THE SHAPING OF CHRISTIANITY

The History and Literature of Its Formative Centuries (100–800)

Gérard Vallée

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The Painful Partitions (150–430)

The formation of an orthodox or mainstream position in the church was prompted by historical necessities that began to press in the second century. A unified structure could hardly develop out of the earliest traditions: Paul had "left behind too many loose ends relating to church organization, belief and worship."[1] By 100 C.E. there was a wide variety of gospels and collections of Jesus' sayings, forms of Eucharist, and even versions of the Lord's Prayer. In the middle of the second century, on the same streets of Rome one could have run into Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin, all three then active as Christian teachers. Far from being a monolithic entity, second-century Christianity saw the proliferation of traditions, writings, beliefs, and hopes, which, although centered on the unique figure of Jesus, nevertheless threatened to take the edge off the movement and compromise its identity.

Thus, not given at the start in a well-formed shape, orthodoxy developed out of a variety of Christianities and by means of a series of exclusions aimed at securing the contours of the movement. It was not sufficient to deal with the challenges coming from "outside" in the form of Judaism and Hellenism. Conflicts "inside," since dissenters made their mark first within the church, soon revealed a latent crisis of foundations and norms that had to be addressed if the movement were to survive.

From Paul to Origen the conviction widely prevails that heresies and dissent were necessary and useful for the construction of orthodoxy. Unable to let everything in, the church felt the pressure to take a stand and close some doors. To understand that process it is clear that ideally heresy and orthodoxy should be studied together and simultaneously. For to identify dissent and heresy meant by the same token to uncover and express a norm: The right doctrine was constituted by means of exclusions that gradually defined the final notions of heresy and orthodoxy. All the same, in dealing with that process, the anachronism of retrojecting the labels *orthodoxy* and *heresy* back into the earliest Christian stages should be firmly resisted.

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[1] W. H. C. Frend, in R. Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 36.

The strategies devised to meet the first serious internal challengers (Marcion, the Gnostics) identified as dissenters and heretics were decisive in that they kept being applied to all those diverging from the majority and were even applied to others from outside. At best, dissenters were recognized as holding to a merely partial truth; at worst, they were denounced as victims and instruments of Satan. Heresiologists also had a practical concern: The harsh treatment meted out to heretics was mainly due to their being perceived as obstacles to the conversion of Jews and pagans. Confident of speaking on behalf of the church, heresiologists made use of the polemical techniques and rhetorical arsenal of the time to disqualify their opponents and deny that they could count as Christians. Thus the tactic against heretics was first to denounce them as alien to the authentic Christian tradition, as reducible to pagans and philosophers. Then, less charitably and more aggressively, they were accused of being fraudulent imitators, liars, presumptuous in their boundless curiosity, deceitful sophists, traitors renewing Satan's apostasy. That is why, as typically seen in Epiphanius, invective, abusive language, and slander were felt justified. Heretics must be ejected by all means, their teachings eradicated and their writings destroyed. In that, the orthodox party was successful: Only scant heretical writings have survived, mostly embedded in the hostile arguments of the winners, the heresiologists, making an impartial study of orthodoxy and heresy hardly possible.

Not all teachers and bishops espoused the mean attitude and verbal assaults of the most aggressive heresiologists, but they shared the same major concern, that of ascertaining what was held to be the one original truth of Christianity. The emerging "orthodox" group was willing to see the church for a while sacrifice some universality in favor of some uniformity, prune itself and even amputate itself of some cumbrous members if it was felt that to do otherwise and to let everything in would lead to a loss of its essential contours. Diversity itself gradually was perceived as an embarrassing commodity.

The necessities of controlling dissidence and of defending, isolating, and refuting brought about the development of norms and the explicitation of doctrine. Exclusion and self-assertion went hand in hand, as did gains and losses. A brief overview of the rejected groups with the corresponding reaction of the growing mainstream church will document this double impulse of painful door-closing and anxious securing of a self-definition.

The developments outlined in this chapter were considerably aided by imperial occurrences that will be dealt with in chapter 6. If Gnostic and Manichaean world views reappear in the present chapter, they are this time viewed not as syncretistic movements but rather as "Christian heresies."

The Marcionites

Marcionite churches flourished from the first half of the second century until well into the fifth century in the East, when they were mostly absorbed into Manichaean groups. Their success was cause for worry, less perhaps because of their rigorism in ethics and their docetism (the belief that Christ only *seemed* to have a human body) in Christology than for their radical breach with Judaism. Marcion of Pontus (ca. 85–160) had no use for the Old Testament, which, he thought, dealt with an inferior God, the clumsy creator-God, God of the Jews, called the "just God" who judges. Rather, he proclaimed a greater God, Father of Jesus, called the "benign God" or good God who saved, until recently an Unknown and Alien God. Any syncretist alliance with Judaism was ruled out, even when encountered in "apostolic" writings corrupted by people inclined to keep Christianity Jewish. Along with this, the permanent validity of Torah was denied, the Old Testament robbed of its authority, the law discredited in favor of the gospel, and allegory rejected as a poor way of glossing over the contradictions (the "antitheses") between the Old Testament and authentic Christian writings. Finally, Marcion dispelled all association with Jewish nationalistic hopes dangerously exasperated at the time of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. Perhaps more radical than the Gnostics, Marcion rejected any oral tradition and opted for a drastic shrinking of the Christian sources[2] that left only a truncated Paul/Luke as authoritative gospel and infallible teacher. Thus he created the first collection or canon of New Testament scriptures and introduced the idea of a Christian Bible.

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[2] Tertullian, in Adv. Marc. 1.1.5, talks about "the Pontic mouse who has nibbled away the gospels."

Confronted with the Marcionite position, Justin, Irenaeus, and their like took as their first task rescuing the Old Testament for Christian usage. They did so by asserting that both "testaments" came from the one and same God, the Old Testament being a stage toward a final revelation at the same time that it was an essential instrument to secure the antiquity of the Christian movement. Thereby an impetus was also given to the church's defining more precisely those recent books that could unquestionably be considered authentic documents. Thus began the movement toward the definition of the canon of the New Testament. By 180 we find widespread, though still debated, the idea of a collection of scriptures as a closed corpus universally and forever valid. Christian writings then took their place alongside the LXX version of the Old Testament. New scriptures (the name "New Testament" appeared for good ca. 200) combined with old scriptures to form a new totality: the bipartite Christian Bible. The process of definition had moved into high gear by the end of the third century. Whereas the expression canon of faith (rule of faith) had long been used to refer to standard summaries of Christian faith current in the churches and expressed in baptismal confessions, canon as a technical term to designate normative scriptures came into use only in the fourth century. The New Testament canon found its final form in the West around 400, in the East around 600.

No doubt Marcion helped the church sort out its writings, but his drastic reduction of the writings was firmly refused as partial and as a harmful impoverishment of the Christian sources. Future generations were left with sticky problems, for the process of canonization is difficult to document and was to remain a sensitive issue. No official decisions by the church are recorded in the early centuries. Questions about who took the decisive steps toward defining the canon, what instances initiated them and when all received traditional answers. These included such explanations as the regular usage of writings for liturgical reading, the judgment and awareness of the church, the faith of the church, or that authentic books were self-authenticating. Such answers only highlight the intricacies of the issue.

The Gnostics

Far from following the Marcionites in their dealings with writings, the Gnostics went in the opposite direction. They accepted the Old Testament but subverted it by means of their allegorical interpretation. In addition, they welcomed a great number of gospels and writings as authoritative, and were open to a multiplicity of new reports about the risen Jesus' words and deeds, of unknown acts of prophets and apostles, of recovered epistles; if necessary, appeal to a secret tradition would secure the wanted authority. It must be recalled here that, as witnessed by Papias, even in 130 oral traditions mediated by the elders who had known the apostles were more trusted than written testimonies.

Heresiogists had to work on many fronts when confronted with the mushrooming *gnosis*. From Justin on, "heresies" are said to be recent productions when contrasted with the pure tradition of the apostles, a thesis widely received well into the twentieth century. In addition to depicting opponents as associates of Satan, conspiring to introduce novelties (they are novelty-mongers), heresiologists assign to each opponent a place in a "succession of heretics" *(successio haereticorum)* that presumably goes back to Simon Magus. In that genealogy recent perpetrators borrow from previous ones in a sequence of arbitrary inventions that slowly degrade the true teaching of the apostles. Placed in that succession of evildoers, an opponent's claim to the Christian title is automatically disqualified. Facing the succession of error we find a succession of truth, presumed more ancient since it comes from the apostles, and preserved intact through a genuine succession of bishops. According to this view, early in the second-century, when it became clear that the end of the present age was in fact not in sight, the prophet yielded to the bishop, who became the guardian of the tradition. Thus not everybody was entitled to speak for the church but only the bishops, who stood in the apostolic tradition and in communion with the bishop of Rome, and the teachers, who often happened to be those very bishops or men in agreement with them.

If the task of the church confronted with Marcion had been to reclaim the Old Testament and the Jewish element and to broaden the body of authoritative writings, confronted with the Gnostics the church had to adopt the reverse attitude—to limit the number of authentic writings and also to rescue the interpretation of scripture from gnostic mishandling. For a while allegory was questioned as well as the appeal to a secret tradition to justify an idiosyncratic interpretation. Nothing could be added to or subtracted from the apostolic tradition in which the core of the faith resided; only that was valid which agreed with the rule of faith, that public declaration of the church's faith based on indisputable writings and soon to be fixed in the articles of the creed.

Dissent thus compelled the church to spell out the elements that really counted for its structure and substance. Those elements had to be verifiable through the public tradition coming from the apostles. By 200 "secret" or "apocryphal" ceased to be impressive epithets and began to take on a negative sense, while a definitive impetus was given to the church's definition of its authoritative writings. Much was lost by the exclusion of the Gnostics, their colorful visions and creative minds; but much was gained in terms of disciplined attention to the sources of revelation and reliability of its witnesses. Obviously the problems of a valid interpretation of the received scriptures remained a permanent task for future generations.

The Montanists

Not all believers were ready to see in the apostolic times the final norm of faith. Very early the principle of authority based on apostolic tradition was challenged by a Christianity of the Spirit emphasizing the freedom of Christians. Prophecy and apocalyptic beliefs never totally deserted the early church; rather they were prompt to reemerge in times of crisis and intensified suffering within groups submitted to hard times. When Montanus and his two companions, Priscilla (or Prisca) and Maximilla, began to prophesy in Phrygia (in 156/157 according to Epiphanius, in 172/173 according to Eusebius), the situation was apparently one of exasperation due to persecutions, inner conflicts, and social turbulence (warfare, plague). The "new prophecy," uttered in ecstasy as being the very word of God, claimed not only that God-given changes were at hand but that the New Jerusalem was soon to be established. Hence Christians were to prepare themselves for that event by a life of renunciation, continence, and fasting, and to be ready to confess the name of Christ at the (welcome) risk of martyrdom.

What puzzled the bishops at the time Montanism was spreading beyond Asia Minor to North Africa, Lyons, and Rome was that they felt overrun by a movement that appeared doctrinally orthodox. The Montanists, in fact, represented a movement of restoration and reaction, nourished on the old Jewish-Christian prophetic and apocalyptic traditions that had surrounded the birth of Christianity in the first place but had been superseded. They espoused, as did many other "dissidents," rigorist idealism. So it was difficult to attack a movement merely aiming at reviving the primitive situation with its fervent expectation, but obviously archaizing Montanists were clashing with the established traditions. Further, they proclaimed new prophecies and commandments surpassing and relativising the earlier revelation. This could not be admitted. The church was now becoming aware that prophecies and writings that had taken form after the "apostolic" period were not receivable as normative and "inspired," and that the process of limiting the New Testament collection had to be hastened. Bishops were also certainly aware of the subversive slant of any revival allied to apocalyptic exaltation at a time when they were searching for an accommodation with the empire. The sharp-witted Tertullian, who joined the Montanists around 206/207, had no use for such accommodation; he made no secret of favoring a church of the Spirit and prophets over against a church of the bishops. In rejecting Montanism, which survived until sometime after 500, the church opted against uncontrolled prophetism but at the same time deprived itself of a certain spiritual pliability. Suspicion will always be tied to apocalypticism and often to asceticism itself, at least in its extreme form called "encratism."

The Donatists

Akin to Montanism for its strong regional and rural appeal and its quasi-orthodox doctrine, Donatism strictly belongs to the aftermath of the Great Persecution that raged between 303 and 305 under Diocletian. But its antecedents in North Africa go back to the time of the pillars of Latin Christianity, Tertullian, and, above all, Cyprian (210–258), when the scenario, so to speak, was rehearsed before being fully staged in the fourth century.

The persecution that started under Decius (249–251) saw, in North Africa as elsewhere, a number of clergy waver under duress, surrendering the holy books when requested or offering incense to honor the gods and the emperor, thus becoming "material apostates" and putting themselves outside the church (schismatics). The question arose then: What to do about those who had been baptized by a fallen minister but wished to be in full communion with the church? The bishop of Rome, Stephen, declared around 200 (against the intransigent Novatian) that they should be readmitted by simple imposition of hands without being rebaptized since the sacraments were Christ's, not the minister's, and a fallen clergy could act with validity. The eighty-seven bishops attending a council at Carthage in 256 (consultations among bishops, starting in Asia Minor at the time of Montanism and following procedures modeled on the Roman senate and municipal councils, appeared increasingly necessary) disagreed. Their leader Cyprian, an urban notable made bishop and soon to die a martyr in 258, argued that baptism administered by a fallen minister was invalid; he further propounded his ideas in *On the Unity of the Church*. In fact, unity was somehow restored and the two diverging positions were tacitly allowed to stand without being formally reconciled.

Some fifty years later the situation came to a head. During the Great Persecution, again summoned to surrender *(tradere)* the Christian scriptures, many among the clergy, including bishops, complied and fell. They became *lapsi* (lapsed, renegades or backsliders) and *traditores* (surrenderers)—in other words, collaborators. Others refused to comply and became confessors, even martyrs. When the persecution having ended, the situation throughout the empire had to be assessed; in North Africa (and in Egypt with the Melitians) it led to a schism. Old scores were settled and the fronts hardened. Adding a new element to the old controversy, the consecration of Bishop Caecilian of Carthage (312) by an alleged *traditor* was contested. The Numidian clergy supported the mob of Carthage and elected a counter-bishop soon to be succeeded by Donatus (hence Donatism). If we are to believe Jerome, within a generation, his party became the religion of "nearly all Africa," aided for a good part by the social and economic conditions of Numidia. With utter intransigence it espoused a concept of ritual purity and separation from the world, turning its back on the more moderate view of the "catholic" church interested in being at peace with state and world.

In the meantime (Donatus does not seem to have been fully willing to register this fact), the empire had ceased to be the symbol of a world ruled by demonic powers and, in the person of Constantine, had laid the foundations for an alliance with the church. Advised by the bishops of Rome and Gaul, the emperor offered his support to Caecilian and thereby to the Roman position already expressed around 250.

For the first time, the "secular arm" was made available to defend the orthodox position, and it was willingly used. Unity was reestablished for a while in 348 and again in 411 (at a conference in Carthage attended by 570 bishops), but at a high price: The Donatist clergy was banned and exiled, and the Donatist church proscribed and expropriated. Nevertheless it somehow managed to survive until the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries. Archeological evidence seems to indicate the persistence of Donatism in Southern Numidia over that period, steadfast in the view that the empire was ruled by demonic powers with Constantine himself subsidizing "apostates" and backing them with the force of law and arms.

When Augustine entered the fray around 393 and above all between 400 and 421 with his anti-Donatist writings, he could echo the transition from a situation when Donatists were branded as mere schismatics (such was the accusation levied against Donatus in 313/314) and deviationists to one where they were accused of heresy. The latter stage was reached officially in 405, with formal condemnation in 412, making it possible to invoke the anti-heretical legislation of 392 against them, including the loss of rights and protection of the law. Thus the controversy that had looked like a lengthy family litigation ended in the total dispossession of the opponents and their coercion into compliance, political pressure being allowed to bear on an ecclesiastical debate, and Augustine ending up justifying the persecution of dissenters in the name of "fatherly correction."

The arguments of the orthodox party, summed up and elaborated by Augustine, put forward a view of the nature of the church that was to characterize the prevailing form of Christianity until the Reformation of the sixteenth century. First, the church is not a sect exclusively made up of righteous elect and pure members and constituting an alternative to the surrounding society (like the small society in the Ark of Noah—saved within, damned without). Rather, never without spot or wrinkle, it includes both "wheat and tares" that will mix until the end. Holy in spite of its unholy members and ministers, coextensive with society, it is confident that it is able to absorb, transform, and perfect society without losing its identity. In other words, the church is "catholic," extended throughout the world well beyond North Africa, and able to include all who are in communion with the apostolic sees. Second, sacraments, especially baptism, are valid even when performed by a *traditor*. They are, as was emphasized at the time, acts of Christ, of grace, of the church, and hence have an objective validity irrespective of the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister who dispenses them and who is a mere channel of grace.

What is being excluded here, ultimately, is the African tradition of Tertullian and Cyprian. Theirs was a church of the persecution made up of confessors and martyrs, suspicious of pagan culture and pure from *traditores* and sinners. This tradition was excluded in favor of a church in which the "two cities" mingle, a conception that made integration into the Roman Empire and society possible. In fact, the majority in the church consistently favored indulgence and opposed rigorism. Perhaps a compromise with "civilization" was struck, but it proved necessary for the catholicity of the Christian movement. It is "in and through Africa that it (Christianity) became the religion for the world."[3] The independence of national churches vis-à-vis Rome suffered in the process, a price that the Coptic church of Egypt after 451 would not be ready to pay when it rejected a form of orthodoxy forced on it by the eastern emperor.

The Arians

The optimist Christians of the late third century who had hoped that the evidence of scripture and the authority of the bishops, once asserted, would be enough to eliminate or solve all possible internal conflicts were in for a surprise. Obviously scripture was not always clear; bishops/teachers were not always in agreement. Concerning God and Christ, many loose ends stood gaping not only in the New Testament writings but also among second- and third-century writers. It was particularly the conflicting legacies of Tertullian and Origen that constituted the most pressing appeal to clarify the issues. With increasing urgency the need was felt to take a stand on the question of how the uncompromising monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition could be reconciled with the worship of Jesus Christ as divine. To that question, no "orthodox" answer was given at the start. The traditional doctrine of God had to be reconstructed and a new solution invented. Great minds went to work in the fourth century, step by step groping toward the light by "the method of trial and error"[4] and fashioning a position that was to become the orthodox one.

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[3] Th. Mommsen quoted in P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine*. London: Faber & Faber, 1972, p. 338.

Prior to 318, nearly all positions had been tried concerning the status of the Son, all attached to prestigious names—especially those of Tertullian and Origen—all appealing to scripture, tradition, and predecessors. That was the time when even conceptions of a "qualified divinity" of the Son were found adequate to account for the suffering of God. Some thought that no distinctions ought to be found in the Godhead (monarchianism) or that the Son was a mere man adopted by the Father (adoptionism); others that he was inferior to the Father (subordinationism); still others that he was fully God. Many more variations on the theme circulated. A doctrinal storm was gathering.

The storm broke out in 318 when Arius, a respected Libyan presbyter in Alexandria, began to teach what many thought acceptable in view of the sufferings of Jesus: that the Logos/Son was a creature, made from "nonexistence" and had not always existed. Hence he was not quite equal to the Father. Immediately, perhaps precipitately (Arius's alliance with the schismatic Melitians of Upper Egypt may have brought panic among Alexandrian clerics), he was excommunicated by his bishop, Alexander, with the result that now two fronts built up and the stage was ripe for an open controversy. Between 318 and 381 more than twenty conferences or councils were summoned to sort out the true position of the church. The controversy went through episodes of such violence, unfortunately not only verbal violence, that Emperor Constantine, badly concerned with the peace and unity of the estate, called a general council at Nicaea in 325, which he himself attended and which was presided over by his representative and messenger, Ossius, bishop of Cordova. Anxious to safeguard the reality of the redemption wrought in Jesus Christ, the council proclaimed two main theses, incorporated in the so-called Nicene creed: that Christ had a real body (against those who still thought he only "seemed" to have one, the "docetists"); and that the Son was perfectly equal to the Father ("of one substance" with the Father: *homoousios*). Imperial approval was given to the findings of the council, with penalties meted out to those who disagreed with its decrees and lasting vilification tacked to the name of Arius.

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[4] R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, pp. xx, 873.

For all its epoch-making importance, the agreement reached at Nicaea proved to be no more than apparent. The Greek terms used then to settle the dispute (above all *ousia*: substance or person; *hypostasis:* person or substance) were susceptible to a variety of meanings. Imperial politics, dissension between East and West, cabal, all those nontheological factors complicated the stormy debates of 330 to 361. Around 360 there were many who feared that the whole world was tipping over to the Arians. Doubts were raised as to the ability of Greek conceptuality to interpret the biblical tradition: Does it not rather promote, even create, heresies? After Athanasius, the shrewd but ruthless bishop of Alexandria, had entered the debate in 339/340, new alignments of views gradually emerged. Further refinements of doctrine appeared on the stage; they resulted in the reaffirmation and reworking of the Nicene creed at the general or ecumenical council of Constantinople in 381. The council brought to fruition the elaborations of Athanasius's views offered by the Cappadocian fathers (see chapters 8 and 9). It was able to be clearer on the status of the Son and on the humanity of Christ (that he had a human soul as well as a human body) while adding a statement on the divinity of the Spirit, thus rounding up a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity. Emperor Theodosius I, by confirming the conclusions of the council, "rendered the pro-Nicene version of the Christian faith the official religion of the Roman Empire."[5] In a sense, orthodoxy was established by coercion: Because the emperor wanted all bishops to sign, nearly all did. Once more Theodosius demonstrated the active role played by emperors since Constantine in the development of doctrine, acting as the de facto head of the church (the leadership of the Roman bishop was only timidly emerging in the fourth century), controlling the course of the council and ruthlessly enforcing its implementation. It must be said in his defense, however, that Theodosius was also reflecting the wide consensus that was finally appearing in the church and that needed expression.

It is difficult today to understand that huge segments of the empire got excited about such subtle linguistic nuances. Yet the debates paid off richly. The discussions that were to follow on the council of 381 and that finally culminated in the decisions of the councils of Ephesus 431 and Chalcedon 451 contributed to a superb "fine-tuning" of the doctrine of God and especially to the clarification of questions of Christology. Those decisions became normative and ruled out a further series of not insignificant options (especially Nestorians and Monophysites); those issues will be addressed again in chapter 8.

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[5] Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God,* p. 821.

The condemnation of the Arians and their like in the fourth century meant a certain escalation in the motives for exclusion from the mainstream of the church—the exclusion of apparently sincere Christians who, for intellectual reasons, were tampering with the unqualified divinity of the Son and were inclined to divide the Trinity. A wind of conceptual intransigence was blowing among the orthodox ranks. Variations in terminology, concepts, and ideas were reason enough for depositions of bishops, for condemnations and excommunications. The post-Nicene debates exposed an amazing readiness to ostracize fellow Christians because of one word, even one letter in one word (e.g., *homoousios*/*homoiousios*: of the same or of like substance, though a single letter obviously made a big difference). Variance in opinion had become "thought crime."[6] Certainly much was at stake in those debates and people saw the danger of undermining faith and salvation through sloppy language. In particular, they smelled practical idolatry in the Arian willingness to worship a Son-creature. But from the fifth century another danger loomed: the temptation of credal fetishism, which attached salvation to the anxious keeping of the articles of a creed.

The Manichees

The Arian controversy of the fourth century saw each side brand its opponents with the label "Manichaean." As noted previously (chapter 4), Manichaeism posited two co-eternal principles, God/Light and Evil/Darkness, out of whose mixture, through a complicated process of downward weakening of the divine substance ("devolution"), our world emanated. While Arius was felt to come too close to admitting two opposite principles, the created and the uncreated, he could accuse his accusers, because of their way of conceiving the origin of the Son from the Father, of espousing the Manichaean emanation thesis that the Son is "from the substance" of the Father. The term of opprobrium was generously flung as a disqualifying epithet until well into the late medieval period. It sometimes looks as though everybody had been fighting a secret personal temptation he tried to exorcise, projecting intimate fears unto others.

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[6] P. Brown in P. Veyne, ed., *A History of Private Life,* vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 276.

The Manichaean church seems to have flourished among the cultivated classes of Egypt, Syria, and North Africa, but its presumed "Persian" origin was not to endear this kind of secret society to Roman emperors sporadically at war with Persia. Already in 302 (297 according to some) a rescript of Diocletian banned that "poisonous snake"[7] for putting forward vile novelties that contradicted the established religion. Manichees were excepted from the edict of toleration of 372; they suffered many more repressive measures, proscription and persecution. In 386 in Trier the Christian Priscillian was condemned on the wrong charge of Manichaeism and executed, the first "heretic" to undergo that fate. The arrival of the Vandals in North Africa (429) forced hordes of Manichees to seek refuge in Rome, where they met with the hostility of both church and empire.

The factors that made the religion of Mani (216–277) attractive to educated people in the West can be gathered from the career of Augustine (354–430), associated with it for some nine years. The radical dualism of the two principles offered a simple solution to the problem of Evil and suffering while the same doctrine with its essential determinism proved to be a soothing device for the conscience plagued by guilt and now finding in the overwhelming power of Evil a welcome alibi. Moreover, to follow the Manichees meant that one could dispense with the crudities of the Old Testament "fables," a source of continuous embarrassment for the educated. Finally and paradoxically, the "scientific" facade of Manichaeism, its confident speculations in physics, cosmology, and psychology as well as its clever use of astrology, the whole cast in the appealing mold of graphic poetry, were enough to impress the searching minds. All the same, Augustine's doubts and misgivings soon accumulated and were exacerbated by his encounter with Ambrose's "more scientific" theology, indebted to the Alexandrians, and above all by his discovery of the "Platonists" (especially Plotinus). He broke with the Manichees and between 388 and 404 got down to refute them in a series of writings (the anti-Manichaean writings) dealing with God as creator of all, the origins of the world, sin and free will. Typically, Augustine the anti-Manichee proclaimed that everything is good though threatened.

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[7] In J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*. London: SPCK, 1987, p. 267.

As early as around 280 the church denounced Manichaeism as being a "Christian heresy." Was it merely rejecting a caricature? Some of the objections raised against Gnosticism in the second century applied to Manichaeism and were reaffirmed. Uninhibited syncretism, arbitrary mythical speculations, denigration of matter and the body because of their evil origin, rejection of the Old Testament tradition (but not of apocalypticism)—these were for the church non-negotiable items that had to be firmly opposed. The church was looking for a solution to the problem of Evil and suffering that would stay away from the unacceptable consequences of extreme dualism and fatalism. Masses were not to be discouraged in their hope for salvation and their efforts to make spiritual progress.

Manichaeism always kept the stigma of being perceived as a foreign body not only in the empire but also in the church in spite of its Christian varnish. Thus its rejection meant the ejection of yet one more form of alienation. It also meant the reaffirmation of the biblical tradition complete with its Judaic and Greek legacy at the expense of the foreign "Oriental" importation and "compound of all errors"[8] that Manichaeism, doubtless unjustly, was perceived to be.

This new exclusion overlooked the civilizing influence of the Manichees as documented in Central Asia and China where they flourished along with Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity until the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. It also overlooked the resilience of its appeal, similar to that of Gnosticism, throughout the centuries; Manichaeism kept resurging in Europe (e.g., in the twelfth-century Bogomils and Cathars). Finally, it overlooked the remarkable ascetical ideals and practices of the Manichees, and their possible contacts with nascent Christian monasticism, especially in Egypt. However, in proclaiming the evil origin of the body, the Manichees trespassed the fine line beyond which the body is seen not only as a burden but even as a disgrace. That was indeed too much for the church's religious sensibility.

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[8] Leo the Great, *Sermon* 16.16, in J. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*. London: SPCK, 1989, p. 325.

The Pelagians

The Donatist and Arian controversies had demonstrated that even synods could contradict one another. This was to be further exemplified in the course of the Pelagian debates. Additional norms of Christian teaching, beyond scripture, creed, bishops, and councils, had to be carved. At this juncture the role of the bishop of Rome and imperial pressures came into play.

Sometime around 402–405 a distinguished personality in Rome took open exception to Augustine's prayer to God, "Grant what you command, and command what you will."[9] This view seemed to sound the death knell of human free will. The author of the protest was a certain Pelagius (ca. 350–425) who had come from Britain to Rome around 380. A rival of Jerome, this pious layman had become the spiritual advisor of a prestigious Roman family and the leader of a reform-minded and ascetical group. Driven out of Rome along with many others by the Goths of Alaric (410), he moved on to Palestine, where he again encountered Jerome, who did not intend to leave him in peace. He eventually accused Pelagius of Manichaean leanings. Asceticism, especially in its extreme, "encratic" form, was regularly suspected of being under the influence of some Mani-like virus. Athanasius had gone out of his way to dispel the doubt and to insist that the austere monk Antony had always shunned the company of Manichees, but perhaps some ascetics had not done so.

But it was Pelagius's way of understanding the freedom of human actions in relation to God's help that was to be at the center of a controversy that raged from 402/405 to 431 and saw again the involvement of Augustine. This was to be the clash of two religious giants whose legacies generated two notable poles of Western religion: Augustinianism and Pelagianism.

At issue was indeed a typically Western problem. It must be recalled that since 395 the empire was split into western and eastern parts and that incomprehension kept mounting between Rome and Constantinople in all respects, including the religious outlooks. It was not so much the lofty mysteries of the Godhead, so attractive to the East, as that concrete area of interaction between God's grace and human freedom that was Pelagius's concern and that of his supporters.

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[9] Conf. X.29 (also X.31 and 37).

He saw in Augustine's statement the danger of utter passivity, discouraging all efforts at practical reform as well as our strivings for perfection. Without denying the reality of divine grace, Pelagius saw in free will a divine gift, already a grace—a "natural grace"—allowing one to act freely toward one's salvation. Before baptism, he argued, infants are not under the rule of Adam's transgression and after baptism free will makes one capable of living without sin. Thus perfection is in the reach of all since God's grace is given to all at creation and in the law. Origen had already propounded a similar version of inclusive optimism. As a champion of reform, Pelagius wanted to put an end to the ravages of debilitating determinism. All must work toward perfection and (anticipating Kant) if they must, they can; God's help will certainly crown their efforts. Pelagius was not a monk, but he wanted every baptized person to be like a monk because everyone had the potential to reach the state of Christian perfection and to meet the high standards of the ascetic movement.

To Augustine such a view meant the collapse of Christian faith. For a while he hesitated before intervening, perhaps in regard for Pelagius's powerful protectors among Roman aristocratic families recently attracted to Christianity, or out of deference to trustworthy common friends, such as Paulinus of Nola, who preferred to leave Pelagius in peace. But when, close to home, Pelagius's companions (e.g., Celestius) turned to radicalism, he thought he had to speak out, spurred on to do so by Jerome. In his anti-Pelagian writings (412–430) Augustine insists that our freedom is bound by sin and has first to be set free by grace in order to be able to produce good deeds. God has sovereign power over our wills and all good; even our very desire for perfection, though proceeding from our wills, comes from above. Conversely, everything that does not originate in faith is sin. Augustine's anti-Manichaean battles had led him to emphasize freedom over fatalism. Now, reflecting on his own experience of conversion in which God had all the initiative, he inclines toward a certain determinism, which brings him full circle back to a kind of semi-Manichaeism in his concern to vindicate grace. That evolution was already reflected in the conflicting parts of *On Free Will,* written between 388 and 397. The logic of his new position would lead him in the last years of his life to his dreadful statements on predestination with its predetermined quota of saved (the council of Orange in 529 would substantially tone down such views) and to his theology of original sin and its transmission that was to be a typical feature of Western thought.

If in the course of the controversy Augustine developed views that made him into the "doctor of grace" universally acclaimed, it would be wrong to depict Pelagius as the enemy of grace. The mysterious interaction of free human action and God's help was an open question at the time and was ever not going to receive a definitive, satisfying explanation. Human thought encounters here a dilemma: Our ethical convictions require our freedom, but our religious convictions require our dependence on God. Perhaps Pelagius minimized grace in applying the term grace to the gift of freedom, or he overemphasized free will, untainted by original sin, as preparing the way for grace. Perhaps Augustine minimized free will in insisting on a doctrine of original sin (his second achievement in this debate along with his doctrine of grace), or he overemphasized grace as necessary even for preparing free will to move toward the good. In all this Augustine might have been the "innovator," seeing life after conversion as "one long temptation"[10] that reveals the enduring weaknesses of a wounded human nature, while Pelagius held to a tradition for which the ideal of a blessed life was a possibility in this world because baptism opened the door to the kingdom, not to a "church of convalescents."[11]

The Pelagian controversy was certainly compounded by the contemporary controversy on Origen's orthodoxy (see chapters 8 and 9) stirred up by the same Jerome, and in Augustine's case by the resilience of the Donatist schism in North Africa. As a result, Augustine's heart hardened toward the end of his career. He saw in Pelagius one of those pseudo-monks denying the grace of God under the cover of defending the freedom of the will. In his efforts to debunk Pelagius he felt justified in lobbying his patrons at the court of Ravenna in order both to crush Donatism and to have Pelagius condemned by the church that the same Pelagius had wanted to reform. Pope Zosimus would apparently have liked to wait; a synod in Diospolis had just acquitted Pelagius. But the pressure was too strong. In 417–418 Pelagius was excommunicated and banished from the Italian peninsula by imperial rescript. Nineteen Italian bishops who refused to subscribe to the condemnation were deposed. The council of Ephesus (431) gave faint attention to the problem but ratified for the East the decisions taken in the West where North Africa so to speak had hijacked the church. Pelagius was condemned for taking a position on an open question; unlike Origen, he was never to be rehabilitated. The debate he had initiated was never totally closed; picked up by Julian of Eclanum after Pelagius's death, it would remain endemic in the West and be vigorously revived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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[10] Conf. X.28.

[11] Brown, *Religion and Society*, p. 205.

With the defeat of Pelagius, an optimistic view of the human condition with its ideal of perfectibility takes its leave from mainstream Christianity and pursues its career outside. Augustinianism was the realistic position. It had a better grasp of the human predicament with its congenital failings and its craving for grace, and it could offer a coherent explanation of that predicament in spite of a certain obsession with sin, concupiscence, and hereditary guilt. Questions kept nagging because the "synergy" between God's grace and human freedom remains unfathomable, although it should be possible to say clearly how the act of faith, though given by God, can also be one's own act. One cannot help wishing that the debate in the fifth century had been allowed to go on without the massive ecclesiastical and civil intervention that took place. But soon after the second ecumenical council (Constantinople 381) a hardening of orthodoxy had clearly gained an undeniable momentum.

Dissent and Development of Norms

It could not be expected that champions of orthodoxy active at the time of the first ecumenical councils, such as Athanasius, would take a relaxed attitude and repeat the thoughtful remarks of Paul and Origen as to the necessity and utility of heresies.[12] The fact remains, however, that without dissent, and vocal dissent, the church would not have been compelled to define itself in the way it did. It is in debating controversial issues that the authority of bishops, the determination of the normative writings, the uncompromising elements of the faith, and the nature of the church were progressively affirmed. In the process, while at the start a bishop's pronouncement could settle a debated matter, other forums had soon to be called into play: synods, councils, expert theologians, and, not least, the religious sense of the believing community.

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[12] 1 Cor 11:19; C. Cels. 3.13.

Every time a matter was resolved, the result was the exclusion of dissenters who were thought willfully to stray away from a mainstream assumed to embody the tradition flowing from the apostles. To part from dissenters always implied a double movement. First, it meant giving up possible options seen as inadequate interpretations of Christianity; second, it was accompanied by the affirmation and formulation of the faith of the church in a way that left no doubt as to what it considered right doctrine. Interestingly, though, ancient "heresies" were never reduced to total silence, for the first heresies represented various types of interpretation of Christianity, permanent and recurrent at all times; each epoch has its Pelagians, its Arians, its Gnostics, its Marcionites. The day Christianity will be entirely deprived of them, it will cease to be alive.

Formalization of Norms in Christianity and Judaism

Did some pervasive historical pressure befall intellectual and religious movements in the third century and push them to try to eliminate a great deal of the diversity that had characterized them hitherto? It is striking to observe that Judaism and Christianity, for instance, at roughly the same time, were engaged in the business of denying authenticity to some of their subgroups blamed for mistaken views concerning what it meant to be either Christian or Jewish; they both then took steps toward the codification of their beliefs.

In the aftermath of the Second Jewish Rebellion (132–135), left without the center of religious life that the Temple had represented, the Jewish community restructured itself around the synagogue in the local community, and prayer and ritual in private homes. In both places study and practice of Torah became the center of Jewish religion. The process of transfer of the religious center from the Temple to homes and local communities was completed around 200, the date of the compilation of the Mishnah, the great achievement of victorious Rabbinic Judaism and the basis for the normative Judaism of the centuries to come.

The wrestling for Christian norms began in the second half of the second century. The first heresiologists had formulated the main creed-like statements by 200. What came afterward brought a deepening and hardening to the substantial delimitations carried out at that time. An orthodox position had been defined, which had to be defended, invented further, and specified over against alternative options judged unacceptable.

The shaping of orthodoxy, however, is not adequately accounted for by exclusive reference to ideological preferences, clerical prerogatives, or, at the limit, political pressures. Impulses came as well from the practice of Christian life. In particular, the way toward lasting doctrinal positions was already marked out by forms of prayer and ritual commonly in use, whose implicit contents called for more precise theological explication.

Religious and Liturgical Practices

One point raised against Pelagius in 417 by Pope Innocent I was that his views were contrary to the use of prayer and the practice of infant baptism. The ritual of baptism, from the start, was accompanied by representations of the sacred action taking place and by confessions of faith. Similar contents inhered in the Eucharist and in religious practices and beliefs generally. Christian devotion developed on those foundations, embodying practical theological views that came to be expressed in doctrinal assertions. For instance, Mary's title "Mother of God" *(theotokos)* was employed by people long before it was officially accepted (431) and theologically explicated; Augustine took recourse to people's long-standing belief in original sin to justify a position absent from most previous theological discourses. In the end, theology was forced to come to terms with people's devotional preferences and liturgical customs.

That the prayer of all in the church preceded formal theological definitions and that rite preceded doctrine were encapsulated in the axiom "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" (the rule of prayer lays down the rule of faith). It was tacitly assumed that the orthodox consensus had to take its orientation from the religious sense of believers past and present. Creed and theology followed on the faith of the church universal. When Vincent of Lérins in 434 found the astute words for what is meant by an orthodox consensus ("*quod ubique, semper et ab omnibus creditum est*": that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all), he was expressing, doubtless with some historical, geographical, and sociological short-circuiting, what had been the driving force behind the process of consolidation that led to the Christian form of orthodoxy.

No doubt similar developments could be found outside the Christian movement, even in the formation of secular orthodoxies. To a large extent praxis comes before theory. Christian liturgical practice, up to 70 sharing with Jewish worship, carried along devotional doctrines from the primitive tradition that called for explication. It embodied symbolic expressions of theological discourse. This can be seen in literary remains dealing with liturgical usage. From the *Didache* (arguably a late first century manual of Syrian origin, close to Jewish traditions, e.g., in its doctrine of the Two Ways and in the formulation of liturgical prayers) through Justin's *Apology* to Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition,* one can observe a remarkable continuity in the implied dogmatic substance. Evidently the Christian community expressed its emerging distinctiveness first through its worship. Such a cultic term as *Kyrios* (Lord), for instance, was used of Jesus Christ in worship before it became a creedal statement. The same could be said of the preexistence of the Logos, of the divinity of the Spirit, and so forth. Early theologians were well aware that the doctrine of the Trinity was adumbrated in the baptismal formula long before it was formally defined.

The separate courses of Rome and Byzantium after 395 (the date of the division of the empire into western and eastern parts) and especially after 476 (the end of the western empire) did not alter the principle of the interrelatedness of worship and dogma. The East, including Egypt, may have been more inclined to speculation on divine matters and metaphysical elaboration; the West, including North Africa, may have been more interested in matters of ethics and issues related to salvation. When it came to worship, liturgical practices embodied doctrines that were strikingly common throughout the Christian world and which constituted the subterranean feeder of orthodoxy.

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