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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Some Facts About the Alexandrine Christology

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Modern Nestorian studies have had a number of significant consequences for our understanding of the fifth-century Christological controversies. For one thing, it has led a number of scholars in the present century to show an unprecedented appreciation for the theological position associated with the name of Nestorius. Though the study of the documents connected with the teaching of the Nestorian, or the Antiochene, school helped this movement, the ground had been prepared for it by modern Liberalism. Traceable to Schleiermacher and Ritschl, it had left no room for a conception of our Lord which does not see Him first and foremost as a man. Against this intellectual background of the modern theologian the Nestorian studies disclosed the fact that the teaching of that ancient school of theological thinking also emphasized the full humanity of our Lord. Naturally, many in our times have been drawn to appraise it favourably. From this appreciation for the Nestorian school many have gone a step further in offering an added defence of the doctrinal formula adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

One of the ablest presentations of this point of view in recent times may be found in W. Norman Pittenger's book, *The Word Incarnate*, published in 1959 by Harper and Brothers, New York, for 'The Library of Constructive Theology'. An eminent Professor at the General Theological Seminary in New York, Dr. Pittenger is one of the top-level theologians of the American continent. The book is not a treatise on the History of Doctrine, but is an apologetic work. It undertakes to expound the Christian faith concerning our Lord, with an understanding of contemporary trends in theology, philosophy, and Biblical scholarship. The book shows on the part of the author vastness of learning, depth of Christian conviction, and sincerity of concern to expound the faith in a way relevant and meaningful for our generation.

Dr. Pittenger is convinced that this is possible only if we take over the Antiochene Christological teaching to the exclusion of the Alexandrine and expound it making use of insights gathered from modern trends in philosophic thinking, particularly from process philosophy. To be sure, there have been other theologians

besides Dr. Pittenger who have employed the same intellectual tool to interpret the doctrine of the Person of our Lord. Dr. Pittenger is conversant with their works and even comments on some of them. But between most of them and him there is one significant difference. Whereas the latter claims to employ the Antiochene teaching, at least some of the former stand in the Alexandrine tradition. William Temple, for instance, in his *Christus Veritas*, while discussing Christology along similar lines, expresses the method which he has adopted. 'Plainly', he writes, 'the position indicated is that which was formulated by Leontius of Byzantium with the terms adjusted to modern usage.'¹ For Dr. Pittenger, not only Leontius, the sixth-century Chalcedonian theologian of the Alexandrine theological persuasion, but even Cyril, the greatest Alexandrine theologian of the fifth century, himself has not really avoided the danger of docetism.

Dr. Pittenger's Criticism of the Alexandrine Christology.—In one place Dr. Pittenger admits that the Alexandrine and the Antiochene are two legitimate ways of thinking on the Person of our Lord, and that each of them will have adherents and admirers all the time. For himself, he says, he has chosen to be on the Antiochene side.² But the fairness evinced in this instance is not followed up anywhere else. For on all other occasions when he refers to the Alexandrine teaching he is very critical of it.

His chief criticism of the Alexandrine position is that it shows no real interest in the human nature of our Lord. So he writes :

St. Cyril of Alexandria—saint, certainly, only by his traditional title³—with all his zeal for what he conceived to be the orthodox teaching about our Lord, seems to have taken an attitude towards human nature which made it impossible, despite his verbal insistence on its reality, for it to have any really adequate place in the person of Christ. Some of the spokesmen for the monophysite Christology, which was in a deep sense at one with Cyril's view, would appear to have been moved not only by an interest in maintaining the unity of Christ's person as against what they conceived to be the dualism which Chalcedon affirmed, but also by a feeling that it was somehow unworthy of Christ to think of him as having two natures, one of them human in the most utterly complete sense.⁴

This certainly is a strong statement. Two emphases in it should be specially noted. In the first place, Dr. Pittenger argues that Cyril of Alexandria had 'taken an attitude towards human nature'

¹ *Christus Veritas*, Macmillan, London, 1954, p. 149.

² *The Word Incarnate*, pp. 12-13.

³ These words remind us of what Friedrich Loofs had written long ago: 'More than the heretic Nestorius', he writes, 'the "saint" but really unsaintly Cyril is to be held responsible for the Nestorian controversy' (*Nestorius*, Cambridge, London, 1914, p. 41).

⁴ Pittenger, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

which made it impossible for him to assign to it 'any really adequate place in the person of Christ'. Secondly, 'the spokesmen for the monophysite Christology' objected to the Chalcedonian phrase *in two natures* not merely because of their insistence on the unity of Christ's Person, but also on account of the feeling that it was unworthy of Christ to have a human nature 'in the most utterly complete sense'. These words, to be sure, are too sweeping, and Dr. Pittenger softens them a bit as he continues: 'To state it thus', he adds, 'is to run the risk of being charged with a simplification, even a misreading, of history, yet I believe that one may read between the lines and discern just this kind of feeling of distrust of human nature'.

The question, however, still remains unanswered, namely: Where are the lines between which one can see these ideas? For, in spite of all these damaging criticisms of the Alexandrine teaching, Dr. Pittenger's book does not show them. Yet the charge is repeated in several places besides the one noted above.⁵

As already shown, Dr. Pittenger is an admirer of the Antiochene emphasis in Christology. He refers to the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia (who died c. 428) to make his point. Referring to F. A. Sullivan's work, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 1957, Dr. Pittenger brings out the teaching of the great Antiochene theologian. In Christ there is

'an inhabitation' of the 'divine nature' or of God in human nature or in man which is 'superior in duration and in degree, but not in essential character, to that . . . which characterizes the inhabitation of God by "good pleasure" (*eudokia*) in . . . saints'. This superiority in 'duration' is found 'because the union, in the case of the *homo assumptus* [as Theodore consistently calls the manhood of Jesus, . . .], begins at the moment of his formation in the womb'; it is 'superior in degree, for the grace granted to the *homo assumptus* was to redound to the benefit of all men; his victory over sin was to win salvation for all' . . . The 'unity' of the divine and human in Christ is in 'worship and honour' . . . but it is also a 'unity in a *prosopon*' in that it is a unity which is 'moral and dynamic'.

This interpretation of the Person of Christ came to be censured by the Church on the ground that the unity of His Person affirmed by it is inadequate. On this point, as Dr. Pittenger notes, Father Sullivan, the author of the work on the theology of Theodore, agrees with the traditional judgement. But Dr. Pittenger thinks that the exposition of Theodore is not only adequate, but that a better cannot be even possible.⁶

Dr. Pittenger feels uneasy not only about the Alexandrine teaching but also about orthodox Christology in general. Thus in

⁵ Pittenger, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 89, 94, 129, etc.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

his opinion 'a fundamental difficulty with the Christology of the patristic age is that while in word it asserted the reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ, in fact it did not take that humanity with sufficient seriousness'. But the Ebionites, 'such condemned "heretical" theologians as Paul of Samosata', and the Antiochenes maintained it. Although at Chalcedon 'the excesses of the Alexandrine teaching were somewhat restrained', "orthodox" Christology' subsequently 'tended toward an impersonal humanity which is, I believe, no genuine humanity at all'.⁷

Two Comments.—(a) The theory of impersonal humanity, which Dr. Pittenger rightly criticizes, was developed by a group of men within the sixth-century eastern Chalcedonian ecclesiastical body, who tried to make out that that had been the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria. But Severus of Antioch, the sixth-century non-Chalcedonian theologian, himself an admirer of Cyril, most vehemently criticized the attempt in his work, *Contra Grammaticum*. Severus challenged both the ascription of the theory to Cyril and the theory itself. It was most probably after the time of Severus that Leontius of Byzantium, a spokesman of that group, improved on it by his theory of *enhypostasia*, which tried to make out that the impersonal (or the *anhypostatic*) humanity assumed by God the Word in the Incarnation became personal in (or *enhypostatic*) His own Personality (or *Hypostasis*), a theory which Dr. Pittenger is 'not persuaded' that it 'does not mean *anhypostasia*'.⁸ The fact to be noted here is that the theory neither of *anhypostasia* nor of *enhypostasia* marks the best in the development of the Alexandrine Christology in ancient times.

(b) Theodore of Mopsuestia speaks of a continuity between Jesus Christ and other men. What he means by it needs a word of explanation. In a life led in obedience to God man comes into a kind of union with the Creator, which Theodore characterizes as 'the inhabitation of God by "good pleasure" (*εὐδοκία*)'; this is referred to by both the Alexandrines and the Antiochenes as 'union in *Prosopon*' or *Prosopic union*. In the opinion of the Alexandrines the union of God and man in Jesus Christ is not merely *prosopic*, but it is *hypostatic*. But for the Antiochenes *hypostatic union* is not possible; so they insist on *prosopic union*.

A Quick Glance into the Position of Dr. Pittenger.—Dr. Pittenger says very clearly that his own exposition is an elaboration of the Antiochene teaching. Broadly speaking, two emphases in his interpretation will justify his belief. In the first place, he is quite insistent that Jesus was a man, fully and really. What is required for this emphasis is the affirmation that Jesus had a human consciousness. 'Unless he had a human consciousness, he was not a man.'⁹ No affirmation of our Lord's divinity should lead us away from this great Christian truth. This is an emphasis

⁷ Pittenger, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

which the Antiochene theory of *prosopic union* does make explicit; whereas the Alexandrine phrase, *hypostatic union*, cannot be so clear on that. Secondly, the Antiochene emphasis on a continuity between Jesus and God the Word on the one hand and every man and God on the other is taken over by Dr. Pittenger and interpreted by him in the light of process philosophy.

But as regards the second, Dr. Pittenger goes very definitely beyond the admissions of the Antiochene theologians. For he identifies the *Nisus* (namely the Principle which, according to process philosophy, operates itself within the evolving world and produces emergents, or new evolutes which cannot be explained in the light of earlier evolutes) with the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The *Nisus* operates itself behind the various levels of reality as also within the entire created realm. It is its presence and operation that makes the emergence of new levels of reality possible. Jesus Christ, affirms Dr. Pittenger, is the highest evolute; He is the most definitive emergent. In this way he is able to say about our Lord that He is on the one hand continuous with the rest of the created world, and on the other unique.

For an interpretation of this kind the traditional language of 'Son' with reference to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity is not indispensable. So in agreement with Dr. Cyril Richardson, Dr. Pittenger maintains that the word means 'God in action' and may be referred to as 'Logos or Word, or best of all God Self Expressive'. Thus it is a kind of Logos Christology that Dr. Pittenger is endeavouring to work out.

The Real Issue between the Alexandrine and the Antiochene Emphases.—The ablest Alexandrine theologian of the fifth century, Cyril was a voluminous writer, a great deal of whose literary productions have come down to us. It is a pity that no modern scholar has undertaken a comprehensive study of Cyril's theology. Three of his short statements on the faith have been included with English translations in T. H. Bindley's *Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, a work with which Dr. Pittenger is conversant. In his second and third letters to Nestorius, namely two of the three documents referred to above, Cyril insists that *prosopic union* is not adequate and argues that *hypostatic union* is indispensable to conserve the faith. 'For our sakes and for our salvation', affirms Cyril, 'the Word united humanity to Himself *hypostatically* and came forth from a woman'. This is the emphasis of the Creed, argues Cyril, but it is being jeopardized by the Antiochene assertion of *prosopic union*. That Cyril had understood the Antiochene position is clear even from Dr. Pittenger's own reference to the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. For it says that Jesus Christ had, from the first moment of His existence in the womb as a child, a *prosopic union* with God. In other words the issue between the two ways of thinking lay in the ideas of union which each side held. Objecting to the adequacy of seeing in *prosopeon* the locus of union, Cyril insisted that it lay in *hypostasis*. The union of the nature, he says, is not

their conjunction, but something far more deeply and inwardly personal.

It is certainly true that the Alexandrine Christology has not been properly understood; in fact it has often been misunderstood both by those who accept it and by those who reject it. In treating it the Chalcedonian as well as the non-Chalcedonian versions of it should be taken into consideration. As already noted, the latter's position was neither *anhypostasia* nor *enhy-postasia*. At the same time they maintained an emphasis concerning *hypostatic union*, which may be indicated with reference to two non-Chalcedonian theologians of the sixth century. One of them, Severus of Antioch, writes: ¹⁰

The Only-begotten Son of God became of the same substance with us and was united *hypostatically* to one flesh animated with a rational soul. By reason of this the entire human *ousia* and the race became united in love to the divine nature, to which formerly it had been opposed. On account of this, as it is written, we became partakers of the divine nature, having been made worthy of the original harmony. As by participation, we obtained divine gifts and immortality which had been lost to us by means of the trespass of Adam.

The other theologian to be quoted is Philoxenos of Mabug, who writes: ¹¹

He [God] formed Adam and breathed in him the breath of life, and he became man, a living soul—outside the Personality of God, it should be noted. But now it is not like that, for in God Himself the nature of man has been created anew.

There is not the slightest indication in these passages that their writers had any distrust of the human nature with reference to our Lord. On the contrary they were concerned to make a significant emphasis. *Prosopic union* represents the relation between God and man, vouchsafed to Adam in the beginning. But because of the fall it became impossible for man to enjoy it, least of all to restore himself to his original status by his own efforts. In the face of this human predicament God acted to bring him back to the state from where he had fallen. Since man could not keep the gift of *prosopic union*, which had been granted to him in the beginning, a renewal of it in Jesus of Nazareth was not sufficient to guarantee his salvation. So in His infinite love God established *hypostatic union* of the Word with humanity in Jesus Christ, and opened up the way through Him as the Mediator for the whole human race to have *prosopic union* with Himself.

The real difference between the Alexandrine and the Antiochene positions did not lie in the supposed fact that the

¹⁰ *Contra Grammaticum I* (Syriac), p. 200. The expression 'united in love' in the passage should be noted. Because of the *hypostatic union*, the entire human race has been united in love, or brought into *prosopic union*, with God.

¹¹ *Essay on the Trinity and the Incarnation* (Syriac), p. 38.

latter did, and the former did not, affirm the reality of Christ's manhood. But the fact is that the Alexandrines had a deeper awareness of the meaning of Christian soteriology than the Antiochenes. For *prosopic union*, if related to the doctrine of the atonement, cannot go much beyond the emphasis of the 'moral influence theory'. The Alexandrine Christology does not have to minimize the fullness of our Lord's humanity.

A Word of Conclusion.—Dr. Pittenger's own interpretation in the light of process philosophy is more Alexandrine than Antiochene. He takes, as we have noted already, the *Nisus* of process philosophy as a clue to conceive of the Logos. The *Nisus* is the principle underlying an evolving world and it is a deeply inward reality. Therefore, the theory of Dr. Pittenger cannot find a real support in the Antiochene *prosopic union*, but it can in the Alexandrine *hypostatic union*. Furthermore, in ancient times, Logos Christology was not the contribution of the Antiochene theology; it does not belong to that theology in the twentieth century either.

Dr. Pittenger's book is an important work as an outstanding theological construction. It deserves careful study, and anyone who takes to it will benefit by it immensely.