

Christological Insights in the Commentary of the Gospel of St. John by Cyril of Alexandria

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Introduction

The first five centuries of Christianity were marked by theological and doctrinal disputes. J.D.G. Dunn in his book *Christology in the Making* says that:

“In a real sense the history of Christological controversy is the history of the Church’s attempt to come to terms with John’s Christology - first to accept it and then to understand it and to re-express it.”¹

Cyril of Alexandria was a key figure in these disputes whose contribution left its mark on the Church’s teaching. For him, theology was the interpretation of Scripture. He did not distinguish between theology and biblical interpretation. For a long time, this made his Commentary on John one of the best pieces in Biblical interpretation.

Our main task in this essay is to present Cyril’s main Christological insights as described in his own terms throughout his Commentary on John’s Gospel. This will help us understand what Cyril was trying to achieve in his reading of John. We will divide this essay into three main parts. Firstly, we will present Cyril’s background and introduce his Commentary on the Gospel of John. Secondly, we will present Cyril’s Christology. Thirdly, we will examine the relationship between Cyril’s main Christological insights with his understanding of the obedience of Christ.

Cyril of Alexandria: His life and his writings

Cyril was born in Alexandria between A.D. 370-380.² Judging from his works,

¹J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, London: 1989, 250.

²M. Jungie, ‘Cirillo d’Alessandria’, *EC* 1715.

we can say that he received a wide education based on Biblical³ and Patristic Theology, perhaps due to a monastic formation.⁴ He participated in the "Synod of the Oak" in 403,⁵ during which St. John Chrysostom was deposed.⁶ Following the death of his uncle Theophilus, Cyril was consecrated as bishop on 18th October 412 in spite of opposition from secular armed forces. The first years were stormy and Cyril's behaviour provoked extreme reactions.⁷

Cyril's important role in Church history began in 429 when he directed his energies against Nestorius who denied that Mary is *Theotokos* (divine child bearer) and that there is no real union between the Godhead and the manhood in the person of the Son. In 431, the Alexandrian Patriarch presided over the Council of Ephesus. He condemned Nestorius' views and deposed him. He also declared Mary as *Theotokos*. Many have claimed that during this Council, Cyril had no theological interest but that he was motivated solely by political ends.⁸

Cyril died on the 27th June, 444. The extreme reactions against him are exaggerated as evidenced in this sarcastic note written when the news of his death was announced:

"At last with a final struggle the villain has passed away. His departure delights the survivors, but possibly disheartens the dead; there is some fear that under the provocation of his company they may send him back again to us. Care must therefore be taken to order the guild of undertakers to place a very big and heavy stone on his grave to stop him coming back here."⁹

³ Cyril's knowledge of the Bible has been explored by B. De Margerie, "L'exégèse Christologique du saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie", *NRT* 102 (1980) 400-425.

⁴ H. De Manoir, "Cyrille d'Alexandrie", *DS*, 2672-2673. The suggestion, however, that Cyril was a monk is doubtful: see P. Evieux, "Isidore de Peluse", *RSR* 64 (1974) 322-340.

⁵ J. Tixeront, *A Handbook of Patrology*, London: 1944, 161.

⁶ *Letters to Acacius of Beroea*, Ep. 33, *PG* 77, 159. It was only in 417 that Cyril caused the name of Chrysostom to be replaced in the diptychs, that is, the roll of those whose name should be included in the prayers of the liturgy of the Alexandrian Church.

⁷ See G. Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, Belmont: 1987, 251; see also Richard Giraud, "Cirillo", *DUSE* 467; P. Pianton, "Cirillo", *EncEcc* 727; F. Schaefer, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Murder of Hypatia", *CUB* 8 (1902) 441-453; J. Rouge, "La Politique de Cyrille D'Alexandrie et le meurtre d'Hypatie", *CNS* 11 (1990) 485-504.

⁸ R.L. Wilken, "Exegesis and the History of Theology", *ChH* 35 (1966) 141. See also L.R. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria, Select Letters*, Oxford: 1983, xi.

⁹ Theodoret, *Ep.* 180. See also J. Stevenson, *Creeeds, Councils, and Controversies*, London: 1966, 301-302.

Cyril's death marked the end of his earthly life but not of the importance of his works.¹⁰ Cyril's writings fill ten volumes in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* - vol. 68-77 - making him one of the most prolific writers in the history of early Christian literature. His works comprise exegetical, apologetical, dogmatic-polemical writings, homilies and letters. The Nestorian controversy divided his literary works into two periods: those written *before* and *after* the controversy.¹¹

The Commentary on the Gospel of John

Cyril's commentary on John's Gospel is his greatest exegetical work. It is a verse by verse commentary made up of twelve books, of which books VII and VIII (in 10, 18 - 12, 48) are lost. P.E. Pusey joined the fragments which he found in the *Catanae*, but their reliability is questioned.¹² The text of this commentary is found in *PG* 73 and 74, 9-756. In this essay, we will use P.E. Pusey's translation of Cyril's commentary on John.¹³ We will refer to this edition simply as [P] adding to the volume and the page number.

Prior to J. Mahé's article in 1907,¹⁴ many scholars held that the commentary was written after 428. Today most scholars hold that this commentary belongs to the period before the Nestorian controversy,¹⁵ even though there is still a dispute about the precise dating of this commentary. The reasons for dating this commentary before 428 are mainly three. First, its terminology differs from Cyril's later terms used during the Nestorian controversy. Secondly, the famous term *Theotokos* - one of the main factors which led to the Nestorian controversy - is never mentioned in the commentary: Mary is simply called "*the Holy Virgin*." Thirdly, unlike the

¹⁰ See N.M. Haring, "The Character and Range of the Influence of St. Cyril of Alexandria on Latin Theology (430-1260)", *MS* 12 (1950) 1-19. See also P. Renaudin, "La théologie de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie d'après saint Thomas", *RT* 18 (1910) 171-184.

¹¹ For Cyril's works, see M. Simonetti, "Cirillo di Alessandria", *DPAC* 691-697; M. Jugie, "Cirillo d'Alexandria", *EC* 1715-1724; J. Quasten, *Patrology*, 6th edn., vol. iii, Maryland: 1992, 125-135.

¹² E. Leone, *Cirillo di Alessandria, Commento al Vangelo di Giovanni*, libri i-iv, Roma: 1994, 20.

¹³ P. Pusey, *The Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John by St. Cyril Archbishop of Alexandria*, 4 volumes, Oxford: 1874, 1885.

¹⁴ J. Mahé, "La date du Commentaire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie sur l'Évangile selon saint Jean", *RSR* 9 (1907) 41-45.

¹⁵ J. Bonassard in several articles has shown that the commentary was written between 425-428. See his *Activité littéraire de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428*, *MP* (1945) 159-174; "Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie aux prises avec la 'communication des idiomes' avant 428 anti-ariens", *SPat* 6 (1962) 11-121.

several references to other heretics which Cyril was arguing against,¹⁶ the commentary does not mention the name of *Nestorius* at all.

Cyril's use of the two levels of interpretations, namely, the literal sense - realities perceived by the senses - and the spiritual sense - realities perceived by the mind¹⁷ - reveal his relationship with the Alexandrian tradition. He assumed that the literal sense is accurate, yet he was not concerned about historical discrepancies between John and the Synoptic Gospels. The spiritual sense enabled Cyril to use the Johannine symbolism,¹⁸ particularly where it points to one of his favourite themes, the superiority of the "newness" of Christianity¹⁹ over the "oldness" of Judaism.²⁰ But it is Cyril's interest in the Church's orthodox teaching against the Arians and the other heretical interpretations of the day, which gives Cyril's commentary on John its chief characteristics.

Cyril's doctrinal framework

Cyril's Christology is like a spider's web. Such a web is made up of different threads carefully woven with each other. In the same way, Cyril's Christological arguments are so closely related to one another that it is hard to speak of one argument without considering the other arguments. He undertook the commentary on John's Gospel within a dogmatic framework, namely, the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325): a belief in the Son who is *homoousios* to *patri*, who really became man, suffered, died and rose again.²¹

The Arian controversy remained for Cyril the great dogmatic issue. In the fight for truth, the Fourth Gospel provided both Cyril and his opponents, namely, the

¹⁶ The following names are mentioned: Arius, (P.1: 22-23, 29, 575, 607; P.2:102); Anomeans (P.2, 331); Sabellius (P.2:349; cf. also P.2: 102, 233, 250, 255, 285, 303).

¹⁷ See A. Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria Interpreter of the Old Testament*, Rome: 1952; "The Objects of the Literal and Spiritual Senses of the New Testament according to St. Cyril of Alexandria", *TU 63* (1957) 354-374.

¹⁸ See J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, Chicago: 1971, 243-244; M. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel*, Cambridge: 1960, 25-64.

¹⁹ See Jn 13,34 "a new commandment ..." (P.2,218-219); Jn 19,41-42 "a new tomb ..." (P.2,647-648).

²⁰ For Cyril's antagonism against Judaism, see R.L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, New Haven: 1971. The Jewish people and what belongs to their tradition have a great role to play in this commentary: a very negative role! We have counted some 365 direct references to the term "the Jews" and some 116 indirect references to the term "Israel" in this commentary. The same terms recur again and again with an adjective before them, and this nearly always carried with it negative connotations.

²¹ *Dz* n.125-126/52.

Arians, with an effective support for their respective arguments as T.E. Pollard says:

"If it is St. John's Gospel which raises the questions which these heresies sought to solve, it is the same Gospel which provides the basis for the answers which the church gave to them."²²

On the one hand, the Arians sought out Biblical passages - especially from John's Gospel - and interpreted them in support of their position, namely, that God alone is eternal and unbegotten, and that the Son is only "a creation."²³ They argued that if the Logos *became* man and suffered, the Logos could not be God because whatever changes or suffers cannot be divine.²⁴

On the other hand, Cyril, following Athanasius and in line with the doctrine of Nicea, also used the Fourth Gospel as a kind of pond to fish for proof-texts that the Son is not a creation. Cyril considered Arianism as more than an erroneous teaching. He saw it as a threat which cuts away the foundations of his Christian belief. If the Son is not equal in essence to God, then Christ cannot be the subject of Christian worship.²⁵ His first task was, therefore, to show that the Son *is God*.

The nature of the Arians' teaching forced Cyril to lay at the foundation of his theology the "oneness" of essence between the Father and the Son, without losing sight of the distinction between the two persons of the Trinity. The following two quotations are examples of what Cyril repeats elsewhere in the commentary:

"Not only was *the Word* with God, but He was also God, that through His being with God, He might be known to be Other than the Father and might be believed to be Son distinct and by Himself; through being *God*, He might be conceived of as Consubstantial and of Him by Nature, as being both God and coming forth from God. For it were inconceivable, since the Godhead is by all confessed to be One, that the Holy Trinity should not in every wise arrive at Sameness of Essence and so reach one relation of Godhead."²⁶

²² T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, Cambridge: 1970, 164.

²³ *Dz*: 126/54. The Anathema of the Council of Nicea. See Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian tradition*, vol. 1, London: 1975, 155.

²⁴ See J. M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Suffering in History and Theology*, Minneapolis: 1991, chapter 1.

²⁵ See R.L. Wilken, "Tradition, Exegesis, and the Christological Controversies," *ChH* 34 (1965), 123-145.

²⁶ *Jn* 1,1 (P.1:22-23).

"Though he [the Son] seems in His own Person to have a separate and distinct Being, yet He is accounted, by reason of His innate identity of Substance, as One with the Father."²⁷

Cyril felt that it was important to show that the Son is *one* in essence with the Father because this was the proper object of the Christian faith. The "why" of Cyril's explanations seems to justify the "what" of the contents of this commentary. He, therefore, used a variety of metaphors, such as the relation between the sun and its radiance;²⁸ the heat with the fire;²⁹ and the honey with sweetness,³⁰ which all explain the close relationship between the two persons of the Trinity. This kind of vocabulary, however, is alien to John, and so the idea of the Sonship of Jesus has come to mean much more to Cyril than it meant to John.

Having defended the Son's Divinity, Cyril had to answer another important question which the Arians raised from John's Gospel. If the Son is one and equal in essence to the Father, why does the Son state that: "the Father is greater than I."³¹ In other words, how can statements like Jn 10,30 and Jn 14,28 be reconciled with each other?³²

In order to understand how Cyril answers this question, one must first examine three major problems which Cyril's Christology raises, namely, (i) the use of the Johannine concept of the Logos; (ii) the oneness of Christ; (iii) the use of the term *kenosis*. It is only after these are dealt with, that one can understand Cyril's answer to the Arian's objections. At the same time, this examination will also manifest how complicated is Cyril's Christology.

i. The Logos Before and After the Incarnation

Following Athanasius, Cyril distinguished two stages in the "life" of the Logos: the Logos *before* the Incarnation and the Logos *after* the Incarnation.³³ The Divine

²⁷ Jn 17,22-23 (P.2:553).

²⁸ Jn 1,1 (P.1:13).

²⁹ Jn 1,1 (P.1:13).

³⁰ Jn 1,1 (P.1:32).

³¹ Jn 14,28.

³² For a full discussion of Jn 10,30 during the Patristic era, see T.E. Pollard, "The Exegesis of John 10,30 in the Early Trinitarian Controversies", *NTS* 3 (1957) 334-349.

³³ See L.K. Uppola, "Partitive Exegesis in Cyril of Alexandria's Commentary on the Gospel of John", *SPat* 25 (1991) 116; H.A. Wolfson, *La Filosofia Dei Padri Della Chiesa*, Brescia: 1978, 79-80; M. Simonetti, "Cristologia", *DPAC*, 852-862.

Logos is *homoousios* with the Father in his Divine Nature, and likewise he is *impassible* and *unchangeable*. At the same time, Cyril emphasized that in becoming man, the Divine Logos, manifested himself *as man*, while he retained his Divine Nature.

As we will see as we go along, by making the distinction between the Logos *before* and *after* the Incarnation, Cyril provided a consistent interpretation of the Fourth Gospel's narrative. The distinction between the Logos *before* and *after* the Incarnation, however, led Cyril to another problem, namely, the *oneness* of Christ.³⁴

ii. The Oneness of Christ

The Christological question of how *the Divinity* and the *Humanity* are *one* in Christ had not yet become acute when Cyril wrote this commentary on John's Gospel. It was after A.D. 428 that Cyril concentrated more on this issue against Nestorius. Yet, the foundations of Cyril's later attacks against Nestorius who divided Christ into two persons are laid in the commentary as evidenced in the following quotation:³⁵

"Since the Word of God came down from heaven, He says that the Son of man came down, refusing after the Incarnation to be divided into two persons ... for as He is the Word of God, so Man too of a woman, but One Christ of both, Undivided in regard to Sonship and God-befitting Glory."³⁶

In distinguishing between the Logos *before* and *after* the Incarnation, Cyril did not mean to posit an independent Divine acting distinct from the Humanity assumed. Cyril argued that there is only *one* subject: *the Divine Logos*, who is now acting in

³⁴ Cyril's understanding of the unity of person in Jesus, see R.A. Norris, "Towards a Contemporary Interpretation of the Chalcedonian Definition", in *Lux in lumine*, (ed., R.A. Norris), New York: 1966, 109; see also G. Joussard, "Une intuition fondamentale de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie en christologie aux premières années de son épiscopat", *REB* 11 (1953) 175-186.

³⁵ This shows that although Cyril's Christology as expressed in his commentary was not yet fully developed, one must study his pre-Nestorian writings - of which this commentary forms part - in order to grasp Cyril's basic Christological position. For this argument see J. Liébaert, *La Doctrine Christologique de Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle Nestorienne*, Lille: 1951, 78; see also his "L'évolution de la christologie de S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie à partir de la controverse nestorienne. La lettre paschale XVII et ses liens aux Moines (428-9)", *MS* 27 (1970) 27-48.

³⁶ Jn 1,12-13 (P.1:172); see Jn 8,12 (P.1:562); Jn 17,22 (P.2:553-554).

accordance with the conditions of the flesh he assumed. In order to explain the unity between the Divinity and the Humanity of the Logos, Cyril made use of a number of analogies, such as the Body and Soul analogy.³⁷ He demonstrated that the union between the Divinity and the Humanity of the Logos did not result in a mixture or the transformation of one nature into another. Rather, each persisted in the property appropriated to it.³⁸

Thus, throughout the commentary, Cyril employed the phrase: "the Logos dwelling in a Temple" to explain the manner in which the Divine nature assumed the Humanity.³⁹ The following two quotations are a sample of Cyril's use of this phrase in the commentary.

"The Divine exceeding well added straightaway *And dwelt among us*, that considering that the things mentioned are, the Dweller and the wherein is the dwelling, you might not suppose that He is transformed into flesh, but rather He dwelt in *Flesh*, using His own Body, the Temple that is from the Holy Virgin."⁴⁰

"The Divine Word dwelt in His Body from the Virgin, as in His Own Temple, having come from above from the Father unto us."⁴¹

The fact that the Divine Nature is enfleshed does not mean that the humanity is destroyed nor that the Divine Nature is changed. As a matter of fact, Cyril's explanation of the notion of 'becoming' in Jn 1,14 takes on an ontological complexion:

"Cyril's emphases on the pre- and post-incarnational status of the Logos and that it is one and the same Logos who is God and man, both highlight and make evident the fact that 'to become man' denotes

³⁷ See Jn 15,1 (P.2:371); T. Weinandy, "The Soul/Body Analogy and the Incarnation: Cyril of Alexandria CChR, 17:3 (1996) 59-66; R.M. Siddals, "Oneness and Difference in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria", *SPar* 17 (1983) 201-211.

³⁸ See M. Simonetti, "Alcune Osservazioni sul Monofisismo di Cirillo di Alessandria," *Aug* 22 (1980) 493-511.

³⁹ The use of this phrase is another indication that this commentary on John's Gospel was written before the Nestorian Controversy. During and after this conflict, Cyril stopped using this terminology. As a matter of fact, it was precisely this kind of language that Cyril attacked mercilessly.

⁴⁰ Jn 1,14 (P.1:110).

⁴¹ Jn 6,42 (P.2:397); see Jn 2,21-22 (P.1:163-164); Jn 6,27 (P.1:349); Jn 6,53 (P.1:418); Jn 6,63 (P.1:433).

not a change of nature, but a new manner of existence for the Logos ... what the Logos is, God, and what the Logos becomes, man, in no way undergo change. What is new is the manner in which the person of the Logos exists."⁴²

The oneness of Christ led Cyril into a series of complicated arguments. If the one Christ is God and man at the same time, how can one attribute to the Divinity of Christ what is characteristic to the Humanity and vice-versa? This was precisely the Arians' stumbling block, as outlined in syllogistic form by F. Sullivan:

- "The Word is the subject of the human operations and suffering of Christ.
- Whatever is predicated to the Word must be predicated of him according to his own nature.
- ergo, the nature of the Word is limited and affected by human operations and sufferings of Christ, and is subordinated to the Father."⁴³

Cyril denied that the Son may be said to have suffered in his Divine Nature. The Alexandrian Patriarch would rather say that the Son suffered "in the flesh." But the flesh belongs to the Logos, and through it the Logos who is now incarnate, appropriates suffering to himself.

This explanation led Cyril to express himself in a paradoxical language, such as "the Logos suffered without suffering (*apathos epathen*)."⁴⁴ J.A. McGuckin offered a very helpful explanation of Cyril's paradoxical language:

"If 'God' means 'to be impassible' then to speak, for example, of a God who suffers, is simply to say 'the Impassible is passible', and that would be nothing more than nonsense-talk. There is only one possible way out of the dilemma thus caused by this language of cross-referencing, and that, as Cyril never tired of repeating, is the

⁴² T.G. Weinandy, *Does God Change?* Massachusetts: 1985, 54-55. See also his "The Human 'I' of Jesus," *ITQ* 62A (1996/97) 259-268.

⁴³ F. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Rome: 1956, 158-159.

⁴⁴ See R.V. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies*, London: 1954, 88; J.M. Hallman, "The Seed of Fire," *JChS* 5:3 (1997) 383; J.J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *ThS* 58 (1997) 39-60.

realisation that the statement 'God' is being used in a different way to normal. In fact in all incarnational language Cyril says that it is being used as a synonym for 'God-in-the-flesh', and this crucial qualification is given in the very paradox itself, since all Christians will, or ought to, admit that suffering, death, sorrow, and suchlike, are inapplicable to 'God-in-himself', but no longer inapplicable to God-made-man, in so far as he has appropriated, along with a human body, all that goes to make up a human life, that is soul, intellect, emotion, fragility, even mortality.⁴⁵

In line with this reasoning, Cyril rejected the idea of "two natures" of the Logos after the Incarnation.⁴⁶ Only belief in "one nature", he thought, can preserve Christ's unity. But applying the formula, *One Divine Nature enfleshed*, Cyril, without knowing, was in fact using the very phrases that Apollinarius had used to assert the composite unity of Christ's person.

For this reason, Cyril was and still is accused by some of being an Apollinarian himself. In spite of these accusations, Cyril gave this Apollinarian formula an essentially non-Apollinarian interpretation.⁴⁷ The Alexandrian Patriarch constantly affirmed that the Incarnate Logos assumed a real and full human existence. It was the Son of God himself who was incarnate, obeyed, suffered, died and was raised, not in his Divine Nature, but in so far as he was the Logos-in-the-flesh.

iii. The kenosis

The clue to Cyril's thinking lies in his use of Phil 2,6-11, a central text which "Cyril of Alexandria used ... more than any other Greek Father."⁴⁸

"The importance of this conception [Phil 2,6-11] to his [Cyril's] Christology is suggested by the fact that he uses it with fair regularity

⁴⁵ J.A. McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, Leiden: 1994, 191.

⁴⁶ It was after Cyril signed the "Formula of Reunion" with the Antiochenes that he retreated from this position and acknowledged that with careful qualifications, one could speak of two natures. See O. Gould, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Formula of Reunion," *TDR* 106:365 (1998) 235-252.

⁴⁷ For a discussion about Apollinarian tendencies in Cyril's writings, see F.M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, London: 1983, 259-263.

⁴⁸ P. Henry, 'Kénose', *DBSupp*, 5.92.

to explain the sense of the 'Word become flesh' - particularly when he is at pains to deny that 'becoming flesh' implies any change in the divine nature itself.⁴⁹

The problem with Cyril's usage of Phil 2,6-11 is that this is not a Johannine idea or term but rather a Pauline motif. Cyril placed the emphasis on the permanence of the Divine Nature through the period of his *kenosis* or "self-emptiness." The Divine Logos became man, yet he remains God. Thus, we can rightly say that while the Letter to the Philippians stresses the reality of the *kenosis*, Cyril inverted the statement: "The movement of Paul's thinking can be summarized thus: although God, He became man. Cyril takes this up and interprets: although He became man, He remains God."⁵⁰

In 10,30 and Jn 14,28

Having presented Cyril's Christological principle of the Logos before and after the Incarnation, Cyril's arguments about the oneness of the Son, and Cyril's use of the term *kenosis*, we can now understand more clearly Cyril's answer to the question of how does Jn 10,30 be reconciled with Jn 14,28. Commenting on Jn 14,28, Cyril argued that the Son is inferior to the Father in so far as the Son became man, or to use Cyril's expression: "as He still wore the guise of a servant."⁵¹ At the same time, Cyril argued that in becoming man, the Son did not change his Divine Being. The Divine Logos remains equal to the Father in his Divine Nature.

"The Father then is *greater* since the Son was still a servant and in the world, as He [the Son] says that He is God of Himself, and adds this attribute to His human form ... He [the Father] is *greater* therefore than He [the Son] that chose inferiority by His own dispensation, and remained in such a state until He [the Son] was restored to His ancient condition, I mean His own and natural glory in which He [the Son] was at the beginning."⁵²

⁴⁹ R.A. Norris, "Christological Models in Cyril of Alexandria," *SPat* 12 (1971) 259.

⁵⁰ A. Dupré, "La Doxa du Christ dans les oeuvres exétiques de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *RSR* 48 (1960) 523-524.

⁵¹ In 14,28 (P.2:348).

⁵² In 14,28 (P.2:349).

We have now an answer of how Cyril reconciled the tension between the two Johannine affirmations in 10,30 and 14,28. As we tried to show, Cyril's arguments takes on an ontological complexion. The nature of the Arians' teaching forced him to develop such an elaborate Christology. But if one compares Cyril's explanations with John's Christology, one would immediately notice the striking difference of approach to the person of the Son. The question of inter-Trinitarian relationship, as developed by Cyril, goes beyond what John wrote in his gospel.

A Voluntary Free Will

Our next task is to examine how Cyril's Christological arguments influenced the way he understood the obedience of Christ. This does not mean that Cyril developed a neat systematic treatise on the obedience of Christ in his commentary on John. The theme of obedience is spread throughout the commentary and it goes hand in hand with the Christological arguments we have presented in the previous section.

Having established that the Son is one in essence with the Father in his Divine Being, Cyril moved a step further and argued that if the Son is one with the Father in his Divine Nature, he must also be one with the Father in his Divine and/or human will. The following examples clarifies our argument.

"For as He [the Son] is of the same Substance, so also has He [the Son] the same Will as His Father. For as the Substance is one the Will also is one, and there is one purpose over all, and there is no discord severing Their Wills in twain."⁵³

"He [the Son] says that He wills and speaks and effects the same things as the Father, and easily performs what he [the Father] wishes; even as the Father doth, in order that he [the Son] may be acknowledged in all respects Consubstantial with Him [the Father], and a true Fruit of His Essence; and not merely as having a relative unity with Him [the Father]."⁵⁴

⁵³ Jn 14,22 (P.2:326).

⁵⁴ Jn 10,37-38 (P.2:109).

"For since One Godhead is conceived of in the Father and the Son, the Will too (I suppose) will be surely the Same."⁵⁵

These comments show that Cyril considered the obedience of the Son as another assurance that the Son is a Divine Being equal to the Father in essence. If the Son did not obey the Father's will, he could not be a truly Divine Being. Only in agreeing with the Father's will, could the Son claim to have a Divine Nature. For Cyril, therefore, the obedience of the Son does not mean that the Son is inferior to the Father, since both the Father and the Son are consubstantial in their Divine Nature. Here, one must recall Cyril's principle of the Logos *before* and *after* the Incarnation. The Son is inferior to the Father only in so far as he assumed a humanity. But since the Divine Logos who is enfleshed is the subject of all the activities, the Son remains *homoousios* with the Father in his Divine nature.

This conclusion led Cyril to consider another important question. If the Incarnate Son of God has the same will as the Father, does this imply that the Incarnate Son is not free in his actions? Does the Son have a human free-will or is he conditioned by the Father's will?

Arguing from a pre-existence perspective, Cyril did not consider the Incarnation as something which was undertaken in a violent way against the Divine will of the Divine Logos. The Divine will or the obedience of the Son was a full, voluntary action, self-chosen, accepted and maintained by the Divine Logos. This is repeatedly affirmed in several texts with words like: "He chose inferiority by His own dispensation", "the time of His voluntary degradation", "voluntary humiliation."⁵⁶

"The Only-begotten could never submit to violence against His Will. Rather was His humiliation self-chosen, accepted and maintained from love towards us. For He humbled Himself, that is, of His own Will and not by any compulsion. For He [the Son] would be proved to have undergone the Incarnation against His Will, if there were any one at all able to prevail over him, and who bade Him unwillingly take this upon Him. He [the Son] humbled Himself therefore willingly for our sakes, for we should never have been called His sons and

⁵⁵ Jn 5,30 (P.1:277).

⁵⁶ Jn 10,28 (P.2:346-348).

God's, if the Only-begotten had not undergone humiliation for us and on our account."⁵⁷

Cyril did not tire of repeating that the Son came into this world by his own Divine free will; indeed, he also made it clear that the Son's obedience unto death, that is, his human will, was carried out *willingly* as shown in the following examples:

"He [the Son] counted His suffering most precious, saying that the benefit of His passion would be great; for else He would not have chosen to suffer, for He suffered not unwillingly. For by reason of His clemency towards us, He displayed such great and tender kindness as deliberately to endure cruelties of all kinds for our sake ... for the death of Christ became a seed of life."⁵⁸

"You have heard how, though He [the Son] was the true God, seeing that He was of the same fashion with the Father, He [the Son] humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death. For when God determined to save the corrupted race upon the earth, and it did not satisfy justice that any created being should accomplish this, the Only-begotten God, who knows the Will of the Father, Himself undertook the task, as the enterprise exceeded all the power that there was in the world. And thus He [the Son] came down to a voluntary subjection, so as even to descend to death, and that a most shameful one ... you have therefore in His willing obedience the fulfilment of the purpose of the Father."⁵⁹

"We must remark that Christ did not unwillingly endure death on our behalf and for our sakes, but is seen to go towards it voluntarily, although very easily able to escape the suffering, if He willed not to suffer. Therefore we shall see, in His willingness even to suffer for us, the excellency of His love towards us and the immensity of His kindness."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Jn 17,11 (P.2:511-512).

⁵⁸ Jn 12,24 (P.2:147).

⁵⁹ Jn 15,9 (P.2:395).

⁶⁰ Jn 10,16 (P.2:87). See Jn 10,31 (P.2:102); Jn 12,1-2 (P.2:136); Jn 18,3 (P.2:567); Jn 18,11 (P.2:577); Jn 18,33 (P.2:597).

What we would expect here is a reference to Heb 5,7-9: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." The context of this passage recalls the Gethsemane episode which is omitted in John, although it is echoed in Jn 12,27. At Gethsemane, Jesus wrestled with and accepted the sufferings which he was to endure. In doing so, Jesus completed the perfection of his obedience to the will of the Father.

Cyril, however, did not make any reference to Heb 5,7-9 in his commentary on John to support his arguments, even though he used Hebrews quite often to speak about Christ's death. We suspect that Cyril omitted this reference from Hebrews because of the terms "learned" in v.8 and "made perfect" in v.9.

Coming from the Alexandrian tradition, Cyril would not posit a moral and intellectual growth to the person of the Incarnate Logos. For Cyril, the manhood of Jesus was perfected in wisdom from the very act of the Incarnation. We recall here Cyril's explanation on the one subject: the Incarnate Logos who is enfleshed. Cyril's comment of Jn 1,15 helps us to clarify our point. Here Cyril referred to Lk 2,52:

"*And Jesus increased in wisdom and grace ...* He [Jesus] is said to increase, not in that He is Word and God, but because He ever more greatly marvelled at, appeared more full of grace to those who saw Him, through His achievements, the disposition of those who marvelled advancing, as is more true to say, in grace, than He Who is Perfect as God."⁶¹

With this in mind, we can understand why Cyril would have omitted Heb 5, 7-9 from his commentary on John. The terms "to learn" and "become perfect" imply that Jesus grew and matured through his afflictions.⁶² "What is most distinctive in this verse [v.8] is the clear statement that the sufferings of Jesus had effects on Jesus himself."⁶³ Cyril would never permit us to think of the Incarnate Logos in these terms. He argued that passages like Lk 2,52 do not mean that there was a

⁶¹ Jn 1,15 (P.1:112).

⁶² See W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: 1991, 121.

⁶³ P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Carlisle: 1993, 292.

modal development in the Incarnate Son. Instead, there was a gradual elevation of the humanity of Jesus by the Divine Logos who is now enfleshed. What this means will be explained in our next section.

At this point, however, we must notice another problem, namely, the role of Christ's soul, which is related to Cyril's accusations of being an Apollinarian. Among modern scholarship there is a debate whether Cyril gave a passive or active role to the soul of Christ. A. Grillmeier, for example, described Cyril's earliest Christology as a *Logos-Sarx Christology*, in which the soul of Christ is only a physical factor and yet not a theological factor.⁶⁴

On the other hand, scholars like L.J. Welch argued that Cyril assigned a clear soteriological function to the soul of Christ.⁶⁵ It is beyond our aim to enter into this discussion.⁶⁶ For us it is only important to note what Cyril said in this commentary, as this throws light on our question of whether or not the Incarnate Son had a free human will.

In his comment on Jn 6,38: "I have not come down from heaven to do my will but the will of the one who sent me", Cyril stated that what Christ both willed (*theleon*) and unwilled (*anetheton*) was his suffering and death.

"He [Christ] accepts the suffering, he makes what he willed not, his will, for the value sake of His passion, God the Father agreeing with him, and co-approving that he should readily undergo all things for the salvation of all. Here especially do we see the boundless goodness of the divine nature, in that it refuses not to make that which is spurned its choice for our sake. But that the suffering on the cross was unwilled by our Saviour Christ, yet willed for our sake and the good pleasure of the God the Father, you will hence have understood. For when he was to ascend to God, he made his address to God, saying, that is, in the form of prayer, 'Father, if be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you.' For in what he is God the

⁶⁴ A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Atlanta :1975, 417.

⁶⁵ L.J. Welch, "Logos-Sarx? Sarx and the Soul of Christ in the Early Thought of Cyril of Alexandria," *SVTQ* 38 (1994) 271-292.

⁶⁶ For a longer discussion on this subject, see F.M. Young, "A Reconsideration of Alexandrian Christology," *JEH* 22 (1971) 102-114; M.F. Wiles, "The Nature of Early Debate about Christ's Soul," *JEH* 16 (1965) 139-151.

Word, immortal, incorruptible, and life itself by nature, he could not shudder at death, I think is more clear to all: yet made in the flesh he suffers the flesh to undergo things proper to it, and permits it to shudder at death when now as its doors, that he may be shown to be in truth man."⁶⁷

What is striking in this comment, is Cyril's reference to Mt 26,39 ("Father if it is possible, let this cup pass ..."). Following this reference from Matthew's Gospel, Cyril went on to say that if the soul of Christ underwent psychological conflicts, then, it follows that Christ possessed a weak human will. Christ's struggle in Gethsemane manifested a distinction between the human activity and the divine activity in Christ.

"If it may be (Christ says) Father, that I, without suffering death, may gain life for them, that have fallen there unto, if death may die without my dying in the flesh, that is, let this cup (he says) pass from me; but since it would not take place (he says) otherwise, 'not as I will, but as you.' You see how powerless (*atonousa*) human nature is found, even in Christ himself. But it is brought back though the Word united with it unto God-befitting courage and is retrained to the noble purpose, so as not to commit itself to what seems good to its own will but rather to follow the divine aim, and readily to run to whatever the Law of its Creator calls us ... For Christ was not ignorant that it was very far beneath God-befitting dignity, to seem to be overcome by death and feel the dread of it ... saying that the flesh was weak, by reason of what befits it and belongs to it by nature; but that the spirit was willing, knowing that it suffered nothing that could harm. You see how death was unwilled by Christ, by reason of the flesh, and the disgracefulness of suffering; yet willed, until he should have brought unto its destined consummation for the whole world the good pleasure of the Father, that is, the salvation and life of all?"⁶⁸

The above quotation shows that for Cyril, the humanity of the Logos was will of its own which truly belongs to the Logos, who really trembled before death. Yet,

⁶⁷ In 6,38 (P.1:486-487).

⁶⁸ In 6,38 (P.1:487).

Cyril did not consider the flesh as somehow separate from the Divine Logos. The subject of fear is the Logos who made the flesh his own. This presentation, however, explains the apparent docetism so often detected in Cyril's Christological arguments. It is to this problem that we now turn.

Traces of Docetism

So far we have learned that in his Christological arguments, Cyril was at pains to safeguard the true humanity of the Incarnate Logos. At the same time, the Alexandrian Patriarch also wanted to safeguard the immutability of the Son. Cyril, therefore, presented certain actions performed by the Incarnate Logos, using the phrase: "it seemed" (*dokein*) which "could easily suggest that the whole human life of Jesus was a pretence."⁶⁹

In order to follow Cyril's use of this term, we shall now analyse Cyril's comment on the account of the raising of Lazarus as presented in Jn 11. In his comments on this miracle, Cyril repeatedly made use of this device.

Commenting on Jesus' grief for the death of his friend Lazarus, Cyril defended Christ's true humanity, saying: "since Christ was not only God by Nature, but also Man, He suffers in common with the rest that which is human."⁷⁰ Immediately after this comment, Cyril added that these kinds of feelings had to be brought into subjection to the Divine Logos, and so the trouble which the Incarnate Son experienced was only an "appearance."

"When grief begins somehow to be stirred within Him, and His Flesh now inclines to tears, He does not allow it to indulge in them without restraint, as is the custom with us. But *He groans in the spirit*, that is, in the power of the Holy Spirit reproves in some way His Own Flesh: and That, not being able to endure the action of the Godhead united with It, trembles and presents the appearance of trouble. For this I think to be the signification of '*He was troubled*'; for how otherwise could He endure trouble? Shall that Nature which is even undisturbed and calm be troubled any way?"⁷¹

⁶⁹ M. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel*, Cambridge: 1960, 138.

⁷⁰ Jn 11,32-34 (P.2:121-122).

⁷¹ Jn 11,32-34 (P.2:122).

In the same way, Cyril's comments on Jesus' question: "Where have you laid him?" (Jn 11,34) do not attribute ignorance to the Son. Cyril found a parallel in God's question to Adam in Gen 3,9 and argued that if a question can legitimately be attributed to God on the grounds of the necessary anthropomorphic use of the language about God, it can be accounted for on the lips of Jesus in a similar way:

"The asking a question therefore does not imply any ignorance in Him Who for our sakes who made like unto us, but rather He is shown from this to be equal to the Father; for He too asks a question: *Adam, where are thou?*"⁷²

Cyril, then, tries to present once again phrases like: "*appears not to know.*"

"It is not as being ignorant that He asks: *Where have ye laid him?* For He Who had known of Lazarus' death when He was in another part of the country, how could He be ignorant about the tomb? But He speaks thus as being averse to arrogance; therefore He did not say: 'Let us go to the tomb, for I will awaken him', although asking the question particularly in the way He did have this significance ... With a set purpose therefore He says this also, drawing by His words many to the place, and appears not to know, not at all shrinking from the poverty of man's condition, although in His Nature God and knowing all things, not only those which have been, but also those which shall be, before their existence."⁷³

Such a presentation attracted criticism. R.L. Ottley accuses Cyril of being a docetic, saying that "there is, in fact a docetic element in Cyril, in spite of his energetic protests against docetism."⁷⁴ Cyril, undoubtedly, has allowed the humanity of Jesus to be overshadowed by his divinity, yet, as R.M. Siddals rightly stated: "unless we are constantly aware of Cyril's debt to his tradition, we fail to understand a considerable part of his argument."⁷⁵ By using words like "seems to", Cyril did not want to convey that the Incarnate Son was merely pretending to experience such realities, while in fact he was not; nor did Cyril wish to suggest that the Logos^s

⁷² Jn 11,32-34 (P.2:123).

⁷³ Jn 11,32-34 (P.2:122-123).

⁷⁴ R.L. Ottley, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation*, London: 1946, 409.

⁷⁵ R.M. Siddals, "Oneness and Difference in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria," *SPat* 18 (1983) 342.

humanity was only a pretence. On the contrary, the Alexandrian Patriarch strongly affirmed a true and genuine humanity of the Logos. His comment on Jn 1,14 can be considered as a framework for his understanding of Christ's humanity.

"He [John] has now entered openly upon the declaration of the Incarnation. For he plainly sets forth that the Only-Begotten became and is called son of man. For this and nothing else does his saying that the Word was made flesh signify. It is as though he said more clearly: 'The Word was made man.' And in thus speaking he introduces again to us not the strange or unusual, seeing that the divine Scripture often times calls the whole creature by the name of flesh alone, as in the prophet Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.' We do not suppose that the prophet says that the divine Spirit should be bestowed upon human flesh soulless and alone (for this would be by no means free from absurdity). Comprehending the whole by the part, he names man from the flesh ... But he [the prophet] says not that the Word came into flesh but that it *was made* Flesh, that you may not suppose that He came to it as in the case of the Prophets or other of the Saints by participation, but did Himself become actual *Flesh*, that is man."⁷⁶

A similar thought is found in his comment on Jn 9,37. Here we read:

"For the Son is one and only one, both before his conjunction with the flesh, and when he came with flesh; and by flesh we denote man in his integrity, I mean consisting of soul and body."⁷⁷

In the light of the above quotations, there is no reason to conclude that Cyril was actually docetic in his understanding of the person of Christ. When Cyril wrote that Christ "seemed" to pray, he meant that Christ did in fact pray. In the same way, when Cyril wrote down that the sufferings on the Cross were unwilling by Christ in that He was man, Cyril meant that Christ did in fact have a powerless humanity. But the Alexandrian Patriarch was at pains to show that although the Incarnate Logos was limited in *his humanity*, he remained unlimited *as God*. Cyril's use of the words "seems to", therefore, was only a device to underline his doctrine on *the*

⁷⁶ Jn 1,14 (P.1:109).

⁷⁷ Jn 9,37 (P.2:200).

single subject in the Incarnate Logos. The Divine Logos who is now enfleshed, is the subject of all the human acts and experiences.

Conclusion

Our presentation of Cyril's Christology manifested the deep theological character of his thought sustained throughout his commentary on John with a high level of consistency. In the light of the Arians' reasoning, it was important for Cyril to present a consistent interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. His main principle, namely, the Logos *before* and *after* the Incarnation ensured the internal consistency of John's narrative in which Jesus seems to play two roles: one human and the other divine.

Cyril, however, approached the Johannine text with fixed doctrinal ideas which laid a disproportionate emphasis upon the exact "nature" of the Son. The Alexandrian Patriarch did not make any difference between his faith as expressed in the Church's tradition and what John was actually trying to say, and thus, if Cyril was an exegete:

"He was so only very imperfectly since he came with clear doctrinal presuppositions ... Cyril was a theologian from the first and he always remained one; he cherished Scripture, but as a theologian - to the point where his theology easily intrudes when he claims to be explaining a text."⁷⁸

Biblical theologians, however, who want to remain loyal to John's intentions, must learn how to place the text's communicative aim, namely, its genre, before their own aims. The interpretation of the subject-matter of religious texts must risk a conversation with the religious questions expressed in the text itself. In this process, preconceived ideas are challenged and have to be replaced as new features of the Biblical author's thought begin to emerge.

⁷⁸ G. Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428," *Mélanges Pödehard*, Paris: 1945, 173-174.