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The Meanings of Nicaea: Interpretation in Fifth-Century Christological Controversies

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One who would seek to understand interpretation in the early church is faced with an immediate difficulty. How may one understand early Christian interpretation without forcing the evidence to fit one's own interpretive categories, thereby unduly distorting the evidence? That unwarranted distortion has occurred may be seen in the way early Christian interpretation is usually presented. It is a commonplace to find two broad schools of interpretation identified in the patristic period: one, associated with Alexandria, was characterized by a speculative philosophical tradition and a wide-ranging use of allegory; the other, associated with Antioch, enjoyed a more conservative interpretive tradition, grounding typological exegesis in the brute facts of history.[1] Such constructs, in place at least since the nineteenth century, pass largely unquestioned from one generation of scholars to another. It is of course true that two broad traditions of exegesis emerged in the early church, as is testified by polemics against allegory on the Antiochene side. But it is no accident that patristic interpretation has been conceptualized primarily in terms of methodologies (allegorical and typological) and schools (Alexandrian vs. Antiochene). For at least two hundred years theologians have been preoccupied with method as the key to an objective historical science of theology. And so if the great nineteenth century patrologists assessed interpretation in the early church in terms of method, they were only making the patristic church speak in a language they could understand. The implicit circularity here became vicious, however, when they forgot to distinguish their own fascination with method and science from the interests of early Christian interpreters.

The example of Adolf von Harnack, perhaps the greatest nineteenth-century interpreter of the early church, is illustrative. Behind the development of Christian doctrine he discovers the deployment of systematic methodologies designed to erect what he describes as a "scientific Christian theology". Allegory, in particular, suffers under Harnack's critical eye. Philo bequeathed "*his fundamental hermeneutic principles*" (Harnack's emphasis) to Valentinus and Origen, who were in turn able to reconcile the Gospel "with the religion and scientific culture of the Greeks."[2] Allegory (nothing less than "Biblical alchemy" according to Harnack) was the hand-maiden of a historical process whereby the freedom of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus and Paul mutated into the Law of dogma. Allegorical method opened the way for theologians such as Origen to achieve a systematic and legalistic conceptualization of Christianity in Greek philosophical and theoretical terms.

But his tracing of this development is by no means purely descriptive. Harnack is entirely forthcoming in the profession of his own aims.

> The history of dogma, in that it sets forth the process of the origin and development of the dogma, offers the very best means and methods of freeing the Church from dogmatic Christianity, and of hastening the inevitable process of emancipation, which began with Augustine.[3]

There is a certain irony in all of this. For Harnack himself was no opponent of systematic method (as indeed the reference to method in the above quotation indicates). Indeed his commitment to a rigorous historical-critical methodology is at the heart of his attempts to emancipate from the encrustations of dogma the real historical Jesus and to re-establish his historic relationship with the world and God as the fundamental content of the Gospel. Thus when Harnack rails against the uses of certain methods of interpretation in the early church he is not doing so as one opposed to scientific methods, but rather as one opposed to the wrong kinds. In fact, proper methodology is the key to his whole undertaking of the recovery of the true essence of Christianity. "What is Christianity?" asks Harnack at the beginning of his book of the same title. "It is solely in its historical sense that we shall try to answer this question here; that is to say, we shall employ the methods of historical science and the experience of life gained by witnessing the actual

course of history."[4] In setting things right, therefore, it is no accident that it is primarily in terms of method that he seeks to understand early Christian interpretation, nor is it merely coincidental that it is on the level of method that his fiercest criticisms of the early church are made. Method and method alone is the key to truth.[5]

But it is at least permissible to ask whether such a preoccupation with method does not distort the nature of early Christian exegesis. I am not suggesting that early Christian writers did not employ exegetical methods. I am quarrelling with an interpretation of those methods which sees them as consciously employed scientific philosophical tools. To interpret them this way is simply to read one's own interests into the past and to force it to speak in one's own terms.

Is there not a different way to read early Christian exegesis? I want to suggest one which arises out of a view which sees early Christian hermeneutics, not as the deployment of scientific methods in the service of theological systems, but rather as a conversation with tradition.[6]

Consider the case of Origen, in Harnack's estimation the *enfant terrible* of scientific allegorism, "the father of ecclesiastical science", the great "hellenizer" and transformer of a historically grounded Gospel into a philosophical system.[7] A different, and I believe ultimately more faithful reading of the evidence, begins not with method but tradition. Origen's most systematic work, *On First Principles*, begins not with a discussion of method but a charting of the tradition handed on to him by the apostles (Preface, 4). Thus having established the boundaries of the tradition, he fills in the content and only towards the end of his work does he turn his attention to a full exposition of the threefold method of interpretation (4.11). What this suggests is not that Origen is concerned to construct a systematic dogma, but that he is struggling to make sense of the tradition passed on to him: he is engaged in a dialogue or conversation with his tradition, a conversation in which he genuinely seeks not only to listen to, but also appropriate his tradition. Where he reflects upon the use of allegory or the determination of the spiritual sense of Scripture, he connects the attempts to find the deeper meaning of the divinely inspired text not with the canons of a systematically derived method of

interpretation, but with a mysterious God who has so charged the world and scripture with meaning that they can be read on various levels. Origen inherited from the Alexandrian platonism of Philo and Clement a view of physical creation which saw the visible world as the embodiment or effulgence of a transcendent rationality, a notion which spills over into his understanding of the sacred text.[8] Allegory, therefore, is not so much a scientific methodological key to unlocking the meaning of a text as it is indicative of a fundamental stance of being in the world. An allegorical hermeneutics arises out of and reinforces a mode of existence in a world filled with divine meanings.

In early Christian exegesis what I have described as a conversation with tradition extended beyond the interpretation of the Bible. In the fourth century the rule of faith which Origen presents as the starting point of his dialogue is replaced by the conciliar statements of the councils of Nicaea (325 C.E.) and Constantinople (381 C.E.). In particular, the Nicene creed becomes a central text which orients theological discussion. As we will see, there are theological reasons for this. In the following discussion I will show how tradition, specifically that represented by the Council of Nicaea,[9] functioned in constituting understanding in one particular case: the fifth-century dispute between Nestorius (d. ca. 451 C.E.) and Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 C.E.) over the title *Theotokos*. In their correspondence with each other each lays hold of the heritage of Nicaea, but seeks to appropriate it in different ways. The debate over the proper meaning of the Nicene text has a central place in their writings. To use a spatial analogy, Nicaea presents a broad vista which is seen from particular vantage points and interpreted accordingly. I am interested in the various points of fusion between the horizon extended by Nicaea and the gaze of Cyril and Nestorius.[10]

The debate between Cyril and Nestorius concerning the propriety of naming Mary, *Theotokos*, i.e. Mother of God, is a complex one. Very generally stated, what is behind the disagreement is a theological difficulty which emerged in the wake of Nicene orthodoxy: if the Son is *homoouios* with the Father, i.e. essentially and not derivatively divine, and if Jesus was a human being, a problem arises as to how one is properly to conceptualize the union of natures in the person of Christ. Cyril proposed a union between the natures so intimate that

one could legitimately profess Mary to be the Mother of God. His central christological proof text, Phil. 2:6–11, is repeatedly cited to support his contention that the proper subject of Christ's human experiences was the Logos, the divine person who was made flesh. But Cyril is also committed to maintaining a distinction of the natures; they are both present in the person of Jesus but in an unconfused way. How this unity may be explained Cyril cannot say: the union of natures is ineffable or mysterious. Cyril does, however, try to clarify the limits of acceptable teaching concerning this mystery by using theological language akin to the trinitarian vocabulary of his contemporaries. His overriding concern is to preserve a natural unity of the two natures (technically named by him a "hypostatic union") in the one person Jesus.[11]

Cyril's preference for the title *Theotokos* raised the suspicion in the mind of his contemporary, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, that the Alexandrian was confusing the divine and human natures in Jesus. Instead of the title "Mother of God", Nestorius preferred "Mother of humanity", *anthropotokos*, or "Mother of Christ", *Christotokos*. In this way he hoped to preserve a distinction between the human and divine natures. Rather than referring to the Word *becoming* flesh, Nestorius speaks instead of the Word *assuming* flesh or a full human being. Where Cyril speaks of a natural union between divinity and humanity in one person, Nestorius refers instead to the analogy of a moral union, a union of the divine and human wills in Christ. Where Cyril ventures to make the divine Logos the subject of the incarnate experiences of Jesus, Nestorius prefers rather to speak of "Christ", the historical person constructed of two natures. Thus instead of a natural union, Nestorius would have a "prosopic union", a union or conjunction of persons, or the properties of persons, in the one historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. He hopes in this way to avoid what he regards as a confusion of natures by Cyril. In the end he was charged, and ultimately condemned and exiled, for teaching that there were two Sons in Jesus—a kind of schizophrenic Christ with two personalities. But it is ironic that the heresy of Nestorianism associated with him is probably not indicative of his own teaching. Nestorius' reference to the distinction of natures in Christ is tempered with a concern to assert what he calls a "deep unity". Or when he refers to the

separate persons of the natures he qualifies himself by stating that the two persons are not distant from each other and that one may properly refer only to one person, Jesus Christ.[12]

This all too brief resumé of the ideas of these two theologians is consistent in form with the majority of contemporary presentations of their thought. But it is misleading to summarize these two christologies in this way. One is left with a false impression of a series of abstract metaphysical definitions created *ex nihilo* and then piled upon one another. But such complex conceptualizations did not emerge like Athene from the head of Zeus, perfectly formed without a pre-history of understanding. In fact, Cyril's and Nestorius' christological speculation occurs within the context of a very intriguing debate over the proper definition of an inherited theological tradition. Thus Cyril's so-called *Epistula Dogmatica*, his second letter to Nestorius written near the outset of the dispute in 429 C.E., sets the tone for christological reflection and debate by claiming the authority of "the teachings of the holy Fathers" and citing the words of "the great and holy council" (Nicaea).[13] Nestorius responds in kind by asserting that he is preserving intact the "inspired chorus of the Fathers".[14] Either writer is certain that it is he, not his opponent, who is properly expounding the content and meaning of the tradition handed on to him.

The abundant references to the "Fathers" in the writings of these theologians is significant. The term had already begun to appear in the synodal statements and theological writings of the fourth century, but gained a more widespread usage in the theological literature of the succeeding century. Ecclesiastical historians roughly contemporary with Cyril and Nestorius, such as Theodoret, Sozomen, and Socrates, refer to those gathered at Nicaea with phrases such as the "holy Fathers of Nicaea".[15] From a modern perspective it is perhaps surprising that ascriptions such as these seem to have little to do with the passage of time: they are not "Fathers" because they lived long ago (less than two years after the Council of Ephesus Cyril repeatedly refers to those gathered at the council as "Fathers"), rather they are accorded this title because of the episcopal seats they occupy. The title points back to an understanding of tradition developed in the second century against gnostic claims to a secret tradition. Anti-gnostic writers such as Irenaeus

and Tertullian asserted that the true apostolic teaching is to be found in the instruction of those bishops who can identify a public chain of succession reaching from themselves back to the apostles. Apostolic teaching here is understood as a body of knowledge, written, oral, or even in the form of practices, passed on unchanged from generation to generation. Those who receive it and transmit it faithfully are "Fathers": they represent the living voice of the apostles, who in turn represented Jesus, who ultimately derived his teaching from God the Father. Thus, when the bishops meet and agree on a given topic, it is the teaching of the apostles they are presenting.

Fifth-century ecclesiastical historians can refer to the Nicene Creed in terms of divine inspiration. The logic is similar to that already presented: if the teaching of the apostles was divinely inspired and that teaching is represented by the teaching of bishops which perfectly restates what has been received, then what the bishops teach when gathered together in an ecumenical (i.e. universal) council is necessarily also a divinely inspired restatement of apostolic teaching.[16]

Given this high view of the authority of tradition an interesting state of affairs occurs when there is disagreement over the proper way to interpret what has been passed on. In the case of Cyril and Nestorius, both claim to be faithful transmitters of the authoritive tradition and accuse each other of innovation. This occurs in various forms. First, for the first time in theological discussion, each writer formulates catenae or catalogues of the "sayings of the Fathers" to prove that his christology represents orthodox teaching. The writers cited (often the same ones, and indeed the same passages!) are the major anti-Arian (i.e. pro-Nicene) theologians of the fourth century: Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Ambrose, and others. The battle to claim the authority of these teachers becomes uglier when Cyril seeks to undercut the legitimacy of the christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the heroic anti-Arian theologian of the East, and, more importantly, Nestorius' teacher. For Nestorius, Cyril's attack on this great Father indicates what kind of heretic the Alexandrian really is.[17] Again, to attack the authority of the Fathers is to call into question the very foundation of the apostolic teaching.

Further, the assertion that Nestorius' or Cyril's own teaching reflects that of deceased orthodox teachers is set in stronger

relief by identifying the christology of one's opponent with that of arch heretics of the past. If there is a list of "worthies" with whom Cyril or Nestorius seeks to identify himself, he seeks equally to identify his opponent with those false teachers who have sought to corrupt and distort the apostolic legacy. This is another way of placing oneself within a particular tradition of understanding and claiming it as one's own. Nestorius is an Arian, contends Cyril, because he denies that Mary can be said to be the Mother of God (a tacit dismissal of Christ's essential divinity). No, Cyril is the Arian, says Nestorius, because in claiming that God was born of Mary he is stating that the Logos is changeable (i.e. able to be born) and is therefore a creation. Nestorius is a Manichaean, argues Cyril, because he denies that the Logos really took flesh and was born of Mary; no, replies Nestorius, it is the Alexandrian bishop who is a disciple of Mani precisely because an unchangeable God cannot be born; thus if Cyril wants to maintain that the Logos is the subject of the human experiences of Christ and avoid the error of Arianism, he must assert that Jesus was not really human. Cyril is Apollinarian; Nestorius is an adoptionist: the examples could be multiplied. In all of this there is tradition at work, negative and positive genealogies designed to demonstrate that one does or does not have a right to claim the authority of tradition for the christological interpretation advanced.

The formulation of catenae of sayings and the identification with a form of heretical teaching serve to support a much more important claim: that each position faithfully reproduces the meaning of the Nicene Creed. Since by the outset of the fifth century the Nicene Creed emerges as *the* definition of orthodox teaching, christological debate focuses on the proper interpretation of the text of the creed. The fact that the debate over the proper interpretation of the creed occurs alongside references to heretics and revered past teachers indicates that neither Cyril nor Nestorius comes to the creed *de novo*. Rather their interpretations arise out of a pre-history extending from Nicaea to their contemporary dispute. The creed is presented in the context of a horizon which appears as a result of a pre-history of theological conflicts (first with Arian, and later with Apollinarian, teaching). Thus Cyril, for example, not only interprets the creed with a view to refuting the opinions of Nestorius, his interpretations appear within a horizon

of tradition which provides him with a particular orientation toward the Nicene text. Because, for example, the Apollinarian appropriation of that tradition (that Christ was two-thirds human and one-third divine) is judged heretical by Cyril and his orthodox contemporaries, when Cyril exegetes the text of the creed in order to support his high christology, he must also demonstrate that he confesses that Christ was fully human. Contemporary christological controversies (Apollinarian, Arian, etc.) present Cyril, as indeed Nestorius, with a particular vantage point from which he gains the meaning of the creed.

But the horizon which extends forward from Nicaea to Cyril and Nestorius does not wholly predetermine the point of view which these authors bring to it. Stated in other words, these writers not only *receive* the sense of the creed, they *give* sense to the creed. Indeed, that they *bring* a point of view indicates that the meaning of the Nicene creed is not fixed or static. Rather, either author brings with him a set of questions which means that the horizon will be seen in *this* or *that* way. There are various points of fusion between the horizon of interpreter and text, various ways in which the meanings contained within the words of the creed may be appropriated.

This is illustrated in Cyril's and Nestorius' dispute in two ways. First, a fascinating debate rages between them over which is the proper starting point from which to uncover the christology Nicaea presents. In *Ep.* 55, otherwise known as his *Letter on the Creed*, Cyril cites the opening words of the second article of the Nicene Creed ("I believe in *one* Lord Jesus Christ") in support of a union of natures. To support his contention that the Logos is the true subject of Christ's incarnation he cites the order of the phrases which directly follow: first there is reference to the divine nature, ending with the words "Through him all things were made." Then follows the description of the incarnation. According to Cyril, it is clear who is the proper subject of the professions concerning the historical events of Jesus' life, it has already been stated in the words which describe the divine nature of the Son: the Logos who is consubstantial with the Father. Thus when Cyril reads the phrase "he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made human," the subject of the clause refers back to the Logos; consequently, "was made human" is describing the self-emptying of God in a human being. Thus, Cyril concludes,

"Accordingly, following the footsteps of the confession of the Fathers without deviation we say that the very Word of God the Father, begotten as the only begotten Son, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered, died and rose from the dead on the third day" (55.33). And he gains this understanding from his reading of the text of the creed.

Nestorius accuses Cyril of making a false beginning in his reading of the creed which results in the latter confusing the divine and human natures in Christ's person. He contends that the words "one Lord Jesus Christ" refer to the one person (*prosopon*) in whom the natures are united. When the creed goes on to refer to "the only Son of God" "eternally begotten of the Father... of one being with the Father" and, later, to the one "incarnate from the Virgin Mary... crucified under Pontius Pilate" and so on, the formulators at Nicaea were defining the two natures from which the one person Jesus Christ was constructed. It is not the Logos who is the subject of the second article, but he who enjoys both natures, Jesus Christ. Cyril is corrupting the clear sense of the Nicene text when he posits his interpretation.

> Observe then first who reduces and takes away from the deposit which has been laid down by the fathers (i.e. Nicaea), but lets not (anyone else) steal aught therefrom. This man (i.e. Cyril) who has made no mention of the beginning and avoided the beginning and made a beginning which they laid not down but in this wise passed over the beginning and wished not to make a beginning therefrom, whereas it is I who have established the things which the fathers rightly said, and I said that we would make a beginning from here showing also the cause wherefore they first laid down the names which are common to the divinity and the humanity and then built up thereon the tradition of the Incarnation and of the Sufferings and of the Resurrection, "first laying down the names of the two natures which indicate that these are common, without the Sonship or the Lordship being separated and without the natures, in the union of the Sonship, coming into danger of corruption and of confusion."[18]

And so Nestorius claims that it is he, not Cyril, who is reading the text as it was intended to be understood.

But Cyril and Nestorius are not content merely to quote the creed at each other to arrive at the sense of the text. A second way in which the meaning of the text is arrived at is through the deployment of specially formulated christological language. Terms such as "hypostasis", "prosopon", "physis", "henosis",

and so on appear repeatedly as either author attempts to attain the meaning of the text before him. This raises for both authors a particularly complex problem because none of these terms in fact appears in the text in question. In many instances the logic of polemic leads them to argue that their terminology faithfully represents the intentions of the authors of the Nicene creed. Both authors often appear to proceed on the assumption that the formulators of the creed arranged the order of the clauses of the Nicene text to stave off the interpretation of their opponent, even that they did so "not fortuitously but by the divine purpose."[19] The order of the words and clauses of the text is thus seen as a means to the original thoughts of the authors.[20] When they argue in this way there is no acknowledgement of a distance between their dispute and the formulators of Nicaea. On this basis each can claim that he is representing the original thoughts or intentions of the Nicene authorities, without addition or diminution.[21]

But there are a few intriguing passages which acknowledge a degree of distance between the Nicene authorities and Cyril and Nestorius. Both writers realize that they are doing more than just reciting the words of the creed, they are attempting to express the meaning of those words. Terms such as *theotokos* and *anthropotokos* serve as points of fusion between the words of the text and the sense which either author brings to it.[22] Both authors must admit that these terms do not appear in the creed, but they are equally firm in their conviction that they express its meaning. Thus Nestorius admits that although he is not saying anything different from what is expressed by the creed or authoritative teachers before him, he is giving a fuller exposition of previous statements.[23] Similarly, Cyril is able to make a distinction between the words of the creed and their interpretation. Indeed he accounts for the ideas of Nestorius on the basis of this distinction. Thus he promises in many of his epistles to give a full exposition of and commentary on the meaning of the words of the text.[24] It is on these bases that either author is able to justify the deployment of a sophisticated series of christological concepts and vocabularies which appear neither in the creed nor in the authorities they cite.

It is necessary to make a distinction here between Cyril and Nestorius' own estimation of their commentaries and expositions of the creed and a contemporary appraisal of them.

Given the strong emphasis of the authority of tradition and the charges against innovation levelled against each other, it is not surprising that either author claims that his exposition is drawing out more precisely the intended meaning of the text. But there is another way of understanding their reflections on the creed which acknowledges their own contribution to the discovery of the meaning of the text. They are not only uncovering a meaning, they are giving a meaning to the creed. The space between interpreter and text is productive of meaning especially when the overcoming of that space becomes the occasion of a deployment of new terminology designed to appropriate the text with a view to contemporary concerns. The language of the interpreter creates meaning as much as it uncovers it, inasmuch as the text is made to answer in terms of the logic of the questions set before it. The anachronistic assertion of Cyril or Nestorius that the creed was providentially formulated to prevent the christological misunderstanding of his opponent in fact points to the meanings they created in their debate with each other.

Although either author can claim to be reconstructing the original thoughts or intentions behind the text and to be spelling them out more fully through the form of commentary on the text, there is another way of understanding what they were doing when debating with each other.[25] Rather than focussing on intentionality, one can instead refer to the polarity which exists between text and interpreter. Here interpretation is not the rethinking of original thoughts behind the words of a text, but the overcoming of the distance between text and interpreter. The difference is an important one. In the former case, there is only one meaning of a text (in this case the Nicene creed), that which is in harmony with the authors' intended meaning; the interpreter is locked into the task of reconstructing the past as a means of access to the mind of the authors. In the latter case, because it is primarily the text and not authorial intent one is trying to understand, a space is opened for a variety of meanings as different readers with different interests try to come to terms with a wide possibility of meanings the text presents. Thus, as questions concerning the text and issues surrounding it differ, new meanings are created in the movement back and forth between interpreter and text. The form of the questions asked is delimited by the tra-

dition in which they are formulated. Because Cyril and Nestorius come to the text with similarly formulated questions and because their questions arise out of a particular tradition of christological reflection, they cross the space separating interpreter and text in the same way and thus can engage in debate with each other. Yet it is precisely because this space is never overcome that Cyril and Nestorius can read the same text in different ways, bring different vocabularies to the text, and derive different meanings from it. Thus the text opens a series of different horizons, or a series of meanings which allow for a variety of points of fusion with the interpreter. One's horizon of interpretation is not a closed, uni-directional, pre-textual psychological history of intention, but rather an open dialectical one in which present interests discover textual meaning and textual meaning reforms interpretive textual meaning and textual meaning reforms interpretive interests.

This assessment of the interpretation of the creed by Cyril and Nestorius opens for the pastor a new way of appropriating early Christian interpretation. On the one hand one is not confined to pitting outmoded methodologies against each other (allegorical and typological vs. historical critical). This way of assessing early Christian interpretation will be seen as largely irrelevant. On the other hand, one is not straitjacketed in an endless repristinating traditionalism which merely seeks to remouth what past luminaries have stated. Rather one is invited to engage in the continued process of movement across the space separating text and interpreter and to continue the production of meaning which interpretation necessarily involves. In the case of the Nicene creed, this implies that the text is not a dead artifact of bygone christological disputes, but that it may be reappropriated as the horizon between pastor and text becomes fused at different points. In the remainder of this discussion I should like to show how one contemporary theologian has continued the conversation with tradition which I am proposing here.

Liberation Theology and dogmatic reflection on the nature of the Trinity are not what one usually associates. But in his book entitled *Trinity and Society* Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan Brazilian priest, seeks to appropriate the traditional doctrine of the Trinity from the liberationist point of view.[26] In the process of that appropriation Boff reflects upon the conciliar

definitions concerning the nature of Christ and patristic formulations concerning the Trinity.

Much of *Trinity and Society* is taken up with recounting and describing ways in which the Trinity has been understood and conceptualized in the past. In this way Boff seeks to place himself squarely in the patristic trinitarian tradition of reflection, especially as it developed after the categories of Nicene theology became established orthodoxy. Twenty centuries of trinitarian theology form the horizon which shapes his understanding of God. But Boff is not happy merely to record the statements of bygone theologians and councils; he is committed to the tradition, not to traditionalism. He seeks to enter into a dialogue with the tradition from the perspective of what he calls "a changed cultural situation."[27] Throughout his book he determines what implications the traditional doctrine of the Trinity has for the shaping and governance of human society. This is a pressing issue for him because of the forms of social oppression, inequity, and injustice he sees in his own Latin American society.

Boff thus seeks to find a point of fusion between issues which are of importance for him from a liberationist perspective and the broad horizon of trinitarian reflection. Briefly stated, he discovers such a point of fusion in the trinitarian understanding of *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the three divine persons of the Trinity. For Boff, the self-giving and self-identification of each member of the Trinity with each other member (without, however, loss of identity of each person) is a model for shaping human community. Instead of a patriarchal monotheism, in which God the Father occupies the top of a hierarchical pyramid of authority, with Son and Holy Spirit below, Boff prefers to understand the Trinity in a way more consistent with patristic writers from the fourth century onward. This understanding of God is used by him to legitimate a vision of society, based on a shared community of goods, in which individuals live with and for one another. The all-important focus of unity for him in his understanding of the oneness of the triune God is the communion between the divine persons.[28] Boff stands firmly in the western Augustinian tradition of trinitarian reflection when, in addition to the substantive category of essence, he portrays the unity of the three persons in terms of relations.[29]

> Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in community because of the communion between them. Communion is the expression of love and life. Life and love, by their very nature, are dynamic and overflowing. So under the name of God we should always see Tri-unity, Trinity as union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[30]

Father implies the presence of Son, the love of Father and Son is expressed in their shared out-breathing of the Holy Spirit. The language of dogma is given life by Boff when, in a way reminiscent of nineteenth-century socialist divines such as F.D. Maurice, he derives from his understanding of the mutual relatedness of the members of the Trinity a model for a just and equitable society.[31] Ideally, according to Boff, because humans are created in the image and likeness of God, society too is to express that image.

The hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in one person, Jesus, reasserts christologically the communion between persons Boff finds in the Trinity. The doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* which asserts that the union between the divine and human natures in Jesus is so intimate that one can properly speak of an interchange of properties proper to the divine and human natures respectively, similarly expresses a model for human community where members of society identify with one another as fully as possible, while maintaining their distinctive individuality.[32]

Boff's reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity from a cultural perspective of liberation represents one instance of contemporary conversation with tradition. I suggest that his form of reflection is not different in kind from that undertaken by Cyril and Nestorius (though of course he would articulate what he is doing differently from these fifth-century theologians). In either case there is a fusion of horizons which arises out of a movement to and fro between the interests contemporary with the writer and the received tradition. The space between self and tradition or self and text of tradition becomes productive of meaning as one struggles to appropriate and make familiar what stands over against and alien to oneself. The pastor as she or he is invited to reflect upon and engage the tradition enters similarly into conversation. Through the process of interpretation the contemporary pastor similarly discovers meanings for his or her distinctive cultural setting, points of fusion between present theological challenges and the tradition which stands over against him or herself, and so makes tradition one's own.

Endnotes

[1] This paper will not cover this ground; allegorical and typological exegesis is most ably discussed by M.F. Wiles in his essays on the biblical exegesis of Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* Vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to Jerome* (ed. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 454–509.

[2] *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (Boston: Beacon, 1957) 31.

[3] Ibid. 9–10.

[4] *What is Christianity?* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904) 6–7; for further reference see lectures one and two of the same work.

[5] Harnack's commitment to historical criticism as the methodological key to unlocking timeless truth historically expressed emerges most clearly in his essay "What has History to Offer as Certain Knowledge Concerning the Meaning of World Events?" in *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height* (trans. and ed. by Martin Rumscheidt; London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1989) 45ff.

[6] For the theoretical background to the notion of conversation I am using here see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 235ff.

[7] *History of Dogma*, Vol. 2 (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith) 332ff.

[8] *On First Principles* 1.5–6.

[9] For the sake of simplicity I will identify the Nicene Creed with Nicaea although the present form of the creed did not emerge until the end of the fourth century.

[10] For a fuller discussion of the phrase "fusion of horizons" see Gadamer, 273f.

[11] For a good discussion of Cyril's christology see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* Vol. 1: *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (AD 451)* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975) 414–416, 473–483.

[12] See Ibid. 447–472 for a fuller discussion.

[13] *Ep.* 4.2,3: all citations to correspondence and translations thereof are those of John I. McEnerney, *St. Cyril of Alexandria Letters 1-50, 51-110*. The Fathers of the Church Vols. 76–77. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1987).

[14] *Ep.* 5.3 (a favourite expression of both Nestorius and Cyril).

[15] E.g. Socrates *H.E.* 4.12; Sozomen, *H.E.* 6.11; Theodoret, *H.E.* 1.6.

[16] See, for example, Socrates, *H.E.* 4.12.

[17] John of Antioch, Nestorius' one-time supporter who later sided with Cyril, censures his ally for attacking the memory of this illustrious contender of the faith. Cyril, consistent with his character, remains firm in his vilification of Theodore; see *Ep* 66; 67; 70–73. For Nestorius' interpretation of Cyril's attack of Theodore see *Bazaar of Heracleides* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925) 332f.

[18] Ibid. 142; all of section II.i deals directly with the interpretation of the creed and builds on this argument.

[19] For example, *Bazaar*, 168; for providential arrangement, cf. 169; Cyril, *Ep.* 55.4; 39.7.

[20] See especially, Cyril, *Ep.* 45.1: "... when reading their works (i.e. of the "Fathers") we put their thought in such order as to follow after the order and to introduce nothing strange to the orthodoxy of their teachings."

[21] *Bazaar*, 148; Cyril, *Ep.* 92.11; 33.7; 39.7.

[22] In the case of the term *theotokos* Cyril claims the authority of tradition for its use. But he also contends that it draws out the implications of the phrasing of the Nicene text; see for example his *Five Tomes Against Nestorius* 1.2.

[23] *Bazaar*, 264–265, 148f.

[24] *Ep.* 16.5; 55.8; 71.2.

[25] For the following discussion see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *op.cit.* and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). It falls outside the scope of this paper to enter into a precise discussion of these works. I have opted instead to offer an application of their insights to the instance of interpretation in the early church before us. I am not, of course, suggesting that Cyril or Nestorius articulated their understanding of interpretation in this way. Indeed the notion of interpretation being productive of meaning would have been anathema to them. The model I am presenting, however, does account for their attempts to remain faithful to the received tradition while at the same time introducing new or more systematic ways of articulating it.

[26] All references are to the English translation by Paul Burns, published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988.

[27] See 111f.

[28] See 13–16.

[29] See 115.

[30] See 4–5.

[31] See especially 164ff.

[32] See 136.