

Jesus Wars:
How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided
What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years
by Philip Jenkins

Review by Barbara Buzzard

“Jesus spoke of love; his church spoke in riddles.”

The heart of the matter is the book’s subtitle — *How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*.¹ If Christians were to truly study, consider and evaluate this — and then be radical enough to act upon their findings — the religious world would look very different.

As Robert Shaw, the well-known choral conductor, son of a Baptist preacher, once explained, he didn’t attend church because he was expected to check his brain at the door. Do the opposite of that: come with me now on a mini tour of church history.

Orthodoxy states that Jesus was both God and man. “But when we have said that, we have raised more questions than we have answered, as the basic belief in Jesus Christ demands combining two utterly different categories of being. Such a transgression of boundaries puzzles and shocks believers of other faiths, especially strict monotheists such as Muslims and Jews. But even those Christians who accept the basic concept probably could not explain it with anything like the precision demanded by early church councils.”² Jenkins adds that they would soon lapse into grave heresy! (merely by attempting to explain it!)

Bloody Detail

“What ultimately became accepted as Christian orthodoxy was hammered out in a process that was painfully slow, gradual, and often bloody. This conflict was marked by repeated struggles, coups, and open warfare spread over centuries. *It is easy to imagine another outcome in which the so-called Orthodox would have been scorned as heretics, with incalculable consequences for mainstream political history, not to mention all later Christian thought and devotion.*”³ Jenkins maintains that this fixing of doctrine “turned on a dime.” The decision as to who were the heretics might as well have been made by saying “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe” or by tossing a coin to see which side was right. There was a time when the two-nature or God/man description of Jesus was a heresy. Would that this one fact were known! Doctrinal shifts went back and forth like a seesaw. The fact that it is now orthodoxy should lead to an examination of how it came to be that way, and Jenkins shows that all was not well, far from it. The book cover description reads thus: “A Top Historian Reveals in Bloody Detail the Fifth Century Battles over Christianity’s Biggest Paradox — the Claim That Jesus Is Both Fully Human and Fully God.”

¹ Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, Harper Collins and Harper One, 2010

² *Ibid.*, Introduction

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17

Professor Jenkins revels in the fact that the course of history depended not on just one man, but upon one horse! The horse of emperor Theodosius II stumbled, killing him. Had he lived he could easily have reigned another twenty years and Jenkins feels that the history of the world might have been quite different.⁴

Jenkins describes well the dramas that occurred with the Jesus wars. Bishops were on again, off again, often forced to sign documents against their consciences. *There was even a condition known as Vicar of Bray syndrome — the urge to keep one's job at whatever cost.* Each settlement was fragile, with defections occurring whenever they dared and anathemas being uttered by the victors.

Political Accident

This is how one of the battles was won: “Chalcedonian ideas triumphed *not* because of the force of their logic, but *because the world that opposed them perished.*”⁵ (Emphasis mine) “Looking at history, the process of establishing orthodoxy involved a huge amount of what we might call political accident — on the outcome of dynastic succession, on victory or defeat in battle, on the theological tastes of key royal figures. Throughout, we are always tempted to say: if only this event had worked out differently, or this, or this. It is a story of ifs, and matters might very easily have gone another way.”⁶ *And yet the outcome — the Trinity and the supposed two natures of Jesus — form the bedrock of orthodox Christian belief.* What an amazing set of facts, all but unknown to the churchgoing public who have accepted dogma without critique in our supposedly sophisticated age.

Jenkins asks *if chance is a valid concept* and answers no — not from a Christian perspective. He then leaves aside the theological difficulties and as a historian records the dual nature picture of Jesus that we were just *left with* when the strong arm of religion said: no more squabbling., i.e. this is the truth and if you don't believe it, you are a heretic.

Playacting?

And yet he says how good it is to consider these things. He quotes Dorothy Sayers as saying, “If Christ was God...then he knew everything that was going to happen, so that his sufferings were really no more than a kind of playacting. And if he was God, he couldn't actually be tempted in any real sense, could he? What kind of example can an ordinary Christian find in stories like that?”⁷

We all know that the winners write history but as Jenkins sees it, it is even worse than that — far worse. He argues that “historians write retroactively from the point of view of those who would win at some later point, even if that victory was nowhere in sight at the time they are describing.”⁸

This is anything but a pretty story. It is a story of *profane wrangling, violent faith, gangster-like synods, countless reversals and then re-instatements of previous councils,*

⁴ Ibid., p. 17

⁵ Ibid., p. 265

⁶ Ibid., p. 268

⁷ Ibid., p. 277

⁸ Ibid., p. 11

murder and mayhem. It is the filthy, twisted, tortured history that is the background of what is known as the Christian faith.

Remaking the Faith?

I have often wondered why the terms extremist and radical are mostly applied to Muslims, and yet the heritage is a shared one — one of out-of-control clergy, intolerance, fanaticism, bloodthirsty mob-like behavior, and hatred. Radical Islamists in the 21st century subject their people to anathemas just as Christians did in the 5th century. The following is, I think, Professor Jenkins' most profound contribution: he says that the church councils which were responsible for the present-day creeds "*remade a faith.*"⁹ Under a subheading entitled "The New Language of God," Jenkins outlines the church's development of an entire new Christian philosophical system which involved new vocabulary and new language. This ancient practice of redefinition our culture takes full advantage of.

I was very disappointed in Jenkins' handling of the John 10:30 text: "I and the Father are one." This is understood even by Trinitarians as a statement of unity of purpose and action between Father and Son.¹⁰ It does not point to a dual nature in Jesus. Jenkins asks, "Assuming that Christ became God, when and how was he Godded?"¹¹ He reveals that many early thinkers read the Scriptures very differently to today's handling of them. There are huge difficulties in believing in a God/man: "*half flesh and half spirit, a very baffling and neutralizing assortment of fractions since the two elements are forever at variance.*"¹²

When Did Jesus Become God?

"For many modern readers, claims about Christ's divinity represent *a later distortion* of his original claims. According to this view, the earliest church saw Jesus as a man, and only later and retroactively was he promoted to Godhood. This elevation was associated especially with the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity and events like the Council of Nicea in 325. Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* argues that Nicea was the moment at which *Jesus became God*, as a result of power plays in the empire and church: ***he owed his Godhood to majority vote.***"¹³

Let me give you just one example of the disputes that took place. Arius was a priest and a bishop whose view of Jesus was that he was an "immensely powerful and holy figure of supernatural dimensions, but as the Father had created him at a specific moment, we could not regard him as equally divine."¹⁴ On the other side was Athanasius who said that Jesus was fully equal with the Father, had always been, and was a part of God who was three-in-one. The word *homoousios* which described the latter's view had once been considered heretical nonsense. Sixty years later, it became the watchword for identifying who was "in" and who was "out."

⁹ Ibid., p. 33

¹⁰ The *Word Biblical Commentary* on John confirms that "a functional unity of the Son and the Father in their care for the sheep is in mind...one in action not in person" (p. 174).

¹¹ *Jesus Wars*, p. 44

¹² Ibid., p. 41

¹³ Ibid., p. 50, Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51

And thus it was that the former heretical nonsense became the bedrock of the Christian Church, a not to be questioned formula which has become what is popularly called “a salvation issue.” It is expressed this way: 1+1+1=1!

The author mentions as key questions: How is it possible to possess two natures — what was their relationship? And what did Christ know and when? Was the infant Jesus still upholding the universe as he lay in the manger? Also the huge issue of a God who could suffer and die. The question, Has God a mother? was answered both yea and nay. Some felt that their logical minds revolted at the term “mother of God” and said that this view came from pagan precedents. Nestorius on the other side said, “The creature did not bear the Creator, but she bore a man, the instrument of deity.”¹⁵

Who Were These People Who Decided What We Were to Believe?

Who were these people who forged your theology? Were they worthy enough to make such a choice for you? Just two examples: Apollinarius (follower of Plato) rejected any suggestion that Jesus could have a human mind and said that if he did that would have meant that he had a kind of schizophrenia, a dual personality. Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, thought that Christ was an abstraction, his humanity unrecognizable in human terms. His opponent warned him that he was going into very grave heresies, that he was seeing Jesus as a “nonresident alien.” It was said of him that “there was no biblical ring in his thought, for all his commentaries of the books of the Bible.”¹⁶ Jenkins says that “through Cyril’s mishandling of a bogus text, the doctrines of Apollinarius left their stamp on mainstream Christology, pushing the image of Christ in much more exalted and divine directions than they might otherwise have done.”¹⁷

Monty Python?!

Dear reader, do these people sound worthy of your “vote”? It is not our way to give away our say. *Many people think that Christianity was rooted in Europe, not in paganism.* The author of this book admits that when he hears the language of Chalcedon he imagines *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. He is at his best when he says “a critic could be forgiven for comparing the straightforward words of Jesus, with all the everyday analogies and images...to the arcane philosophical language used here. Jesus spoke of love; his church spoke in riddles.”¹⁸

“Arguably, fourth-century councils like Nicea marked the point *When Jesus Became God*,¹⁹ to quote scholar Richard Rubenstein — but that was the easy part. The fifth and sixth centuries had to tackle the far more stressful task of preventing Jesus from becoming entirely God. Many lives would be lost in the process, and at least one empire.”²⁰ In relation to all the violence cited, one would do well to wonder where this persecutory impulse comes from. “In the context of the time, the forces pushing to make Christ a purely divine figure seemed overpowering, not least because a god-man was such a familiar concept to a society in transition from paganism.”²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 135

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 145

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 60

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 63,4

¹⁹ *When Jesus Became God*, New York, Harcourt & Brace, 1999

²⁰ *Jesus Wars*, p. 19

²¹ Ibid., p. 269

It is interesting to note that there was a perfectly good word for God-man in the Greek of the New Testament. Not once was it ever applied to Jesus.

The following is a wonderful description of the enthusiasm of the common people and indicates how drastically different our culture is: "Every part of the city is filled with such talk; the alleys, the crossroads, the squares, the avenues. It comes from those who sell clothes, moneychangers, grocers. If you ask a moneychanger what the exchange rate is, he will reply with a dissertation on the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you enquire about the quality and the price of bread, the baker will reply: 'The Father is greatest and the Son subject to him.' When you ask at the baths whether the water is ready, the manager will declare that 'the Son came forth from nothing.'"²²

Which View Works?

It strikes me that Jenkins tried the paradigm of Jesus being fully divine, and the paradigm of Jesus having two natures. Neither works although orthodoxy claims that the second does (but only when reason is stifled and faith stands aghast). A Christian should be unafraid to explore the image of a human-faced Christ. Never once, in all the pages of this book, did I hear a clarion call for Jesus being the Son of God (and that of course means, as top scholars say, that he is *not* God). Why not Jesus according to Jesus, and God according to God? "The churches officially follow Chalcedon in preaching a Christ in two natures, without confusion, change, division, or separation; but popular devotion unabashedly worships God lying in the manger."²³

Who do you say that I am? This is the real question. This is the question Jesus asked the disciples. I do not think that Jenkins appreciates the fact that Peter answered correctly and that Jesus commended him for his answer and says that he was blessed in knowing it. I will stand with Peter any day rather than the church councils and their convoluted mind games. Peter got the answer right: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

²² Ibid., p. 62

²³ Ibid., p. 275