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# Can Cognitive Science of Religion Help Us to Better Understand the Reasons for Nestorius' Downfall?

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There are many reasons for Nestorius' personal downfall and I will try to explore most of them in this essay. But the main aim of this paper is to look at the possibility of employing cognitive science in this exploration. In other words: is it possible that Nestorius was not successful, at least partially, because his "theological correctness" went against the "cognitive optimum"? One of the main reasons that influenced the result of the Nestorian controversy was the popular opinion of the masses ("vox populi"). This claim may sound as too big an exaggeration but if we take a better look we will find out that it is not. Could this opinion have been formed, among other things, because of natural unintentional human tendency to anthropomorphize god concepts? And what was Nestorian controversy about? It started one of the greatest theological disputes in Christianity after the Arian crisis and it is also one of the best examples of what can possibly be involved in the shaping of an orthodox doctrine.

Nestorius was summoned to Constantinople in the spring of 428 C.E. to be enthroned as Archbishop of the Byzantine capital. He was an external candidate, who enjoyed a high reputation in his own region of the Syrian church (Russell 2000: 31). After the death of his predecessor, the ecclesiastical politics of the great city was once again in ferment and Emperor's advisers probably asked for an outsider. "Whoever it was that took that throne was destined from the outset to be courted by all interested parties, and run the risk of offending them all, even if (as it seems to be the case with Nestorius) he adopted the policy of forging ahead independently" (McGuckin 1996: 7).

In his initial sermon as a consecrated bishop Nestorius addressed the Emperor himself with a request for a purified Kingdom, in return he was offering the Kingdom of Heaven, and the victory over the barbarian Persians (Russell 2000: 31). What he really wanted was the freedom to pursue his fight against heretics in all possible ways. This was actually a "standard" policy and it demonstrates a general principle in the political theology of the Eastern Roman Empire. "[F]idelity to God's will was the ultimate aspect that secured its political stability," it was "[a] critical matter of military security" (McGuckin 1996: 10). At the time of Nestorius' accession it was a pressing issue. "Barbarians" had made great advances. There were constant wars in Africa and an increasing pressure on the northern borders.

## Five steps

The trouble with an otherwise "normal" policy emerged when the purge turned against the last remains of Arians, who at that time were no real risk or challenge for orthodoxy in Constantinople, and who "held on by a fingernail, with merely a chapel of ease at their disposal" (McGuckin 1996: 10). The security of the capital

depended on Gothic mercenaries who were stationed there in considerable numbers and they were all ancestrally Arian in their faith. Moreover when it came down to enforcement of Nestorius' demands "the congregation set fire to their own church rather than surrender it" (McGuckin 1996: 11) and the fire subsequently destroyed a whole surrounding area. Many senior army officials turned hostile to Nestorius when he refused to allow the rebuilding even of a small military chapel for the use of the Gothic troops.

Another step which was particularly dangerous was connected to Nestorius' attempt to regulate monastic life in the capital. He thus caused a major disaffection in his own see and that was a weakness which proved costly in the following international controversy. Monks developed a way in which they were able to be very active in the affairs of the city. They usually earned their living by secretarial services to the aristocracy and as such they were patronized by the nobility. They were also a part of many other secular matters which might had been seen as decadence and Nestorius recalled them to their monasteries, and forbid their involvement in the numerous "unofficial" ministries they had instituted around Constantinople (McGuckin 1994: 23). Monasticism was also closely connected to notable ascetics who often attracted enthusiasm of common people as well as of high society. Nestorius was also bound to receive strong opposition when he tried to bring them under his canonical jurisdiction (Wessel 2004: 88).

He did not win a favour with common people with his third move either. He tried, and to some extent successfully, to prohibit nudity in the theatres, circuses and stadiums and to ban hunting and combat with dangerous animals as well as other kinds of profane entertainment where men competed against one another (Barhadbeshabba 1913: 522). "He moved to close down the many strip clubs which were operating in lucrative sites and expel them to off-city limits" (McGuckin 1996: 13). It is not difficult to deduce what sort of response this created in popular feelings and in one case we have very interesting indication of public resentment. "When people asked the dancers why they were in distress, and why they had to leave the city, they replied: 'It is because of Bishop Nestorius.' And when the name of Nestorius was mentioned, men kept silence. The Emperor Theodosius held him in high regard" (Barhadbeshabba 1913: 523). The Byzantine city factions were extremely volatile and the court had good reason to fear them. As will be shown later, it was exactly this sort of popular demonstration of dislike which eventually prompted the Emperor to abandon his protégé.

In his fourth step Nestorius achieved to alienate an important body of influential women. This was part of his wider dislike of involvement of Byzantine women in the affairs of the church. There were certain virgins (deaconesses and dedicated virgins) who played an active role in liturgy and charity work in the Great Church in Constantinople. This usually happened via the vigil services which involved memorial meals. "The use of common meals was an extremely important element of Byzantine social cohesion and political influence" (McGuckin 1996: 17). Under the suspicion of moral indecency Nestorius did not allow them admission "since no decent woman, he said, would want to be out at night in the city" (McGuckin 1994: 25). Such highly connected women were able to cause much political damage and "surely financed much of the opposition against him" (McGuckin 1996: 18).

One of these dedicated virgins was the Augusta Aelia Pulcheria, which leads to the last (fifth) step of Nestorius' early administration which was probably the most lethal one. Pulcheria was Emperor's older sister, she was a Regenta during her brother's minority and she wielded immense power in the Palace, manipulating her vacillating brother Theodosius II. "In her person the other forces of opposition, the monks and famous ascetics, the dedicated virgins, and the aristocratic women of the capital, all find their centre and point of focus" (McGuckin 1996: 18). Nestorius and Pulcheria met indirectly in two previous steps. First, she had shown herself to be an active protector of the monks and ascetics even before Nestorius came to Byzantium. She had "intervened decisively to frustrate legal moves taken against leading monastics" (McGuckin 1996: 15), and in doing so she had greatly increased her own popularity. When a wandering ascetic and visionary Basil harangued Nestorius publicly in his cathedral church while he was preaching, Nestorius had him beaten for his insubordination and arranged for his exile. But Pulcheria granted him a site of refuge under her own patronage at St. Euphemia's where he could continue with his agitations. Second, as mentioned before, Pulcheria together with her two younger royal sisters Arcadia and Marina were all dedicated virgins. She publicly declared their dedication to perpetual virginity to safeguard the minority of Theodosius II, and this repudiation of dynastic marriage stabilized the dynasty at the critical time. Her sacrifice of marriage was then more than a personal affair, it was a root and a foundation of her status in which she was able to continue to influence the imperial policy even though there was no legally defined *basileia* for her when her brother assumed reign. Nestorius expressed more than clearly his disapproval of such a use of dedicated virginity (Wessel 2004: 102). Apart from these incidental encounters, Nestorius crossed Pulcheria also face to face. On the very first state liturgy he conducted, Nestorius refused to grant her the right to communicate alongside the Emperor. Of all laymen, only the reigning Emperor was allowed to receive the Eucharist within the sanctuary and Pulcheria seems to have established the right for herself too. But Nestorius refused to administer the sacraments under such conditions. This hostility went even further when Nestorius removed "a costly robe which Pulcheria had donated as its covering" (McGuckin 1996: 19) from an altar in the Great Church. In *Book of Heraclides* Nestorius refers to her as to an "aggressive female" and he even adds "Here on earth she prevailed against me, but it shall not be so in front of the Judgement Seat of Christ" (Nau 1910: 89). To see her as a main reason behind Nestorius' failure and personal tragedy is getting more realistic proportions when we consider that "it was doubtless her influence that relocated the proposed general synod from Constantinople to Ephesos: the site, with its great shrine of Mary and its powerful bishop who was antagonistic to Nestorius could not have been better chosen to disadvantage the archbishop of Constantinople" (McGuckin 1994: 26). And the Syriac Legend of Nestorius regards Pulcheria as the "main agent behind Nestorius' removal from the relative ease of his exile at Antioch to the severe penal colony of the Great Oasis" (Nau 1910: xxi, n. 1), following Theodosius's accidental death.

## Will of the Demos

I made this analysis of political background to point out that Nestorius had set against himself almost everyone on the home front and that this alienation was deep and severe even before the doctrinal conflict began. All these facts show that his fate had been sealed largely before the council of Ephesos ever opened. Political reasons were undoubtedly the main force which shaped Emperor's decisions and when the conflict came to a critical point in the deadlock of councils in Ephesos in the summer of 431 C. E., solution was once again in Emperor's hands. Theodosius II did not allow Nestorius to return mainly because he was hated by the city and the elite citizens. "The masses at the capital had then chanted slogans for three days and occupied important buildings in Constantinople, demanding the deposition of their unpopular bishop" (Schwartz 1927: 14). It was a demonstration of the political will of the Demos that was part of the traditional fabric of city politics, and very dangerous for the court to ignore (Gregory 1979).

In this paper, I try to show that it is in fact not necessary to go into the analysis of theological concepts and debates to explain why this controversy ended as it did. Nestorius' unpopularity both in the eyes of aristocracy and the people of the city is sufficient for the understanding of Emperor's final decision. What is necessary is to have a closer look at what stands behind this enmity. As I showed in the previous text Nestorius made a lot of enemies on both sides (leading military men, highly placed women including Pulcheria among aristocracy, monks, ascetics and certain parts of population in general) by his own political mistakes. After the debate about *Theotokos* started to unfold, inner and outer enemies joined forces.

## Theotokos

The monastic party under the leadership of Basil and with the support of several aristocratic patrons (including Pulcheria) came to Nestorius with a theological test case for him to settle (Grillmeier 1975: 373). "They wanted him to make a statement affirming the orthodoxy of the veneration of Mary as Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> They had clashed with a group, possibly that of Nestorius' own chaplain Anastasius, who were (...) arguing that the *Theotokos* title evidenced a defective theological understanding that could only be put right by the application to Mary of the title *Anthropotokos* (Mother of the Man). The Constantinopolitan monks were obviously wanting to draw Nestorius out into the open" (McGuckin 1994: 27). Nestorius tried to solve this problem with a proposal that they should adopt the biblical notion of Mary as the Christ-mother (*Christotokos*) and he stressed the need for semantic exactness in this difficult theological area.

But the refusal to allow the validity of the title *Theotokos* left open a big field for mockery of Nestorius' argument and his opponents took all the advantage they could.<sup>2</sup> With a few public lectures and sermons the matter became public. "In the

<sup>1</sup> "Pulcheria redirected the powers of her *imperium* to establish public, institutionalized veneration of the *Theotokos*" (Limberis 1994: 59–60).

<sup>2</sup> They draw upon him an ancient heresy of Paul of Samosata. Christology of a "mere man" (psilanthropism) and ever since used the syllogism: "If Mary is not, strictly speaking, the Mother of God, then her son is not, strictly speaking, God."

Spring of that same year matters reached a serious pitch at Constantinople when the lawyer Eusebius arranged for a public placard to be carried around the city openly accusing the archbishop of the heresy of the Samosatene and the monastic leaders caused demonstrations in the cathedral to disrupt Nestorius' preaching" (McGuckin 1994: 32). At this stage it became an international matter because Cyril the archbishop of Alexandria got involved<sup>3</sup> and it was mainly through his actions that it reached the extent of the Third Ecumenical council.

Cyril was a very experienced and strong opponent who soon joined in and ideologically backed up Pulcheria's circles. Having access to the great fiscal resources which the see of Alexandria could command he did not hesitate to use them even though he almost bankrupted the church. Many influential aristocrats and leading ladies<sup>4</sup> had been won over to their cause by lavish "eulogie" (blessings) in cash and kind (McGuckin 1994: 103). Through his network of agents in the capital Cyril was also able to manipulate some of the popular feelings.

But we can still focus our interest more on popular opinion and how it had been formed. It was shown that it had been shaped against Nestorius by political mistakes of the archbishop himself and by political intrigues of his enemies, but might there have been more reasons?

### **Cult of the Virgin Mary on increase**

"From the physical and cultural evidence of the period, it is clear that the cult of the Virgin Mary grew tremendously between 400 and 451" (Limberis 2004: 321). Manifestation of this was rapid building of new churches to her all over the Mediterranean, new hymns extolling the Virgin in emotional, hyperbolic language or appearance of legends concerning her death. Ephesos, which at that time was losing its prestige and power to Constantinople, was in reality "the greatest Christian shrine dedicated to Mary then in existence" (McGuckin 1996: 47). Whenever a cult becomes important, physical sites of holiness in regions and cities gain great significance. This trend explains the importance placed upon the location of Mary's later life on Earth and the city of her death. "Evidence that Mary was in Ephesos is meagre, but probably proliferated in popular circles with the quick growth of the cult of the Virgin at the end of the fourth century (Limberis 2004: 326). The citizens of Ephesos were wholeheartedly behind the propagation of the Theotokos title and during the entire summer 431 C. E. Nestorius could not leave his house in Ephesos due to violence. For the masses the defence of the Mother of God was the matter of upholding the honour of their own city. Her cult was an essential part of the city's redefinition of identity in the Byzantine period. "The Mother of God as patroness would ensure that Ephesos had as glorious a future in the Christian oecumene as once it had in its now

<sup>3</sup> The reasons of Cyril's engagement are again another story which would need a thorough examination itself. It seems that it had a lot to do with rivalry of their sees, with the differences of Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetical schools and, last but not least, with the review of the case of certain clerics and lay people who felt they had been too harshly treated by Cyril's judicial court at Alexandria (If Nestorius found for the petitioners, the best that could result would be a public humiliation for Cyril, the worst could be no less than a legal call for his deposition from office (McGuckin 1994: 35).

<sup>4</sup> Pulcheria's two ladies-in-waiting, Marcella and Droseria, were among the listed contacts. They each received 50 libers of gold for services rendered in representing their interests in the Royal Gynaeceum (Nau 1910: 368).

overshadowed past when it was dedicated to the Mother Goddess, Ephesian Artemis, whose shrine was one of the chief wonders of the ancient world” (McGuckin 1994: 60). When Cyril’s synod finished and anathematized Nestorius, there were genuine celebrations. Crowds had been gathering outside the church throughout the day and when the bishops came out they were greeted with great popular enthusiasm. They looked out to “a starlit summer’s night and flickering illumination throughout the square and city streets from the torches of the enthusiasts who had been waiting expectantly all day for the outcome of the council. (...) The women chanting in torchlit processions to honour the Virgin Mother of God resonated deep echoes for the Ephesians of the ‘virgin mother of the god’ Isis, whose cult used just such illuminated liturgies” (McGuckin 1994: 88–89).

It seems that apart from these cultural residues in Ephesos, it was especially the devotion to Mary at a popular level in general that Nestorius had underestimated. And as can be seen in this and other cases which took place in Constantinople, people understood it as a victory of their own expressions of piety over the “sharp-witted and intellectualist” theology. When the news of the deposition of Nestorius leaked out, there was a widespread delight in the streets of the imperial city. Especially monks were celebrating. They even organised a procession<sup>5</sup> to the imperial palace to plead with Emperor to confirm the result. And it was not just monks. As I mentioned before, the people of Constantinople were agitating in the streets and held a protest meeting in the Great Church for three days (Schwartz 1927: 14) demanding the same thing.

### “Theological correctness”

Is there then a possibility of going even further in the explanation? Might there have been a cognitive optimum involved, “patterns of mental activity, rooted in the biology of brain functions” (Whitehouse 2002: 293) with direct effect? We could make a hypothesis where we would see the increasing devotion to Mary as an aspect of underlying cognitive anthropomorphism (Guthrie 1993). “Humans anthropomorphize pervasively, cross-culturally and mostly unconsciously” (Guthrie 2006: 42). They often use anthropomorphic god concepts that are inconsistent with stated theological beliefs (Barrett–Keil 1996: 219), and as such it is only natural for a believer to assume, that if there is god the father and god the son, the son needs to have had a mother, most likely god the mother. Moreover, such a concept is then thanks to an optimal violation of intuitive ontological category<sup>6</sup> easier to remember<sup>7</sup> and therefore advantaged<sup>8</sup> compared to other religious beliefs. And if believers are

<sup>5</sup> This caused a great sensation in the city because of involvement of Dalmatius (an aged monk and hermit, who was held in high veneration and who in fulfilment of his vow had not left his cell for the previous forty six years).

<sup>6</sup> “What goes on in your mind when you create a new concept is not entirely driven by the input but by a combination of that input with previous representations. [...] Religious representations are particular combinations of mental representations that satisfy two conditions. First, the religious concepts *violate* certain expectations from ontological categories. Second, they *preserve* other expectations” (Boyer 2001: 68–75). In this case ontological category PERSON preserved implicit intuitive aspect of motherhood.

<sup>7</sup> “[r]eligious beliefs ... must take a form that people can remember” (Whitehouse 2002: 295).

<sup>8</sup> “[c]oncepts that are minimally counterintuitive are *cognitively optimal* and therefore, all else being equal, more likely to be successfully transmitted” (Sørensen 2005: 473).

already used proceeding with their intuitive beliefs which meet new wide range of their emotional needs and are even being encouraged with official liturgy as it seems to have been the case with Pulcheria's cult of Theotokos, they would respond angrily to any attempt to disrupt their doings from the positions of theological correctness.

### **True but trivial**

But to what extent is it possible to just come up with a hypothesis like that? How does the method work? "Like the scientific study of anything, a cognitive study of culture must proceed from the 'bottom up'" (Dennett 1995: 74–76). "Although scientific explanations might ultimately begin with physics, the embodied nature of all life suggests biology as a more productive point of departure for an explanation of any cultural production" (Edelman 1992: 136). But how do we get from one level to the other? I think that precise rules for these steps are missing and that the answer "you just build one layer of complexity on top of another until you have what you need" (Wade 2000: 4) is simply not sufficient. Edward O. Wilson in his book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998)<sup>9</sup> distinguishes between two kinds of consilience: consilience by reduction and consilience by synthesis. Consilience by reduction is simply a possibility of transforming the data (knowledge) from one level to the more basic level without any redundancies. It is a sort of analysis "from up to bottom" which states that for example knowledge from psychology can not go in principle against the knowledge from biology, the biology is dependant on chemistry, chemistry on physics (Pyysiäinen 2004: 21–27). We can choose whatever thread we want and logically expect that it will be possible to trace it, through a complex body of causality, back to the laws of physics (Wilson 1999: 77). And there is nothing wrong with it. It is completely in agreement with the theory of reductionism, which itself together with induction or analytical mathematical modelling, is an undisputed part of the methodology of science since the Enlightenment. The trouble appears to be with the consilience by synthesis which tells us that it should be possible to go also the other way round ("from the bottom up"). Wilson himself honestly says that it is much easier to come back than going forward (Wilson 1999: 77). The main problem is the exponential growth of complexity. On each level of organisation, and especially from the living cells upwards, there are phenomena which need their own laws and principles which can not be simply deduced from the previous levels. It is for example still impossible to determine the structure of a whole cell just from what we know about its molecules and organelles (Wilson 1999: 95). But this makes every statement made on one level of organisation true but trivial for the higher level.

Does it say anything about how the cognitive sciences work in a real life? It seems that it is not possible to go from "the bottom up" as the case of a structure of a cell shows and so be able to make valuable predictions, because in this way they might be true but trivial. Is it then "politically correct" to work the other way round and form hypothesis based just on an intuition for which we subsequently try to find evidence in hard data or even create psychological tests. But in this way will there still be a chance of having valid predictions or we will have to do with "just" explanations of the phenomena which already appeared.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations are from a Czech translation of this book (Wilson 1999).



In the case of Nestorius' downfall we would need a special study from cognitive psychology to confirm human natural inclination to project biological realities of reproduction especially the necessity of female agent that bears the offspring to the nonnatural entities. With such a case study we would be able to answer the main question of this paper positively and apart from the obvious political reasons (which are accessible by classical historical and hermeneutical methods) there would also be "cognitive" reasons for Nestorius personal failure.

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## Teorie příbuzenství ve Starém zákoně

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### Úvod

V této studii<sup>1</sup> se zaměřím na popis a analýzu nábožensko-symbolického univerza starověkých Hebrejců skrze metodu sociální a kulturní antropologie, konkrétně teorie příbuzenství. Studium příbuzenských vztahů a systémů patří do oblasti klasického antropologického bádání a úzce souvisí se vznikem a vývojem antropologie jakožto samostatné vědní disciplíny. Evropská expanze a objevení „těch druhých“, takzvaných primitivních společností, vedla k rozsáhlému studiu příbuzenských vztahů, jež se mnohdy považovaly za jediný klíč k pochopení celkové organizace těchto společností. Nutno však podotknout, že příbuzenství obecně je důležitým aspektem společnosti, definované jako organizované a vnitřně rozrůzněné seskupení lidí, a příbuzenské vztahy jsou považovány za primární model pro organizaci ostatních společenských vztahů.

Příbuzenství jako jeden z viditelných způsobů organizace lidí do určitého řádu, může napomoci osvětlit i další sociokulturní aspekty daného společenství, tedy i náboženství.

### Descendence<sup>2</sup>

Starověkou hebrejskou společnost řadíme mezi unilineární, přesněji patrilineární descendenční skupiny<sup>3</sup>. Členství v této skupině je přenášeno skrze mužské potom-

<sup>1</sup> Tato studie vychází z bakalářské práce „Příbuzenství a incestní tabu v posvátné symbolizaci hebrejské bible“ (Polífková 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Descendence (původ, rodovost) je obzvláště důležitým kulturním principem. Definuje sociální kategorie skrze kulturně uznávaný vztah potomek–předek, tedy mezigeneračně. Skupiny jsou definovány s ohledem na předky a mají svou časovou hloubku.

<sup>3</sup> Patrilinearita označuje situaci, kdy se členství v příbuzenské skupině či jiné prostředky dědí přes otce, který je získal od svého otce a tak dále do minulosti. Dle tohoto zvyku člověk může dědit po otcově bratrovi, ale ne po matčině bratrovi. Neznamená to však, že dědí pouze muži, neboť dcery také dědí patrilineárně.