The Two “I”s of Christ: Revisiting the Christological Controversy

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Books Discussed:


The christological controversy of the fifth century is notoriously difficult to understand, and even more so to appreciate. However dizzying the debates regarding the nature(s) and person(s) of the Incarnate Christ, what eludes many students and scholars alike is why anyone then (or indeed now) should have cared so deeply about the precise solution as to effect the dissolution of the Eastern Christian oikoumene in order to see it prevail. To teach this controversy well—as I try to do—requires exploring with my students what seems to be most at stake in it. This is harder than it might seem: the different contestants cannot agree on exactly what is or should be at stake; they make a virtue of speaking past one another; and the terminology is as

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shifting sands beneath the reader’s feet. As a result, some students throw up their hands in frustration, and dismiss the whole mess as clear proof that these Christian elites heartily deserve the pejorative title “Byzantine.” So too some scholars in despair search for an explanation on another plane of causality: they reduce the theology of the controversy to social and political forces, such as the rivalries between ancient sees (especially Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome), currying capricious imperial favor, the persistent threat of Persia and the security of the military limes, or the need for Egyptian bread in order to feed the Eastern Empire.¹ All of these factors, and many more, are certainly relevant to the controversy of the fifth century, but none can sufficiently explain why these theologians cared so deeply about the question of the Incarnate Christ that they would devote themselves as they did to its adequate resolution, and suffer exile and persecution on its behalf.

All the books under consideration here try mightily to understand and appreciate what is at stake theologically in the christological controversy—and so are for that fact alone to be commended. I will start with the most recent, Paul B. Clayton, Jr.’s The Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus, but turn to the other two as the discussion warrants. My aim in reviewing these three books together is not principally to give a review of recent scholarship, but rather to use them as a means to discern what I regard as the crucial issue animating the christological controversy, and advocate why we today should still care about these seemingly arcane debates. At the root of this controversy, I contend, is a debate about the subjectivity of Christ, and by extension, our own subjectivity. The Antiochens offer a startling answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?”—an answer that deserves to be heard and heeded again.

I.

If you are not familiar with the christological debates, Clayton’s learned treatise is not the best place to begin. It condenses a lifetime

¹ For a critique of this approach, see McGuckin, Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 227–229 and Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassible God, 136–137. In both cases, however, I suspect that these orthodox authors are being softer on Cyril than is his due. I prefer the honest, and ironic, remark of John Henry Newman, “Cyril, I know, is a Saint; but it does not follow that he was a Saint in the year 412” (Historical Sketches, vol. 2 [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912], 341).
of study, and offers a nuanced picture of the controversy that is hard
to appreciate without a broader, and perhaps simpler, backdrop in
place. A somewhat easier entrée is John McGuckin’s *Saint Cyril of
Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (reissued in paperback
in 2004 by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press), although this too can
be demanding for the uninitiated.\(^2\) Perhaps the best introduction is
still chapter 6 of Frances Young’s *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, newly
updated and expanded for a second edition with the help of Andrew
Teal.\(^3\) Those with interest (and endurance!) can consult Alois Grill-
meier’s two-volume *Christ in Christian Tradition*.\(^4\)

In these books and in many others, the controversy is often framed
as a clash of titans: a *tête à tête* between Cyril, the indomitable patri-
arch of Alexandria, and Nestorius, the stubborn patriarch of Constan-
tinople whose intellectual roots stretched eastward to Antioch. With
such titans as these on the scene, it is unlikely that many ATR readers
will have heard of Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 466). Or if they have,
it is more likely that they will associate him with his *Historia Religiosa*
(or *History of the Monks of Syria*), which contains the *vitae* of ascetic
virtuosos from his native Syria, including (most famously) Simeon the
Stylite.\(^5\) Although Theodoret was for many years relegated to the ob-
scure corners of scholarship, he has recently been the subject of sev-
eral studies and translations.\(^6\) One of Clayton’s principal points is that
if the christological controversy is to be understood as a clash of titans,
then it should be understood as a clash between Cyril and Theodoret, *not*
Nestorius. For while Nestorius can be credited (or debited) with

\(^2\) Originally published in 1994 by E. J. Brill.

\(^3\) Frances M. Young, with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to
the Literature and Its Background*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Aca-
demic, 2010).


(Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1985). The life of Simeon Stylites is
chapter 26 of the *Historia Religiosa*.

\(^6\) See especially István Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (New York: Rout-
ledge, 2006); Niketas Siniossoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropria-
tion of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2008); Adam M. Schor, *Theodoret’s People: Social Net-
works and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of
having started the controversy, his fortunes soon waned and he found himself after the Council of Ephesus (431) exiled to Egypt (under the close watch of his adversaries). Even if Nestorius was able in exile to write his own bitter *apologia pro vita sua*, the so-called *Book of Heraklides*, he was irrelevant to the debate as it developed after 431.\(^7\)

Into his shoes stepped Theodoret, who Clayton convincingly argues in chapter 1 is the true spokesman of the Antiochene tradition in the years between the third and fourth ecumenical councils.

Nearly as often the controversy is framed as a collision between the theological commitments and exegetical traditions of two ancient sees, Alexandria and Antioch, for which Cyril and Nestorius are seen as merely the respective champions. One influential version of this imagines Alexandria and Antioch to have had rival schools. This “two schools hypothesis” goes back at least to John Henry Newman, who imagined that the catechetical school of Alexandria had a sort of evil twin at Antioch, which was for him “the very metropolis of heresy.”\(^8\)

This hypothesis was endorsed by Adolf Harnack, whose *History of Dogma* has cast a rather long shadow over subsequent treatments of the controversy.\(^9\) In *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, Paul Gavril'yuk is very critical of it, or at least of its duller versions, which so favor symmetry as to have Alexandria under the sway of Platonism, Antioch of Aristotelianism; Alexandria placing greater emphasis on Christ’s divinity, Antioch on Christ’s humanity; Alexandria indulging in allegory, Antioch restricting itself to the literal sense of Scripture. Alois Grillmeier put another version of it into circulation with his distinction between the *logos-sarx* Christology of Alexandria, which sought to understand how the Word was united to human flesh, and the *logos-anthropos* Christology of Antioch, which sought to understand how the Word was united to a full human being, flesh and soul. Gavril'yuk


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discusses Grillmeier’s version along with the rest, but principally because he does not think that “the precise nature of the union between divinity and humanity in Christ was at the heart of the Nestorian controversy.” In section V below I will consider what, according to Gavrilyuk, was at the heart of the controversy.

Regarding the Alexandria versus Antioch frame, Gavrilyuk is certainly right that “the term ‘school’ here functions as a vague designation of four different entities: a catechetical school in Alexandria, a monastic school of scriptural exegesis near Antioch, a geographically restricted theological tradition, and a party loyal to a particular theologian.” He goes on to discuss how these entities are very often elided or confused. In his view, the only version of the two schools hypothesis that survives is the “fairly trivial observation that Cyril quite conscientiously built upon the foundation of the Nicene theology in its Athanasian form, whereas Nestorius saw himself as the follower and disciple of Theodore.” While I agree that Alexandria and Antioch should not be regarded as rival “schools,” I do not agree with him that what remains is a “fairly trivial” observation. On the contrary, what hangs in the balance between Athanasius and Cyril on the one hand, and Theodore and Nestorius on the other, is whether Christ (and crucially, by extension, whether we) should be regarded as having a single “I” or in fact two “I”s.

II.

Let me try to say, in as little space as possible, what the christological controversy was explicitly about, which should not be confused with what was at stake. All contestants agreed that Christ had both a human and a divine nature; the debate centered on how the two natures so to speak “co-existed” in the one Incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ. Nestorius infamously objected to the popular title Theotokos or “God-bearer” for the Virgin Mary on the grounds that it confuses the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine. Mary is the mother of the man Jesus, not the mother of the Word, the Son eternally begotten from and “of one being” (homoousios) with the Father. Strictly speaking, Nestorius argued she bears not God the Word, but the Incarnate Christ, and so
is better hailed as Christotokos. In order to preserve the distinction between and the integrity of each nature, Nestorius preferred to speak of a “conjunction” (synapheia) rather than a “union” (henosis) of the two in the Incarnate Christ. For him, to confuse the divine and human natures—as loose talk about “union” is wont to do—amounted to “nothing more nor less than to corrupt both.” Cyril’s objections were many, and fierce: he regarded Nestorius’s opposition to Theotokos as an attack on Mary and her popular cult; he regarded a “conjunction” of the two natures as too weak to secure the saving efficacy of the Incarnation; he feared that anything less than a natural union—or later, a hypostatic union—would result in a “twofold” Christ, what McGuckin has colorfully characterized as the “bi-polar” Christ of Nestorius (to which I will return below in section VI); finally, Cyril was anxious that Nestorius’s account of the “conjunction” of the human and divine natures in Christ did not sufficiently mark him off as unique, that Christ appeared as a man “adopted” by God in much the way that other saints have been.

Cyril and Nestorius were not the first to have pondered such questions, and their respective traditions—the Alexandrian and Antiochene—can be seen to have been on a collision course for at least a hundred years before their acrimonious exchange began. In chapter 2, Clayton endorses two scholarly frameworks for appreciating what is at stake in the controversy. The first is that proposed by Francis Sullivan in 1956: he traces the christological debates between Alexandria and Antioch to their respective reactions to the Arian controversy in the previous century, which concerned whether the Son (Word) is or is not a creation of God the Father. The Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) insisted that the Son is not created but eternally begotten and homoousios with God the Father.

The key to understanding the christological controversy, Sullivan argues, is appreciating how the Alexandrians and Antiochenes offered different objections to the “Arian syllogism,” which (according to Clayton’s paraphrase) runs thus:

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[Major premise]: “The Word or Logos is the subject even of the human operations and sufferings of Christ.”

[Minor premise]: “Whatever is predicated of the Word must be predicated of him in his divine nature, that is, *kata physin*.”

[Conclusion]: “The Word is limited in his *physis*, or nature, being passibly affected by the human operations and sufferings of Christ. Therefore, the [impassible] divine Being, or *ousia*, cannot be predicated of the Word. He is other than God the Father in nature, or *physis*.\(^{15}\)

Obviously the emerging “orthodoxy” from both Alexandria and Antioch wished to avoid the Arian conclusion that the Word or Son is other than God the Father in nature. They did so, Sullivan suggests, by refusing one or the other premise. The Alexandrians refused the minor premise; that is, they were open to the idea that the human operations and sufferings of Christ can be predicated of the Word in some way other than *kata physin*.\(^{16}\) The Antiochenes refuse the major premise; that is, they are open to the notion that the Word is not the subject of the human operations and sufferings of Christ. This led eventually to the conviction that Christ has two subjects, human and divine—although what Sullivan means by “subject” requires further discussion.

Let us focus on the Antiochene response to the Arian syllogism. The first wave consists of Eustathius of Antioch (d. before 337) and Diodore of Tarsus (d. before 394). On Clayton’s telling, Diodore speaks of Christ as having two *prosopa*—two persons or “faces”—and thus safeguards the distinction between the human and divine natures. The problem with each nature having its own proper *prosopon*, however, is that Diodore fumbles in his efforts to say whether and how Christ is also somehow one. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428) represents the second wave and is widely regarded as the towering intellect of the Antiochene tradition. Although his Christology and his scriptural exegesis have long been of interest to scholars of the Antiochene tradition in general and the christological debates in particular, Frederick McLeod has recently published a helpful introduction to Theodore as well as a selection of his writings newly translated

\(^{15}\) Clayton, *The Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus*, 56.

\(^{16}\) This will lead eventually to the notion of the *communicatio idiomatorum* or “communication of idioms.”
Theodore suggests that while Christ has two natures and two corresponding *prosopa*, the human *prosopon* or “face,” in Clayton’s words, “not only manifests his own life, which it does as a function of nature, but also the indwelling Word, which it does as a function of grace and free will (both that of the *homo assumptus* [assumed human] and that of the Word). Thus the man’s face is the image of the Word, so to speak: his human *prosopon* is the common *prosopon* both of himself and of the indwelling Word.” But the shared or common *prosopon* of the human Jesus is something of a screen, a veil behind which lay two distinct natures and *prosopa*. Pull aside the veil and you will see two faces staring back at you. Sullivan argues that Theodore and his fellow Antiochenes are so committed to the impassibility of the divine nature, to the chasm between the human and divine, that they are forced into what Clayton calls “a Christology of two subjects.” Sullivan calls these “two subjects of predication,” that is, two agents to which we can, and must, assign distinct actions and attributes.

The second scholarly framework that Clayton endorses is that of Richard Norris. Although appreciative of Sullivan’s framework, Norris insists that Theodore of Mopsuestia is motivated by more than merely the desire to defeat Arianism, more than merely safeguarding the two natures by policing how we predicate things of them. For Norris, the key to the lock of Christology is anthropology; in other words, Theodore’s views of what it means to be human, for us and for Jesus, drive his solution to the problem of the Incarnate Christ:

Theodore’s thought requires not only that “the Man” be a subject of attribution, logically independent of the Word: it requires also that he [Jesus] have a function, as a centre of voluntary activity, in the work of redemption. And just as this emphasis issues in a definite christological dualism, so it derives from what we might have called the biblical strain in Theodore’s doctrine of man and human nature: his comprehension of the problem of sin in terms

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For Theodore, the human nature of Christ cooperates with the indwelling Word. But according to Norris, the Word does not indwell in this particular human, Jesus, simply because he, alone among humans, agrees to cooperate. If such were the case—and this is how Theodore is often interpreted—then Cyril’s charge would hold true, namely that the Antiochene tradition forwards a Christology of “adoptionism” based on human merit. According to Norris, Theodore preemptively eludes this criticism by insisting that the Word indwelled at conception, and that divine pleasure or grace (eudokia) gave the human Jesus the power to cooperate with it, freely, as he grew into moral maturity. If Norris is correct, then Theodore is no Pelagian, as is often thought.

Shifting back to the makeup of this Incarnate Christ, Norris’s interpretation of Theodore’s Christology aligns with Sullivan’s in many ways: Jesus the man and the indwelling Word each have a proper physis and prosopon; the human prosopon lends itself as the face of the union, a “prosopic” rather than “hypostatic” union. Theodore will call each of the two natures “I” and the one prosopon likewise “I”—in other words, behind the one “I” of Christ lies two “I”s. These two “I”s are considerably more robust than Sullivan’s “two subjects of predication.” Theodore is fascinated by the episode in the Garden of Gethsemane, especially as it is told in the Gospel of John, where Jesus the man, the homo assumptus, speaks in the first person, and speaks to God both in the second person (12:28: “Father, glorify thy name”) and in the third person (12:30: “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine”). Norris argues that this passage “appears to draw the consequence of Theodore’s comprehension of the doctrine of the ‘two natures.’ The Man and the Word in Christ are not only two logical subjects, of which attributes may be predicated. They are psychological subjects as well, at once distinct and intimately related as two centres of will and activity.”

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23 Norris, Manhood and Christ, 201; quoted in Clayton, The Christology of Theodoret of Cyprus, 63.
of a relationship of action and response . . . two intimately related agents bent upon an identical project.”

Despite the fact that Sullivan and Norris agree that the Antiochene tradition, as represented by Theodore of Mopsuestia, forwards a “two subjects” Christology, the difference between their approaches is significant. Sullivan envisions Theodore as having certain prior metaphysical commitments and a need to foil the Arian syllogism, and together these push him to posit two distinct subjects of predication in the Incarnate Christ. Norris prefers not to see Theodore’s two subjects Christology as something he has backed himself into, but rather as integral to his view of what human nature is and how it participates with the divine nature in the Incarnate Christ to effect salvation. Furthermore, on Norris’s telling, Theodore envisions these two subjects not merely as two substrata to which appropriate actions and attributes adhere, but on top of that as two “psychological subjects . . . two centres of will and activity.”

IV.

But back to Clayton: why, in his book on Theodoret of Cyrus, does he spend so much time on Theodoret’s teacher, Theodore of Mopsuestia? After all, hasn’t he been fighting to let Theodoret step out from the shadow cast by Nestorius and other, earlier Antiochenes? The reason for his attention to Theodore is simple: Clayton is convinced that Theodoret is more or less loyal to him, even as he weathers the storms of the christological controversy, and even as he is forced finally to condemn Nestorius. In chapters 3 through 7 Clayton moves slowly and carefully through Theodoret’s extant works, trying to ascertain whether and how his views evolved. The only major shift comes in 435, after the “Formula of Union” of 433, after Theodoret has finally accepted reconciliation with Cyril. Here Clayton notes a change in Theodoret’s tone: “Stress falls upon the unity in Christ, upon unity in one prosopon, while at the same time Theodoret continues to insist on there being two physeis in Christ to uphold the immutability and impassibility of the Word and the genuine human response of ‘what is assumed.’”24 And yet despite this new stress on the prosoponic union—which seems not to differ meaningfully from Theodore—“a careful examination of all the major texts up to and after Chalcedon has shown

that Theodoret’s fundamental Christological model remained exactly the same.”

Not only did Theodoret stay true to himself throughout the controversy, but also to his teacher Theodore, and together their views had a fair, if not exactly a *perfect*, spokesman in the patriarch Nestorius. In other words, Clayton concludes, the Antiochene tradition really is “Nestorian”; that is, despite some variations of tone and tenor, it does endorse a christological model very different from the Alexandrian tradition and, ultimately, even from the christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon. That Theodoret finally relented and condemned Nestorius and signed on to Chalcedon does not contradict Clayton’s conclusion: first, Theodoret condemned a straw man version of Nestorius even as he continued to share his basic christological model; and second, he found Chalcedon’s language of a union of *hypostasis* and *prosopon* sufficiently wide as to inhabit only one half of it.

This fidelity does not mean, however, that Clayton regards Theodoret as derivative or regurgitative: on the contrary, he regards him as “the fullest possible development of Antiochene Christological principles . . . the final Antiochene in this regard.”

Estimations such as these, early in the book, spurred my interest: Theodoret (and not Theodore), I thought, would emerge as the great genius of the Antiochene tradition. I was disappointed, then, to learn that these estimations are only a back-handed compliment. On Clayton’s telling, the poor Antiochene tradition, carried by Theodoret “as far as it would go,” doesn’t in the end get very far. Like many others, Clayton does credit the Antiochene tradition with insisting on the human nature of Christ, which was felt to be under threat from certain quarters. But this “great debt of gratitude” feels rather like a consolation prize when seen in light of its alleged shortcomings.

What are its alleged shortcomings? Despite his endorsement of both, it is clear by the end of the book that Clayton is much more influenced by Sullivan than by Norris. Following Sullivan, Clayton regards the Antiochene tradition as having a commitment to an unbending doctrine of God as absolutely immutable and impassible. Everything else—and especially the “two subjects Christology”—is a “function” of this prior, philosophical commitment. Once they have

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made this first misstep, the farthest they will go, their “fullest possible development” under the leadership of Theodoret, is to provide a mere check on any impulse to let the divine nature absorb and annul the human nature of the Incarnate Christ.  

When Clayton concludes that Antiochene Christology “could not move beyond its own philosophical limitations,” he sounds very much like Alois Grillmeier, who had hoped that Theodoret, of all the Antiochenes, might be the one that broke free of the tradition’s confining commitments, transcended its limitations and thereby returned the lost sheep to the fold of “basic orthodoxy.” He also sounds a familiar horn in the battle hymn of conciliar orthodoxy—one that also goes back to John Henry Newman, if not earlier—namely that the Antiochenes are logic-choppers whose fetish for philosophical precision leads them to spoil the mystery and the unity of the Incarnate Christ.

V.

In the final pages Clayton pronounces a familiar verdict on Theodoret and the tradition of which he is the apogee: “his picture of God is sterile.” Clayton longs for “the biblical God who cares, who enters into human pain and suffering . . . who can take into his own life all that it is to be truly human, who can enter into living humanly, enter himself into our history—Cyril’s Word.” I feel somewhat sad for Clayton that his scrupulous study of Theodoret has yielded only a longing for his Alexandrian adversary and the suffering God on offer in Cyril’s understanding of the Word Incarnate. But to return for a moment to Sullivan and the Arian syllogism, recall that the Alexandrians reject the minor premise, that is, they say that when we predicate suffering of the divine nature, we do not do so kata physin—we do not say the nature of God suffers. Instead, the Alexandrians say that the hypostasis of the Word, united to the human nature, is the subject of suffering. In other words, the Alexandrians are, on my reading at least, as committed to divine immutability and impassibility as the Antiochenes. They preserve an impassible God—the divine physis ( = ousia, theotes)—but offer the

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divine hypostasis up as the sacrificial lamb that can suffer. So the Alexandrian solution, following Sullivan at least, requires yet a further distinction within God between the divine hypostasis—to which suffering can be predicated—and the divine physis, ousia, or theotes—to which suffering cannot be predicated. But is this Alexandrian solution any less logic-chopping than the Antiochene position? Does this distinction deliver a “biblical God who cares, who enters into human pain and suffering” any more than the Antiochene position does? I for one am not yet convinced that Cyril offers a God who can suffer with us as much as he offers a sophisticated—and some might say sophistic—theory of predication as it applies to further distinctions within the Godhead.34

I am open to being convinced, and thus I wish that this most interesting and charged evaluation had come earlier than in the final pages of Clayton’s book. Thankfully, Paul Gavrilyuk has devoted an entire study to this subject, The Suffering of the Impassible God, one chapter of which concerns the christological controversy. Gavrilyuk’s book is exceedingly well written and well argued. I assign my students chapter 6 from his book, along with Sarah Coakley’s brilliant meditation on the Council of Chalcedon35—and I know from my students’ evaluations that they are grateful to have such guides as they trudge through the morass of the fifth-century debates.

One of the most refreshing points Gavrilyuk makes is that the Antiochene insistence on the immutability and impassibility of God does not owe to any thraldom to philosophy, but is rather a piece of the patristic inheritance, and one shared by the Alexandrians: namely, a sharp distinction between creator and created, a “patristic negative theology” that would see God as radically transcending creaturely conditions, especially suffering.36 If in this regard Gavrilyuk bucks the trend since Newman, in other regards he follows it: on his telling, the Antiochenes bear an uncanny resemblance to the Arians in-

34 See McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 132–33: “The divine Logos . . . did not suffer (qua God) but in so far as his body suffered he can be said to have suffered-in-the-body.” Emphasis added.
sofar as they want to preserve a transcendent Godhead untouched by creation; and while they are carrying on a patristic legacy shared by the Alexandrians, the Antiochenes unfortunately carry it “to its logical extreme.” So while they may not be philosophers per se, the Antiochenes still come across as sterile logicians of a sort.

Gavrilyuk seems to share with Sullivan the conviction that their insistence on divine impassibility is the Antiochenes’ first principle, and that the two subjects Christology is a rather unfortunate corollary of this prior commitment. For his part, “Cyril did not see the choice between divine impassibility and passibility as an either/or matter.”

Taking a page from the scholastics, Cyril sought to resolve the difficulty by making a distinction: in Gavrilyuk’s words, God “apart from the incarnation” and God “within the framework of the incarnation.” God does not suffer in his “naked” Godhead, apart from the incarnation. But when God becomes human, we can say that God suffered “in and through human nature.” This “qualified divine passibility” resolves the dilemma to Gavrilyuk’s satisfaction. But resolution means something specific here, namely an affirmation of the “ultimate irreducibility” of a “paradox,” a “creative tension,” navigating “between the Scylla of God’s suffering in his own nature outside the economy of the incarnation and the Charybdis of the man’s suffering on his own.”

While talk of paradox, creative tension, and the avoidance of mythical sea monsters is certainly appealing, I remain unconvinced that this offers a resolution any less susceptible to critique than the Antiochene option. Nestorius himself believed that Cyril was just as committed to divine impassibility as he was. Gavrilyuk admits as much, “as Cyril stressed on many occasions, the Word remained impassible in his own nature throughout the incarnation.” God-in-the-flesh, God “within the framework of the incarnation” may suffer through the hypostatic union with the human nature, but neverthe-

37 Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassible God, 142.
38 “Nestorius maintained unqualified divine impassibility, which undermined the union of Christ’s person” (Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassible God, 171).
39 Gavrilyuk, The Suffering of the Impassible God, 149.
less, throughout even this suffering, the divine nature itself remains apart from it all, a transcendent reserve untouched by creaturely concerns. And as much as we might be attracted to the notion that God gains experiential knowledge of human misery in the passion and crucifixion, if that experiential knowledge does not penetrate to the divine nature, then we might be forgiven if we ask what God has in fact learned. By Gavrilyuk’s own standards, Cyril seems as much an Arian as Nestorius: neither of them is willing, in the end, to have God descend completely to our condition; both prefer that he remain, at least always in part, in his vertiginous heights.

VI.

And yet I suspect that Gavrilyuk is right that “the difference [between Cyril and Nestorius] was indeed profound.” But if the difference is not to be found in their commitment to impassibility (qualified or not)—as Gavrilyuk thinks it is—then where? I wish to suggest that the profound difference may have more to do with whether Christ is confessed as having one “I” or two, whether Christ is a single subject or is in fact irreducibly twofold. Recall that Sullivan, Gavrilyuk, and Clayton—and many more besides—regard the two subjects Christology as an unfortunate corollary of the Antiochene commitment to absolute immutability. Norris attempts to move the two subjects Christology from the margins to the center of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s theology. Following Norris in this respect, McGuckin regards the question of the “single subjectivity” versus the “bi-polarity” of the Incarnate Christ as the beating heart of this controversy. Despite the fact that McGuckin is squarely on the side of Cyril he gives a sophisticated and relatively generous interpretation of Nestorius’s “prosopic theory,” or what he calls “associative difference in Christ.”

McGuckin regards Nestorius as equally faithful to Theodore of Mopsuestia as Theodoret was (at least according to Clayton). As we

45 Rowan Williams has suggested that Arius represents an early “apophatic” or negative theology, but one in which “the unknowability of God” amounts to “simply the inaccessibility of a kind of divine ‘hinterland’, the mysteriousness of an indefinite source of divinity . . . an overplus of ‘unengaged’ and inexpressible reality . . . that is not realized in and as relationship, in God” (Arius: Heresy and Tradition, revised edition [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002], 242).
47 McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 151.
have seen, at the heart of Theodore's Christology is the notion that the two natures, human and divine, have two corresponding prosopa (aspects or faces), which in the Incarnate Christ are united insofar as the one human prosopon lends its face to the irreducible duality. McGuckin is certainly right that “central to the coherence of Nestorius's thought was his belief that all christological thinking should always begin from this concrete experience the church has of Christ in his double reality.” Following Theodore, Nestorius thought that we should start with neither the man Jesus of Nazareth, nor the divine Word, but rather the one face of the Incarnate Christ, in whom the “eyes of faith” have always recognized “two clearly observed aspects of his reality, which signify to the beholder divinity as well as humanity.”

Nestorius also follows Theodore in insisting that the christological union in a single prosopon is a union kat'eudokian, by God's pleasure or grace. In other words, the divine does not unite with the human due to the latter's merit or their mutual cooperation (kat'energeian), but neither does the divine unite naturally (kat'ousian) with the human—there is not and can never be a union of natures. Crucially, this prosopie union of the two distinct natures and corresponding prosopa is not—and cannot be—“ontologically grounded.” This fact did not sit well with Cyril, and it does not sit well with McGuckin. Nestorius’s unwillingness to ground the union of the two natures ontologically threatens to split open what McGuckin calls the “single subjectivity of Christ.” Hardly a page goes by where McGuckin does not loudly intone this worry, and in a variety of idioms: what is under threat is the “one concrete subject,” “the single individual reality,” “the sole personal subject,” “a concept of unitive subject in Christ,” and so on.

But for all the work—rhetorical or substantive—that “subject” and “subjectivity” are doing in McGuckin’s treatment, the concept is undefined and relatively underdetermined. This may be a virtue in his eyes, since McGuckin consistently faults Nestorius for pursuing precision in theological terminology and commends Cyril for a sort of “wall of sound” approach that cares less about exactitude in language and more about conveying overpowering convictions in a rhetorical tapestry rich in weaves and cross-weaves. In McGuckin’s own words,

48 McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 156.
50 McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 144, 163.
“Whereas Nestorius demanded logical exactitude in the theological exchange, Cyril preferred to defend an intuited principle of single subjectivity regardless of the strains his varied use of technical terms placed on its hearers or upon logic itself.”

When we press him on this intuition of single subjectivity, we see that McGuckin, like Cyril, is worried that the two subjects in the Incarnate Christ might be more than merely grammatical subjects to which we properly assign attributes and actions, but might in fact be distinct psychological centers. In other words, McGuckin is concerned that Norris might well be right and Sullivan wrong, that Nestorius and the other Antiochenes might really have been advancing “an intolerable dualism” with their Christology. McGuckin does not specify what he seems to regard as the obvious liabilities of such a christological dualism, but instead means to frighten the reader back into the arms of single subjectivity, the comforting “intuition” most of us (allegedly) already possess. McGuckin’s boogey-man is the “bi-polar” Christ: by repeatedly characterizing Nestorius’s view with a modern term of psychological pathology, he aims to instill in his reader a deep aversion to this christological option. One reviewer takes up McGuckin’s same rhetoric, lamenting that “Antiochene exegesis had lurched into soteriological schizophrenia,” imagining the two natures “switching off” in serial fashion.

In a single paragraph buried deep in his chapter on Nestorius, McGuckin finally admits what he believes hangs in the balance with the christological controversy: the “single subjectivity” of Christ secures not only a proper christological confession, but also grounds the “emergence of the concept of ‘person’ . . . [in] European consciousness.” To endanger the former is to endanger the latter. On McGuckin’s telling, Nestorius and the other Antiochenes confessed a bi-polar Christ, and then attempted to lash the two ontologically-divided natures together to form an empty singular subject, a prosopon that amounts to little more than a “grammatical subject of reference in discourse.” Cyril, on the other hand, understood Christ as a “dynamic spiritual subjectivity and consciousness that stands as the direct

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51 McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 143.
53 This and the remaining quotations in this paragraph are from McGuckin, Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, 159.
and unmediated initiator of actions, words, and intentions.” This is the crucial sentence. What Cyril’s Christology articulates—and what Nestorius’s threatens—is a “spiritual subjectivity,” in no way alienated from itself, having overcome its constitutive ontological difference, and “dynamic” in the sense of being in full command of its actions, words, and intentions. Its relationship to itself and its actions, words, and intentions is untroubled—because direct and unmediated. This is the content of McGuckin’s intuited single subjectivity of Christ.

And most crucially, this subjectivity of Christ is the model of all human subjectivity “from Late Antiquity, even down to our own age,” and marks the “emergence of the concept of ‘person’ . . . [in] European consciousness.” If Nestorius or the other Antiochens were to have prevailed, neither Christ nor we would have been graced with a subjectivity of this kind—we would not have become persons in the sense that we understand ourselves to be now. Instead we would be bi-polar, intolerably dual, containing within ourselves unassimilated ontological difference, ever self-alienated and self-distantiated, but still “dynamic” in the sense that our words, actions, and intentions are never final because they are never in our full possession and control. We would not possess ourselves. And we would regard this dual or doubled subjectivity as salutary because it is the same subjectivity as Christ’s.

I am grateful to McGuckin because I think he has put his finger on what is at stake in the christological controversy, namely whether Christ is—and by extension whether we each ought to be—a single “I” or not, a unified subject that brooks no interior alterity or meaningful difference (Cyril’s hypostatic union, on McGuckin’s own description), or rather an irreducible duality, dynamically bringing constitutive difference together without annulling it (Nestorius’s prosopic conjunction). I thank McGuckin, along with Norris, for moving the two subjects Christology from the margins to the center of the debate, for treating this irreducible duality not as the embarrassing appendage of the Antiochene commitment to immutability, but as perhaps its greatest defining feature. Of course, McGuckin underscores this defining feature precisely so as to discredit it: for him, “bi-polarity” is a dead end for both Christology and theological anthropology. But I believe ardently that if the Antiochene tradition is to be resuscitated, both historically and for present use, it will be because its confession of an irreducibly dual Christ, and by extension an irreducibly dual human self, has much to recommend it, notwithstanding the promises
of unmediated self-presence on offer in the Alexandrian alternative. A contemporary resuscitation may involve carrying the Antiochene position further than even its best representatives were willing to go, because they too were groping after something of which they were as yet uncertain. And yet I think we would do better to grope forward, as they did, rather than be bullied back into singular subjectivity by warnings of pathology and the end of proper personhood. Whether one agrees or disagrees is less important to me than securing the reader’s acknowledgment that this is where the debate should begin, and perhaps end. Who is Christ and who am I? Am I—is he—one “I” or two, and if one or two, how? And what, after all, is an “I”? These are questions that must be asked together, with “the eyes of faith” beholding a Christ who, however much one, is also always two. These are questions to which Antioch began to offer a distinctive answer, and one that deserves a hearing—a hearing I am convinced it has not yet to this day been given.