CHAPTER 21

Christological Declarations with Oriental Churches

Theresia Hainthaler

1 Preliminary Remarks

1.1 Oriental Orthodox Churches

Characteristic of their tradition is the mia physis formula: there is mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene, that is, one nature of the incarnate God Logos. To the family of Oriental Orthodox churches belong the Coptic Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic, the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Eritrean Orthodox, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. They all accept this mia physis formula and they reject the definition of the fourth ecumenical council (Chalcedon), that Christ is in two natures one person (prosopon) or hypostasis. Because of the confession of the Oriental Orthodox to one nature in Christ they have been called ‘monophysites’, a term “in some respects infelicitous and misleading.”

The Assyrian Church of the East in no way belongs to this church family; on the contrary, it is viewed as their direct opponent with its christological formula of two natures and two qnome (hypostases) and one parsopa (prosopon). But it is the ‘Church of the East’, a name used by themselves already in the first millennium; this church reached out to the East, to China, already in the seventh century. A christological declaration with the Catholic Church was signed on 11 November 1994.

1.2 The Problem

If Christ is one nature, how can he “be recognised in two natures” (definition of Chalcedon)? Thus, the two main statements of the Oriental Orthodox churches and the Chalcedonian churches, that is, the Eastern Orthodox as well as the

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Catholics and the churches of the Reformation (to sum up: all the churches of the West), seem contradictory.

There is a voluminous literature, from the mid-fifth century onwards, of polemical treatises, from both sides. Especially in the sixth century the position of the parties hardened. The respective christological formulas each became a shibboleth, a marker of one’s own identity. Just to give some examples. For Severus of Antioch\(^2\) († 538) the cursed ‘two’ had to be avoided at any cost: “For the duality establishes each nature in itself, separate and for itself, and if once the human nature is distinct from the Logos [which for Severus means separate], one necessarily has to ascribe to it a proper person.”\(^3\) Philoxenus of Mabbug († 523) still wrote in 521, that it is indispensable for the “pure, apostolic and immaculate faith” to “anathematise without any hesitation, besides the other heretics and especially Nestorius, Eutyches and their teachings, the council held in Chalcedon and the impious Tome that was produced by Leo, the head of the church of Rome, as well as all the letters which he has written against the faith.”\(^4\)


3 Severus, *Hom.* 47 (PO 35:310, 311 [French trans. Brière, Graffin]). Cf. Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition, 2/2.145. The vehement rejection of Severus of any ‘duality’ in Christ can be seen also in his controversy against Sergius the Grammarian. See Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition, 2/2.74–76. For Severus a duality in Christ is impossible (one nature, one hypostasis, one energia, one activity); only in the effects, lying outside Christ, duality is possible. See Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition, 2/2.146.

4 Philoxenus of Mabbug, Letter to the monks of Senoun (A. de Halleux, ed., Philoxène de Mabbog, Lettre aux moines de Senoun, cSCO, vol. 231, Scriptores Syri, vol. 98 (Leuven: Peeters, 1963), 95–6): “ܐܢ ܡܕܝܢ ܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܟܝܬܐ ܘܫܠܝܚܝܬܐ ܘܕܠܐ ܡܘܡܐ ܥܡܢ ܪܓܿܝܢ ܐܢܬܘܢ ܠܡܐܚܕ ܐܚܪܡܘ ܥܡ ܗܠܝܢ ܐܚܪܿܢܐ ܗܪܿܛܝܩܘ܂ ܘܥܡ ܢܣܛܘܪܝܣ ܘܐܘܛܘܟܐ ܘܝܘܵܠܦܢܝܗܘܢ܂ ܟܕ ܣܟ ܒܡܕܡܿ ܠܐ ܩܿܢܛܝܢ ܐܢܬܘܢ܂ ܘܐܦ ܠܣܘܢܗדים ܗܿܝ ܕܗܼܘܬ ܒܟܠܩܕܘܢܐ܂ ܘܠܛܘܡܣܐ ܪܫܝܥܐ ܗܿܘ ܕܗܼܘܐ ܡܢ ܠܐܘܢ ܡدبܿܪܢܐ ܕܥܕܬܐ ܕܪܗܘܡܐ܂ ܘܬܘܒܼ ܵܠܟܠܗܝܢ ܐܓܪܿܬܗ ܗܵܢܝܢ ܕܥܵܒܝܕܢ ܠܗ ܠܘܩܒܠ ܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ܂,” and he argues: “For without these being anathematised explicitly by all the children of the church the heresy of Nestorius will not be removed completely from the Church. . . . If the council and Leo were not anathematised from the church—in fact, they are already excluded—the anathema on Nestorius cannot be just and sincere, and also that it [scl. the anathema] was hurled against the impious heresy of two natures established by him.” On the date of the letter see de Halleux, Philoxène de Mabbog, Lettre aux moines de Senoun, cSCO, vol. 232, Script. Syr., vol. 99, vi. On Philoxenus see now the chapters of Tanios Bou Mansour and Luise Abramowski in: Theresia Hainthalter (ed.), Christ in Christian Tradition, vol. 2: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604), part 3: The Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch from 451 to 600, with contributions of Alois Grillmeier, Theresia Hainthalter, Tanios Bou Mansour, and Luise Abramowski, trans.