Ten years after the death of Athanasius, the great champion of faith in Christ as fully God, the bishopric of Alexandria was bestowed on one Theophilus. He was a man of fiery temperament, and ruthless and violent in the pursuit of what he conceived to be his duty. Having obtained the consent of the government, he destroyed pagan temples, and the monastaries of monks whose views differed from his own. He is on the Egyptian (Coptic) and the Syrian calendars, but not on most eastern or any western ones. Summary: unpleasant but orthodox (Right but Repulsive). Upon his death in 412, he was succeeded by his nephew Cyril.

Cyril began his career as Bishop of Alexandria by showing himself to be an ill-tempered, quarrelsome, hasty, and violent man. He shut the churches of the Novatianists (a group of Christians who were indistinguishable in doctrine and manner of worship from other Christians, but who as descendants of those who had stood firm in the persecutions 260 years earlier could have nothing to do with the descendants of those who had not -- nearly a century earlier, the emperor Constantine had disgustedly told their leader to set up a ladder and climb to heaven by himself), he drove out the Jews, he quarrelled with the imperial prefect Orestes, and with Orestes' friend Hypatia, a distinguished neo-Platonist scholar. (Hypatia was murdered by a mob. There is no evidence that Cyril was directly guilty, but the murderers were persons who regarded him as their leader.) In short, he made a bad beginning.

Then there arose a controversy over the relation between Christ's Divinity and His Humanity. One view, associated with the name of Nestorius, spoke of Jesus as a sinless man in whom the Spirit of God fully dwelt, suggesting that the difference between Jesus and any other good man was a matter of degree. (Jones is an almost sinless man in whom the Spirit of God dwells almost fully. He is therefore 99% whatever Jesus is 100%.) This may not do justice to the subtlety of the Nestorian position, but it is the danger that others saw in it, and the Nestorians were unable to explain what safeguards their position had against this danger. Cyril wrote learnedly and with great logic and conviction against the Nestorian position, and was largely instrumental in getting it condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Afterwards (surprisingly in view of his earlier record), he worked to reconcile the two parties, and to bring many of the less extreme Nestorians back into the fellowship of the church. But it is as a theologian and a scholar, not as a bishop or human-relations man, that Cyril is honored. I do not find him on any Anglican calendars, and I think I know why.

But on the other hand....

As I was taking a cab back from the airport (thank you, William Raspberry), the driver asked me, "What are you writing there?"

I said: "A biographical sketch of Cyril of Alexandria."

He said: "Not an altogether enthusiastic appraisal, right?"

I said: "Of course not."

He said: "That figures. What do people like you have against Cyril anyway? Why can't you leave the guy alone? He was a great theologian!"

I said: "He was a bigot and a tyrant. To start with, he forcibly closed the churches of the Novatianists."

He said: "That was not a matter of forcing men to give up their faith. The Novatianists held exactly the same beliefs as other Christians in Egypt. They just couldn't stand to worship with others whose ancestors had a less pure record than their own ancestors. When the government integrated the public schools and made the children of former slaveholders go to school with the children of former slaves, did you wax indignant? I thought not!"

I said: "Next thing, you'll be defending the murder of Hypatia."

He said: "Last time I checked, there was no evidence that Cyril had anything to do with the murder of Hypatia."

I said: "Not directly. But his sermons and denunciations created the climate of hate that led to her murder."

He said: "Climate of hate, indeed. You guys always trot that out when it suits you. After the Oklahoma City
bombing, you said that anyone who had complained about the government's actions in Waco was guilty of creating a climate of hate that caused the bombings. When an abortionist was shot, you said that anyone who talked about abortion as the taking of innocent life was responsible for creating a climate of hate that encouraged the shooting of abortionists. Do you ever put the shoe on the other foot? Have you ever written a column saying that people who complain about police brutality or complain that blacks in the United States face systematic injustice are responsible for creating a climate of hate that resulted in the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King trial or the Watts riots in 1965 or the Detroit riots in 1968? Do you say that people who raise concerns about battered wives are responsible for creating a climate of hatred that leads women to mutilate their husbands or set them on fire while they are sleeping? Just when does this 'climate of hate' argument apply and when doesn't it?"

I gave him less than my usual generous tip. If there's anything I can't stand, it's an uppity cabdriver.