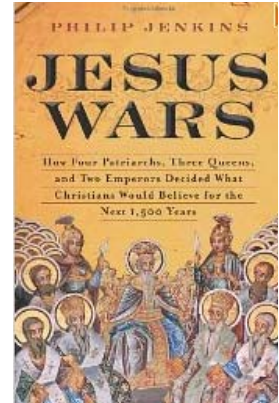


Jenkins, John Philip, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*

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Philip Jenkins has written a serious history of the Christological controversies that strongly marked the fifth to seventh centuries. It is an era whose strident tensions and bloody conflicts over the identity of Jesus were punctuated by ecclesiastical councils and driven by political powers. In this period one sees the forces in play that evidence the transition from classical times to the Medieval Period in the West and the strident disruptions which left many of the ancient churches, warred upon by Christian brethren of different persuasions, welcoming the tolerance of Islamic invaders. It is in fact the story of the collapse of Roman and Christian rule over Egypt and the East which in effect insulated the protagonists from each other, or, as the author puts it, "How the Church lost half the world."



The book brings back into focus that, compared to the Protestant Reformation and the Counter Reformation of Catholicism in the 16th and 17th centuries and the subsequent sectarian conflicts in the West, the period under study here was far more violent than the latter fragmentation has managed to become despite its well known atrocities. It seems incomprehensible today that debates over whether Jesus had one nature or two, one will or two, could he and did he really die, and the like, could have produced Bishops who could sic their hit teams of cudgel and knife wielding monks on their fellow bishops and their congregants. But they did, even with imperial and military support in many cases. Fist fights were not uncommon at meetings of bishops wrangling with concepts that would seem arcane and perhaps incomprehensible to most Christians today.

Do theological debates of this nature rage today? Probably with less overt physical violence between Christian groups, but Jenkins raises the question: "Do churches today fall into internecine conflict over issues of biblical authority and sexual regulations while millions of Christians starve?" Of course the issues of the identity of Jesus and of the Christian are in never ending reflection and development, and mental images of present day believers are affected both by the orthodoxy that was created in these earlier centuries. They frequently impact the cultures we are a part of on an everyday basis but, given the transparency that culture tends to assume and the reluctance of many who study culture to eschew religion as either irrelevant or as too conflictual, we are rarely in a position to accurately and comfortably knit religious realities into the cultural pictures we draw.

Despite the complex terminology involved, Jenkins, a frequent contributor of op-ed pieces to major media, has managed to tell the intricacies of the theological debates in simple, almost conversational language. He has managed clarifying lists of events and people where today's reader is unfamiliar with both the issues and the cast of characters. An appendix nicely summarizes the dramatis personae of the period and the footnotes are full and professional. It is a pleasant but not an easy read and, in a sense, emblematic of the present where, in understanding of the mental and emotional conflicts surrounding religious or theological controversies, it is nigh impossible to put ourselves in the shoes of the other in our families as well as in public fora.