The Deification of Jesus

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The Deification of Jesus
BY JACK McLEAN

D espite the growing numbers of encounters in recent years of the world religions in forums of exchange Christianityl continues to set itself apart through a firm belief in the uniqueness of its founder, Jesus Christ. While individual Christians may acknowledge the inspitational nature of the non-Christian founders of religions, adherents of the major branches of Christianity
are united in the belief that Christ has no equal. This conviction in the uniqueness of Jesus has become the unassailable fbrtress of Christian belief. Such a belief is the product of historical and theological developments in the early church. Through a series of creeds baseli on theological speculation Jesus the Son was declared to be the very essenc~ of Divinity walking upon the earth, the Godhead Itself united with a deified Holy Spirit in a trinitarian
theology. These creeds, far from descending upon Ithe church fathers as divine revelation, underwent a long historical development that was not uncontested. They were finally elaborated in their present f~rm after four centuries of acrimonious theological quarreling that necessitate~ four world councils of the church-those of Nicaea, Ephesus, Constantin<Dple, and Chalcedon-that brought in their wake bloody warfare among ChrThtian factions. These chrisro-logical controversies resulted in the fragmentation of the churches of Asia Minor from those of Greek Orthodox ConstandlOple, a fragmentation that has continued to this day. I

The writings of the Apostle Paul were a great factor in this deification of Jesus. Paul's interpretation of the Christ figure ~Iears the unmistakable stamp
of a savior figure of the Greek mystery religions into whose form Jesus was cast. The statements of Jesus Himself, however, dp not support His exaltation to the Godhead. As the Son, Christ clearly saw Himself in a role subordinate to that of the Father.

In this paper I offer a three-dimensional studyl of the historical, doctrinal, and comparative aspects of the deification of Jesus. I will first examine Paul's
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interpretation of Jesus to Gentile Christians together with a contrasting

inter-
pretation set forth by Christ Himself. I will als6 include the Gnostic Jesus, which touches indirectly on the christological qubstion. Third, I will review two major christological controversies: (1) thJ schism of Arius and the development of the notion of trinity; and (2) t~e God-man debate of Cyril and Nestorius. These movements spanned a fopr-hundred year period. In my comparative study I will present a Baha'i perspective on the deification of Jesus and, where possible, make comparisons with the Baha'I Faith on relevant issues. I

Baha'i-Chrisrian studies are by no means n9w in the literature of the BaM'i Faith. They promise, however, to be ofI continuing interest as the Christian world comes to grips with the serious claims made by Baha'u'Ilah to the followers of the Gospel.

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St. Paul and the Deification of Jesus!

IN CHRISTIANITY the writings of Paul have had a determining role in trans-
mitting a characteristic understanding of Christ. With the gradual demise of the Jewish wing of ChristianifY Paul's Christology came to the forefront in the Christian understanding on Jesus. His glorification of Christ's divinity has
played a major role in the deification of Jesus. If Christ taught the kingdom, it is true to say Paul taught Chrlist.

While generally enjoying +idespread acclaim among Christians, Paul has not escaped being a subject o~ great controversy, both for his contemporaries and ours. His missionary journeys to Greece and Asia Minor, coupled with a sizeable corpus of theologicaf writings, have earned him the adulations of some Christians as "the second founder of Christianiry.t'f Other more critical theologians have been less enfuusiastic in their acclamation of Paul. 3 Basing his view on a study of Paul's Jpistles, one comparative religionist has referred
to him as "The problem figuke of primitive Christianity" who became em-
broiled with the pillars of the Imother church at Jerusalem-Peter, James the Lord's brother, and John--D"ier the teaching and admission of the Gentile Christians into the new faith'i The first council of the primitive church, the

1. This section was written before the discussion that has emerged in World Order
on the role of St. Paul in the early church. (See "A Forum: Concerning St. Paul,"
World Order, 13, No.4 [Summer 1979], 5-12; letter from Juan Ricardo Cole,
World Order, 13, No. 2 [Winte~ 1978-79], 7-8; and book review by William S. Hatchet, "The Quest for the MeAphysical Jesus," Wo"ld Order, 12, No.4 [Summer

1978],35-42.) I have no purpose in promoting or discouraging the view that Paul
was either a "usurper" or in some sense the breaker of a Christian covenant. My
primary purpose is to elucidate pLl's special brand of Christology, which conrributed
in large measure to the fixation bf I
Christ as God. It does touch incidentally on the
differences that Paul had with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. That these differences
occurred Paul himself admits (Gal. 2); they are also set forth in Acts 15 in a diHering
version. Thus they are a matter df historical record. Aside from that, since both the
New Testament and Baha'i sources are equivocal on the matter, I do not see how
anyone can seriously argue from J srrictly partisan point of view.

2. Quoted in John B. Noss, !Man's Religions, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan,
1963), p. 620. Fully five of thel fourteen epistles are not Paul's according to New
Testament textual exegesis (Ephesians, Hebrews I and II, Timothy, and Tirus), Colos-
sians is also questioned. Howard iClark Kee, Franklin W. Young, Karlfried Froelich,
Understanding the New Testament,- 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall,
1957),pp.164-66. I

3. Udo Schaefer and Huschmand I
Sabet refer to the following theologians, all of
whom have been critical of Pauli's special brand of Christianity: Albert Schweitzer,
Hans Joachim Schoeps, Karl-Heinz Deschner, Wilhelm Nestle, E. Meyer Schonfield,
Steinheim E. Grimm. These men lare not obscure by any means and have made some
of the most outstanding contributions in the field of theology and comparative religion.
See Udo Schaefer, The Light Shi'neth in Darkness: Five Studies in Revelation after
Christ, rrans. Helene Momtaz N~ri and Oliver Colburn (Oxford: George Ronald,
1977) and Huschmand Saber, 7Jlhe Heavens Are Cleft Asunder (Oxford: George
Ronald, 1975). Christopher Buck notes that the following theologians endorse primi-
tive Ebionite Christianity as opposed to the Gentile Christianity of St. Paul: Harris
Hirschberg, Shlomo Pines, David iFlusser, James Dunn, Cardinal Danielou, and Gilles
Quispel. See "A Forum: Concerning St. Paul," World Order, 13, No.4 (Summer
1979),9.

4. S. G. F. Brandon, "Saint Paul, the Problem Figure of Primitive

Christianity," in
Religion in Ancient History: St4dies in Ideas, Men and Events (London: George

In of Jesus! Jerusalem Council, was _convened in the holy cicy (A.D. 49) to resolve the
ole in trans- controversy. 5 I
II demise of The writings of the Apostle Paul effected a great transformation of Jesus
forefront in from the Jesus of the synoptic gospels and of non-Pauline epistles in the
divinity has New Testament. Paul recast Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah of Israel,
ae kingdom, .into a deified Lord bearing all the traces of a savior-god of a Greek mystery
cult. Styling himself Apostle "among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:16; Acts 9:15),
as, Paul has Paul determined to adapt his presentation of Jesus to the Greek Gentile
aternporarres world in which he lived, a radically different religious milieu from the
ipled with a Jewish one. What is often overlooked, however, in Paul's claim to mission to
dulations of the Gentiles is that Peter claimed precisely this mission for himself at the
more critical Jerusalem Council, a mission he states he had "in the early days."6
aul. 3 Basing For Paul to have preached Christ as the Jewish Messiah to the Greek-
has referred speaking Gentiles would have been futile. The messiahship was a virtually
became em- meaningless concept to the Gentile world that Paul determined to evangelize.
-r, James the To them there was no long-standing tradition of a davidic kingship that
the Gentile promised an anointed of .God who would rise up and vindicate Israel. Further-
~church, the more, certain of the Ebionite Christians, who were dominant in the apostolic
church until Romano-Pauline Christianity emerged, reconciled their faith in
World Order Christ with temple worship as well as with circumcision and dietary and
ing St. Paul,"
purification laws." Accordingly, he preached "another Jesus," one whom those
Ricardo Cole,
Iy W illiarh S. living in the Greek-Gentile world could understand and to whom they
J. 4 [Summer could relate. 8

·iew that Paul The Jesus that Paul preached was a deihed savior, One Who could rescue
covenant. My a hapless humanity from the power of sin. It was precisely this presentation
ch contributed
of Jesus as redeemer of men's sins and purveyor bf immortality to those who enrally on the
ese differences
in a differing Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), pp. 310-23.
.ince both the 5. The point at dispute was the observance of Mosaic law by Gentile converts. Acts
not see how 15: 29 states that Paul with his party and the Jerusal~m church agreed on exhorting
Gentile converts to abstain from unchastity, food offerJd to idols, blood, and strangled
c: Macmillan, animals. In a differing account of the same incident !Paul states that he reached no
.ding to New compromise with the Jerusalem elders: "to them we did not yield even for a moment"
Titus). Colos- (Gal. 2: 5). Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard version.
fried Froelich, 6. The complete verse by Peter reads: "Brethren, you know that in the early days
Prentice-Hall, God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word
of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15: 7). Paul claimed that he was converted to
ogians, all of Christianity by a vision of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. During this
.rt Schweitzer, experience, Christ commissioned him to teach the Gentiles. Paul, however, mentions
rer Schonfield, nowhere in his letters that Peter also made the same claim at the Jerusalem Conference,
ve made some a conference he attended.
:ative religion. 7. Along with the Nazarenes they are the earliest of Jewish Christian communities.
eoeletion after The Ebionites were the Jerusalem Christians, brought into the Faith by Christ Himself
eorge Ronald, and the Apostles. Before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they emigrated to
cford: George the Gentile town of Pella east of the Jordan River, where they survived until the
mdorse primi- third cenrury (some date their survival to the fifth century). Their Christology, which
Paul: Harris resembles in some ways Baha'i prophetology, is discussed later in this section.
au, and Gilles 8. The phrase is from Paul himself (2 Cor. 11: 4). In this chapter Paul speaks of

. 4 (Summer his "divine jealousy" for the Corinthian community) Brandon (Religion in Ancient
History, p. 315) thinks that his warnings to the Corinthians of "another Jesus" and
aristianiry," in "another gospel" (Gal. 1: 6) are veiled references to the Jerusalem apostles, Peter,
adon : George James, and John, with whom he had fundamental differences.

accepted Him in a personalized faith that has prevailed in western Christendom
ever smce.

The religious background of the Gentiles explains why Paul's approach was so successful. The Greek~speaking Gentiles whom Paul addressed held that the flesh was a degraded fo)m of spirit, a "tomb" as Plato had taught, from which the spirit longed to escape. Its liberation was only final and complete with death, and there the prospects of Hades were dark and terrifying.? The Gentiles, then, had blekk prospects for the future life and longed for deliverance from sinful corporeal existence. In search of solace they had turned to the Greek mystery cults that promised them a means of escape. The mystery religions held that by choosing and worshiping a personalized deity, a savior, a man could escape death and win eternal life. 10 The personalized worship of a savior was accompa9ied by sacramental rituals that bear striking resemblances to Christian sacraments. 11 - Through such savior worship and sacramental observances the devotee could be Lat. renatus 'born again' into a new spiritual existence. Thus, like the mystery religions, Pauline Christianity
offered itself as a religion of bondage and liberation, through a deified savior.

As such 'it thoroughly satisfied the Gentile penchant for personal religion. The presentation of Christ to the Gentiles as the redeemer of their sins and purveyor of immortality was one of Paul's central themes, a theme known otherwise as "vicarious atonement" (at-one-ment), man's reconciliation with
God through the sacrificial death of Jesus: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25). Paul's writings are thoroughly imbued with the consciousness of men's sins, a concern that occupies the opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. Although St. Augustine fully elaborated the doctrine, Paul's understanding of the Genesis account of the fall of Adam (Gen. 3) qualifies him as the originator of the doctrine of original sin (Rom. 5: 12-21). Whatever one may think of Paul's other doctrines, his preoccupation with sin has, in my view, stamped Christianity with much of the morbidity that is sometimes found in it.

9. During the life of Christ Hellenistic ideas about life after death were in

flux.
The common people mostly believed in Hades, although it held little promise for a
better life. Hope for a blessed life after death developed among the religious sect of
Orpheus, who looked for their reward in the Elysian fields of the West. The mysteries
also promised a hereafter.
10. The Hellenistic-Roman period of Christ's lifetime was a period of great spiritual
curiosity very much like that of today. The mysteries had to compete with various
schools of Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, magic, and astrology to quench the people's
spiritual restlessness.
11. The cult of Mithra, the Persian god of light, also mentioned by Shogi Effendi
(The World Order of Bahd'u'lldh: Selected Letters, 2d rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'I
Publishing Trust, 1974], p. 184), hJd an eucharistic style communal meal. The cult
of Attis had an animal blood baptism and celebrated the god's resurrection on 25
March. The cult of Isis, the Egyptian mother-goddess, used holy water from the Nile
and held processions and litanies. The mysteries also used altar-pieces and cult
images. One statue of Isis depicts her nursing her holy child, not unlike the statues of
the Virgin with the baby Jesus.
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· Christendom In a bold departure from Judaism Paul taught
that faith in Christ's sacri-
ficial death freed the believer from the constraints lof Jewish law (Rom. 7: 6)
.
ul's approach Paul, however, was inconsistent in his stand on the
law. At the request of
ddressed held James he observed the rites of purification in the
temple as a proof of his
) had taught, Jewish orthodoxy to the Jewish-Christians of
Jerusalem (Acts 21:21-26).
11y final and The Acts version of the Jerusalem Council alsol
states that Paul agreed to
k and terrify- Jewish dietary laws. However, in a differing account
Paul states that he

e and longed reached a compromise with the Jerusalem elders lonly on the point of main-
lace they had taining contributions to the mother church in Jerusalem. To a more orthodox
f escape. The group at Jerusalem, probably the Judaizers, Paul levels the charge of "false
nalized deity, brethren" and states that "to them we did not yield submission even for a
personalized moment" (Gal. 2:5) .
bear striking Paul's teaching of the bodily resurrection of Jesus also paralleled the
worship and mystery cults. Like the resurrected saviors, Isis, Artis, or Mithra, Paul taught
n again' into Christ's bodily resurrection mystery as a proof of His deity. Mystical union
= Christianity with Jesus was offered to the believer through the !ritual of immersion baptism,
leified savior. from which the neophyte Christian emerged a new spiritual being, as Christ
l religion. had emerged immortal from the grave (Rom. 6:1-11).
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of their sins Paul's interpretation of Christ to the Gentiles contained another radical
heme known departure from Israelite religion. This was his presentation of Christ as God.
:iliation with Paul presents Christ as God through two main modes: by blurring the distinc-
ned and fall tion between Christ and God, and by conferring upon Jesus attributes normal-
gift, through ly reserved for God alone.
an expiation In the Greek version of the Torah, the Septuagint, the most common
writings are name for God was kyrios 'Lord'. The mystery clrlts also called their saviors
:oncern that "Lord." Paul, in his epistles, freely applies the term to Jesus. For example,
<\.lthough St. the promise of the Jewish prophet Joel that "Everyone who calls upon the
the Genesis name of the Lord will be saved" (2:32) Paul transposes and applies to
inaror of the Jesus (Rom. 10:9). For Paul Christ's prophetic station not only eclipsed
'nk of Paul's that of Moses, "Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than
mped Chris- Moses" (Heb. 3: 3), but it took on a cosmological function reserved for God
it. alone, that of creation itself. Christ was the one in

whom "all things were
created, in heaven and in earth . . . all things were created through and
for him" (Col. 1:16).
were in flux.
promise for a Paul more clearly identified Christ with God
through his teaching of the
igious sect of incarnate sons hip, the belief that God the Father
became incarnate in Christ
The mysteries the Son: "For in him the whole fullness of
deiryldwells bodily" (Col. 2:9, d.
2 Cor.' 5: 19 and Col. 1: 15). The term "Son of God" was not new to the
great spiritual Jews. The term had an ancient usage that was abplied
to Israel's sacral king,
with various
1 the people's
the Messiah (Ps. 2: 7) .12 In applying it to Christ Paul did not use the
term primarily in its Judaic sense but rather in its mythological hellenistic
Shogi Effendi sense of the Son of God as an incarnation of the
Deity.
e, Ill.: Baha'i In spite of Paul's preferred usage of the term
"Son of God" this was not
leal. The cult
the term with which Christ primarily designated Himself. Christ most often
ection on 25
rom the Nile
ces and cult 12. Oscar CuUmann gives a complete discussion of
this christological title in
the statues of The Cbristology of the New Testament, trans. Shirley
C. Guthrie and Charles A. M.
Hall (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 270-305.

refers to Himself as Heb. bar nasha 'Son of Man', a title that not only
designates Christ's perfect humanity, a standard interpretation, but primarily
the Heavenly Man, a divine adamic prototype, created at the beginning of
time, who would usher in a spiritual rather than a political kingdom.v" Such
a description fits Jesus. Christ rarely refers to Himself as "Son of God," in
all
probability because His Jewish opponents interpreted this designation in the
mythological sense that Yahweh had generated offspring. In any case, to them
it signified a blasphemous identification with God worthy of His condemnation
and death (John 5: 18). But of the two terms, "Son of Man" is charged more
fully with potency and significlnce.
What is so extraordinary about the affirmations of Christ's deity made in
the writings of Paul and the creeds is how little account such declarations
take of the pronouncements of Jesus about Himself. A careful examination of
certain passages impels us to make a serious reevaluation of what is stated

in the trinitarian theology of the creeds and the writings of Paul. While certain statements of Jesus clearly indicate that their author regarded Himself as a Divine Manifestation revealing the will of the Father (John 10:30; cf.. John 8:19,14:7), taken as a whole, they reveal that Christ clearly subordinated Himself to the essence of Divinity.

Paul's assertion that "Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses" (Heb. 3: 3) has led Christians to uphold a radical discontinuity between Christ and the Prophets of Israel and Judah. Though Christians assent to ChrIst's own declaration that He fulfilled the Jewish law (Matt. 5: 17), they insist that, on the basis of Christ's divinity, He is disqualified even to assume the title of prophet.

Not only did Christ refer to Himself as a "prophet" on occasion, but He did so in the context of linking His own suffering and rejection with that of the prophetic figures of Israel and Judah. After His rejection by fellow Galileans at Nazareth, He remarked that "A' prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (Mark 6: 4). Christ further est1blished His prophetic function by linking His own coming to the prophecy of Moses, the greatest of His Hebrew predecessors, that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you" (Deut. 18: 15). Christ indicated that He was the prophet promised by Moses (John 5 :45-47).

Christ's identification of Himself as the "Prophet" promised by Moses was precisely the christological understanding held by the earliest group of Jewish Christians, the Ebionites. The Ebionite understanding of Jesus as the "Prophet" or the "True Prophet" is contained in "The Preaching of Peter" (Kerygmata Petrov), which forms a part of the uncanonical "Pseudo-Clementine Novel." True-prophet Christology is also found in the apocryphal "Gospel of the Hebrews," which was used by the Nazarene Christians. St. Jerome wrote that they regarded it as the original Aramaic Matthew. The parallels between the Jewish-Christian belief in Christ as the "True Prophet" Who appeared at the end of an Adamic cycle df prophetic figures and the Baha'i concept of progressive revelation show basic similarities. The Jews who awaited the "True

13. Ibid., p, 142.

iat not only Prophet" believed in a cycle of prophetic figures beginning with Adam Who
Jut primarily would appear until a period of great decay had set in. At that time the
beginning of "True Prophet," the great Teacher culminating the cycle would appear and
;dom.13 Such inaugurate a spiritual kingdom.
God," in all At the first and second ecumenical councils of the church at Nicaea and
nation in the . Constantinople, it had been laid down that Christ was of the same essence
case, to them with the Father and that the Godhead consisted of three

divine persons.
:ondemnation St. Paul, with his doctrine of incarnate sonship, also put forth the notion of the
:harged more coequality of Christ with the Father. As to the Nicene affirmation of His being
of one essence with the Father, Christ was silent on that particular issue. The
.eity made in terms "essence" and "substance" were concepts borrowed from Greek philoso-
I declarations phy and not biblical. Eusebius of Caesarea and other conservatives had op-
:amination of posed the Nicene creed on that account. As far as trinitarian theology is con-
rhat is stated cerned, Christ declared to a scribe who had come to question Him that the
1. While cer- belief in the divine unity was the greatest of the commandments: "The first is,
:ded Himself 'Hear, 0 Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'" (Mark 12:29). By His
III lO:30; d. affirmation that there was only one Lord-that is, God-Christ was lending
clearly sub- His approval te the Jewish declaration of faith, the Sbema, the belief that
God is one. Jesus also referred to His Father as "the only true God" (John
much more 17: 3). Jesus indirectly repudiated the incarnation theology that God could
l radical dis- take human form by declaring that "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and that
:lah. Though "His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen" (John 5: 37).
~ Jewish law Furthermore, Christ's coequality with God, which was also affirmed at Con-
t, He is dis- stantinople, was something that he had emphatically denied on several oc-
casions in His encounters with the Jews.
sion, but He In an exchange with the Pharisees in which He established His station
with that of of Sonship Christ declared that both His mission and genesis were the
n by fellow Father's doing, not His, thereby clearly dispelling any notion that He was
.thout honor, equal in power with the Father: "If God were your Father, you would love
own house" me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord
r linking His but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say?" (John 8:42-43) .
ew predeces- He revealed His dependence on the Father in another

context. This occurred
ike me from at a time when Christ's fame as a healer had spread
throughout Palestine.
the prophet Since He had healed on the Sabbath, the Pharisees had
accused Him of
breaking Mosaic law. The Jews understood Christ's reference to God as His
d by Moses Father in a mythological sense that implied
identification with The Godhead.
est group of Such an identification caused the monotheistic Jews to
level the charge of
Jesus as the blasphemy against Christ. His response was: "Truly,
truly, I say to you, the
ag of Peter" Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he
sees the Father
udo-Clemen- doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise"
(John 5: 19). Christ
ohal "Gospel clarified His dependency on Divine Omnipotence in other
passages: "I can
erome wrote do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and
my judgment is
.lels between just, because I seek not my own will but the will of
him who sent me" (John
. appeared at 5:30). Shortly before His arrest, Jesus spoke these
words to Judas, the
i concept of brother of James (not Iscariot), in reference to His
return: "Y ou hear me
ed the "True say to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you: If you
loved me, you would
have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than 1"
(John 14:28).
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By His own admission, Christ established His relationship to the Father as that of Servant, a qualification that Baha'u'Ilah also applied on occasion to His own station: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him" (John 13: 16). Christ even went so far as to eschew Himself as a model of moral perfection in order to illustrate the sanctified nature of the Divinity: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10: 18). Not only did Christ indicate that the Father was more perfect and more powerful than He but that the Divinity possessed a knowledge He did not fully share. This is reflected in one of Christ's statements on the second coming: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24: 36) .

The Gnostic Jesus

AT THE SAME TIME that St. Paul was elaborating his exalted and mystical

notions of Jesus, there were other Christians who held obscure beliefs of Christ and who were finally pronounced unorthodox by the Fathers of the Church. These were the Gnostics.J" Gnosticism was one of those "popular cults" and "fashionable and evasive philosophies" mentioned by Shoghi Effendi as one of a group of hybrid religions and philosophies in the Roman Empire that threatened to engulf infant Christianiry.I" Entire Christian communities on occasion adopted Gnosticism as their creed.16 The Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and especially Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, arose to combat it fiercely in their writings.!?

Gnostic Christians compromised the unique soteriological role of Jesus with their indiscriminate belief in a host of savior figures (Gk. Soter 'savior').

Christ was in fact often placed below other saviors and lesser divinities (Gk. aeons). This was the case for the Gnostic churches of Tarsus, Paul's native city, which worshiped the supernatural powers of the Greek hero Heracles in an annual ceremony celebrating his death and resurrection. Gnostic Chris-

14. Gnosticism is strictly speaking a doctrinal, not a christological heresy. Since the movement is mentioned in BaM.'; literature, and since Gnostics had their own,

11:

albeit imperfect, understanding of Jesus, I have included it as a matter of interest.

15. Shoghi Effendi, "The Unfoldment of World Civilization," World Order of Bahd'u'lldh, p. 184. Gnosticism was one of the more widely spread syncretistic religions in the Hellenistic-Roman period. Its complex origins have been traced to Iran (Manichaeism, Mandaeism) , to Syria and Egypt, and to ancient Greece (Orphism, Platonism).

Gnosticism was a religious philosophy of the nature and destiny of man. As such, it aimed at explaining the origin of evil in the world and man's deliverance from it.

Its conflicting sects proffered contending mythologies by way of explanation. Gnosticism's conceptual framework paralleled in some ways Judaeo-Christian thought. It contained creation myths, an account of the fall of a primal man, and his redemption through a savior figure. Philosophically, it was markedly dualistic.

16. The churches at Corinth and Collasae had both been rent by Gnostic heresies.

At Corinth a spiritual aristocracy had developed that prided itself on esoteric knowledge. The church at Collasae wanted to amalgamate Christianity with the mystery

cub and heterodox Judaism (Col. 2:8-23 and 1 Cor. 18-31; 1 Cor. 2:6-13).
17. Irenaeus' best work was titled Refutation and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely
So-Called, more commonly known as Against Heresies. See Ante-Nicene Fathers
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.) , I, 315-58.

• the Father tians also compromised Christ's soteriology in another way. For those Chris-
on occasion tians who accepted Christ alone as Lord, salvation was a matter of faith in
greater than Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Gnostics held that salvation was won
him" (John through gnosis (Gk. 'knowledge, insight'), which was viewed to be a higher
lel of moral state than faith. Their own form of gnosis was esoteric enough, sometimes
inity: "Why held to be a secret knowledge transmitted by Christ to the Apostles and in
0:18). Not turn to the leaders of Gnostic culrs.I" Shoghi Effendi's description of
Ire powerful Gnosticism as "evasive" indicates that the Gnostic community never held
fully share. to fixed tenets of belief.!?
ng: "But of Lacking a widely circulated scripture, the church at Rome formulated the
'en, nor the first of the creeds, an orthodox doctrinal statement, to combat the Gnostic
heresy (Gk. hairesis 'party, school'). The Apostles' Creed, composed between
nostic Jesus A.D. 150-75, alluded to the uniqueness of Jesus as the "only Son, our
Lord," to counteract Gnosticism's submerging of Jesus in a host of other
.nd mystical deiries.P" To combat further the evasive teaching of esoteric Gnostic leaders,
e beliefs of the Church Fathers recognized as authoritative teaching only the New Testa-
:hers of the ment, which had derived directly from apostolic reaching.U se "popular
by Shoghi The Christological Controversies
the Roman The Schism of Arius and the Development of the Trinity. By the end of the
ristian com- second century the force of the Gnostic movement with its competing savior
be Church figures was well-nigh spent. In the second, third, and fourth centuries

, Bishop of Christology continued to occupy the central place in the writings of the
Fathers. But christological writing at this stage was characterized by greater
le of Jesus controversy than in earlier generations, controversy that finally escalated into
er 'savior'). open warfare between sectarians.
inities (Gk. In the second and third centuries the church experienced dissension over the
aul's native Monarchian controversy. Although this christological controversy provoked
ro Heracles great debate, it did not seriously disturb Christian unity and died quietly
ostic Chris- toward the end of the third century.22

ieresy. Since 18. Simon the Magician was one of the Gnostic cult leaders. He received the
I their own, condemnation of St. Peter by attempting to buy his spirirual powers from the
interest. Apostles (Acts 8:9-25). The Egyptian Basilides and Valentinus of Rome, although
Id Order of closer to orthodox Christianity, founded docetic (Gk. dokesis 'illusion') Gnostic
stic religions heresies that exalted Christ's spiriruality to the point that they denied His physical
fran (Mani- reality.
Platonism) . 19. Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahd'u'lldh, p. 184.
As such, it 20. Later tradition attributes this creed to the Apostles. It was composed not only
nee from it. to combat the Gnostic heresy but was used primarily as a summary statement of
ion. Gnosti- questions and answers, requisite knowledge of catechumens prior to their being bap-
thought. It tized. Helmer Ringgren and Ake V. Strom, The Religions of Mankind; Today and
redemption Yesterday, ed. J. c. G. Greig, trans. Niels L. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,
1967), p. 149. I
stic heresies. 21. The Gnostics put forth their mythologies in literature of their own. "The
teric knowl- Gospel of Truth" and "Book of Baruch" are among their works.
the mystery 22. Monarchianism was a theological controversy arising out of concern for main-
6-13). taining the "monarchia" or divine unity. It expressed this concern in two movements
iosis Falsely that were fundamentally different. "Adoptionism" wished to stress the divine unity
ene Fathers to the point that it taught that Christ was only an inspired

man. Christ was,
so to speak, adopted by God's Spirit. The other movement, "rnodalism," stressed

The fourth century, however, witnessed a shock wave of major proportions that was felt throughout Christendom. 'Abdu'l-Baha has referred to its disastrous effects on the unity of the Christian faith:

Even after Christ, Arius, the well-known patriarch, was the cause of a widespread schism in the Cause of God and intense agitation among the believers. His followers numbered even three million, and he as well as his successors exerted the utmost effort in order to produce a split and a widespread commotion in the religion of God.23

Aside from naming Arius as a violator of Christianity, 'Abdu'l-Baha clearly indicates that Arius essentially used a theological pretext for achieving power,
a connivance common to violators in all dispensations.P"

Arius was a learned priest from Alexandria who quarreled with his bishop, Alexander. The disputation began with Arius' assertion that the Son, even as the Logos, the Divine Word, was inferior to the Father. He held that Christ, like other beings, was created ex nihilo by God and was, therefore, a created and finite being. He also! argued that Christ had a beginning whereas the Father was eternal: "We are persecuted because we say the Son has a beginning whereas God is without beginning."25 Alexander took issue with Arius, holding to the orthodox belief that the Son as Logos was eternal, uncreated, and of the same essence or substance as God. The most serious offense of Arius' teaching in orthodox eyes was its debasing subordination of Jesus. Arius argued that Christ was liable to change in regard to His divine nature and even to sin. The appellation "Son of God" was for the Arians a courtesy title rather than an indication of Christ's divine origin.

Alexander summoned a provincial synod and had Arius excommunicated in A.D. 321. The banished Arius refused to submit and won a large following in Palestine. His supporters spread the controversy frOID Palestine all over the eastern Greek episcopates (bishoprics). Constantine, the newly converted Christian king, anxious to preserve the empire from schism, summoned the first ecumenical council of the church at Nicaea, across the Bosphorus from Constanrinople.P" 'Abdu'l-Baha's commentary on Constantine speaks favorably of his great spirituality and administrative skill: "He spared no efforts, dedi-
cating his life to the promotion of the principles of the Gospel, and he solidly

Christ's divinity to the extent that it did not distinguish Him in any way from the Godhead.

23. 'Abdu'l-fsaha, "'The Covenant of God shall remain stable and secure': Recent
Tablet to Roy C. Wilhelm," in Star of the West, 10 (5 June 1919),95. In the same
passage 'Abdu'l-Baha assures Mr. Wilhelm that the Baha'i covenant will remain

in-
violate.
24. Nicolas Zernov quotes church historian Socrates Scholasticus (d. A.D. 450), who said that "from love of controversy" Arius opposed his bishop in the discussion.
See Eastern Christendom: A Study of the Origi« and Development of the Eastern Orthodox Church (New York: Putnam's, 1961), p. 45n.
25. Arius, quoted in J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), p. 228. This passage on Arius' teaching has been gleaned from pp. 226-31.
26. Constantine was converted to Christianity by a vision of the cross superimposed
on the midday sun. The accompanying message read, "By this sign conquer." Against
all odds and good judgment Constantine made a rapid invasion of Italy and defeated
his rival, Maxentius, at the battle of the Milvian Bridge at Rome (A.D. 312).

proportions established the Roman government, which in reality had been nothing but
to its disas- a system of unrelieved oppression, on moderation and justice."27 'Abdu'l-
Baha's favorable assessment of Constantine is not shared by all historians,
cause of a some of whom view his intervention in spiritual matters as a means of gain-
among the ing ascendency over his political opponents. 28
he as well . The point at issue at Nicaea was whether Christ was simply like the Father,
split and a much in the same way as an image would resemble its perfect archetype, or
whether He was of the same essence or substance as God, the very matter of
3aM clearly Divinity. The 220 delegate bishops were separated quite literally by a mere
ving power, letter of the Greek alphabet (Gk. homoousios 'of the same substance';
bomoiousios 'of like substance'). Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria and his
. his bishop, party defended Christ's full divinity and coequality with the Father, a position
! Son, even deriving from Logos theology. Eusebius of Caeserea, "father of church history,"
e held that stood by the dictum "Sola Scriptura" and argued for the bomoiousios since
therefore, a ousia (Gk. 'substance, essence') was not a biblical term at all but one
ing whereas drawn from Greek philosophy.P" Eusebius argued further that favoring the

Son has a homoousios would risk compromising the sovereignty of God and his oneness.
: issue with Constantine took his stand against the Arians at Nicaea and argued force-
eternal, un- fully in favor of the homoousios. The creed was adopted almost universally
ious offense (only four bishops refused to sign it) and with great jubilation. The Jesus
III of Jesus. of Nazareth Who had begun His christological journey in the mind of the
vine nature early church as the "suffering servant" messiah-figure of Deutero-Isaiah
; a courtesy emerged from Nicaea as a deified being, consubstantial with God.30
The promulgation of the Nicene Creed, far from bringing the spiritual
nmunicated peace that Constantine had sought, inaugurated a second stage of vitriolic
e following struggle between Nicenes and Arians that was to rage for the next half
ae all over century. !I 1 During this second phase of the contest, the Arian party witnessed
Y' converted a momentary victory. By a series of skillful diplomatic maneuvers, Arian
unoned the bishops were able to win the support of Constantius I, Constantine's son and
horus from
:s favorably
fforts, dedi- 27. 'Abdu'l-Baha, The Secret of Divine Civilization, trans. Marzieh Gail and
Ali-Kuli Khan, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 85. 'Abdu'l-
I he solidly Baha's statement is borne out by the full weight of history. Constantine systematically
altered the legislation of the Empire to accord it with Gospel teaching. He punished
Y' way from sexual offenders; no longer penalized celibates; tightened divorce laws; facilitated
the liberation of slaves; protected prisoners, widows, and orphans; and gave bishops
ure': Recent certain magisterial powers.
In the same 28. Among these historians are Gibbon, Burckhardt, Schwartz, and Harnack. See
remain in- Zernov, Eastern Christendom, p. 39n.
29. John Courtney Murray, S.]., The Problem of God; Yesterday and Today A.D. 450), (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 47.
e discussion. 30. Oscar Cullmann believes that the most ancient chrisrological title applied to Jesus

the Eastern was that of the "servant." Acts 3:26 and 4:30 ascribe its usage to St. Peter, who
was greatly impressed by the suffering of his beloved Master. Peter protested when
n: Adam & warned by Christ of His impending death (Mark 8: 32). Isaiah's prophecy speaks of
een gleaned the coming servant's suffering as a propitiatory death: "when he makes himself an
offering for sin" (53: 10). Christo logy of the New Testament, p. 74.
zperimposed 31. When the Arian bishop, Macedonius, was returned to office in Constantinople,
er." Against over three thousand people lost their lives in the fighting. More Christians were slain
md defeated by fellow Christians in this one contest alone than had died during the last terrible
312). persecution of Roman emperor Diocletian (311).
_L .__ .__-.__ .__. _

ruler of the eastern states, who abandoned his father's policy of standing behind the Nicene Creed. At the Synod of Constantinople in A.D. 360, held during the dedication of the Hagia Sophia, the Nicene Creed was abrogated and replaced with an Arian creed, declaring the Son to be simply "like the Father, as the Holy Scriptures call Him and teach."32 It seemed that Christendom had gone Arian.

During this second phase of the Arian controversy a third force along with the Father and Son was introduced into the debate. This was the Holy Spirit. The turn of the century was destined to witness not only the destruction of the Arian party but also the formulation in church council of Christendom's most central doctrine, the trinity.

The sources for the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit are Judaic. In the Bible the dynamic spirit of God (Heb. ruach Yahweh) was active especially at creation (Gen. 2: 7) but was also evident in the mission of the Hebrew prophets who were sustained through God's spirit and spoke through the authority of His word: "Thus says the Lord."

In early Christian literature this understanding was reflected in the writings of the apologist Justin Martyr who referred to the Holy Spirit as the "prophetic spirit.":13 The Fathers, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons; Tertullian of Carthage; and Origen of Alexandria had given place in their writings to the Holy Spirit in reference to the Godhead. By the fourth century a movement had been gradually building to deify the Holy Spirit. The writings of Hilary of Poiriers and especially those of the fourth-century Cappadocian fathers, St. Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus, were instrumental in winning support for the teaching of a deified Holy Spirit. Augustine, building on a trinitarian tradition four centuries old, gave final expression to the doctrine by writing, over a twenty-year period, De Trinitate, a work setting forth arguments and analogies to explain the mystery of the

trinity. 34
Judaism,· however, was rigidly monotheistic. For the triune expression of
the Godhead one must look to ancient Egypt. From the time of the Old King-
dom (2770-2270 B.C.) until Christian times, Osiris, one of the "Ennead"
or Nine of the. Egyptian pantheon of gods, was worshiped alternatively as
three gods and as one. In his triune form, Osiris was worshiped as Serapis;
Isis, the wife of Osiris; and Horus, their son. In a papyrus dating from the
time of Alexander the Great the trinitarian formula, "Thus from one god I
become three gods," is recorded as Horus' self-description.s" Tertullian of
Carthage, also writing from North Africa, produced almost identical wording
in his own formulation of the Christian trinity with his celebrated phras~

32. Quoted in Noss, Man's Religions, p. 637n. This Arian creed is sometimesre-
ferred to as the "Dated Creed."It was later abrogatedat the Council of
Constantinople
(A.D. 381) when the churchrerurnedto Nicenetheology.
33. Justin Martyr, quoted in Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, p. 102.
34. St. Augustine, "On Trinity," A Select Library of Nicene and Poss-Nicene
Pasbers, Vol. III (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886-90).
35. Francis Legge, Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: From 330 B.C. to
330 A.D. (New York: University Books, 1964), I, 88.

inding be-
"All three are one.":l6 Coincidentally, the strongest supporters of trinitarian
360, held theology, Athanasius and Cyril, were both bishops of
Alexandria, the breeding
abrogated
ground of Egyptian tritheism. It is to this "Alexandrian cult" of the worship
r "like the
of the triune Osiris that Shoghi Effendi refers in his discussion of those
move-
t Christen-
ments that threatened the early church. 3 7
That the doctrine of the trinity itself underwent a historical development
irce along
is readily apparent. It was to appear early in the writings of the Church
the Holy
Fathers and apologists, but its exegesis was by no means uniform. It was cau-
re desrruc-
tiously circumscribed in its early stages by a respect for Jewish monotheism
:ouncil of
but witnessed the gradual development of three divine and consubstantial
persons within the Godhead. Justin Martyr, referred to earlier, formulated a
lie. In the
triad of God, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. He wrote of the Word as being
especially "another God" beside God. 11 R The Logos (Word) in
time came to be super-

ie Hebrew
seded by the Son.
tough the
A contemporary of Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, was the first to use the
word "triad" in his writings in relationship to the Godhead. Theophilus' triad
the writ-
had a novel twist in that the Holy Spirit was replaced by Wisdom, to consist
irit as the
of Father, Son, and Wisdom.:{!l Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, reaffirmed the tri-
rtullian of
une Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching that the Son (Word) was
in
ngs to the
eternal generation and was, therefore, coexistent with the Father. Since He
movement shared God's eternity, Irenaeus argued that the Son was
also God: "The
of Hilary Father is God and the Son is God, for whatsoever is begotten
by God is
fathers, St. God."40 Hippolytus of Rome first used the word pet'Jona
(Latin for 'mask,'
nzus, were as used in Greco-Roman theater; hence 'appearance,
manifestation, aspect')
oly Spirit. in relation to the three aspects of the Godhead and taught
that, although
gave final single, God was multiple in respect to His fourfold
attributes of Word, Wis-
, Trinitate,
dom, Power, and Counsel. 41 Tertullian of Carthage coined the famous "three
ery of the in one" formula referred to above and was also the first to
use the word
trinitas in his writings, thereby giving impetus to the independent subsistence
.ression of of the three divine persons." 2
Old King- The writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian
constitute a water-
"Ennead"
shed in the development of the trinity. It is in their writings that the first
iatively as tensions appear between the unity of the divine monarchia
and the independent
is Serapis; subsistence of the three persons. Overall, however, the
ascendancy was given
. from the to the Divine Unity with the three persons being
"manifestations" (Lat.
one god I species) or "aspects" (Lat. formae) of the Godhead, a
theology called "eco-
rtullian of nomic trinitarianism," because it wished to stress the
paucity of the three per-
II wording sons compared with the monarchia 'Divine Unity.'43 The

major contribution
:ed phrase
36. Henry Chadwick, "The Early Church," in The Pelican History of the Church, ed. O. Chadwick (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967), I, 89.
37. Shoghi Effendi, World Order of BahJ'u'llJh, p. 184.
netimes re-
38. Chadwick, "The Early Church," p. 85.
israntinople
39. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, p. 104.
40. Ibid., p. 107. In one analogy of the trinity Irenaeus used a word that is very familiar to Baha'is. He spoke of the Son and the Spirit as God's "hands," for
Post-Nicene
)0) .
him the vehicles or forms of His self-revelation.
41. Ibid., p. 111.
30 B.C. to
42. Ibid., p. 113.
43. Ibid., p. 108. The term "economy" or "Divine Economy" is also used by

of this theology was its vocabulary. The words persona and trinitas became standard for future discussionsand took on meanings that were not originally intended by their authors.

This second phase of the Arian crisis, complicated by disputes over emerging trinitarian theology, necessitated the second ecumenical council of the church, held at Constantinople in A.D. 381. It was presided over by Emperor Theodosius I, a solid supporter of the Nicene Creed. At Constantinople trinitarian theology was formally canonized. It was laid down that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all of the same substance but manifest themselves in three divine persons.t "

Following the Council of Constantinople, the Arian parry, now divided into contending sects, collapsed with astonishing speed, As for Arius, fate was to decree that he would not live to see the momentary victory of his party. He died quite suddenly, in misery and obscurity, in the streets of Constantinople, possibly a victim of poisoning, having been discarded by his own party who had gone on to quarrel with the Nicenes:

He had been left out in the cold, almost forgotten. At length, sick and old, he had pleaded with Constantine to allow him the benefits of the sacraments before he died, sadly complaining that his powerful friends like Eusebius of Nicomedia could np longer be bothered to do anything for him." 5

To the circumstances of Arius' unhappy ending an ominous ring is lent by the following comment of 'Abdu'l-Baha that serves as warning to those who divide the religion of God for personal gain, regardless of their theologies:

"But eventually the power of Christ exterminated and utterly destroyed them all to the extent that no trace (of them) has been left."46

The God-Man Debate-Cyril and Nestorius. like the hydra of Greek myth-

ology that grew a new head for each of its severed ones, the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople generated rather than silenced further controversy about the person of Jesus. Scarcelyhad the canonization of trinitarian theology taken place at the council of Constantinople when a new issue in the christological debate plunged the church deeper into dissension. This was the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus.

Not only did this new phase of the christological battle prove to be by far the most bloody, but it also had fatal consequences for the unity of the Byzantine empire. A new and divisive force was added to the dimensions of the theological quarreling-the expression of nascent nationalism. The aspiration toward national autonomy in Syria and Egypt found expression in theological creeds that were used as a tool to throw off the imperial mantle of

Irenaeus. Shoghi Effendi's use of the same term (World Order of Bahd'u'lldh, pp. 19,
20, 22, 24, 61) would appear to coincide exactly with its early Christian usage.
His usage of "Divine Economy" had nothing to do with Baha'i teachings on economics
but rather indicated the Divine Plan or redemptive World Order, a parallel with early
Christian usage of the term. (See Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, pp. 110-11.)

44. It was the Council of Constantinople rather than Nicaea that proclaimed trinitarian theology. The creed proclaimed in 381 is called the Niceno-Constantinopol-
itan creed since it incorporated elements of the two councils.

45. Chadwick, "The Early Church," p. 136.

46. 'Abdu'l-Baha, .. 'The Covenant of God shall remain stable and secure;" p. 95.

Constantinople. These potent movements of religious nationalism spelled
'Zitas became
permanent schism for the church, and the dislocation of a once proud empire, lot originally
making it easy for the Muslim conqueror in the seventh century to overrun.

The quasi-miraculous preservation of church unity that had prevailed during over emerg-
the Arian crisis finally failed under the onslaught of these new separatist uncil of the
forces.
by Emperor

The quarrel flared up initially between two patriarchs of great rival sees, tinople trini-
Nestorius of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria. Both men had proved God, Christ,

to be unduly harsh in their treatment of dissident groups, and their confronta-
hemselves in
tion had disastrous effects for the church. 4 7
Nestorius had been called by Theodosius II from his native see of Antioch
now divided
to serve as preacher to the court of Constantinople. Nestorius' Christo logy is
jus, fate was
sometimes referred to as "duophysitism" or two-natured Christology (Gk. physis
his party. He
'nature') since he believed that the divine and human natures of Jesus op-
.nstantinople,
erated in a loosely knit unity or "conjunction," as he wrote.48 But as a
learned
n party who
exponent of antiochene theology Nestorius laid emphasis on the humanity of
Jesus, a long-standing tradition reflective of its Judaic origins. For
Nestorius
sick and old,
Christ's humanity was crucial to his soteriological role. To win the salvation
.e sacraments
of men Christ had made use of His free will and the power of His rational
ike Eusebius
soul, attributes He shared with other men. His sacrifice was not compelled.
ir him.45
Christ wanted to show the ordinary believer that salvation could be won only
g is lent by
by willingly accepting God's will, as He Himself had willingly accepted the
o those who
cross.
r theologies:
At the heart of the controversy between Cyril and Nestorius was the philo-
itroyed them
sophical problem of reconciling duality with oneness. Any talk of a two-
natured Jesus was unsettling to Cyril and his Alexandrian school. Nestorius'
3-reek myth-
emphasis on the humanity of Jesus led Cyril to charge him with denying the
ils of Nicaea
divinity of Christ. Nesrorius' too careful distinctions between the divinity
and
oversy about
manhood of Jesus led Cyril to charge that Nestorius had in a sense mutilated
eology taken
the unity of Christ's person that had been fused through the LogoS.49 Cyril's
:hristological
teaching is usually referred to as "Monophysire" since it stressed one nature
relationship
in Jesus, His divinity. For Cyril there was no such thing as Christ's humanity

in the ordinary sense. All His human attributes were divine, since they served
to be by far
as vehicles for the Logos, Christ's eternal divinity. Cyril carried the
implications
miry of the
of his beliefs to the extreme. The baby Jesus was nothing less than God in the
rnensions of
flesh and Mary the Gk. theotokos 'mother of God,' a notion that was for him
sm. The as-
sacrosancr.P" Unlike Nestorius, who argued that the humanity and divinity
xpression in
al mantle of
47. Cyril's intolerance had led to the murder of Hypatia, "a virtuous and
clever
woman" who had taught Nee-platonism at Alexandria (Chadwick, "The Early
l'ildh, pp. 19, Church," p. 194). Kelly (Early Christian Doctrines, p. 318)
justifies Cyril's char-
ristian usage.
acter with the remark that "he was also inspired by motives of a purely
theological
on economics
character."
leI with early
48. Ibid., p. 320.
110-11.)
49. These dualistic differences Nestorius would emphasize when he taught, for
.t proclaimed
example, that it was the man Jesus that wept and died but that it was the God
Jesus
msrantinopol-
that stilled the storm (Chadwick, "The Early Church," p. 197).
50. Nestorius with his antiochene theology was offended by the term "Mother of
God," which he felt to be degrading. He caused a riot among the monks of Con-
He;" p. 95.

of Jesus were distinct, Cyril argued that they formed a "hypostatic union," a
God-Man union, not unlike the platonic unity of body and soul, "the single
unique Christ out of two different natures."51 Cyril's teaching contributed
in large measure to the theology of the incarnation.
The distinctions between the two theologies were, indeed, dubious. As often
happens in confrontations, ironically, the disputants seemed to be saying
exactly
the same thing, "one out of both," for Cyril, and "twofold in his being God and
man," for Nestorius." 2 It was hair-splitting theology at its worst, suiting
per-
fectly Christ's characterization of pharisaic discussions as "straining at a

gnat"
and "swallowing a camel" (Matt. 23:24). There were clearly other motives at work than a sheer concern for theological truth.
The quarrel escalated with an exchange of pastoral letters between the patriarchs. Having won the support of Pope Celestine and convinced that he would be vindicated at a general council of the church, Cyril used his influence
on Emperor Theodosius II to summon the third world council of the church at Ephesus in A.D. 431. 5:{ While inclement weather delayed the arrival of Nestorius' delegation, Cyril and sixty Alexandrian bishops went ahead and unilaterally excommunicated Nestorius, "the new Judas."54 A tragicomedy ensued. Upon arriving four days later Nestorius and his delegation held their own rival synod and excommunicated Cyril and his ally, Memnon, the Bishop of Ephesus. The exasperated emperor confirmed the excommunications of the rival councils and ordered both Cyril and Nestorius out of office.
In a turnabout Neseorius' Oriental bishops withdrew their support after learning of his excommunication, something he must have felt as a cruel betrayal. Banished to the Egyptian desert, Nesrorius died a solitary and tragic figure in A.D. 450. Cyril, through bribery at the court, retained his bishopric until his death in A.D. 444. It was Cyril's theology that was ultimately declared
canonic at Ephesus.
The successors to both parties persisted in their fanaticism, thus necessitating
a second council at Ephesus in A.D. 449, dubbed "The Robber Synod" by Pope Leo 1. Here the princes of the Monophysite Egyptian church resorted to murder to vindicate their theology. The Nestorian patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, was arbitrarily condemned, dragged from the altar by a group of Alexandrian monks, and beaten so badly that he died within days. The same church councils that the fathers had insisted were inspired by the breaths of the
Holy Spirit had now become the arena for the murder of a patriarch. 5 5 His crime was that he had subscribed to a different theology.

stantinople by daring to suggest that the term be discontinued and replaced with
"Christ bearer."
51. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, pp. 322, 320.
52. Ibid., pp, 320,314.
53. Ephesus, on the Asian side of the Aegean sea, is in ruins today. A great harbor city in irs day, the silting up of its port gradually rendered it
useless.
54. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, p. 327.
55. Dioscorus, the Monophysite chairman of this "Robber Synod," railroaded the proceedings. He gave Flavian no chance of self-defense. At the dose of the council
the Monophysite victors shouted: "Those who contradict Dioscorus blaspheme

against God. God has spoken through our Patriarch; the Holy Spirit has inspired him. All who keep silence are heretics" (Zernov, Eastern Christendom, p. 62).

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The murder of Flavian threatened not only the unity of the church but the Byzantine empire itself. In a last-ditch attempt to preserve the church-state from schism, the fourth ecumenical council was convened at Chalcedon, near Constantinople, in A.D. 451. Its aim was to produce a universal christological statement that would weld together the Egyptian Monophysite and Nestorian theologies of the church thereby subduing the flames. of separatism that threatened to disrupt the empire. Subsequent history revealed, however, that the factions were unwilling to compromise. •

The theological formula produced at Chalcedon was that of divine incarnation. It stated in its basic outline that Christ was both perfect God and perfect man, made known in two distinct natures in a hypostatic union without confusion or admixture. Of necessity the Chalcedon formula had to be a compromise mosaic of the theologies of Antioch and Alexandria. Statements of Roman theology were also written in.

As a compromise, however, Chalcedon failed to please the churches either of Egypt or Syria. Monophysire Egypt rejected Chalcedon. Adopting "one nature" as her new creed, the church of Egypt, after a series of bloody revolts, broke with Constantinople in A.D, 575 and formed a separate church, now known as the Coptic church. In Syria imperial forces from Constantinople restored order only after a bloody battle with armed Monophysite monks. Jacob Baradaeus founded the Syrian Jacobite church by traveling around the country disguised as a beggar and ordaining Monophysite bishops. 5 6 The followers of Nestorius later migrated to Persia, hom where they sent rnis-sionaries to India, Ceylon, and even as far as China.

The alienation had grown so great between Copt and

Greek orthodox that
his bishopric the Christians of Egypt threw open the gates of their
cities to the Muslim
.tely declared invaders in A.D. 641, welcoming them as liberators from the
sway of Con- .
stantinople. Like the blowing sands of the Arabian desert from which it was
necessitating borne, Islam quietly buried the religious war waged between
the Greek Ortho-
lad" by Pope dox and Egyptian Monophysite Christians. 5 7
.rted to rnur-
nstantinop Ie, A BahtfJ(Perspective on the
Deification of Jesus
a group of I DO NOT INTEND that the foregoing should be taken merely as a
lesson in
's. The same the contortions of early Christian theology. Along with the
specifics of the deity
reaths of the of Jesus, about which more shall be said, the christological
controversies lead
.iarch." 5 His us to a greater understanding of the problems of a growing
religion.
The early church fell into disharmony and ultimately warfare over the
person of Jesus because of three closely related factors: (1) the lack of a
replaced with unified system of belief; (2) the lack of a clearly
authorized interpretation
of doctrine; and (3) the lack of clearly defined roles in the administration
of the churches. It might prove of interest to compare these Christian devel-
day. A great opments with parallel elements in the Baha'i Faith.
se1ess. During the first century, Christians had no canonical
scripture. The Old

ailroaded the
f the council 56. It was not only the Syrian Jacobite and Egyptian
Monophysite churches that
s blaspheme broke with Greek Orthodox Constantinople. The Ethiopian and
Armenian churcbes
has inspired also rejected the Chalcedon formula.
p. 62). 57. The analogy is partially borrowed from Zernov,
Eastern Christendom, p, 84.

Testament in the Septuagint version continued to be used as the only au-
thorized Holy Writ. The teachings of Jesus circulated in diverse oral
traditions
throughout the communities. The church recognized the necessity of a fixed
New Testament canon to combat the Gnostic heresies, but no order of books
was agreed upon until the end of the second century. 5 8 Even with the
tentative
fixing of the canon the Arian crisis raised once more the question of authori-

tative doctrine. Without a clearly designated interpreter of Christ's teachings,
individual bishops put forth their own interpretations of christological ques-
tions as inspired by the Holy Spirit and made their teachings binding upon the faithful in their care, bringing about confrontations between bishops. 5 9 Another complicating factor was the role of philosophy. By the time of the Arian schism philosophy was in the mainstream of the intellectual life of the church. The fathers used philosophical concepts and schemes to elucidate and buttress theological argument. This naturally involved a great deal of speculation and individual interpretation that ultimately fostered heresy. The key word in the Nicene creed homoousios was borrowed from philosophy. How different from the earlier days of the church when only New Testament teaching had been the rule, as it was in the struggle with the Gnostics, who had proven themselves masters in "esoterica."
The excessive decentralization of the church only exacerbated the fragmentation over doctrinal issues. Until the time that Pope leo I (440-61) asserted the primacy of Rome over other sees, bishops were on an equal footing as sole rulers of their congregations. When Nesrorius and Cyril waged theological warfare, the whole congregations of Constantinople and Alexandria
were perforce brought into the fray, and no supreme head was able to compose differences. The Baha'i Faith, on the contrary, has been fortunate enough, by . virtue of its written convenants, to have had only one clearly designated leader at any given time in its history as well as, from the very beginnings of the Revelation, a written body of scripture that was universally accepted. Its administrative order strives to strike the balance between the excesses of overcentralizarion and decentralization.P" Generally speaking, in the Baha'i Faith, institutional expansion has followed in an orderly fashion the transmission of the Revelarion.v ' In the early Christian church the institutions were being expanded while doctrinal and scriptural questions were being completed in the midst of major schism. In the Baha'i Faith "Unity of doctrine" was maintained from the very beginning by authentic texts of scripture as well
II as their authorized interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. "Unity
II of administration" is assured by the Universal House of Justice.62
,II
i 58. A council in Rome under Pope Damascus drew up the first canonical list of
'IJ books in A.D. 382.
i 59. This was the claim made for the Monophysite bishop of Alexandria at the
second council of Ephesus in A.D. 449 (see n. 55).
60. Shoghi Effendi, Baha'i Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, 7th rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 142.
61. Under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi the insrirutions of the Baha'i Adminis-

trative Order were developed from 1922 until 1936. Systematic prosecution of 'Abdu'l-Baha's Divine Plan began with the Seven Year Plan (1937).
62. The Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968, Ist rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 53.

ie only au- The christological controversies reveal the tragedy of religious controversy.
al traditions Contrived beliefs in the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit in church coun-
, of a fixed cil justified fratricidal warfare waged on fellow Christians because they did
er of books not share the same theology. One is also struck by the gap between Christian
he tentative morality and theology, between virtue and learning. How different from
of authori- Baha'u'llah's teaching in which the teacher's divine wisdom can only be re-
s teachings, flected to the degree that he practices the spiritual virtues recommended by
ogical ques- the Manifesrarion.v" Baha'u'llah has warned of the destructive force in re-
Ig upon the ligious dissension: "Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring
IOpS.59 An- fire, whose violence none can quench."64 Even the mighty Constantine could
If the Arian not still the roaring flames of the Arian schism. The fatal consequences of
the church. the God-man debate for the Byzantine empire have already been alluded to.
ind buttress At the same time, Baha'u'llah reminds us of the essential purpose of religion
ulation and so denatured by religious strife: "Oh people of the world! The religion of
vord in the God is to create love and unity; do not make it the cause of enmity and
ferent from discord."65 Further, in "The First Glad Tidings," Baha'u'llah specifically
g had been abolishes religious warfare, which had been accepted in previous dispensa-
oven them- tions. 66 In the "Tablet of the Wodd" Baha'u'Ilah abrogates what He calls
the "four words," all of which figured in the christological controversies: (1)
e fragmen- "Destroying men's lives"; (2) "Burning the Books"; (3) Shunning other
10-61) as- nations"; and (4) "Exterminating other communiries.?"?

ual footing Baha'u'llah's prohibition of religious discord and His exhortations to fel-
raged theo- lowship are not only for the purposes of maintaining the social peace. They
Alexandria have a much deeper impact on the epistomological implications of mankind's
to compose intellectual life. As I see it, harmony and unity in religion are the preconditions
enough, by that will lead man to the discovery of new spiritual truths. 'Abdu'l-Baha has
designated written: "The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody
~innings of else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity
:cepted. Its is essential if we would reach Truth, for Truth is one."68 This quotation sug-
excesses of gests a plurality of meanings in any theological construct or dialogue.
the Baha'i The other lesson to be gained from the christological controversies is that
e transrnis- man must recognize the limitations of his own knowledge. Christians allowed
.tions were themselves to tamper with highly abstract, speculative theological issues that
completed were clearly beyond their capacity to comprehend. The first four ecumenical
trine" was councils of the church necessitated by the controversies reveal a deep-seated
re as well preoccupation with definition and analysis as a solution to doctrinal issues.
idi. "Unity Where the requisite spiritual attributes are lacking, this approach is clearly

63. Bah3.'u'lLih, in Bah3.'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-'Baha, "The First Tajalli," Baha'i World
rical list of Faith: Selected Writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.:
Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 188.
dria at the 64. Baha'u'Ilah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, trans. Shoghi Effendi,
2d rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 288.
-1932, 7th 65. Baha'u'Ilah, in Baha'u'Ilah and 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Kitab-i-'Ahd," Baha'i World
Faith, p. 209.
'i Adminis- 66. Ibid., p. 191.
recution of 67. Ibid., pp. 177-78.
68. 'Abdu'l-fsaha, quoted in J. E. Esslernont, Bahd'u'lldh and the New Era: An

iges 1963- Introduction to the Baha'i Faith, 4th rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust,
>3. 1980), p, 201.

not a means of solution. The leaders of the church passed beyond the bounds of "intellectual honesty and humility" and put forth doctrines that reflected their own imperfect understanding as perfect reflections of the will of the Holy Spirit."? Baha'is have also been warned about the same dangers: "In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding ... to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary." 7 0

Christian affirmations about the divinity of Jesus would warrant several observations. First, it seems clear that the deification of Jesus belies the oft-repeated Christian affirmation that revelation is static. The deification issue evolved as a historical process, both biblically and in the creeds. New Testament exegesis of Christ's earliest christological titles as the "Suffering Servant" and the "True Prophet" contrasted with later incarnation theology clearly indicates this. The Apostles' Creed, the first of the extrabiblical creeds, devised by the church of Rome as a reaction to Gnosticism, in no way even hints at Christ's identification with the Godhead. The deification itself did not occur until Nicaea in A.D. 325, the doctrine being later ratified as trinitarian theology at Constantinople in A.D. 381.

Though it would be quite wrong in Baha'i terms to subordinate Christ to other mythological redeemers as the Gnostic heresy had done, one can still clearly discern how much of the Gnostic theological substratum Paul used in his own presentation of Christ. Paul's thematic presentation of the fall of man and his enslavement to the evil powers, "rulers of this age" (1 Cor. 2: 8), and his victorious redemption by the Christ savior, all reveal features of a cosmic drama that is quite Gnostic. 71

It was the Arian schism, however, that brought the whole question of Christ's divinity into the forefront of the debate. It is tempting for Baha'is to see in Arius an ally of the Baha'i view that basically subordinates the prophetic figure to God. Upon closer examination, however, Arius' subordinationist Christology reveals itself to be at variance with Baha'i teaching. Unlike Arius who taught that Christ was properly a phenomenon, a created and finite Being, Baha'I theology teaches that the Divine Manifestations are eternal in their

station of the Logos-that is, preexistent to their human condition. 7 2 Naturally,
the physical vehicle is phenomenal like that of other men. Baha'i teaching
also holds to the "essential sinless ness" of the Divine Manifestation, whereas
Arius indicated that Christ was liable not to change alone but also to sin." 3
The three major councils of the church-Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chal-
cedor; -that evolved successively the deification, trinitarian, and incarnation

69. The Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance, p. 87.
70. Ibid., pp, 87-88.
71. Brandon in "The Gnostic Problem in Early Christianity" states that by the
phrase "rulers of this age" Paul does not intend the temporal authorities but demonic
beings who had control of the lives of men. He also discusses other Gnostic influences
in Paul. Religion in Ancient History, pp. 324-36.
72. 'Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford
Barney, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1964), p. 174. Orthodox
theology of the early church also taught the preexistence of the Logos.
73. Ibid., p. 197.

:l the bounds aspects of Christian doctrine all have the common and objectionable feature
that reflected of compromising the Divine Unity. The Divine Unity is one of the "major
will of the beliefs" of the Baha'i Faith, "the integrity of which," Shoghi Effendi states,
dangers: "In "no one of its followers should allow to be compromised." 74 All of these
:l's revelation creeds tampered with the Divine Unity by recasting Christ's relationship to
ramework of the Father in its pagan mythological meaning, which was that God had
ue because it generated offspring. The wording of the creeds, as well as Cyril's pantheistic
theotokos (mother of God) clearly indicate this.75 Baha'u'Ilah, however,
rrant several specifically rejects the belief that the Manifestation of God can somehow
elies the oft- share in God's essence as the homoousisos of Nicaea held, or coinhabit the
fication issue Divine essence in a triune Godhead as the Constantinopolitan doctrine of
:w Testament trinity maintained: "If any be set up by His side as peers, if they be regarded
Servant" and as identical with His Person, how can it, then, be

maintained that the Divine
clearly indi- Being is One and Incomparable, that His Essence is indivisible and peerless"
eeds, devised (my emphasis)? 76 As for the incarnation, first outlined in Paul's theology
even hints at and canonized at Chalcedon, it has been qualified by Shoghi Effendi as a
lid not occur "crude and fantastic" "theory." 7 7
rian theology The question then is raised. If Christ is not all these things, what in the
Baha'i understanding is He? Only the briefest outline can be offered here;
ate Christ to but the answer, I believe, is clearly in complete harmony both with Gospel
one can still teaching and with much Christian scholarship. Paul's writings do not con-
en Paul used stitute divine revelation for a Baha'i. This, of course, would meet with major
)f the fall of objections from Christians who believe that all scripture is divinely inspired
1 Cor. 2:8), (2 Tim. 3: 16).
features of a The Baha'i writings indicate that each Divine Manifestation is "known by
a different name" and "fulfills a definite mission."78 Baha'i recognition of
question of Christ's sonship would apply equally to "Son of Man," the more common of
or Baha'is to the titles used by Christ, and to the term "Son of God." As I pointed out earlier,
the prophetic Christ is "Son of God" not in any mythological sense as in a sharing of God's
oordinationist divine essence but in terms of His messiahship or spiritual kingship. Christians
Unlike Arius have fastened almost exclusively upon the mythological meaning of the term,
finite Being, that Christ is God's offspring, and have ignored the counterpart implied in
mal in their the term, that the "Son" is one who above all shows obedience and humility
72 Naturally, to the Father-that is, the "Son" does the Father's will. The term "Son of
ha'I teaching Man" contains paradoxical assertions that the Christ figure would achieve the
tion, whereas redemption of mankind by suffering a humiliating death and yet at the same
ilso to sin. 7 3 time indicates a cosmological figure of paramount importance who would
le, and Chal- usher in a spiritual kingdom promised from the beginning of the world. 7 9

I incarnation The Baha'i writings are in harmony with these views since they recognize the
sacrificial death of Jesus "as a ransom for the sins and iniquities of all of the

s that by the 74. Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahd'u'lldh, p. 114.
s but demonic 75. The Nicene Creed reads, for example: "begotten from the Father ... true
istic influences God from true God ... from the substance of the father." Kelly, Early Christian
Doctrines, p. 232, passim.
Laura Clifford 76. Baha'u'Ilah, Gleanings, p. 70.
l 74. Orthodox n. Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Baha'u'ltah, p. 112.
78. Baha'u'Ilah, Gleanings, p. 52.
79. Cullmann, Cbristology of the New Testament, pp. 158, 142.

peoples of the earth" and His having ushered in a spiritual kingdom. 8 0
The later Christian obsession with Christ as God, due mainly to the theology of Paul and the councils, is belied by the New Testament itself, which reveals a variety of christological titles. The Christ figure of the New Testament, j
notwithstanding the preeminence of the title of sonship, is depicted as a mosaic j

of christological images, each with its own history rooted in a different tradi- 1
tion. For early Christians Christ was the True Prophet, the Suffering Servant of
Deutero-Isaiah (Heb. ebed Yahweh 'the Righteous One'). There are also traditions of Jesus as the High Priest, Jesus as Lord, and so on.S1 Such a mosaic is consistent with Baha'u'llah's explanation that the prophetic figute reveals a wide range of spiritual attributes, from the state of servitude at one end of the scale, "a servitude the like of which no man can possibly attain," and covering successively the stages of Apostleship, Guardianship, Messengership, Prophethood, Lordship, reaching ultimately to Divinity, "the Call of God Himself."82
In addition to this prophetic mission, Baha'i teaching points to the preexistent or' metaphysical reality of Christ. However, rather than restricting this preexistent reality to Jesus alone, Baha'i scripture attributes it to all of
iri the Founders of the world's great religions. This is the reality of the Divine
"

Word (Logos) or Divine Manifestation: "Therefore the reality of prophethood, which is the Word of God and the perfect state of manifestation, did not have any beginning, and will not have any end.... "83 Not only does Baha'I teaching accord with the preexistence of the Word as stated in the prologue

to St. John's Gospel (John 1), but also Christian scholarship has interpreted '!H
the passage to mean that the Logos means God's self-revelation, a view that coincides perfectly with Baha'i teaching. 84
Further, the hellenistic notions of the term, which are implicit in John's usage, are also pertinent to the comparative aspects of the two religions. For the pre-Socratics and the Stoics as well as the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, the Logos was an intermediary between God and man. For the I!~i

80. Baha'u'Ilah, Gleanings, p. 76. In view of this text of Baha'u'Ilah I feel that
it is proper for a Baha'i to speak of the blood sacrifice of Jesus. However, a Baha'i
~Ii would not link this notion to a belief in original sin as it is in Christian theology.
The church's aggregate condemnation of the whole human race prior to Christ's coming
has been qualified as "superstitious" by 'Abdu'l-Baha (The Reality of Man: Excerpts
from W"itings of Bahd'u'lkih and 'Abdu'l-Bahd, rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Pub-
lishing Trust, 1962]), p. 47. Baha'u'llah reminds us, though, that there are limits
:li to the intellectual understanding of the mystery of sacrifice. See Gleanings, p. 76;
cf. Baha'u'Ilah, The Kitdb-i-[qan: The Book of Certitude, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 3d
ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 129.
81. See Cullmann, Cbristology of tbe New Testament.
82. Baha'u'llah, Gleanings, p. 55.
83. 'Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 174.
84. Cullmann, Cbristology of the New Testament, pp. 265-66. Because of Baha'u'-
llah's and 'Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Logos theology, I cannot concur with those
who look to Ebionite Christology as being closer to the Baha'i concept of the Manifesta-
tion. It is in some ways; however, the Johannine Logos that is endorsed in the
Baha'i Faith and that is also used by Paul was rejected by the Ebionites. Ebionites also
rejected the virgin birth, which is espoused in the Baha'i Faith.

~dom.80 Gnostics the Logos as intermediary was finally personalized in the form of a
the theology Savior. There are direct parallels here with Baha'i belief, which also points
.f, which re- to the Divine Word as an intermediary between God and man.

However, one
v Testament, reservation must be stated here. John's Gospel depicts the
very act of creation
Ias a mosaic as being ascribed to the Logos. In Baha'i teaching God is
the creator. 85
fferent tradi-
19 Servant of 85. Baha'u'Ilah, Kitdb.i-[qan, p. 103.
.re also tradi-
ich a mosaic
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Ebionites also