constantinople and Rome at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. Following the teaching of St Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) they maintain that in the one person of Jesus Christ all contradictions are overcome – that Divinity and Humanity are united in one nature (mono – physis) in a way that does not allow for any separation, confusion or the least alteration. The present day Oriental Orthodox Churches reject the label Monophysite and all Eastern Orthodox Councils from Chalcedon onwards are questionable in their view.

Although championed by the Empress Theodora (the wife of Justinian)<sup>1</sup>, and other Byzantine rulers (Anastasius), this theological school quickly gained support throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Justinian's attempt to reconcile those who had rejected Chalcedon by condemning the Nestorian (or neo-Nestorian) documents: "The Three Chapters" reflects pressure from his wife, the Empress Theodora for a more miaphysite or even monophysite position. His intention, however, may have been less theologically than politically motivated, since by the time the 5<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council (553) endorsed this condemnation, non-Chalcedonian positions were hardening and the Empire's unity was threatened. Certainly the condemnation did not solve the problem. By aligning himself subsequently more closely with his wife's position, Justinian's initiatives helped to trigger new heretical false solutions to the Christological questions under consideration.



Egypt and Syria and spread to Armenia and the Caucasus. The Coptic connection ensured that this position was taken up by Christians in Ethiopia and Eritrea (fifth century) but not Nubia (Nobatia, Makaria, Alodia, collectively Sudan, in the sixth century). Whether in the form of Monophysitism or Miaphysitism this dispute irrevocably divided Eastern Christianity and weakened the Byzantine Empire.

**Dyophysites** is a term of abuse for the adherents of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon held opposite Constantinople in 451. After this Council both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics hold that Christ is one person in two natures; that these natures are 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'. The Chalcedonian tradition would agree with St Cyril (d. 444) that 'both the divine and human natures remained but were perfectly united in the person of Jesus'.

The **Monothelites** represented a theologically compromised movement of reconciliation between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians – usually with the direct patronage of Imperial authority in Constantinople, desperate to bridge the divide. They upheld a compromise solution: the Monophysites could agree that Jesus had two natures if it were established that he had a single will and Chalcedonians could agree that Jesus had a single will if two natures were recognised. Monothelism or 'one-will' was promulgated from Antioch in 633 but had been launched in Constantinople by the Patriarch Sergius I (610-638) and Emperor Heraclius (610-641). ("Monoenergism" or the doctrine of one power in Christ was a failed precursor doctrine, also supported but then abandoned by the same Emperor Heraclius). This compromise of Monothelism was roundly condemned by the Orthodox at the Third Council of Constantinople (the 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council) in 680-681.

Supported by the Emperor Heraclius in his campaigns to reunite the Empire and liberate the East from the Persians, Monotheletism became obsolete as the Byzantines came under attack from the Muslims and retreated to Asia Minor. The **Maronite Church** in parts of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine tenaciously clung to this position before uniting to Rome

during the Crusades. In the Islamic period the Maronites migrated to the heartlands of Lebanon from northern Syria to form a distinct community of the Syriac tradition.

The nature of the Trinity was widely debated in the era of the first Church Councils. Was God the Father quite separate from the Son (the Arian view)? Was one merely an aspect of the other (the Sabellian view)? Or were they at once distinct and similar? By the time this issue was settled (to the satisfaction of the Orthodox) a new storm had broken over the relation of the human and divine components of Christ. Debate centred on whether they were completely fused, entirely separate, or separate and commingled. Both the Monophysite doctrine of complete fusion and the Nestorian doctrine of near or entire separation were condemned by the Eastern Orthodox. The struggle between opposing views continued through the fifth and sixth centuries.

The failure to establish a “broad Church” in these centuries – alongside the meddling of successive Emperors and their courtiers (not least Justinian and Theodora on opposing sides) proved disastrous. Byzantium was severely weakened and persecution of dissenters narrowed “Orthodoxy” to a mainly Greek/Latin base. Between 607-628 the Asian provinces were conquered by the Persians, with the active assistance of Jews, Samaritans, Manichaeans (founded by Mani 215-76) and other persecuted minorities. The Persian invasions were supported by a variety of religious and ethnic minorities including those continuing to practice Paganism.

From 634 onwards the same regions were taken over by the Arabs, inspired by their conversion to the new religion of Islam (by 632), and in alliance with the Monophysite Christians. It is no accident that the early Muslims adopted the Green flag of the Monophysite movement, often emblazoned with the sword of St Mercurius “father of swords” and the abiding symbol of the Copts. The withdrawal of Byzantine forces from Palestine, Syria and Egypt in these years allowed space for a revival of Paganism, Gnosticism and other Christian sects.