

Bishop Cyril and Alexandrian intellectual life

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Cyril was Patriarch of Alexandria from 412-444, a period of Christian triumphalism. Philosophy being at that time the nearest equivalent to what we now call religion, Platonism and Christianity faced one another as rival institutions. At the same time, 200 years of hostilities between the two groups had entailed not only clear distancing in some respects but assimilation in others, and it was possible for an author like Synesius of Cyrene to move from one to the other with only a moderate shift in his profession of belief. Cyril is a more zealous proponent of Christian hegemony, as (for example) in his measures to secure the expulsion of Jews from Alexandria. His alleged complicity in the murder of Hypatia, even if it is an invention by pagan enemies, bears witness to their perception of his ferocity, and his refutation of Julian the Apostate is both the longest and the most learned of many exercises in this vein. It also shows, however, that he was no novice in philosophy, and this is apparent also in his treatise in defence of the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, where he turns the Aristotelianism of his heretical adversaries against them. It has been maintained that even in his most famous texts, where he argues for the unity of Christ and hence for the suffering of God, he is making use of ontological distinctions which he derives from Aristotle; even if this is a somewhat adventurous reading of the evidence, his philosophical studies have enabled him to state his paradoxical faith with a terminological rigour that eluded his opponents and his catholic predecessors. Rigidly averse as Cyril is to all hybridity in religion, his writings testify none the less to the rich intellectual commerce between the Christian church and the pagan schools of late antique Alexandria.