

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



Book Review

by Barbara Buzzard

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

The best part of this book is its subtitle — *How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*. 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. Phillip Jenkins indicates: “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.” He adds that they would soon lapse into grave heresy! (merely by attempting to explain it!)

“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.*” He is saying that this thing “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. 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. In fact 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.

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 syndrome 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. 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.” “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.” *And yet the outcome — the Trinity and the supposed two natures of Jesus — form the bedrock of orthodox Christian belief.*

Jenkins asks *if chance is a valid concept* and says 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. This is the truth and if you don’t believe it, you are a heretic.

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?”

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.”

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

I have often wondered why the terms extremist and radical are only 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. Philip Jenkins points out that these conflicts have “left an impact that survives into the present day.” He then makes what I feel is his most profound contribution: he says that the church councils which were responsible for the present-day creeds “*remade a faith.*”

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 being in perfect unity in their purposes and actions.<sup>1</sup> It does not point to a dual nature in Jesus. Jenkins asks, “Assuming that Christ became God, when and how was he Godded?” 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.”

“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*

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

*God, as a result of power plays in the empire and church: he owed his Godhood to majority vote.”*

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.” 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.”

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.”

So 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.” 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.”

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.”

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).

Respectfully  
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submitted,  
Buzzard