THE METAPHYSIC OF NESTORIUS.

WHAT Nestorius really taught, and whether he was himself orthodox or a heretic, are questions which have been reopened by the discovery of his own defence of his position in the 'Book of Heracleides'.¹ So long as the first of these remains a mystery, the second cannot be answered; and this paper is put forward as a suggestion towards the interpretation of Nestorius's writing and the understanding of what he taught. It deals mainly with one point, the meaning of the word *πρόσωπον* in Nestorius's teaching; but as the argument in the *Liber Heraclidis* depends on his use of the word, it is a point which must receive our first attention.

The traditional view of Nestorius has been that he thought to solve the Christological problem by the theory of a 'moral union': 'The answer was found in the theory of a moral union, the association of Jesus the Son of Mary with the eternal Logos: an association the basis of which is the actual moral identity of the will of Jesus with the divine will of the Logos.'² Such a theory could only be satisfactory if it were based on a metaphysic in which the ultimate reality is identified with will: but, in the language of patristic theology, that would involve identifying will with *οὐσία*, and the slightest acquaintance with Nestorius's writings is enough to shew that he never did that. Dr Loofs has put forward the theory that Nestorius did not mean to teach any metaphysical union at all. He opposes what he calls a 'personal and moral' union to all kinds of metaphysical union, and holds that Nestorius cared nothing for the latter. We misunderstand him because 'we cannot free ourselves from metaphysics'. Without stopping to discuss the curious notion that any non-metaphysical Christology can be satisfactory, or whether such a conception can credibly be ascribed to a patristic theologian, I shall hope first to shew that Nestorius did,

¹ Cf. Bethune-Baker *Nestorius and his Teaching*, Cambridge 1908; Loofs *Nestorius and his Place in the History of Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge 1914; and criticisms of the above in the *Church Quarterly Review* by H. M. Relton (Jan. 1912) and A. C. Headlam (July 1915). Also R. H. Connolly and A. J. Mason in *J. T. S.* xii 486, and xv 88.

² Weston *The One Christ* (1914) p. 88.

as a matter of fact, mean to put forward a metaphysical theory; secondly, to make a suggestion as to what that theory was; and, thirdly, to offer some few criticisms on what I believe him to have taught.

I

When we ask whether Nestorius meant to teach that Christ was one person or two persons, we are faced by the fact that there is in his terminology no word precisely similar to our 'person'. He shares with all his contemporaries an outlook not yet concerned with the psychological investigation which has produced the problem of the nature of personality as it appears in modern philosophy.¹ Still, if by 'personality' we mean the real centre of being of a person, that idea was rightly expressed by the use, which came to be generally adopted in Nestorius's day from the Cappadocian Fathers, of *ὑπόστασις*; which word, although commonly rendered in Latin by *persona*, itself really means *individua subsistentia*. It denotes some thing objectively existent, one piece of reality, so to say, which in the case of a human being will naturally be his personality, though in the case of a material thing we could not use that term to describe it. It is in this sense of *ὑπόστασις*, I am inclined to think, that Cyril bases the oneness of Christ on a *ἔνωσις καθ' ὑπόστασιν*.

Nestorius generally used *ὑπόστασις* in the older sense, as equivalent to *οὐσία*, though there are a few passages in which he shews himself to be acquainted with, and even accepts the newer usage.² Apart from these he has no word which, like *ὑπόστασις* in Cyril, may be looked on as expressing the germ of that conception of 'person' which is still growing to-day. When he wishes to emphasize the unity of Christ's essential (as we should say) personal being, he simply uses the number 'one', or denies that he makes Christ two. He teaches that Christ is one: he denies that he believes in two Sons or two Lords or two Christs.³ This is in effect a claim not to be condemned as Nestorian in the traditional sense, and our object is to discover how he attempted to make good this claim.

It is a question, he says, of the *kind* of unity possible in the circumstances, and to describe it he uses the word *πρόσωπον*. We will call it provisionally *prosopic union*. His argument seems to rest on two principles.

¹ Cf. C. C. J. Webb *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* pp. 143 sq.

² Cf. Bethune-Baker *op. cit.* p. 50.

³ e.g. 'Dominum nostrum Christum secundum naturam duplicem dicamus, secundum quod est filius, unum', Loofs *Nestoriana* p. 341; and cf. *Heracleides* pp. 196, 261, &c. (The references throughout are to Nau's French Translation, as I am unfortunately not able to read Syriac.)

(1) Divine and human οὐσίαι being entirely different things, absolutely antithetical the one to the other, they must remain so in the union of them in Christ, if He is to be perfect God and perfect man: for if either the godhead changes into the manhood, or vice versa, one or other will not be there at all: and if the two are fused, Christ will be neither God nor man, but some new kind of being.¹

(2) The union must be voluntary on both sides. We cannot think either of Christ's humanity or of His divinity as being constrained against its will as a result of the union.²

With these two principles in his mind he turns to consider the three kinds of unity which he finds have to be taken into account.

- (a) There is the unity of the Persons in the Trinity.
- (b) There is the unity of soul and body in man.
- (c) There is the unity of godhead and manhood in Christ.

In the Trinity the Father and the Son are one in οὐσία and φύσις, but differ in πρόσωπον, while soul and body differ in οὐσία and φύσις, but are united φυσικῶς so as to make one human οὐσία with human φύσις. So he calls the first of these a unity of οὐσία, and the second a natural union (ἐνωσις φυσικῇ). Now, the godhead and the manhood in Christ cannot be united like the persons in the Trinity, for their οὐσίαι are two and not one³: but neither can they be united like soul and body, for the union of soul and body is not a voluntary union; they are both created things held together by the will of their Creator, and besides, they are both by themselves, unlike the godhead and the manhood of Christ, incomplete things incapable of separate existence.⁴ So there must be some third kind of unity, exemplified in the third case, and this he calls a unity of πρόσωπον.

All the way through he confidently appeals to this conception of a prosopic union as though it explained everything, and as though it were quite clear what the word πρόσωπον meant. What it did mean to him we shall consider below: the immediate point is that from his use of it in discussing these three kinds of unity we may surely conclude that to him it meant something parallel to οὐσία and φύσις. But these are elements in the metaphysical analysis of a thing, and so πρόσωπον, whatever the word means, must denote some other such element, and if so, then the phrase 'prosopic union' must represent an attempt to find a real metaphysical unity of the godhead and the manhood in Christ.

¹ *Heraclides* pp. 23-24, &c., and cf. his accusation of Cyril on p. 282.

² *Ibid.* pp. 35, 158, 268, and cf. Loofs *Nestorius* p. 68.

³ *Ibid.* p. 167.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 35, 158, 268.

The belief that *πρόσωπον* denotes a real element in the being of a thing is strengthened by the consideration of such passages as these :

‘Although the *πρόσωπον* does not exist without the *οὐσία*, yet the *οὐσία* and the *πρόσωπον* are not the same thing’, and

‘We do not, like Sabellius, make the *πρόσωπον* essenceless.’¹

It looks then as though in the metaphysic of Nestorius everything that exists may be analysed into *οὐσία*, *φύσις*, and *πρόσωπον*. We must now ask what in this analysis the word *πρόσωπον* is used to describe.

II

‘For Nestorius’, says Dr Loofs, ‘who . . . was influenced by the manner of speaking common at that time, the main thing in his notion of *πρόσωπον*, according to the etymology of the word, was the *external undivided appearance*. . . . In his opinion, I believe, everything had its *πρόσωπον*, that is its appearance, its kind of being seen and judged. In not a few places in Nestorius, it is true, the meaning of *πρόσωπον* coincides with our meaning of the word “person”, e.g. “Cyril’s *πρόσωπον*” means Cyril, “these *πρόσωπα*” means these persons, and *εἰς καὶ ὁ αὐτός* and *ἐν πρόσωπον* may be used alternately. Nevertheless . . . I must lay stress on the fact that the notion of *πρόσωπον* in Nestorius grew upon another soil and, therefore, had a wider application than our term “person”.² A similar account of the Syriac word *parṣḡḡā*, which is used throughout the *Liber Heraclidis* to represent *πρόσωπον*, is given in a note added to Prof. Bethune-Baker’s work.³ These passages suggested to me that we should take this simple and clear meaning of *πρόσωπον*, a meaning which the word is undoubtedly able to bear, and, using it as parallel to ‘essence’ and ‘nature’ in the metaphysical analysis, see how far it would carry us in the interpretation of Nestorius’s writing. The surprising thing was that throughout the *Liber Heraclidis* the understanding of *πρόσωπον* in this way gave an intelligible sense, and presented a coherent and consistent Christological theory sufficiently simple to explain how Nestorius could confidently appeal to it as the solution of all difficulty.

In modern times, of course, many thinkers have distinguished between a thing as it is in itself and as it appears to us. In this they have usually started by considering the fact of error in sense-perception, or by contrasting our ‘mental image’ or ‘idea’ of a thing with the reality it is supposed to represent. But neither of these lines of thought must be ascribed to Nestorius. If *πρόσωπον* for him means the appearance of a thing, it means that appearance not as opposed to the thing’s reality, but considered as an objectively real element in its being ; and

¹ *Heracleides* pp. 150, 202.

² Loofs *Nestorius* p. 76.

³ Bethune-Baker *op. cit.* p. 219.

the genesis of the conception must be sought along other lines. Two suggestions may be made. In the first place, an analysis of reality into *οὐσία* and *φύσις* almost demands such a completion. If the invisible *οὐσία* is that in which the various elements of the *φύσις* are united, a word is needed to describe the external undivided appearance of the whole. And secondly, the common conception of the Godhead as invisible but revealed in Christ who is the *εἰκὼν τοῦ ἀοράτου πατρὸς* is a conception akin to that which we are considering.

Supposing then that Nestorius analysed everything that exists into *οὐσία*, *φύσις*, and *πρόσωπον*, that is, into essence, nature (or sum of qualities), and appearance, how can this be applied to Christology?

The godhead and the manhood of Christ each has its *οὐσία*, *φύσις*, and *πρόσωπον*. Now for reasons given above we cannot find the centre of their union in either their *οὐσία* or their *φύσις*. But we *can* think of two different things, different in *οὐσία* and *φύσις*, which nevertheless are identical in appearance. The appearances overlap, so to say. But two identical appearances will be one appearance. Surely here we have found that element in their being in which two *οὐσίαι*, complete with their respective *φύσεις*, can be united so as to be one without ceasing to be themselves.

At first sight this certainly does not look like any real union at all. Two things which look alike are not one thing. But such a criticism entirely misunderstands Nestorius's thought. For him the *πρόσωπον* is no *mere* appearance. It is a real element in the being of a thing, without which, or if it were other than it is, the thing would not be what it is. A *πρόσωπον* which was not the *πρόσωπον* of an *οὐσία* would be a mere illusion, a figment of the imagination, and neither the manhood nor the godhead of Christ was that. On the other hand, an *οὐσία* without a *πρόσωπον* was unthinkable.¹ And so a prosopic union is a real union, and that kind of real union which is possible in the particular case we are considering.

The ordinary view of Nestorius's position is that he taught that the manhood and the godhead of Christ existed in two separate persons who were united by a 'moral union', that is, two persons whose wills were identical in content: the man Jesus being granted *κατ' εὐδοκίαν* complete unity with the Logos. Undoubtedly Nestorius did teach the existence of two wills which were one in that they willed alike.² But he taught

¹ 'Nestorius as an adherent of the Antiochian school could as little realize a really existent nature without *πρόσωπον* as without *ὑπόστασις*, for the whole of the characteristics which make the nature must, in his opinion, as necessarily have a form of appearance, i.e. a *πρόσωπον* as a real being by which they are borne, i.e. a *ὑπόστασις*.' Loofs *Nestorius* p. 78. Cf. *Heraclides* pp. 150, 194, 202.

² *Heraclides* pp. 59, 62-63, 67, 144.

more than this. The contents of the wills are alike, it is true, but also in one of the three elements of their being their owners are united in a real metaphysical union. So although he says 'To have the *πρόσωπον* of God is in effect to will what God wills',¹ yet he denies that he teaches a union of two separate persons united by love and by an equality of honour and power.² No, there is a real metaphysical unity, and he neither teaches nor believes in 'two Sons'.³

The following quotations are examples of the passages which suggest the above interpretation of *πρόσωπον* :—

'He is truly man in His human essence, the essence of the man in whom He is wholly incarnate for all men, and whom he has made His *πρόσωπον*. He has appeared in the human sphere, and borne himself in human nature, being God in human nature. Like a king who in a soldier's uniform⁴ bears himself as a soldier and not as a king and wears the uniform of the army against all that needs to be punished, and one says in a word that he is wearing the uniform, because he has a soldier's uniform just like all the rest—like him He was incarnate in a (single) man for all men of the same nature, for He was in their nature, and in it has spoken to each man, because He spoke as though by the human nature.'

'... the union of the godhead and the manhood. In whatever the *πρόσωπον* is by its own nature there is union as of one *πρόσωπον*, even for the other essence. For He has taken the man for his *πρόσωπον*, but not for his essence or nature so as to make him consubstantial with the Father or a second Son, in order that there should not be more than the one same Son. For the *πρόσωπον* of the godhead is the manhood, and the *πρόσωπον* of the manhood is the godhead. The *πρόσωπον* is one thing by nature and another in the union.'

'It is not without *πρόσωπον* and without *ὑπόστασις* that each of the natures is known in its diversity. We do not think of two *πρόσωπα* of sons, or of two *πρόσωπα* of men, but of the *πρόσωπον* of a single man which is moved in the same way even by the other [nature]. The union of the *πρόσωπα* has taken place in *πρόσωπον*, and not in essence or nature. One must not think of an essence without *ὑπόστασις*, as though there had been a union of essences in one essence, and a single *πρόσωπον* of a single essence. The natures subsist in their *πρόσωπα* and in their natures and in the single *πρόσωπον* of the union. In virtue of the union the one nature makes use of the *πρόσωπον* which naturally belongs to the other, so that there is only one *πρόσωπον* for the two natures. The *πρόσωπον* of one essence makes use of the *πρόσωπον* of the other as well.'

'The man is not adored in his own *πρόσωπον*, but in the *πρόσωπον* which is united to him, and which, as a result of the union, is common.

¹ *Heracles* p. 56.

² *Ibid.* p. 277.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 168-169, 196-197, &c.

⁴ *σχῆμα*.

It is in the *πρόσωπον* that the union has taken place, so that this is that and that this.'

'In the union of the natures there is found in them one single *πρόσωπον* without division or separation. Under the natural *πρόσωπον* there is found one nature, and its *πρόσωπον* makes use of the *πρόσωπον* of the other nature too.'

"As for what the gospels say of our Lord", says John of Antioch, "we recognize those theologians who interpret the common properties as attributed to a single *πρόσωπον*." Do you hear this testimony (Cyril)? "To one *πρόσωπον*", not to one nature. Why do you alter their testimony? The common properties they attribute, as has been said, to a common *πρόσωπον*. But you do not conceive of anything common. To what are they to attribute the common qualities, since there exists nothing common except in the case of those who make use of a common *πρόσωπον*? So speak of one common *πρόσωπον*, and attribute the things in common to one *πρόσωπον*. That is what makes the *πρόσωπον* common, for it becomes common if it is formed of things which are in some way opposed, so that it is not single but common.'

These passages are only a small selection to illustrate Nestorius's prevailing use of *πρόσωπον* and treatment of the subject.² There are also passages of great significance in which the object of the sharing of the *πρόσωπα* is said to be *manifestation*, e.g. 'It was recognized that God the Word is said to have become flesh and Son of man after the form and the *πρόσωπον* of the flesh and of the man which He made use of to reveal Himself to the world.'³ We must also note what a prominent place in his Christological argument is taken by the passage in Philippians ii 7, where St Paul speaks of the Son taking the 'form of a servant'.

One is apt to think that this interpretation of Nestorius's teaching cannot be right because it is so simple and obvious that he must have meant something more. If this was his doctrine, the doubt and confusion which exists as to what he taught could never have arisen. But I am not sure that the very simplicity of it may not have been both the ground of its attractiveness to Nestorius and the cause of its being overlooked by students of him. Certainly his language throughout the *Liber Heraclidis* is the language of one who believes that he is presenting a simple, clear, and satisfactory solution of the Christological problem, which removes all difficulty. Any one who turns from struggling to understand Dr Loofs' interpretation of Nestorius to the study of the *Liber Heraclidis* itself must find it incredible that the

¹ *Heraclides* pp. 18, 167-168, 193-194, 211, 274, 280.

² *Ibid.* pp. 50, 130, 140, 145 (see Loofs as to the probable dislocation of the text, *Nestorius* p. 91), 218, 219, &c.

³ *Ibid.* p. 139. Cf. pp. 52, 152, 173.

theory which Nestorius presents with such confidence should be anything so obscure as his interpreter makes out. And yet its simplicity, on the interpretation suggested above, is based on a very acute subtlety of metaphysical thought, which might easily have rendered the theory unintelligible to many even in his own day; though Cyril may well have understood it when he wrote οὐ διαιρετέον τοιγαροῦν εἰς υἱοὺς δύο τὸν ἓνα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν. ὀνήσει δὲ κατ' οὐδένα τρόπον τὸν ὀρθὸν τῆς πίστεως λόγον εἰς τὸ οὕτως ἔχειν, κἂν εἰ προσώπων ἕνωσιν ἐπιφήμιζωσί τινες· οὐ γὰρ εἴρηκεν ἡ γραφή, ὅτι ὁ Λόγος ἀνθρώπου πρόσωπον ᾔγνωσεν ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλ' ὅτι γέγονε σάρξ.¹

III

In this brief sketch of a suggested interpretation of Nestorius's teaching I have concentrated attention on what seems to be the main point of his teaching as set forth in the 'Liber Heraclidis'. It is true that he objected to the term *θεοτόκος* as implying the ascription of a human mode of existence to the divine *οὐσία*, though he was willing to accept it if properly safeguarded. It is true that he spoke of a unity of will owing to the divine and the human will in Christ willing alike. So far he is purely Nestorian in the traditional sense, and such teaching may be found discussed in any work on Christian doctrine. But if beyond all this he went on to explain the Incarnation as a union in *πρόσωπον* in the sense outlined above, then this will be really the keystone of his dogmatic edifice, and by this he must stand or fall.

Now, in the first place, as often in the case of philosophical theories, the almost immediate objection of the plain man is really justified. Two things which look alike are not really one, and in trying to shew that they are Nestorius has fallen into a temptation which always besets philosophers. All metaphysical systems are attempts to describe reality, but unless at every step one's thought is tested by reference to the reality one is trying to describe, it is fatally easy to elaborate the system, but in doing so to wander further and further from the truth. So here, when we have analysed real things into *οὐσία*, *φύσις*, and *πρόσωπον*, it is tempting to play with these three elements of the analysis as Nestorius does, as though they were the real object of our thought. But if we go back to consider the real thing, and see how it is a unity whose elements are only separable in thought, we see that the *πρόσωπον* is so bound up with the *οὐσία* and *φύσις* that two different *οὐσῖαι* and *φύσεις* must have different *πρόσωπα*. Two identical *πρόσωπα* would be indeed not two but one, and would imply but one *οὐσία* and *φύσις*. The Christology of Nestorius is only possible when his metaphysic has become thoroughly artificial.

¹ Cyril *ad Nest.* ii ll. 101-106 (Bindley)

Secondly, this statement that the system is artificial is borne out when we remember that there is in reality another kind of unity to be considered which is not allowed for by Nestorius. Where are we to place the unity of God and man in the prophets, of Christ and man in the Christian? The fact that Nestorius was accused of Samosatene teaching shews that he was felt to be unsatisfactory on this point: although he himself repeatedly denies that he taught that Christ was a mere man, or that he had any sympathy with Paul of Samosata.¹ But surely there are only three possibilities:—

- (a) Christ and the Christian are united according to one of Nestorius's three kinds of union.
- (b) That list of kinds of union is not exhaustive.
- (c) They are not really united.

Nestorius really seems to have taught (c).² But if we are not satisfied with this we must choose between (a) and (b). Now for Nestorius (b) would destroy his main argument, In what can they be united except, the *πρόσωπον*?; and he has ruled out (a) in teaching that Godhead and manhood cannot be united in *οὐσία* or *φύσις*, and that the prosopic union does not make Christ a man like other men.

So we come to a third criticism. If Nestorius's theory after all does not provide a real union between the godhead and the manhood in Christ, nor allow for a real union between the Christian and God, then, from the point of view of religion, the 'One Mediator between God and man' has not been found; from the point of view of philosophy the universe contains an unresolved dualism between two utterly opposed *οὐσίαι*, godhead and manhood. Here of course lies the importance of Christ for metaphysics: godhead and manhood finding their oneness in Him. He is thus the guarantee of the rationality of the universe. The Christological problem is the problem of explaining that oneness, and the 'prosopic union' of Nestorius's theory is not strong enough to bear the strain it was designed to meet.

It is the conception of the complete and eternal antithesis between Godhead and manhood which prevents any satisfactory solution of the problem, but neither Nestorius nor any of his contemporary theologians would ever have thought of questioning the truth of this conception. The difference between Nestorius and Cyril is that whereas Nestorius is throughout perfectly consistent, and his theory a brilliant attempt to solve the problem on the basis of a principle which renders all solution impossible, Cyril's greatness lies in the very fact of his inconsistency.

¹ Cf. *Heracleides* pp. 173, 210, and Loofs *Nestoriana* pp. 182, 192, 222, 299, 303-312.

² *Heracleides* pp. 45-46, 71.

He would no more question the antithesis between godhead and manhood than would Nestorius, but where the truth was too much for his system, he preferred the truth to the system, and by his self-contradiction (which Nestorius exposes again and again) left room for further developement of Christological doctrine in the future.

What, then, will be our judgement on Nestorius? If the above interpretation of his teaching be true, he surely represents a very gallant and ingenious attempt to explain the Incarnation without giving up the belief that in Christ is to be found a complete human person as well as a complete divine person. He could not think of humanity except as existing in a distinct human person; for him, to deny the human *ὑπόστασις* of Christ was to teach an Apollinarian maimed humanity.¹ Cyril boldly gave up belief in a distinct human *ὑπόστασις* in Christ. Nestorius saw at once that this was inconsistent with the belief of both as to the relation between God and man, but in Cyril's inconsistency we have still a challenge to thought and to the search for a perfect Christology which is not to be found in the barren coherence of Nestorius.

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¹ e. g. *Heraclides* p. 212.