

The Debates of the Medieval Church

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the Christological debates of the medieval church and their ramifications to both sides
2. aim – to cause us to understand how the nature of Jesus as the God-man was fleshed out in time

b. outline

1. The Christological Debates
2. The Ecclesiastical Divides

c. overview

1. the *Medieval Church* – c. 470–1517AD
 - a. medieval = the period of history known as the “Middle Ages” (i.e. between two periods)
 1. the period between the *W Roman Empire* and *Western Civilization*, or
 2. the period between the *orthodox* church of antiquity and the *Reformation*
 - b. while the church in the W is working to bring order, to “convert” the barbarians to faith or to Nicene orthodoxy, and to establish itself as a “political” force under a single bishop in Rome ...
 - c. the church in the E continues on, but it is not without struggles itself
 1. which will *involve* the W (to some degree) – i.e. the councils will be called *ecumenical* = involving the entirety of the church, regardless of difference
 2. **note:** the rise of Islam will effect the E church in the 7th C and after (**see below**), but we need to look *first* at some of the earlier issues the E faced (in the 5th and 6th C)
 - d. and how the two branches of Christendom began to separate from one another ...

I. The Christological Debates

Content

a. the issue of the Christological debates

1. the *divinity* of Jesus had been settled at **Nicea (325)** and **Constantinople (381)**
 - a. the Arianism of the Germanic invaders was eventually subsumed into a Nicene orthodoxy
2. however, a debate over the *nature* of Jesus (as God and man) began during the medieval period
 - a. all parties agreed that the divine was *immutable* and *eternal*; but, how could the immutable and eternal be joined with that which is *changeable* and *historical*?
 - b. the **Alexandrine** position: Jesus was a teacher of divine truth, thus his *divinity* must be asserted, even at the expense of his humanity (i.e. a focus on the divine)
 - c. the **Antiochene** position: Jesus had to be fully human in order to save humans, thus his *humanity* must be asserted, even at the expense of his divinity (i.e. a focus on the corporeal)
3. the (unfortunate) role of Greek philosophy in the discussion:
 - a. Christian theologians had come to define God *primarily* in terms of *contrast with humanity*
 1. i.e. God is immutable, humans change; God is infinite, humans are limited; God is omnipotent, human power is limited; God is omnipresent, humans can only be present in one place; etc.
 2. when God is framed *only* in these terms, the idea of a God-man becomes a contradiction
 - b. thus, the most prevalent error of the time was to declare that the two natures *are not joined*
 1. (**often**) allowing one nature to *overwhelm* the other (e.g. **docetism** = that Jesus’ body was not [in fact] human at all, but an “apparition” of humanness only to satisfy the human senses)
 - c. in the W, the church simply revived Tertullian’s old formula (two natures in one person)
 1. early versions did not attempt to “reconcile” this; it was just accepted as “normal”

b. the debates over the *nature(s)* of Jesus

1. the first attempt to resolve the issue – Apollinaris (prior to Constantinople in 381)
 - a. that Jesus had a human body, but a divine *soul* (i.e. the Word replaced a human soul)
 - b. but, the Antiochenes insisted that Jesus must be *fully human* to save us ...
2. the second attempt to resolve the issue – Nestorius
 - a. he became the bishop of Constantinople in 428 – the “pope” (i.e. Patriarch) of the E
 - b. he was an Antiochene, and the Alexandrines were looking for something to catch him with
 - c. he argued that in Jesus were two natures and two persons

1. **i.e.** Mary should *not* be called *theotokos*, only *Christotokos*
 - a. *theotokos* = the “mother of God” – the role of Mary as the human mother of the God-man
 - b. **ITC**: Mary was only a “mother of Christ” – she *only* “provides” the human side of Jesus, whereas the Spirit provides the divine (not *literally* the mother of God)
2. so, one must *distinguish* in Jesus his two persons – Nestorianism is the doctrine that Jesus was *two distinct persons in a single body*; a human person and divine person, each unique from the other and acting through the body of Jesus at different times and in different ways
3. a clear Antiochene position – *distinguish* the humanity of Jesus from his divinity
- d. Nestorius’ enemies saw the danger of dividing Jesus into an “agreement” rather than a “joining”
 1. the Bishop of Alexandria (Cyril) opposed Nestorius, who convinced the emperor to call a **Council at Ephesus (431) (the Third Ecumenical Council)**
 2. the council condemned Nestorius (*in absentia*) as a heretic
 3. but, John of Antioch arrived a few days later, called a *rival* council, and declared Cyril a heretic
 3. so, Emperor Theodosius II arrested both men, declared John’s council invalid, and exiled Nestorius (first to a monastery in Antioch, then to Petra)
3. the third attempt to resolve the issue – Eutyches
 - a. Eutyches was a monk in Constantinople (without theological subtlety)
 - b. he declared that Jesus was of one substance with the Father, but *not* of one with us
 1. **i.e.** having two natures *before* the union, but only one nature *after* the union
 - c. Patriarch Flavian accused him of *docetism* and condemned him
 - d. but, Dioscorus (Patriarch of Alexandria) maneuvered the conflict until:
 1. Theodosius II called (another) **Council at Ephesus (449)**
 2. the council appeared to be *rigged* (e.g. Dioscorus was appointed president of the assembly)
 3. a letter from Pope Leo (called *Leo’s Tome*) was rejected
 4. Flavian was manhandled so violently that he died in a few days
 5. the council declared that the idea of “two natures” in Christ was *heretical*
 6. Pope Leo labeled the council as the “Robber Synod”
 7. note: this council was never embraced as an “official” council of the ecumenical church
4. the fourth attempt – the **Council of Chalcedon (451) (the Fourth Ecumenical Council)**
 - a. when Theodosius’ horse stumbled and threw him, such that he died
 1. his sister Pulcheria (a moderate Alexandrine) called for a new council
 - a. she felt that Ephesus in 449 left much to be desired
 - b. she called the council at the behest of Pope Leo
 - b. the council condemned Dioscorus and Eutyches, but forgave the others at the Robber Synod
 - c. the council read (and affirmed) Leo’s Tome, a reaffirmation of Tertullian (**see above**)
 - d. the council produced a “definition of faith” (not a creed), reaffirming the previous councils

“This is one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, manifested in two natures without any confusion, change, division or separation. The union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary the properties of each are kept, and both are joined in one person and *hypostasis*. They are not divided into two persons, but belong to the one Only-begotten Son, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

 1. this Chalcedonian declaration is mirrored in the Westminster and 1689 Confessions
 2. it does not “define” the union, but sets the boundaries of error (or heresy)
 3. it is clearly “extra-biblical” in its language, but given the *question*, this was the best *answer*
 4. it is reasonable that the *dissenters* to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy who settled in Persia/Arabia had an *indirect* effect upon Muhammad’s understanding of Jesus
5. continuing Christological debate (after Chalcedon)
 - a. differences remained between the orthodox and the *Monophysites*
 1. monophysitism = those who claim Jesus had only one nature – a “mixture” of human and divine
 - b. Emperor Justinian called a **Council at Constantinople (553) (the Fifth Ecumenical Council)**
 1. the purpose was to “calm” the Monophysite objections to Chalcedon
 2. but, it had little effect and has been **mostly forgotten**
 - c. the Arab Conquests of the 7th-8th C’s put an end to much of this
 1. since most of the Monophysites were now under Muslim control,
 2. Constantinople no longer felt the need to try and reconcile them
 - d. another **Council at Constantinople (680-1) (the Sixth Ecumenical Council)** “ended” the debate
 1. Pope Honorius (who had become a *Monothelist* – “one will”) was declared a heretic
 2. this declaration troubled the 19th C. W church when papal infallibility was dogmatized
 - a. **i.e.** how could a Pope be a heretic when he can speak infallibly?

c. the debates over *images of Jesus*

1. the **iconoclastic** debate – the “final” Christological debate (8-9th C.)
 - a. icon = a picture or image that represents something sacred, by resemblance or analogy to it
 - b. the early church does not seem to have had any trouble with images (**e.g.** catacombs)
 - c. however, with the dawn of the Imperial Church, many bishops preached against icons
 1. because they were concerned about the *masses* flocking to them as *idols*
 - d. some Byzantine emperors in the 8th C. either destroyed or forbade the use of images
 1. possibly because this was a *reasonable* response to Chalcedon
 2. possibly to curb the power of the monks, who were strong supporters of icons
 3. possibly because Islam forbade the use of images and it seemed reasonable in Christianity
 - e. the debating factions
 1. the *iconoclasts* – the destroyers of images (who saw them as idols)
 2. the *iconodules* – the worshipers of images
 - a. since Jesus was the *representation* of God on earth, why forbid *other* forms?
 - b. since God himself was the first maker of images (the *Imago Dei*), why can't we?
 - c. since God represents *himself* in nature, can we not use icons as *commentaries*?
 - f. another **Council at Nicea (787) (the Seventh Ecumenical Council)**
 1. distinguished between *latria* (or worship of God) vs. *dulia* (or veneration of something less)
 2. in the E, images were *officially* restored in 842 (the “Feast of Orthodoxy” in Eastern churches)
 3. in the W, translating these Greek terms (*latria* and *dulia*) into Latin was difficult
 - a. at first, the use of images was not well received
 - b. however, the use of images was *eventually* embraced (even to today)
 4. the issue would appear again at the Reformation (although varying amongst the Reformers)
 - a. Baptists have typically *rejected* images for any sort of veneration
 - b. arguing that it is difficult (impossible?) for human beings to distinguish *latria* and *dulia*

II. The Ecclesiastical Divides

Content

a. the reasons for the slow divide of the E church from the W

1. cultural differences (**i.e.** Latin vs. Greek)
2. the demise of the Western Empire and the church filling that “vacuum”
 - a. **i.e.** the rise of the popes taking political power over the people
3. the continuing control of the Eastern Church by its emperors
 - a. **i.e.** the emperors using their political clout to force some theological issues
4. yet, the church during the *early* medieval period still considered itself *one church*
 - a. many of the decisions debated in the E were taken as *normative* in the W
 - b. however, the debates led to some permanent *schisms*, with separate churches
 - c. eventually leading to an “official” schism between them in 1054