

The Three Crucial Terms in Syriac Theology -Kyana, Qnoma, and Parsopa

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Three words played a significant role in shaping the Christology of the Syriac Churches. They are **Kyana, Qnoma and Parsopa**. Much of the Christological controversies in the Syriac tradition revolved around these terms. It must be asserted as a preamble that these terms did not have a uniform significance among the various groups in the Syriac tradition -the Oriental Orthodox, the Assyrians, and the Eastern Catholics. Each group had an understanding of its own and each looked at others with its own understanding and attributed heresies to the other group. There was no serious attempt to see each group through the eye of that group. Hence until very recently the Syriac Christologies were considered heretical by the various Christian Churches. Some even considered Syriac as the source of all the heresies. This situation remained unaltered for centuries. Although these Syriac terms were originally the Syriac rendering of the Greek words **Physis, Hypostasis and Prosopon**, their significance slightly changed during the course of time. The Second Vatican Council opened a new door for a new way of thinking and gave the possibility to reevaluate several of the accepted conclusions of the past. It prompted the scholars to look at the Syriac traditions in a different way. The **Pro Oriente Foundation** in Vienna, founded by His Eminence Cardinal Franz Koenig prepared the way for such a deep renewed study of the Syriac traditions in the light of the Council. The studies opened the eyes of many church leaders and scholars around the world and as a result many changed their understanding regarding the Syriac Christology.

Trinitarian Understanding

In the Trinitarian theology there is agreement among the various Churches of the Syriac tradition. The Syriac tradition fully agrees with the Greek and Latin traditions also. There is only **one divine kyana (nature)**, common to the three Persons in the Most Holy Trinity. But there are **three divine Qnome (Persons)**: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. **Each Qnoma (Person) has a Parsopa** (relating or distinguishing characteristic): For the Father, his Parsopa is **Paternity**, for the Son, it is **Filiation** and for the Holy Spirit, it is **Procession**. Hence there is **one kyana, three divine Qnome and three divine Parsope** in the Most Holy and Adorable Trinity, that is known and adored as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The reason of this basic unanimity lies in the fact that these terms were accepted by the Syriac Churches before any division among them and they reached them with sufficient clarifications. This was not the case in Christology.

Christology

In Christology the terms reached the Syrians with the already divisive background in the Churches in the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes had their own specific significance for the Christological terms. The non Chalcedonian Syrians (Syrian Orthodox) inherited the Alexandrian tradition and became radical Cyrillians. They were called by others as **Monophysites**. The non-Ephesene Syrians inherited the Antiochene tradition and were termed **Nestorians**.

The Christological terms among the Syrian Orthodox

For the Syrian Orthodox, in Jesus Christ, there is **only one kyana, one Qnoma and one Parsopa**. For them these three terms are almost identical, referring to the one Person of the Logos. Hence one kyana (**mia physis**-one nature) means one Person. They follow strictly the **mia physis** formula of St. Cyril of Alexandria. In former times

this Christological formulation was interpreted by others as heretical. Hence the Syrian Orthodox were considered Monophysites, the followers of Eutyches, although they strongly condemned his heresy. But today the situation has changed, thanks to the **Non-Official Theological dialogues between the Theologians of the Oriental Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches** held at Vienna under the auspices of the Pro Oriente Foundation. It is widely accepted today by the churches and theologians, that the Syrian Orthodox do not teach the Monophysite heresy and their **one nature formula** is not a repudiation of the two natures in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. On the other hand, the **one nature** is referring to **the oneness of Person of the Incarnate Lord**, as St. Cyril of Alexandria understood it and taught it. The Roman Catholic Church, the Byzantine Church and several of the major Protestant churches have accepted the non-Chalcedonian (Oriental Orthodox) Christology with this explanation, as one of the authentic expressions of the mystery of Christ, the God-man.

Hence kyana has double meaning in Christology for the Syrian Orthodox:

1. It means nature, as every one understands the expression. In this sense there is only one divine kyana in the Most Holy Trinity. And in Jesus Christ, there is divine nature (kyana) and human nature(kyana).

2. It means also Person in Christology. It is indicative of the essence of the being and is concrete. In this sense there is only one nature in Jesus Christ. For them, Qnoma has only one meaning both in the Trinitarian theology and Christology. It signifies Person. And Parsopa in Christology is the same as Qnoma, namely Person.

The Syrian Orthodox has very rarely introduced this particular Christological development into the Liturgy. Except in one or two places they did not alter the ancient formulations. During the holy

Eucharist, at the time of fraction, towards the end there is a statement: “*Emmanuel is one, indivisible and of one nature*”. The Second instance is at the time of the ordination ceremony of priests. In the exhortation given to the candidate (*amalogia*) there is a statement: “*there are not two qnome as the teaching of Nestorius.*” But *the two qnome* of Nestorius was understood by the Syrian Orthodox in the light of their *one qnoma* Christology. Today there is no Christological difference in faith among the ancient Apostolic churches.

Christological terms among the Assyrians

The Council of Ephesus, presided over by St. Cyril of Alexandria in 431 identified *physis, hypostasis and Prosopon* and the Oriental Orthodox inherited that tradition. We have seen in the previous paragraph, how the Syrian Orthodox church explained it further today so that it may be understandable to the other churches : *one kyana, one qnoma and one parsopa*. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 made a distinction between *physis* on the one side and *hypostasis and prosopon* on the other side. According to Chalcedon there are **two physes and one hypostasis and prosopon** in the Incarnate Logos. That is to say, there is plurality on the side of *physis*, but unity and oneness on the side of *hypostasis and prosopon*.

The Persian theologians made a further development in the formulation, namely they placed *physis (kyana)* and *hypostasis (Qnoma)* on the one side and *Prosopon (person)* on the other side. In Jesus Christ **there are two kyane, two Qnome and one Parsopa of Filiation** is their formulation. There is plurality on the level of *kyane, and qnome*, but there is oneness and unity on the level of *person (prosopon)*.

When they speak of **kyane**, they understand it as nature in abstract, such as humanity (**kyana nasaya**) and divinity (**kyana alahaya**). It is the same as *physis*, designating the common elements found in

all the members of the species. It is the universal compared to the particular.

For them in Christology, **Qnoma** is the concretization of the abstract *kyana* such as this or that. *Kyana* as such never exists except as *qnome*. It is **this or that substance, substratum, subsistence, reality opposed to unreal or illusion**. It is primarily referring to concrete reality or actuality rather than Person (*Prosopon*). It is not the Chalcedonian *hypostasis*. In order to assert that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, they speak of *a divine qnoma and a human qnoma*. By that they do not refer to two persons in the divinity. It only means that there are two realities in Jesus Christ, as the Holy Scripture teaches. There is duality in Jesus Christ because He is God and man. But this duality is not on the level of Person.

Parsopa is the property, which distinguishes one *qnoma* from another *qnoma* of the same species. It is the sum total of the accidents, and properties, giving the particular characteristic to the *qnoma*. The indivisible and singular property of the *qnoma* is given by the *parsopa*. In Jesus Christ there is *only one ontological parsopa*. It is the *parsopa of Filiation* of the Second *Qnoma* of the Most Holy Trinity. It is the *Parsopa* of the God-man Jesus Christ. The Word of God gave His glorious *parsopa* to the assumed humanity and it became the *parsopa* also of the humanity. It is unique.

Qnoma is fixed and non-communicable. *Parsopa*, the sum total of the properties also is fixed. But it could be communicated and it could be assumed by another *qnoma*. Fixed because it is the distinguishing property of a *qnoma* from the other *qnome* of the same species and it shows that this is not that. It could be assumed by another *qnoma* and can indicate everything that the *qnoma* possesses in its distinction from other *qnome*. When applied to men, *qnoma* and *parsopa* are one and the same thing and there is identity between *qnoma* and *parsopa*. When we say Paul, we mean the *qnoma* of Paul and the *Parsopa* of Paul. In the divinity *qnoma* is

not the same as *parsopa*. *Parsopa* distinguishes one *qnome* of the divinity from the other and there it is no accidents as in the creatures. The distinguishing property of the Word is Filiation and it is ontological and essential, proper to the Son ¹.

The ‘**two kyane, two qnome and one parsopa of Filiation**’ theory was not invented by the Persian Christians. It was already in the Antiochene tradition and the Persians, especially **Mar Babai the Great(+628)** clarified the terms further. The Persians had their basis in the writings of Theodore and Nestorius and other Antiochene writers. Theodore of Mopsuestia spoke of two *physeis* and two *hypostaseis* on the side of duality, and one *prosopon* (*hypostasis*) on the side of unity.² Nestorius of Constantinople spoke of Christ *in two ousias or natures and one prosopon*. Nestorius was referring to Gregory Naziansen, Ambrose and Athanasius.³ Pseudo-Basil develops the doctrine of *ousia* and *hypostasis*. There is the universal nature, common to different members of a species (*koine physis*). The particularizing characteristic, the *idion* pertains to the *hypostasis*, whereas universality is attributed to the *physis*. The particularizing characteristics (*idiomata*) make the universal a *hypostasis*. *Ousia* has the same relation to *hypostasis* as the common to the particular. Every one of us both shares in existence by the term *ousia* and is such or such a one by his own properties.⁴ The Persians might have inherited this distinction from the Greek writers and might have modified it. The early Syriac writers from Persia did not make use of this particular formula of *two kyane, two qnome and one parsopa*. The Seleucian Synods used less technical vocabulary. With regard to Christ they persisted in the mode of speaking of Narsai, namely, Christ is *in two kyane, and one parsopa of Filiation*.⁵

The *two-qnome formulation* appears for the first time in the discussion held by the Persian delegation with Emperor Justinian in 562/3. There the form used was, “*Christ is in two kyane, two qnome and one parsopa*”.⁶ The official Persian Synods after 562 did not take up this formulation. Even though Theodore taught of *two hypostases*, the Persians didn’t take it up until the new translation of the writings of

Nestorius, initiated by Mar Aba after his pilgrimage in the Eastern part of the Byzantine empire. The formula got wider circulation in the Persian church with Mar Babai the Great through his writings in Christology (*Liber de Unione*)⁷. In the discussion of the Persian delegates in 612 at the Persian Court with the Severians⁸, this formula is seen. There the formula appears as one already in use by Nestorius. The Persians proved from the early

¹ Cfr, G.Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, Kottayam, 1982,p.84-91.

² . *Ibid.p.84.no.1*; Theodore, frag.from *De Incarnatione*, VIII, 62.

³ *Liber Heracleides*, tr.by Driver, p.170.233.236; cfr, A.Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, I.p.510ff.

⁴ Ep.38 of Pseudo-Basil:PG 32, 325ff.; Ep.214; A.Grillmeier, *op.cit.p.373*, with n.53.

⁵ Cfr, G.Chediath, *op.cit.p.85-86*.

⁶ Cfr, A.Guillaumont, *Justinien et l'Eglise de Perse*, p.62ff.

⁷ A.Vaschalde,*Babai Magni Liber de Unione*, (CSCO 79/80) Louvain, 1915;G.Chediath,

***Mar Babai-Christusastram*,**

(Malayalam translation of the *Liber de Unione*),Kottayam,2000.

⁸ The followers of Severus of Antioch; it was another name in those days for the non-Chalcedonians.

writers against the Severians, that it was already in use before Nestorius.¹ Under the influence of Mar Babai, the formula appeared in one of the liturgical texts: in a hymn for the Season of Annunciation (*Subara*) and Christmas (*yalda*). This is the only instance where the Christological creed is introduced into the liturgy.² In general neither in the liturgical nor in the canonical traditions of the Persian Church, *the two qnome Christology* is seen. But later it became part of their tradition.

Today after the clarifications given by the delegates of the Assyro-Chaldean Church and the Syro-Malabar Church regarding the term **qnoma** during the *Syriac Dialogue* under the auspices of the *Pro Oriente Foundation*, it is evident that the expression *qnoma* does not have the significance of person in Christology and the accusation Nestorianism of today's Assyrians is totally unfounded³. The Catholic Church is convinced of the fact and the Pope John Paul II has explicitly prohibited the use of the expression *Nestorian* to designate this church⁴.

The *two kyane, two qnome one parsopa of Filiation* Christology is accepted by the Catholic Church as Orthodox as any other Christology. But the Syrian Orthodox Church is still studying the Assyrian Christology and trying to see the Assyrians not with the eye of their own *one qnome Christology* but through the eyes of the Assyrians. Just as the non-Chalcedonian *one nature* was accepted by the Assyrians, the *two qnome* Christology of the Assyrians has to be received by the Syrian Orthodox as a sign of Christian charity and Christian benevolence. After all, Christ our Lord and Redeemer is a great mystery. He could be viewed from several angles and still he remains a mystery. It would be an ecumenical contribution from the part of the Syrian Orthodox to accept it and pave the way for the other Oriental Orthodox to accept it for the greater glory of God our Father.

Eastern Catholics of the Syriac Tradition

Up to the Second Vatican Council, in general the Eastern Catholic Churches held the Christological viewpoints of the Latin Church. Just as the Latin Church considered in the past the Syrian Orthodox and Assyrian Christologies as heretical, under the label of Monophysites and Nestorians, the Eastern Catholic Churches of the Syriac tradition considered them to be unorthodox. The Eastern Churches accepted the Chalcedonian definition of faith: *Jesus Christ is one Person in two natures*. It accepted the Chalcedonian definition of faith, and accepted in the past, no other Christological formulation other than that of Chalcedon. Now with the Second Vatican Council, the whole atmosphere has changed. The present writer in his doctoral dissertation

¹ G.Chediath, *The Christology*, p.60-61; G.Chediath, (tr.in Malayalam), *Synodicon Orientale*, Kottayam, 1996, p.458-490.

² *Ibid.* p.39; P.Bedjan, *Breviarium Chaldeorum*, Leipzig, 1886, vol.I, p.57-58; T.Abimelek, ed. *Ktaba daqdamubatar*, Trichur., 1940, p.174-175.

³ Pro Oriente Syriac *Dialogue, II, Vienna, 1996, p.193*

⁴ *Information service*, 91(1996/1-2) 24-26: "All the Christian Churches must humbly acknowledge their grave responsibility for the marginalisation and the sufferings endured by the Assyrian Church throughout the centuries; the pejorative epithet Nestorian, often synonym of heretical with which they have referred to this church until recent times, is no longer acceptable and must be definitely abandoned"(p.25)

convincingly showed in 1978 in Rome at Augustinianum Patristic Institute, that the East Syrian Christology could be accepted as one of the Christological traditions regarding the mystery of Christ. Now everybody accepts it in the Catholic Church. The three formulations, that of Chalcedon, that of the Assyrians, and that of the Syrian Orthodox are valid Christologies. The whole Christian world is very much indebted to the **Pro Oriente Foundation** for this painful process of bringing together the various churches of the Syriac tradition and arranging the platform for discussions and clarifications.

Conclusion

A correct formulation may be wrongly understood. An apparently wrong formulation could be understood correctly. If there is evangelical charity and an ecumenical spirit, there is always the possibility to understand others and to see them with their own eyes, and not only with our own eyes alone. And this has happened in the recent past years among the Syriac Churches. And the whole Christendom has profited from it.