THE FIRST MAJOR SPLIT (SCHISM) IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH
A) BACKGROUND OF THE 5TH CENTURY COUNCILS

Overriding theme: Christianity is not sufficiently understood. Historians and theologians have not sufficiently uncovered the conditions for the survival and duration of the Roman Empire, within which Christianity developed. Current studies lack the breath and focus of initial ecumenical Christian perspective. Current bias is based on later cultural and confessional divisions within Western Christianity. Prevalent explanations: Caesaropapism (domination of the emperor over the Church) reflect the 19th century perception of the oppression of the state over religion in Northern Europe. (Protestants. Roman Catholics explain everything through papal supremacy (The East is perceived as an unfortunate development of imperial usurpation of papal authority).

There are some prevalent conditions within the Roman world which we cannot overlook:

 a) The Divine emperor retained his divine privileges but these are now seen as a manifestation of Divine Providence (e.g. The conversion of St. Constantine). Why? Because of the predominant world view according to which

b)The invisible world intimately linked with the visible (equally real) and humans were understood in terms of the divine. In this perception we note a slow shift from the ancient world where merger with the divine was considered essential (Neoplatonism) to one where the leadership of holy persons in communities reflects the divine will and opens a channel to God for individuals and community alike .

Still people had to be ruled within a tangible empire. Christian creeds were formed for the convenience of Roman officials (succinct and precise definitions of Christian beliefs). Donatist controversy shows that the Church forced the Emperor to take sides in its controversies and determine its creeds. Thus the emperor-bishop engaged in determining the authority of the majority. Pax Romana becomes the basis for the imperial right to convoke councils. Ambrose and his diplomatic refusal of communion to Theodosius.

 Pax Romana was the means for the verification of the catholicity of the Church. Its structure is a reflection of the perception of “eternal stability” The structure of the church parallels that of the Empire (metropolitan system). Protestants view this as a church capitulation to the state. RC see this era as a time of the verification of papal privileges.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

Bishops are universally accepted prerequisite for the Eucharistic celebration where the laity participated (remarkable how the central government left locals alone) e.g. ordination of St. Ambrose demonstrating that people acclaimed whomever they wished. Bishops functioned as spokesmen of their city. Presbyters and deacons supported his work. Deaconesses never associated with the presidency over the Eucharist.

Celibacy is perceived as clerical attribute (linked to one person, or the local church)with its roots based on both Jewish and pagan traditions. Thus in the east we have the development of celibate bishops and once married priests and deacons. In the West celibacy imposed because of sex as a morally degrading animality (Augustine: means of transmitting the sin) and because of ritual impurity. The unofficial tripartite ecclesiastical structure withstood all heretical challenges. It can be seen as a reflecting the nature of the Church. In the fourth century bishops are linked to a city (the African model constitutes an exception). Secularization, higher education and organizational skills are prerequisites for the bishop. The clergy is seen as the local managers with abundant resources available. Bribery in church practices was prevalent. The bishops were appointed and retained by the emperor. In the 6th century the practice of the monophysite James bar Addai (drawing exclusively on apostolic succession the right to ordain bishops) parallel to the official church is the primary indication of the official establishment of a schismatic church.

MONASTICISM

A remarkable phenomenon of the laity is its withdrawal from the city structure into places of solitude, especially in the desert. Monasticism was established in Egypt by St. Anthony (heremitic monasticism), and was followed by St. Pachomios (coenobitic monasticism). It resulted in the remarkable listing of experiential wisdom within the Apothegmata Patrum (first attempt to explore the depths of the human soul). The Orthodox tradition rejected extreme ascetics such as Messalians, Euchites and Eustathians who scorned marriage, Church sacraments and created new churches. They were condemned by the council of Gangra. Monastics struggled for a long time with the Origenistic thought. In Egypt monasticism spread from the desert to the suburbs of Alexandria. They retained their attachment to St. Cyril and Dioskoros and most became monophysites. In Syria and Mesopotamia monastics encountered and struggled with Encritite and Manichean dualism and promoted total sexual abstinence (encountered also in the writings of St. Ephrem and St. Aphrahat). It is interesting to note that the Nestorian Church (sophisticated and urban) did not include monasticism until much later. Stylites and different forms of strange hermits (dendrites etc.)are also encountered in Syria. In Palestine St. Euphtymius and St. Sabas and the monasteries they founded became bastions of Orthodoxy . The best example of this ancient tendency of laymen to seek God in the silence of the desert and in the foundation of new communities is encountered in the monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai.

MISSIONARY EXPANSION TO THE EAST

There are many records (not all of them well studied) about the expansion of Christianity to the East. There are records of Christian expansion to Syria, India, Armenia and Georgia, the Arabs, Egypt, Ethiopia and Nubia. Many more need to be studied such as Goths and Huns, ethnic groups in the Caucasus, inhabitants of the Persian Gulf islands and African tribes.

There is a spontaneity of the local response to the message of the Gospel and freedom (not compulsion) for the choice of conversion. Monks help in the teaching, evangelizing and translating. Syrian monks are the most notable.

Bishops and clergy follow upon the laymen’s successes. They were identified with sacramental functions. Later traditions introduce the Apostles as the initiators of the conversion (more often than not it is an attempt to establish the legitimacy of the church.

The scope of the effort is monumental and also testifies to early perception of universal application of the Christian message: it is manifested in the need to transplant Christianity to the local civilizations. Both the message and the worship are offered in the local languages. This application does not imply ecclesiastical nationalism but rather a cultural revolution. Conservative pagans (aristocracy and farmers) reacted to it. A universal pattern emerges of a struggle between old and new ways. Inevitably this meant attraction and acceptance of the authority of the Christianizing Roman Empire. Christ is seen as the Savior of the World not of a locality.

Attachment of the bishops of powerful cities to the implied agreement of imperial authority served as a powerful link expressed in the acceptance of the Creed of Nicaea.

Canons of I Constantinople result in the formal acceptance of the role of the emperor and his administration within the Church. Alexandria was not very happy. Still, Constantinople was on the rise because of the seat of the civil administration. Still, sacramentally every church was a descendant of the Pentecostal Church. Nevertheless, the Tome of Proclus to the Armenians verify the leadership of Constantinople.

Violent persecution of the dissidents offers the Persians, the Muslim Arabs and the Franks the chance to attract Christians from the religious unity Constantinople offered.

ROME

There is some sort of primacy. Whether justified or not it cannot be easily resolved. Rome appoints appeals judges for accused local clergy. Eastern bishops used Rome as support against imperial interference. Chrysostom for example in 404 appeals to Rome Milan and Aquileia. Cyprian responsible for linking Peter and Rome but in his view cathedra Petri is a characteristic of every bishop. Canon II of Constantinople I points to New Rome as important because it is the see of the emperor. Dectretum Gelasianum points to Peter’s primacy. It claims that the order of Nicaea is due to the links of Alexandria and Antioch to St. Peter. Constantinople sees this as a natural evolution of the administrative system.

Petrine origin exercised by Roman Pontiffs. Thessalonike welcomes Rome because it is less domineering than the capital. Roman rights are resisted in Gaul as well as in Africa (see the case of Pelagianism where bishops forbade appeals oversees). The Popes were the representatives of Romanitas in a barbarian sea often conflicting with the Emperor for doctrinal (non-political) reasons.

AT the same time the Popes describe their function as one of government within the Universal Church. They claim themselves not only as primatus but also as principatus indicating Imperial Powers. They tie these privileges with the consideration of themselves as heads of Christians. The body of all Christians is not a sacramental entity but a well-defined and concrete organism. This body is endangered by barbarians and the emperors. They are therefore amenable to introducing national Churches (Franks with Clovis and Regnum Francorum and try to eliminate the resistance to their point of view by the ascetics in Lerins and especially John Cassian. Prevenient grace and predestination is thus hidden in the endorsement of Augustinianism: Grace is necessary not only for the process in faith but also can initiate faith. Not so in the East. Criteria of faith (universlity, antiquity and consensus). No appeal to synergy.

ALEXANDRIA

It rivals Rome and Constantinople. Its population is made up of mixed races including a prominent Jewish community. It is a hotbed for theology.

Christian traditions rest on significant figures (Evangelist Mark, Athanasios Theophilos and Cyril patriarchs)

Alexandria possesses many Intellectual and scientific resources.

For the Church we look at canon 6 of I Nicaea for the power of the bishop of Alexandria and for the structure of the Egyptian Church. However canon 3 of I Constantinople places Alexandria below Constantinople and causes a rift between Theophilos and St. John Chrysostom. Aim of the Οἰκουμενικὸς Ἀρχιεπίσκοπος is the preservation of Alexandria’s position within the Roman world and is manifested in the Arian and Nestorian controversy.

However the ecumenical vision (?) of Alexandria contrasts with its surrounding where the Egyptian identity is trampled down. (One would leave Alexandria to go to Egypt).

Coptic is the language of the monks who constitute the real strength of Alexandria. Anastasios of Sinai: Φύσις vs. Ὑπόστασις are unknown differentiation to the Egyptian minds.

Egyptian nationalism is prominent (interference in Church Councils, in the treatment of pagan temples and in the demonstrations against the Roman prefect.