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Heresy: Early Development of the Concept

Mark Edwards

After tracing the evolution in meaning of the Greek word *hairesis* from ‘choice’ to ‘false belief’, this entry examines the criteria according to which a belief was judged to be heretical, either by particular controversialists or by bodies which purported to legislate on behalf of the Christian world. It argues that early appeals to scriptural warrant, tradition, and universal consensus were inevitably circular, while the edicts of ecumenical councils in the post-Constantinian era often leave much undetermined. The role of individual theologians in shaping modern notions of orthodoxy and its heretical antitypes is therefore examined, as is the use of legal coercion to solidify ecclesiastical boundaries. Nevertheless, it will be shown that there were numerous questions on which no ecumenical decisions had been reached before the eighth century, when consensus became inconceivable because of the growing estrangement between the Eastern and Western traditions.

To say of professing Christians that they are heretics is not to say merely that they hold erroneous opinions (as a Scotist might say of a Thomist, for example), but to say that their opinions are so inconsistent with the fundamental teachings of the church as to imperil their salvation. It can be argued that no other religion has a concept perfectly corresponding to this, or at least that none has drawn the line between heresy and orthodoxy with such punitive and enduring rigour; certainly the church found no model for this in the cults and philosophies from which it drew its earliest neophytes. Even the Greek term *hairesis*, as we shall see, is not used of false doctrine either in the classical world or in the New Testament. In modern times, some scholars have leapt to the inference that the first churches were intellectual democracies, in which no teaching, so long as it spoke of Jesus, was deemed more Christian than another; the contrary, and once more familiar, claim that there has always been one recognized church catholic, which has always upheld the same orthodoxy and proscribed the same aberrations, is now more characteristic of popular than academic literature. The present inquiry is offered as a corrective to both positions, which will show on the one hand that even before the noun ‘heresy’ had acquired its modern sense, to hold one doctrine was to denounce another, and on the other hand that there may never have been a time when the clergy, let alone the laity, were of one mind in the identification of heresy, or even of the criteria by which a belief could be found to be inconsistent with membership of the body of Christ.

Keywords: Doctrine, Scripture, Orthodoxy, Schism, Sin, Ecumenical councils, Sects, Two natures of Christ, Censure, Hairesis

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1 Definitions

1.1 Origin of the term ‘heresy’

It is well known that it was only by a shift in Christian parlance (the history of which will be briefly rehearsed below) that *hairesis* ceased to denote a legitimate choice from a range of doctrines and came to mean wilful defiance of, or departure from, an acknowledged standard of truth. That there was, or ought to be, such a standard was one of the many points on which a putative heretic commonly agreed with their accusers; after the second century it was also a universal rule that no standard inconsistent with the scriptures deserved acknowledgement. Yet when it came to determining what books were scriptural and which of the competing exegeses were (as Athanasius warns us) from the devil (*Orations against the Arians* 1.3.8; Athanasius 1884), it was rare to find an ancient writer arguing as though texts alone could supply their own glosses or their own certificates of veracity. There was no way of ascertaining the opinion of a majority of Christians, if only because one would need to decide, before undertaking such a calculation, who deserved to be called a Christian. It is probable, as Bauer maintains, that doctrines which were later deemed heretical established themselves in parts of the Christian world before the advent, let alone the official sanctioning, of those that were later deemed orthodox (Bauer 1971; Hartog 2015). Additionally, the emergence of new heresies from imperial or conciliar proclamations is important to note; the instances where these chose one form of words in preference to another, inevitably sowed dissent among those whose voices had once been joined against a common foe (see further Ayres 2004).

Both in the defence of one’s own opinion and in confuting those of others, it was usual to invoke venerable precursors, ecclesiastical consensus and magisterial authority. But which precursors were worthy of reverence? How many self-styled Christians constituted the *ecclesia*, the one church? Should one look for authority to the Emperor, to a council, to a majority of bishops, or to the bishops of highest status? An episcopal synod summoned by the Emperor and assigning chairs of honour to the four patriarchs under whose auspices it examined the teaching of scripture and the Fathers might be thought to meet every criterion; yet even the first such assembly, held at Nicaea in 325, excluded many who called themselves Christian, while later councils purporting to be ecumenical not only ostracized Donatists and Novatianists, but created new schisms by deposing one patriarch at the instance of another. Even while there was only one communion which went by the name of Catholic, its orthodoxy was not acknowledged by those who had set up a different line of bishops, appealed to different councils, or cherished a different strand of ancestral teaching. There was no one single magisterium, and not even a creed which stated all that most Catholics thought fundamental to orthodoxy, at any time in the first eight centuries CE. The present survey ends at the point where the Eastern and Western foci of the Catholic Church, Constantinople, and Rome, had become so estranged in certain points of

doctrine that each could judge the other heretical, though they had not yet entered into a formal schism.

1.2 From Greek *hairesis* to Christian heresy

It is generally agreed that the early Church derived the term *hairesis* from the less pejorative usage of physicians and philosophers, for whom it denoted simply the choosing of a recognized tradition of thought and practice to follow. The Platonist disagreed with the Stoic, the empiricist with the rationalist, but none of these could have reprimanded their adversary as a heretic without incriminating themselves. Even within a medical or philosophical *hairesis*, no distinction seems to have been made in ancient sources between the heterodox and the orthodox interpretation of the founder's teachings. The first Christians who wrote apologies, or defences of Christian doctrine and practice, styled themselves philosophers, professing to have learned from a more authoritative source the answers to moral, cosmological and theological questions that were commonly debated in pagan schools. It is true that one of their reasons for claiming the privilege was that it gave them the right to differ, and that they might not have claimed it so readily if philosophers had been merely purveyors of intellectual systems and not also instructors in spiritual discipline (Hadot 1997). It is also true that when they contrast their intellectual system with those of pagans, they tend to reserve the noun *theologia* for their own while eschewing the pagan use of that word for the branch of philosophy that we now call metaphysics (Edwards 2021). Nevertheless, these early Christians clearly held the dogmas of pagan philosophy to be akin to those of Christian philosophy, since otherwise Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria could not have accused the philosophers of plagiarism from scripture. The difference between theology and philosophy was not so much one of content as of method, as Origen and Justin imply when pronouncing dialectic and cognate arts to be useless in the discovery of that which can be known only by revelation (*Against Celsus* 7.38–42; Origen 1897–1899; *Dialogue with Trypho* 4–9; Justin Martyr 1997). One might say that in content Christianity was an alternative philosophy, but in method an alternative to philosophy. As an alternative philosophy, it might have been described without prejudice as an additional *hairesis*. As an alternative to philosophy, it was the enemy of *hairesis*, since no-one has the right to choose whether or not to embrace the truths revealed and the laws ordained by God.

The authors of the New Testament, though they may not have been deeply learned in philosophy, were familiar with the translation of the term *hairesis* to the Jewish world, where Josephus applies it to those of his co-religionists who have chosen an exceptional, though not in his view aberrant, way of life. He implies in *Jewish Antiquities* 18.2–6 that the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, and the Zealots represented only a minority among Jews, the greater part of them being content to follow the laws and customs which they believed to have been observed by their ancestors. While, therefore, the Jewish

adherent of a *hairesis* was not in the Christian sense a heretic, they were a member of what we should call in English a ‘sect’ rather than a ‘denomination’. Among the Greeks, on the other hand, it was unusual, if not impossible, to style oneself a philosopher yet not belong to a school. Justin Martyr wrongly assumed that Jews would not regard followers of a *hairesis* as true members of their community (*Dialogue with Trypho* 80; Justin Martyr 1997), while Epiphanius, writing in the fourth century, ekes out his list of heresies to eighty by assuming that the term *hairesis* has the same meaning in both Greek and Jewish parlance (Pourkier 1992). It is never clear, however, in the New Testament, that *hairesis* means ‘erroneous belief’, although it often connotes a reliance on private judgment at the expense of the common good.

Thus, *hairesis* is used once without blame in reference to the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), three times in a similar manner of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 24:14; 26:5), twice with derision of Christians by outsiders (Acts 24:5; 28:22), and twice by Paul of the tendency to faction which arises when a church forgets the gospel (1 Cor 11:20; Gal 5:20). In Titus 3:10, a *hairetikos* is to be reprimanded after a first and second warning; the context does not enable us to decide whether error or misplaced zeal is the fault to be reprimanded. In all the three texts attributed to Paul it is the fact of dissension, rather than any one dissenting opinion, that is subject to rebuke, but in 2 Pet 2:1 the phrase ‘pernicious heresies’ (*haireseis apoleias*) seems designed to stigmatize particular opinions arising from a ‘private interpretation’ (1:20). The assumption in this letter that there is some public canon against which private judgment can be measured is widely held to show that it is one of the later writings of the New Testament, as the attribution of scriptural authority to the letters of Paul at 2 Pet 3:16.

Paul himself does not yet employ the term *hairesis* to characterize those teachings which he declares to be inconsistent with faith in Christ. These include, on the one hand, the requirement that Gentile Christians be circumcised (which is Judaizing; Gal 5:2) and, on the other, the contamination of Christian rites with those addressed to demons (which is paganizing; 1 Cor 10:21). They do not include the decision whether to marry (1 Cor 7:38), whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:8), whether to live only on herbs (Rom 14:17), and whether to observe Jewish feasts and Sabbaths (Col 2:16). In other New Testament texts which are unlikely to be later than 2 Peter, forbidding to marry (1 Tim 4:3), denying the necessity of good works (Jas 2:20), denying that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (1 John 4:3), and affirming that the resurrection has come already (2 Tim 2:18), are all transgressive doctrines, held in peril of one’s own salvation and that of others, although none of them are characterized as heresy.

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (or the author of the so-called ‘middle recension’ of his letters) employs the noun *hairesis* to denote false teaching in *Trallians* 6.1. He seems to define a heresy as a doctrine that denies the real death and resurrection of Christ, and as

disobedience to the bishop, in whose monarchical jurisdiction the majesty of the Father and the unity of the Saviour are jointly embodied (*Trallians* 6; *Smyrnaeans* 8; see Ignatius of Antioch 1999). His adversaries do not (according to Bauer 1971) reject episcopacy, but they 'do all things without' the bishop whom they honour only in name (*Magnesians* 4; Ignatius of Antioch 1999). Justin Martyr appears to have made a catalogue of *hairesis* in a book, now lost, to which he refers to in *First Apology* 26 (2009) after warning his readers not to mistake the tenets of Simon Magus, Menander, and Marcion for those of Christianity. He also employs the noun in its classical sense when he twice upbraids the Jews for traducing Christians as an atheistic *hairesis* (*Dialogue with Trypho* 17; Justin Martyr 1997: 107). He echoes 1 Cor 11:19, prefacing *hairesis* with his own term schisma, of which 'faction' appears to be the best rendering. False doctrine is the charge, however, in *Dialogue with Trypho* 82, where heresies are coupled with the false prophecies foretold by Christ in Matt 24:24. In *Dialogue with Trypho* 62 Justin mocks the Jewish sect as a '*hairesis* among you' which maintains that when God said 'let us make man' in Gen 1:26 he was speaking to his angels. Here it is implied that the Jews would no more acknowledge this sect than the church acknowledges those who abuse the name 'Christian'. Since he admits in *Dialogue with Trypho* 80 that those who deny the materiality of the New Jerusalem have not forfeited their salvation, he appears to hold that, while heresy is always an aberration from truth, not all aberration from truth is heresy, even in Christian circles.

2 The first heresiologists

If Justin's catena of heresies has perished, that is because it was overshadowed by so many of the imitations it inspired. The first of these, the *Refutation of Gnosis Falsely so called* by Irenaeus of Lyons, sets out the positions to be refuted in the first book before proceeding in the second to a detailed criticism of the teachings of Valentinus (Sagnard 1947). In books three to five he adumbrates his own doctrine of creation and redemption in opposition to the Marcionites, though now with more quotation from his godly predecessors than from his purblind adversaries. The Valentinians, as he represents them, are guilty of making the Godhead subject to change and passion, since they imagine the Creator to be the son of the last of thirty emanations, each inferior to the last. Marcion of Sinope at least avoids the materialism of Valentinus, but he too sets the true god against the creator, pronouncing the first to be good and the second just, as though these attributes were irreconcilable (Lieu 2015: 25–40). He also alleges that both believed only the spirit, not the body, to be capable of salvation, and that both held certain humans to be spiritual by nature, and therefore saved already at birth, while others were hylic or material by nature and hence irrevocably damned. Whether or not this charge was well-founded (Lohr 1992), the constant reiteration of it in heresiological literature cemented the assumption that to be orthodox one must hold that the will is free so that we may be

equitably punished or rewarded. This is an early example of the emergence, by opposition to heresy, of an orthodox tenet that was never incorporated in a creed.

Although he can bring the charge of false *gnosis* (knowledge) against any private doctrine which is entertained in defiance of the true *gnosis*, Irenaeus does not anticipate the twentieth-century practice of applying the epithet ‘Gnostic’ to every heretic who denies that God the Father is the creator and saviour of the material cosmos (see further Edwards 1989; Williams 1996). While he may not have misrepresented either the content of his opponents’ teachings or their usage of the term ‘Gnostic’, he is studiously blind to the affinities that have been observed in modern times between groups that he favoured and others that he reviled (Brakke 2010: 90–111; Edwards 2009: 35–56). Tertullian follows his example of propagating truth by the conquest of error in his broadsides against Hermogenes, Praxeas, the Valentinians, Apelles and Marcion; his briefer *Indictment of Heretics*, by contrast, is a catena punctuated by invective, adding no new interlocutors to those of Irenaeus, and intimating that the root of error is a confusion of Athens, the nursery of philosophers, with Jerusalem, the cradle and future abode of the elect (*Indictment of Heretics* 7; Tertullian 1954).

Tertullian's name is incorrectly attached to a treatise *Against all Heresies*, notwithstanding its polemic against the Montanist or Cataphrygian (7.1) movement which is praised and defended in his extant writings (Rankin 1995: 41–52). Although they were not always deemed heretical even by outsiders, the Cataphrygians also appear in a list of sects whose writings are not included in the Muratorian Canon of the New Testament, of which most still date to the end of the second century (Hahneman 1992: 7, 9, 28) Although the Muratorian Canon itself does not use the term ‘heresy’, it demonstrates the inseparability, in this early period, of the norms of doctrine and the bounds of scripture; the suppression of the so-called Gospel of Peter at Antioch reveals that, as early as 170, a bishop’s standard of doctrinal probity could explode the pretensions of an august name.

The Cataphrygians feature again in the tenth book, but not the main body, of the work known as the *Elenchus* or *Refutation of all Heresies*, widely attributed since its discovery in the mid-nineteenth century to Hippolytus of Rome (Wordsworth 1853), but now ascribed by many Anglophone scholars to an anonymous disciple (Brent 1995). The author denounces most of the Gnosticizing adversaries of Irenaeus, but with liberal quotations from the writings attributed to them, which at times yield very different accounts of their teachings, as in their chapters on Simon Magus and Basilides. They are our only source on the self-styled Gnostics whom they name Naassenes (*Elenchus* 5.6–11; Hippolytus of Rome [authorship disputed] 2016), on the unnamed heresiarchs who fuse the gospel with allegoresis, astrology and arithmology, and on a group whom they call the Sethians (5.19), though their usage is not coterminous with that of Theodoret and his modern followers, who treat this term as a synonym for ‘Gnostic’ in its Irenaean sense (*Compendium of*

Heretical Fables 1.14; Theodoret of Cyrus [n.d.]). Most interesting to historians is their assault on Callistus, Bishop of Rome – being at once unparalleled and well-informed, if not free from prejudice – for numerous transgressions, including his patronage of the Monarchian Noetus. The statement of faith which concludes Book 9 is consonant with the doctrine of the *Contra Noetum*, another work attributed to Hippolytus; it is widely agreed, however, that he cannot be the author of both works (Frickel 1993). The author of the *Elenchus* accords themself episcopal status without denying that Callistus is their unworthy primate; it is not clear whether every act that demonstrates this unworthiness – the rebaptism of repentant sectaries, the blessing of illegal marital unions, the ordination of men who had been twice married – falls under their definition of heresy (9.12.24–26).

3 Heresy in Christian Alexandria

The misapprehension that *hairesis* in philosophy means heresy in the current sense of the word will have gained some traction from Clement of Alexandria's claim that the Greeks initially had but one philosophy, derived from the barbarians and consistent with the divine law, until it was dismembered, like the mythical King Pentheus, by the vanity and ambition of its professors (*Stromateis* 1.13; Clement of Alexandria 1905–1970; cf. *Dialogue with Trypho* 1.2; Justin Martyr 1997). Yet Clement, who borrows this simile from Numenius the Pythagorean (fragment 24.67; Boys-Stones 2001: 140), was in his own mind not an enemy of philosophy but a Christian philosopher; in contrast to Irenaeus and Tertullian, he adopts 'gnostic' as his epithet for the Christian who, in order to refute the so-called Gnostics, applies a philosophical hermeneutic to the scriptures under the discipline of the church (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2008). This pursuit of spiritual gnosis does not preclude, but rather invites, engagement with rival interpreters, and Clement's excerpts from the Valentinian Theodotus are not always easy to differentiate from his own responses, which (in contrast once again to the works of his predecessors) seek common ground as often as they seek grounds of disagreement (Kovacs 2006). At the same time he has no tolerance for those who, under pretence of freeing the spirit, throw the reins to their carnal appetites; but for him, the word would have forgotten the scabrous teachings of Isidorus and Epiphanes, while his vivid account of Basilidean orgies echoes, and thus deflects, the charges which are said by other witnesses to have been levelled against all Christians without discrimination (Grant 1981).

Origen of Alexandria, who is said to have been Clement's student, adopted another Valentinian as his interlocutor on his *Commentary on John*, perhaps conceding less to Heracleon (or with less candour) than Clement had conceded to Theodotus, yet showing unmistakable traces of this encounter in his own exegesis of the same texts (see Berglund 2020). In this work his usual adjective for an aberrant teaching, be it Valentinian or Marcionites, is *heterodoxos* rather than *hairetikos*; in more than one passage of the *First Principles* he condemns the *hairesis* that severs the law from the gospel, creation from

redemption and the goodness of God from his justice, but refrains from naming those who propagate it (2.4.1, 2.5.4, 2.7.1 etc.). On the other hand, without styling it a heresy, he repudiates the doctrine of Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion that only those rational beings who are spiritual by nature can be saved (*First Principles* 3.1.16 etc.; Origen 2018; for information on Basilides, see Lohr 1996). Since his term for a person of correct beliefs is *anêr ekklêsiastikos*, or man of the church, it may be that he was reluctant to chide as heresy an opinion that had yet to incur a formal condemnation. There can be no doubt, however, that in his parlance the terms Valentinian, Marcionite, and Basilidean are always used to apprise the reader that the tenets which he is about to discuss are erroneous (*First Principles* 2.7.1, 2.9.5 etc.; 2018). There is not such a clear implication of heresy when he essays to convince unnamed opponents that the New Jerusalem will be incorporeal (*First Principles* 2.11.12; 2018), or that God could be anthropomorphically represented as walking in Eden before he assumed a body of any kind (*On Prayer* 3.3–4; 1897, citing Gen 3:8). In *Contra Celsum* 6.35 (Origen 1897–1899) he disowns the heretical Ophites who have plagiarized the conceits of Mithraism. When Celsus taunts the church with its Valentinians, Gnostics, Ebionites, Simonians, Carpocratians, and other factions (5.61–65), he retorts that heresies need not be more deleterious to the church than to the philosophers and physicians among whom they have existed for centuries (2.27; 5.61). This is, of course, a fallacy, as it is only in Christian circles that the word hairesis invariably connotes error, and he corrects himself at once by citing Titus 3:10: ‘after the first and second warning, rebuke a heretic’ (6.63).

The Neoplatonist, Porphyry of Tyre, who had both met and read Origen, demonstrates his grasp of Christian usage when he says of the Gnostics refuted by Plotinus that they were ‘Christians, but heretics’ (*Life of Plotinus* 1969: 16: *Khristianoi, hairetikoi de*). In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, by contrast, the pagans seem to assume that one confession is as Christian as another when they ask the saint ‘what church are you of?’, and he answers ‘the catholic’ (*Martyrdom of Pionius* 19.4; Knöpf 1901: 72). As an adjective for the church, this term in Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 8.3 (1999), and whether it signifies ‘teaching the wholeness of doctrine’ or ‘embracing the whole of Christendom’, it did not imply the existence of some other institution which was not Catholic but deserved to be called a church. There was as yet no word connoting orthodoxy, for *orthodoxastai* in Clement meant not ‘holding correct beliefs in religious matters’, but ‘thinking rightly on the basis of perception rather than reason’. Methodius of Olympia, at once a debtor and a detractor of Origen, appears to have coined the word at *Symposium* 3.10 (1963). Among pagans, as we have noted, it had no pejorative force, and therefore required no commendatory antonym.

4 Defining heresy before Constantine

How then was a heresy to be proved to be such before the accuser had any sanction in law or any physical power of coercion? In the writings of the early heresiologists, there are at least six distinct strategies of persuasion which will each be explored in the following sections:

4.1 Invidious genealogy

Philosophers of the imperial era supported their opinions by reference to ancient masters, and, while it was not impermissible to acknowledge more than one master, the readiest way of discrediting one's opponents was to show that they had construed their chosen authorities incorrectly or had chosen one who was generally despised. Since the church had been warned by its own apostles against Jewish fables (Titus 1:14), vain philosophy (Col 2:8), and the blandishments of demons (2 Cor 11:14), reliance on profane teachings could be seen as a mark of apostasy in any professing Christian. The most sustained attempt to prove that every heretic borrowed or stole their doctrines from a Greek school is the *Elenchus*, the author of which is frequently obliged to shape their account of a philosopher to match that of their putative disciple, or conversely to draw their own inferences from a heretic's explicit statements in order to assimilate them more closely to their supposed model (Osborn 1987). As Jaap Mansfeld (1992) has pointed out, it was already a convention of pagan doxographies, or histories of philosophy, to fashion an intellectual ancestry even for thinkers who confessed no adherence to a school: it was therefore no argument against its method to say that Basilides would never have styled himself an Aristotelian (*Elenchus* 7.14; 2016) or Marcion an Empedoclean (7.29), while the allegation that Valentinus derived his system from Plato and Pythagoras (6.21) does not seem to have been wholly wide of the mark (Markschies 1992: 32–35, 160–168).

4.2 Appeal to scripture

One might have thought that this would have been the first expedient, for if a professing Christian held that the world was created by some other god than the Father of Christ, would it not be sufficient to cite the numerous passages in which he proclaims his Father to be the Lawgiver of the Old Testament, who is plainly depicted there as the Creator? Would it not be sufficient to adduce the prologue of John, in which all things are created through the Logos who became flesh, or the frequent testimonies in Paul to the salvation of the body? All heresiologists, from Justin onwards, do indeed make frequent use of scripture, and against such authors as Praxeas, or even against a Valentinian commentator on the New Testament, exegesis would always be the most cogent form of proof. But even against such adversaries, the Catholic party found itself setting text against text, while against the Gnostics and Marcion it would be necessary, before any text could be cited, to come to agreement on the canon.

The womb of all Gnostic literature, it seems, was the *Apocryphon of John*, a polemical riposte to the book of Genesis, of which we now have more copies than of Justin's *First Apology* or the *Elenchus*. Irenaeus implies that its admirers used it as scripture (*Against Heresies* 1.29.1; Irenaeus of Lyon 1965–1982). Another text of uncertain provenance, the *Gospel of Thomas*, is cited as scripture in writings that we should call orthodox – perhaps even in 1 Cor 2:9 – while a Valentinian tract often known today as the *Gospel of Truth* was quoted beside the canonical gospels in the late fourth century (2 Clement 12; Edwards 2015). Marcion accorded no value to the Old Testament except as the record of an obsolete covenant (Moll 2010), and did not acknowledge either the fourfold canon of the gospels or the fourteen letters of Paul that Irenaeus treats as scripture (Vinzent 2014). Those who shared his critical spirit will not have been impressed by Irenaeus' appeals to elders of his own choosing as privileged exegetes, and all the less so if this was a conscious imitation of rabbinic practice; even the allies of Irenaeus shrank from repeating his argument that there cannot be more than four gospels because there are four winds and four corners of the earth (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8; Irenaeus of Lyon 1965–1982).

4.3 Judaizing

In addition to noting that certain tenets and practices were expressly condemned in scripture, heresiologists attributed condemnatory descriptions to their adversaries. While *Ioudaismos* (Judaism), for instance, is not stigmatized as a heresy by Paul in Gal 1:14 (or even by Ignatius in Phil 6) the collective noun *Ioudaioi* (Jews) is employed with pejorative force throughout the Gospel of John and at times in the letters of Paul (John 5:18; 7:1; 8:52; 19:7, notwithstanding John 4:22; 1 Cor 1:22–23; 2 Cor 12:24). If, then, it could be shown that a group was adhering to the dietary laws that the church had declared to be obsolete, celebrating a 'Quartodeciman' Easter which coincided with the Passover (Gerlach 1998: 258–265), refusing (with the Ebionites) to acknowledge the Virgin Birth (Klijn and Reinink 1973: 19–43), or arguing (with Arius) that to make Christ God in the same sense as the Father was to compromise the sovereignty and integrity of the one God (Lorenz 1979: 141–180), the charge of Judaizing was all too readily urged and believed.

We should not be too quick to cite such lampoons as evidence of a Jewish Christianity, tenaciously opposed to the Pauline gospel (see Taylor 2000). Nor would it be accurate to imagine Christianity as the mean between Gnostic indifference and Jewish addiction to the Old Testament, or between the Gnostic preaching of a phantom Christ and the Judaizing cult of him as a prophet who was no more than a man. Some Gnostic myths are subversive transformations of well-worn narratives from the Pentateuch, while the worship of the risen Christ as an angel or spirit may be the earliest heresy, and is no less docetic than the theory of some Valentinians that the Saviour came already clothed in the spiritual flesh of the resurrection (see further Marshall 2005).

4.4 ‘Guilt by association’

Guilt by association, to borrow the title of Smith’s work (2014), was another method of identifying heretics deployed by the early heresiologists. The object of a satirical genealogy was usually to arrest a misguided current within the satirist’s own school; in the same way Irenaeus, without applying the label ‘Gnostic’ to all his antagonists, traces most of the sect of this name, whose hostility to the Old Testament and indifference to the New appeared to put them beyond any possible definition of Christian teaching (*Against Heresies* 1.31.3; Irenaeus of Lyon 1965–1982). By the same principle, heretics of his own day were deemed to be pupils of the more infamous heresiarchs, so that Ptolemy, Secundus, and Heracleon fall under the collective indictment against the Valentinians (Markschies 2000; Kaler 2006). This is not to say that Irenaeus is simply lying or mistaken, as his modern critics aver (King 2003); outside Athens, a school in antiquity was seldom as clearly delineated a thing as a building or a succession of licensed professors (Le Boulluec 1985: 48). Likewise, a witness who discerned traits of Valentinian thought in Heracleon could just as easily impose this name on him as Heracleon could to deny it – just as it would be equally legitimate, for example, to affirm or to deny that Hans Urs von Balthasar was a disciple of Karl Barth.

4.5 Moral denigration

This too is a characteristic of all philosophical invectives, which unfailingly portrayed the Epicurean as idle voluptuaries, the Stoics as solipsistic pettifoggers, the Cynics at once a fanatics and hypocrites (Owen 1983). We have noted above the charges of debauchery against certain groups, which were all the more telling when it could be alleged that their delinquencies were the consequence rather than a contradiction of their pretensions. Ambition was a regular charge against heretics, and both Valentinus and Marcion were alleged to have turned against the episcopate only after their hopes of advancement in the Roman church had failed (*Against the Valentinians* 4; *Indictment of Heretics* 30; Tertullian 1954).

4.6 Rule of faith

Irenaeus cites certain holy presbyters as custodians of the true exegesis of scripture (e.g. *Against Heresies* 5.20.2; Irenaeus of Lyon 1965–1982). For him they personify a rule of faith which has been preserved without change in all the great sees since the time of the apostles. As proof he traces the line of Roman incumbents back to the installation of Linus by Peter and Paul (*Against Heresies* 3.2–3; see further Nautin 1957). Tertullian, who also accords a certain pre-eminence to Rome while showing no reverence for its bishops (*Against Praxeas* 1.6; *On Modesty* 1.6; Tertullian 1954), tests the doctrine of Praxeas against a rule of faith (*regula fidei*) which he reduces to a series of propositions on the unity of God, the salvific mission of Christ and the everlasting life to come (*Against*

Praxeas 3.1; Countryman 1982). Like comparable passages in Irenaeus, this formula bears such a resemblance to the Nicene Creed as to suggest that it already had a place in liturgy (see further Kelly 2014: 62–99). Origen commences his *First Principles* with a body of truths supposed to have been laid down by the apostles (*First Principles* proem 7; 2018); in substance these concur with the cardinal tenets of Irenaeus and Tertullian, and similar phylacteries can be derived without difficulty from the writings of Hippolytus and Clement (see further Bokedal 2013). There is little reason for questioning the unity of the episcopate in the period up to the mid-third century; there is, however, no way of determining what proportion of those who regarded themselves as Christians took the bishop's beliefs as a standard for their own.

5 Heresy versus schism?

Most historians now discriminate between heresy and schism, the first being deviation from orthodoxy, the second a rejection of catholicity by the setting up of a rival hierarchy (see e.g. Greenslade 1953). On this view, schism will almost always be the practical outcome, but seldom if ever a logical concomitant, of heresy, while on the other hand schism may occur without heresy of any kind. The corollary is often drawn that schism, though it is culpable, is not such a sin as heresy; on the other hand, it can be urged that a sin against love is more heinous than a sin against faith, and that if ecclesiology is a branch of theology, schism will always be heresy since it implies a false conception of the church. It can also be said that, while both terms are biblical, they are apt to be coupled rather than contrasted in Christian literature before Constantine, and neither is judged, in any extant source, to be less worthy of reprobation than the other.

One might reply that, were heresy and schism not distinguished, we should scarcely have even a retrospective notion of orthodoxy before Nicaea, since Origen, Tertullian, and the author of the *Elenchus* all exhibit some tendency to separate themselves from other churchmen, and not only from those who entertained false doctrines. Tertullian asserts in the *Indictment of Heretics* 5.1 that schism is the lesser sin, but for all his fulminations against the 'Bishop of bishops' (*On Modesty* 1.6; 1954), his physical separation from psychic 'Christians' is not in his own eyes a breach of formal communion. Origen, though the orders conferred upon him in Caesarea were contested in Alexandria, was not in his own day the leader of a sect, and when he met simple believers who misunderstood the anthropomorphic metaphors of the Old Testament, he thought it his duty not to shun them but to make them wiser. The author of the *Elenchus* has been described as an antipope (Döllinger 1876), but scholars now tend to regard him as a late champion of the synodical mode of government in Rome against the autocratic measures of Zephyrinus and Callistus (Brent 1995). It would be equally precipitate to assume that every heresy which they denounced had crystallized in their own time as a distinct communion. We can say with confidence that the followers of Marcion had done so, going so far as to

adopt Marcionite as a self-designation (Moll 2010: 124–126). On the other hand, Tertullian holds that exponents of the new prophecy, whom others styled as Cataphrygians, were estranged from their brethren in Asia only because they been traduced by the monarchians – who, for their part, were more in favour with the see of Rome than their orthodox opponents (*Against Praxeas* 1.6; 1954). Valentinian documents corroborate the reports of heresiologists who accuse them of celebrating private sacraments (Thomassen 2006: 333–385). At the same time, Irenaeus would not have taken such pains to prove that they were not Christians if they had visibly severed themselves from the rest of Christendom. The fact that Origen could be charged with Valentinian sympathies suggests that this appellation was not reserved for those who had consciously joined a sect.

If not the work of an antipope, the *Elenchus* upholds a notion of synodical government in the Roman church that was becoming obsolete (Brent 1995: 416–428). One reason for ascribing it to Hippolytus of Rome is that the latter was remembered anachronistically as a follower of Novatian, whose contest with Cornelius for the Roman see gave rise to a lasting schism (*Peristephanon* 11; Prudentius 2014). Like Tertullian, Origen, and Hippolytus, Novatian denied that the Bishop of Rome had the power to readmit an apostate, even after a term of penance. He may have thought Cornelius a heretic for assuming this prerogative, but the latter had most of the church on his side (*Church History* 6.43; Eusebius 1926), and in the eyes of Cyprian of Carthage, Novatian's claim to an episcopal ministry without election was the one apostasy that could not be pardoned. Whether the transgressor was a heretic or a schismatic was of little account to him; even if one could confidently infer, from his juxtaposition of these terms in *Epistle* 71.1 (see Cyprian 1871), that he drew a semantic distinction between them, he saw no distinction in the gravity of the transgression (see Dunn 2004: esp. 553 and 560). He maintained that, having put himself outside the church, Novatian could neither ordain nor administer baptism (Brent 2010: 58–70): in his subsequent correspondence with Stephen of Rome, he acknowledged no distinction between a baptism that was heretical, being performed in some other name than that of the Trinity, and one that was schismatic yet valid because it had been administered in due form. Stephen's adoption of this distinction contradicted the practice of Callistus, as recorded by the disapproving Hippolytus (*Elenchus* 9.12.26; 2016), and appears to have little precedent, since Heraclas of Alexandria's ruling against second baptism concerned only those schismatics whose first immersion had taken place in a Catholic font (*Church History* 7.7.4; Eusebius 1926)

Nevertheless, Rome's opinion prevailed at Constantinople in 381, if not at Nicaea in 325 (Bright 1882: 66–68, 106–108). Her pre-eminence as an arbiter, if not her juridical primacy, was confirmed a decade later when the Emperor Aurelian decreed that the bishops of Italy should appoint a successor to Paul of Samosata (*Church History* 7.30.19–20; Eusebius 1926). The deposition of Paul by eighty bishops assembled in his own see of Antioch (Riedmatten 1952) set the precedent for Nicaea, not only because it added 'Samosatene'

to the lexicon of polemic as a term hardly less injurious than Arian, but because it revealed the necessity, when a bishop was the object of condemnation, of employing the secular arm in the enforcement of a spiritual decree (*Church History* 7.30.19; Eusebius 1926). The heresy was not extinguished either by Aurelian's intervention or by the synodical condemnation of the 'psilanthropic' thesis that Jesus was merely a man inhabited by the Spirit (*Church History* 7.30.11; Eusebius 1926). The Council of Nicaea denied the validity of baptisms administered by Paul's followers, and a group of adoptionists known as the Paulicians in the Byzantine era may have taken their name from the heretic rather than the saint (Conybeare 1898). It is Rome again that convened the first tribunal to resolve the Donatist schism, the bitterest fruit of Diocletian's persecution (*Against the Donatists* 1.23–24; Optatus 1995); since, however, this event took place at the instance of the first Christian Emperor, it marks the dawn of an epoch in which heresy became at once more visible, more dangerous and (where it endured) more truculent, as it was punished not only by clerical admonition but by legal disabilities which grew more severe in each successive reign.

6 Power and principle in the imperial age

Christian witnesses represent Constantine as a recent convert to the faith when he became sole master of the Western Empire in 312. This is the character that he maintains in all his dealings with the episcopate, whose spiritual authority he augmented by fiscal privilege and a certain measure of temporal jurisdiction. It was therefore of importance to him that this order should be united, and no further cause need be sought for his intervention in the Donatist controversy. Why this controversy proved so intractable is another question: the answer of Frend (1952) – that the dissidents were Berbers by race, fanatical by nature and inveterately hostile to Roman hegemony – is not supported by the most recent studies of the demography of the schism (Leone 2016). To Constantine himself, the greater mystery was the eruption of theological disputes over matters which seemed to be of far less importance than those which had divided Christendom in its first two centuries. It was clear enough that those who worshipped Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world could not coexist with those who held that the world was the work of a lesser God and was doomed to perish; it was equally clear that the language of the New Testament could not be reconciled with the monarchian doctrine that it was the Father who died on the Cross. But when Constantine (now sole Emperor) discovered in 324 that the presbyter Arius had been excommunicated by his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, for holding that the Son was 'out of nothing' and not strictly coeternal with the Father, he took the view that this was a trivial matter, on which Alexander should not have been so inquisitive or Arius so stubborn (*Life of Constantine* 2.69–71; Eusebius 1991). This judgment is recorded with approval by Eusebius of Caesarea, who had made the unanimity of the episcopate in the era before Diocletian a leading theme of his *Church History*. Many historians since his time have wondered how the church could have

been distracted for so long by the proliferating niceties of a quarrel that the Emperor had expected to settle once for all at the Council of Nicaea.

It is certainly true that, in this period as in later times, spiritual weapons could be employed for worldly ends, and that a successful charge of heresy was the readiest way to depose a rival bishop or diminish the authority of his see. Arius found a patron in Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was deposed at Nicaea but subsequently avenged himself by procuring the exile of Alexander's successor Athanasius (Gwynn 2006: 168–244). After both political and ecclesiastical primacy in the East had been transferred to Constantinople, there can be no doubt that jealousy exacerbated the frequent conflicts between this bishopric and the more ancient sees of Rome and Alexandria (Schwartz 1928). On the other hand, the fact that not every collision between the great sees resulted in a general council suggests that the church was not easily beguiled; the intrigues by which Theophilus of Alexandria robbed John Chrysostom of his see, for example, did not compromise the latter's reputation as a saint (Katos 2011). As Wiles (1989) and others have argued, it is reasonable to suppose that, however recondite the points in dispute may seem to a modern eye, the protagonists feared that if they failed to resolve them, they would have no secure understanding of the grounds of their own salvation, and therefore no assurance that they were saved.

The Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition illustrate the truth of this contention, but if soteriology had been such a dominant factor in theological debates of the Roman era, as it was in those of the Western Church at the time of the Reformation, we can only wonder why the Pelagian controversy was never addressed by an ecumenical council and why there was no anticipation of later controversies on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the sufficiency of the Cross as a means of atonement. It would seem that, in the Greek-speaking world at least, disagreement in doctrine seldom led to a breach of communion unless it forced the contending parties to ask not only 'how am I saved?', but also 'by whom am I saved?', or in other words 'whom do I worship?'. Piety required that one should come to a firm persuasion regarding the unity of the Godhead, the divinity of Christ and the identity of the human Jesus with the eternal Logos; it also required one to choose, at the high point of the Christian year, between the Quartodeciman celebration of Christ's death on the fourteenth of the month Nisan, and the calendar adopted in Alexandria and Rome, which ensured that the anniversary of his resurrection would always fall on a Sunday (Gerlach 1998). Did one, in short, commemorate the death that he took on himself by becoming human or the breaking of the chains of hell by the One whom death cannot hold?

When divergence of practice in the celebration of Easter arose in Rome in the later years of the second century, Irenaeus tried to dissuade the Bishop from imposing uniformity too strictly, reminding him that both his own practice and that of the Quartodecimans

rested on apostolic tradition (*Church History* 3.25; Eusebius 1926). Nevertheless, it was Christ himself who ordained that his flock should be one (John 17:21), and divergence of practice is not so easily hidden as diversity in doctrine. This point was illustrated in English history by the Synod of Whitby, convened in 664 to reconcile the Paschal calendar of a Northumbrian king with that of his Kentish wife (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25; Bede 1930). But in fact, the Roman date which was adopted on that occasion had been made law for the whole of Christendom in 325 by the Council of Nicaea under the auspices of the first Christian Emperor. The creed for which this council is most renowned was not adopted for half a century as a norm of orthodox doctrine, and not even then in its entirety. If, by contrast, a uniform date for the celebration of Easter was an almost immediate consequence, the reason is that the councils which have shaped the mind of the church were not only theatres for episcopal debate but subtle instruments of imperial policy (see further Graumann 2021).

7 Constantine and the new conciliar age

The holding of synods and councils, as Eusebius observes, had been a regular practice of the church since its foundation (*Life of Constantine* 1.51, 2.66; 1991). In his day, provincial synods, under the presidency of the bishop of the chief city or metropolis, met as often as twice a year to settle questions of procedural legitimacy, calendrical uniformity, institutional primacy, and personal malfeasance. Trials for heresy seem to have been specially convened, and the most momentous before Nicaea was the deposition of Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch, by eighty bishops from provinces contiguous to Syria. Their decision could not be enforced without the mandate of the Emperor Aurelian, and an ecumenical council, which could claim to represent every portion of the inhabited world, could not be imagined before the accession of a Christian Emperor who had the will, the authority and the means to bring so many from afar to a single place. A bishop of the Emperor's choice presided at such assemblies, but it was he who issued the edicts which enforced and interpreted its resolutions. This exegetic role should not be forgotten when we speak of conciliar orthodoxy, for their laws speak clearly where councils, in their efforts to keep the balance between competing factions, are often equivocal.

The Council of Arles in 314 was Constantine's expedient for establishing a common date for Easter in the West and for determining whether Caecilian or his rival Donatus ought to be Bishop of Carthage. The Council of Nicaea in 325 secured the same uniformity for the date of Easter in Constantine's new territories, reconciled the clergy ordained by Melitius in Alexandria to their new Bishop, Alexander, and produced a creed affirming with Alexander, against his presbyter Arius – that the Son, or Second Person of the Trinity, was not only from the substance of the Father but, like the Father himself, ingenerate and unchanging. Constantine exercised his own judgment by interrogating Caecilian after his acquittal at

Arles (*Against the Donatists* 1.26; Optatus 1995); some years after Nicaea he exercised his own judgment on behalf of the Melitians by suspending the successor of Alexander, Athanasius, whom they accused of tyrannical conduct. Since the Quartodeciman custom of making Easter coincide with the Passover was regarded by some as a heresy and had almost caused a schism in Rome (*Church History* 3.25; Eusebius 1926), the Emperor may have felt that he spoke for the church as well as himself when he published a letter full of menace towards the Quartodecimans. For all that, he enjoined that the Novatianists were not to be punished as harshly as other heretics (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.2, 25 September 326; Mommsen 1905), though we hear that after Nicaea they abandoned the Roman calendar and joined the Quartodecimans (*Life of Constantine* 3.18; Eusebius 1991), not so much from conviction as to pass sentence of ostracism on all who favoured the readmission of the lapsed (*Church History* 10; Socrates Scholasticus 1889).

Constantine is said to have played a conspicuous, yet far from consistent, role in the shaping and promulgation of the Nicene Creed. Allegedly it was he who demanded the insertion of the phrase *homoousios toi patri*, 'consubstantial with the Father', and he who gave the force of law to the condemnation of Arius (*Church History* 1.11; Eusebius 1926). It was he again who enjoined the burning of Arius' books, in imitation of Diocletian's edict against the Manichaeans, fugitives from Persia who believed that the visible world, with all its denizens but for a few embodied particles of divine light, was doomed to perdition. To Diocletian this was the faith of Zoroastrian spies (Lieu and Gardner 2004: 117–118), to Catholic churchmen a new distemper of Gnostic thought. No wonder that 'Manichaean' joined 'Samosatene' as a trite term of abuse (see further Giulea 2018), and that Arius claimed to detect in the *homoousion* a Manichaean or Valentinian tendency to treat the Godhead as a divisible substrate (*On the Synods* 16; Athanasius 1881). In spite of all this, it was Constantine again who requested that Arius be restored to communion after he signed a creed which did not contain the word homoousion (Elliott 1992: 180–183) – the word upon which the Emperor himself had once insisted. Socrates the historian excused him on the grounds that, as a statesman, he had no object but peace (*Church History* 1.10; Eusebius 1926); if that is so it would seem that the synergy of church and state gave rise to two conflicting definitions of orthodoxy. To prelates like Athanasius, the goal was truth, and the union of the whole church about the one truth was the only admissible object of political coercion. To emperors, who aimed first of all at union, any formula for which one could secure a willing majority was sufficient, and would justify the coercion of a minority which defied consensus in the name of truth.

8 Ecclesiastical fissures after Constantine

Constantine's son, Constantius II, acquired a reputation as an Arian, but his enmity to Athanasius seems to arise from the latter's refusal, after 350 at least, to stand on common ground with those who could not embrace the *homoousion* (Barnes 1993: 126–135).

Even in 341, the Dedication Council at Antioch was associated with five creeds, none of which contained this term, though there was little else in them that the Nicene Fathers would have judged heretical (Kelly 2014: 263–274). The Western Council of Serdica in 343 walked the precipice of heresy by proclaiming that there is only one hypostasis in the Godhead; the defence of Athanasius, that truth resides not in words but in what they signify, is an early, though involuntary confession of the futility of creeds (*Tome to the Antiochenes* 5; 2014). For those who held to the Nicene Creed, there was no palliating the 'Blasphemy of Sirmium' (*On the Synods* 28; Athanasius 1881) which proscribed the word *ousia* and its derivatives, permitting no more to be said of the Son than that he was like the Father (*homoios tôi patri*) in all respects. The signature of Liberius, Bishop of Rome, gave force to this document, since this see retained its status as the touchstone of orthodoxy even where its claims to primacy were contested. Athanasius, who enjoyed the protection of Rome in his frequent exiles, alleges that this signature was obtained by duress (*History of the Arians* 41; 1881), and only threats and intrigues won a majority for the Homoian creed at Seleucia, Rimini, and Constantinople. Yet many more bishops had been assembled at Rimini than at Nicaea, as the Goths and Vandals retorted to those who disparaged them as Arians (*History of the Vandal Persecution* 3.5; Victor of Vita 1881); it was against these Ariminians (as we should call them) that Vincent of Lérins defined the Catholic faith as that which has been upheld not only by many on one occasion, but by all, at all times and in every place (*Commonitorium* 6; Klupfel 1809: 101–103).

Vincent was writing some seventy years after Theodosius I had issued a decree proclaiming the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit in one substance or *ousia* (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.6.2; Mommsen 1905), thus undoing the policy of Constantius. This edict of 381 gave legal effect to the amplified version of the Nicene Creed that had been endorsed at the Council of Constantinople; yet dissent had not been silenced, as we see from a voluminous chapter on heresies in the *Theodosian Code*. Almost all the laws which this preserves were enacted by Theodosius and his successors, who bear witness to their own failure by repeatedly seizing the property and abolishing the testamentary rights of the same prohibited sects (16.5.23, 16.5.27, 16.5.49, 16.5.58 etc.). The Eunomians, who denied even likeness of essence between the three persons, were subjected to these penalties in edict after edict, while the books of Nestorius were burned in 435 (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.66.1), and the extreme penalty of expulsion from cities fell on the Manichaeans in 428 (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.65.2). Manichaeans were frequently coupled with Priscillian and his followers, whose ascetic and celibate regimen was alleged to be a mask for both heretical and magical practices (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.40 etc.). Priscillian has the distinction of being the first man put to death for heresy (Chadwick 1976: 144): since his executioner, Maximus Magnus, was a usurper (or held to be so once he had been defeated by Theodosius), the church which had found him guilty could say with good

conscience that it had neither desired nor anticipated this bloody exercise of the secular arm.

By 25 July 383, the catalogue of resilient heretics had reached its longest, including ‘Eunomians, Arians, Macedonians, Pneumatomachi, Manichaeans, Encratites, Saccophori and Hydroparastatae’ (*Theodosian Code* 16.5.11), to whom were added the Valentinians, Marcionites, Borborians, Phrygians, Messalians, Euchites, Audiani, Photininas, Marcellians, Paulians, and Tascodrogitae on 30 May 428 (16.5.65.2). If Theodosius I was preoccupied by errors in trinitarian doctrine, his namesake who compiled the *Code* is no less severe upon Donatists (who had joined or fomented revolts against their imperial oppressors in North Africa) and did not care whether Novatianists were a heresy or a schism. The legislators assume throughout that a sect can be recognized by its mode of worship: we must therefore assume the existence of distinct conventicles, although the few allusions to bishops do not make it clear whether each maintained its own episcopal succession. It seems to be in the 420s that the line of Novatianist bishops expires in Rome and Constantinople; in Africa it was the Arab conquest, rather than Vandal or Catholic proselytizing, that extinguished Donatism.

9 The role of the theologian in the fourth century

As it was not legislation alone that vanquished heresy, so it was not solely the decisions of councils, even when ecumenical, that codified the articles of orthodox belief. No pronouncement on the Holy Spirit, for example, was made at the Council of Nicaea. Authors in the Nicene tradition devised their own labels – Tropici, Pneumatomachi (or ‘Spirit-fighters’), and Macedonians (followers of Macedonius) for those who refused to accept that if the Son was equal to the Father in divinity, the Spirit must be equal in divinity to both. Athanasius undertook to prove this from scripture, with some satire on those who imagined the Spirit to be the Father’s grandson. Basil of Caesarea extended the rule of faith to include the liturgical adoration of the Spirit together with the other two persons (*On the Holy Spirit* 66–68; 1980). Even from this parity of honour he could not deduce with confidence that the Spirit is either God or *homoousion* with the Father. Both his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, and his sometime ally, Gregory Nazianzen, were prepared to draw both conclusions, yet the Council of Constantinople went no further than Basil, notwithstanding Nazianzen’s temporary chairmanship and the subsequent decree of Theodosius I (Kelly 2014: 296–331). Now that the Athanasian Creed (which was not composed by Athanasius or used liturgically in the Eastern churches) is now seldom heard in any Western service outside the Lutheran communion (Kelly 1964), the dogma that the Spirit is God in the same sense as the other persons rests on the consensus of the Fathers – that is to say, on the consensus of those early Christian writers who do not forfeit their claim to be Fathers by contesting the divinity of the Spirit.

Origenism is another heresy that was impugned by theologians before it was discovered by an Emperor or a council. Origen had been praised by Athanasius because he held the Son to be coeternal with the Father, but disparaged by Marcellus of Ancyra because he had given a handle to Arius by identifying the Son with the created Wisdom of Prov 8:22 (*Against Marcellus* 1.4.18–20; Eusebius 1972). Methodius of Olympia had already accused him of heterodoxy in his teaching on the resurrection (*Bibliotheca* 234; Photius 1959–1974). The question of his orthodoxy was forced upon the world by Epiphanius of Salamis, who admired Origen as a scholar but maintained in his *Ancoratus* and in *Panarion* 64 (1919) that he had fallen into heresy by denying the full divinity of the Son and conceding immortality to the soul but not the body (Dechow 1988). The same author, it may be noted, treats Marcellus too as a heretic in *Panarion* 72, notwithstanding the absence of any ecumenical condemnation. His case against Origen was taken up by Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria, and by Jerome the lay controversialist, who was considered one of the best rhetoricians in the Latin world (Clark 1992). Origen continued to be lauded and imitated until the Emperor Justinian extracted eleven tenets from his writings which, by 543, could be deemed heretical. He did not secure a conciliar ratification until 553, if we mean by this the proscription (under imperial duress, if it even proceeded from the Fifth Ecumenical Council) of fifteen heretical articles of belief which were neither attributed nor strictly attributable to Origen (Hombergen 2001: 309–315).

10 Augustine as lone heresiologist

Augustine of Hippo subscribed, with little justification, to the charges laid by Jerome and others against the great Alexandrian. His memorable polemics, however, are those against the Manichaeans, the Priscillianists, the Donatists, and the Pelagians. Despite being a former Manichaean, this if anything led him to launch a more visceral attack against them, as he held their founder's myth up to ridicule and taught them how to resolve the apparent between Jesus and Moses, to be readmitted to the Catholic fold. The heresy of Priscillian, on the other hand, is believed by many scholars to have emanated largely from the minds of his accusers, or perhaps of some rogue disciples (Conti 2009). The Donatist schism had been the red wound of Africa for decades before Augustine's consecration as Bishop of Hippo, and Optatus of Milevis had urged against them that, even if there any wrongs on the Catholic side, it was the Donatists who had failed the two tests of brotherly love and communion with Rome. Augustine upholds the first principle, and will therefore not grant to the Donatist Cresconius that his sin against charity can be palliated as a mere schism (*Against Cresconius* 2.7.9; 1909). In most of his works the test of catholicity is communion with the entirety of Christendom rather than with any particular see, and it can evidently not be met by a sect that barely exists outside Africa (*Against Parmenianus* 3.2.11; 1908). For this reason, while they are orthodox enough to baptize in the name of the Trinity, their sacraments remain valid but inefficacious because the recipient does not

imbibe the Spirit of love, which (as Cyprian held) is present only within the undivided body of Christ (*Against Petilian* 7.11–8.14; *Against Cresconius* 2.31.39–32.40; Augustine 1909; *On Baptism against the Donatists* 6–7; 1908).

The Catholics in Africa won the battle for royal subsidies, if not the battle for numbers. The Eastern bishops (except at Eastern Serdica in 343, which was later judged to be Arian) recognized the Catholic succession in their correspondence with African churches and invitations to Councils (*Against Cresconius* 3.34.38; Augustine 1909). The Donatists appear to have been subsumed with the Novatianists under the epithet *katharoi* ('pure'), which furnished the medieval popes with a second opprobrious term, alongside 'Manichee', for the dualists whom they destroyed at Albigense in 1215 (Bremmer 2002: 68). Augustine had more difficulty in persuading those outside Africa to see a heretic in the British monk Pelagius, whom he accused of slighting both the grace of God and the sin of Adam when he made ascetic perfection the price of entering the kingdom. He did not, as has recently been maintained (Bonner 2018), concoct a syllabus of fifteen errors and impute it to Pelagius. On the contrary, he was willing, in his book *On the Acts of Pelagius*, to waive the majority of these charges when Pelagius had answered them at an Eastern synod. However, he insisted that Pelagius granted more spontaneity, and therefore more merit, to the human will than was consistent with Paul's teaching that we are saved by grace through a faith that is not our own, and that God has mercy on whom he will have mercy (see e.g. *On the Acts of Pelagius* 3.8ff; Augustine 1902).

So long as Augustine argued that works are the fruit of election rather than the cause of it, it was difficult to gainsay him (e.g. *To Simplicianus* 1.2.2; Augustine 1970). But when he drew the consequence that everyone is predestined at birth to salvation or damnation because it is only God's will that engenders saving faith (e.g. in *On the Predestination of the Saints*; Augustine [n.d.]), he failed to carry with him not only the Greek-speaking Bishop of Rome, but even such Latin-speaking opponents of Pelagius as Jerome, who held that we cannot be saved by our wills alone but are free to co-operate, even to the point of ascetic perfection, with the power of the Holy Spirit. Augustine's deduction from Rom 5:12, that all of us sinned in Adam and have inherited his guilt (*On the Merits of Sinners* 1.9.10–15.19; 1913), was seldom accepted in the East, while few of his followers even in the West accepted his argument that if we had not inherited Adam's guilt there would have been no warrant for baptizing infants (*Against Two Letters of Pelagius* 4.8.3; 1913). There has been no ecumenical condemnation of Pelagius, though his associate Celestius was anathematized at Ephesus for teachings that were more plainly contrary to the mind of the church.

11 Councils of the fifth century

11.1 Council of Ephesus

The Council of Ephesus is remembered not for the condemnation of Pelagius but for the downfall of Nestorius, who, as Bishop of Constantinople, had deprecated the use of the title *Theotokos*, 'Mother of God', for the Virgin Mary. He may have shared the distaste with which Epiphanius perceived the excesses of Marian devotion, but he was moved above all by a fear of compromising the impassibility of the divine nature by making it subject to birth and death. For theologians trained in his native Antioch, this had been the principal ground of objection to the teaching of Apollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea, that Christ was 'God bearing flesh' and that God himself had died on the cross. When he was challenged by Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius denounced him as an Apollinarian to Celestine of Rome and the Emperor Theodosius II. Celestine, however, took Cyril's part (Wessel 2004: 103–109), while Theodosius, having initially treated Cyril as the defendant, allowed the Council of Ephesus to take place under the auspices of his ineffectual legate, Candidianus. In the absence of John of Antioch, whose delegation had pledged its support to Nestorius, the proceedings were entirely managed by Cyril, and his rival was summarily deposed when he declined to answer the summons to recant. In endorsing Cyril's letters against him, the Council may be said to have created the heresy of Nestorianism, according to which there are two Christs, one human and one divine. John of Antioch, when he arrived at last, expressed his dissent by deposing Cyril, who repaid him in the same coin (McGuckin 2004: 58–68). Theodosius, woken at last, would not permit either to return to his bishopric until they had come to agreement. The *Formula of Reunion*, drafted in Antioch and signed by Cyril in 433, asserted that Mary was Mother of God, but also that Christ had two natures, acting and speaking sometimes according to his humanity and sometimes according to his divinity (Bindley 1899: 168). While it did not involve him in any logical contradiction, the language of the *Formula* was alien to Cyril, who never ceased to point out that it was less scriptural to speak of Christ's human nature than of his flesh. In this he had the Nicene Creed on his side and he had taken care at Ephesus that any addition to thus should be proscribed.

11.2 Council of Chalcedon

Most scholars in the twentieth century held that the 'Antiochene School' which asserted the duality of Christ's natures was at least as representative of Christendom as the 'Alexandrian School' of Athanasius, Apollinarius, and Cyril, which emphasized the unity of his person (Sellers 1940). Today, at least in the Anglophone world, Nestorius and his mentor Theodore of Mopsuestia are often regarded as proponents of a more local tradition, which formulated the difference between the two natures with a vehemence that inevitably (if involuntarily) separated the Logos from the man, Jesus (Fairbairn 2003: 15–17). Scholars who hold this view cannot concur with their predecessors in praising the Council of Chalcedon in 451 as a restoration of the balance between the Antiochene and Alexandrian parties. They see it rather as that which it purported to be, a corrective

to the mistaken belief that the *Formula of Reunion* contradicted the true opinion of Cyril (Halleux 1976a; 1976b). It would not have taken place had not Cyril's nephew, Dioscorus of Alexandria, supported the Archimandrite Eutyches against his bishop, Flavian of Constantinople, when the latter required him to affirm two natures in the incarnate Christ, as the *Formula of Reunion* implied (see further Bevan and Gray 2008). Nor would the Chalcedonian bishops have been required to do more than republish the *Formula*, had not Bishop Leo of Rome produced his own refutation of Eutyches, in which some detected a Nestorian tendency. No-one at Chalcedon contested the orthodoxy of Cyril; the famous definition in which Christ was declared to be one person in two natures was explicitly declared to be consonant both with his *Second Letter to Nestorius* and with his letter commending the *Formula of Reunion*. It was also declared to agree with the *Tome of Leo*, while at the same time the Council forestalled the charge of adding to the Nicene Creed by arguing that they had done no more than clarify its meaning, as the Fathers at Constantinople had done when they appended the clauses on the Holy Spirit in 381 (Bindley 1899: 229–232).

Nevertheless, the Armenian Church rejected the Chalcedonian Definition as a presumptuous increment to (their own augmented version of) the Nicene Creed (Bindley 1899: 140–141). The followers of Nestorius were not reconciled, for Chalcedon had condemned him again by name. Syria was their stronghold, and Syriac is the liturgical tongue of the Church of the East which continues to proclaim the orthodoxy of Nestorius. In the wake of the deposition of Dioscurus at Chalcedon, the majority of his compatriots chose to follow another patriarch than the one installed by the Emperor; the Arab conquest completed the estrangement of Egypt from the Byzantine Empire, and Coptic became the liturgical language of this church, for which its Greek opponents' coined the invidious term 'monophysite'. In fact, the formula cherished by the theological critics of Chalcedon was *mia physis tou theiou logou sesarkomenou* ('one nature of the divine word enfleshed'), which Cyril professed to have borrowed from Athanasius, unwittingly quoting an Apollinarian forgery (see Galtier 1956). All agreed that Cyril could not be wrong, but if we take the one nature to be that of God and 'flesh' to mean humanity, his dictum seems, as the Chalcedonians argued, to differ only in terms from their own definition (*On the True Faith* 3.7, 3.11; John of Damascus 2013). Their adversaries demurred and were even less ready to concede that the *Tome of Leo*, which at one point divided the acts of Christ between the Word and his flesh (*Tome of Leo* 4; in Bindley 1899: 199, lines 146–147), could be reconciled in substance with the plain sense of John 1:14, a recurrent prooftext for Cyril. By contrast, the Alexandrian metaphysician John Philoponus hoped to establish unanimity with his own formula that Christ had 'one composite nature', which was equally unpalatable to Chalcedonians and those who held the mia phusis formula quoted above (Lang 2002). The most revered of the latter, Severus of Antioch, proved himself no Antiochene in the modern sense by insisting that every act of the Word Incarnate

was at once human and divine. Those whom we now call Neo-Chalcedonians could not endorse this monoenergism (Booth 2013: 222–263); amid these many debates, no single theologian could hope to distinguish between what was heresy, what was merely infelicitous, and what was orthodoxy in a non-Chalcedonian guise.

12 Post-Chalcedonian Babel

The Fifth Ecumenical Council, or Second Council of Constantinople in 553, was rigorously managed by the Emperor Justinian with a view to preserving the Chalcedonian doctrine of two natures in Christ while removing all suspicion that it implied a Nestorian doctrine of two persons. He achieved this by securing the condemnation of three 'Antiochene' theologians, the seminal Theodore of Mopsuestia, the insignificant Ibas of Edessa and the epigonal Theodoret of Cyrus, who had skilfully adapted Theodore's doctrines to the decrees of the Council of Ephesus, while writing in opprobrious terms against Cyril. Ibas and Theodoret had escaped official censure at Chalcedon, and the Roman delegates at Constantinople, present only because Justinian had had them abducted from Italy, advanced this as a proof of their orthodoxy. Theodore, as they demonstrated at length, was as much a heretic in their eyes as in Justinian's, but they argued that it was not the practice of councils to condemn the dead who had had no opportunity to recant (*Collectio Avellana* 83.213; 1885). They were forced into submission, and Pope Vigilius appended his signature to the Acts of the Council, only to incur the displeasure of his fellow bishops who upbraided him from the safety of Ravenna and Milan. The condemnation of Theodore, repeated at the Sixth Ecumenical Council was effective enough to leave no trace of his work in Greek, except for the passages which had been quoted against him (Behr 2011); much survives, however, in Latin and Syriac, while the Greek corpus of Theodore's works has suffered hardly any mutilation. Whether or not the articles against Origen were issued by this Council (Price 2009: 284–286), an attempt was made in the East to destroy his writings; even in Greek, however, we still possess more of him than of any other Christian writer before Nicaea. In the Latin West, the condemnation of Origen was regularly ignored or pronounced invalid, the translations by Rufinus enjoyed a wide currency, and even the decree of Pope Gelasius permits the reading of works that are praised by Jerome in his book *On Illustrious Men* (Dobschütz 1912: 71, 83).

Once again an ecumenical council, far from establishing uniformity, had multiplied occasions for raising the cry of heresy. 'Two natures in Christ' was an orthodox position, but did this imply the presence of a human will, which might at times, as Theodore seemed to have hinted, need to be tamed by the will of the Logos? Even to many who were not monoenergists, this thesis appeared Nestorian, and when Honorius of Rome assumed the 'monothelite' position that Christ had one will in a letter to Sergius of Constantinople, he could reasonably suppose that he was speaking for the church. However, a synod held at the Lateran under Martin I in 649 ratified the 'dithelite' teaching of Maximus the Confessor,

and when this position was reaffirmed at the Sixth Ecumenical Council (or Third Council of Constantinople) Honorius was condemned as a heretic in the presence of his successor Agatho (Chadwick 2003: 65). This resolution has frequently been quoted to show that the Pope's assent is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of orthodoxy. Rome, however, was sure enough of her powers of arbitration to go on upholding the use of icons in churches even when her nominal overlords, the Byzantine Emperors, were opposed to them and the Bishop of Constantinople professed to be of the same mind. The Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787, under the guidance of the regent Irene and her obedient son, restored the use of icons, at the cost of setting aside some evidence of iconoclasm in orthodox writings of the fourth century (Cameron 1992). The authenticity of these texts continues to be debated; it is generally agreed, however, that Charlemagne was the author of the *Libri Carolini* in which he rejected the council's verdict, some years before he received the crown of the Holy Roman Empire from Leo III (Freeman and Meyvaert 1998).

13 East and West

Between the Fourth and the Seventh Councils, the territories that had once made up the Western Empire were occupied by tribes of Germanic origin, the majority of whom were regarded as Arians by their Catholic subjects, although they themselves replied that the truly Catholic creed was that of Rimini. Western bishops could still undertake to determine orthodoxy under rulers for whom the Catholic faith was *religio vestra*, 'your religion', and the Second Council of Orange in 525, which affirmed Augustine's doctrine of predestination against all compromises with Pelagius, exercised a strong influence on medieval discussions of the same problem (Redding 1939). Nevertheless, the doctrine that prevailed in Gaul – which was heresy to the African Catholics – was that while the quickening of the fallen will must be the work of God, it is the will itself, once quickened, that determines its own inclination (Smith 1995). When the Visigoths of Spain embraced the Catholic faith and reproached their former selves as Arians, they were given permission by Gregory the Great to baptize in the name of Jesus alone, because baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was in their eyes an Arian practice (Wiles 1997). In the late eighth century, it appeared to some that adoptionism, the doctrine that God did not become flesh but anointed and inhabited the man Jesus, had been revived by a certain Elipandus: yet his aim was to ensure that neither the Nicene doctrine of Christ's full divinity nor the Chalcedonian assertion of his humanity was compromised by allowing one nature to circumscribe the other (Cavadini 1993). No more in the eighth century than in the second was it common to be a heretic by choice.

The absence of agreement as to what was agreed can be illustrated by the juxtaposition of the two most learned Christians of the ninth century, one from the East and one from the West. Photius I, the illustrious Patriarch of Constantinople, laid his ban not only on Origen but on Clement of Alexandria, who had hitherto escaped censure because he had largely

escaped perusal (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010). He forgave some lesser Alexandrian figures because they wrote before Nicaea, but evidently held, in agreement with Epiphanius and against Vigilius, that his duty of curbing error outweighed that of dealing justly with the dead. In Roman eyes he was schismatic, since he occupied the see of Constantinople without her approval (Dvornik 1948). Nor did he doubt, for his part, that the addition of 'and the Son' to the Constantinopolitan statement that the Sprit proceeds from the Father was a heresy (Hergenröth 1869: 84–138), even if it had now been taken up, against the adoptionists, from the Spanish church by the Franks, and pronounced to be orthodox in Rome (Siecienski 2010: 88–100). His antitype, John Scotus Eriugena, an Irishman at the French King's Court, was a thinker of high originality, daring enough to lay himself open to charges of both atheism and pantheism, fluent enough in two languages to translate both Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor into Latin for the first time. He was equally ambidextrous in putting together a catena of authorities, in Book 5 of his *Periphuseon*, to show that the church had always thought it possible for the devil to be saved. Acknowledging that his inferences from Augustine, Ambrose, and Chrysostom might not be persuasive all, he produced with triumph one author whom none could question, and who openly affirmed that Satan would be at peace once every soul had been freed from death (Jeaneau 2003: 100, lines 3165–3189; purportedly citing *First Principles* 3.5.6; 2018). He had manifestly no intention of defending a heretic, no suspicion that his text of Origen might be unsound, and no awareness of Origen's condemnation by a council whose authority was nominally admitted by Rome and unchallenged in the East.

14 Concluding observations

Eriugena's attempt to construct a uniform tradition was itself traditional. Irenaeus had cited Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr, all of whom had martyrdom as their certificate of veracity (*Against Heresies* 3.28.4; 3.3.4; 4.6; Irenaeus of Lyon 1965–1982). Augustine marshals authorities from the East and the West to corroborate his teaching on the prostration of the will in the wake of the fall (Edwards 2012). It was all the more evidence of past unanimity, and hence to one's own orthodoxy, if one could also claim the suffrage of an author from whom one differed on other questions: thus Basil cites Dionysius of Alexandria (*On the Holy Spirit* 72; 1980), while Theodoret derives precedents from both Apollinarius and Cyril for a Christology that we call Antiochene (Ettlinger 1975: 109–110, 182–187). The Chalcedonian Fathers appealed to previous councils to justify their canonization of Cyril and Leo (Bindley 1899: 230–231); but after this it became increasingly common, even at councils, to cite the works of eminent theologians. Cyril appeals before Ephesus to the use of the title *Theotokos* by the Nicene Fathers although none of them invoked it before Nicaea (*Second Letter to Nestorius*; in Bindley 1899: 107, line 114). He himself, as we have noted, was as much an authority to the Chalcedonian as to their miaphysite antagonists. Yet since it could not be denied that the saints had differed on numerous questions, it proved necessary to rank them. In the East, Gregory

Nazianzen, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom were pre-eminent, while in the West Augustine towered even above his fellow 'Doctors', Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great. Even in the works of these seven, it was found the Holy Spirit could move erratically, and the *Ambigua* of Maximus are designed to vindicate passages in Gregory Nazianzen which were thought to belie the truths that were taught in his name. The touchstones of canonicity, in other words, were liable to be tested by their own canon. This article previously discussed guilt by association, but in Gregory of Nyssa, brother to Basil and friend of Nazianzen, we may see a rare example of innocence by association, for if Origen had hinted at the salvation of Satan, Gregory had foretold it in plainer terms. At the Council of Florence in 1438, when his teaching on the afterlife was adduced in support of the Western doctrine of Purgatory, the Greek response was that Gregory had said many things which they would have wished unsaid (Petit 1920: 72).

Was heresy then in the eye of the beholder? It would not be quite fair to say so, for while the criteria of exclusion may have varied from time to time and from communion to communion, it was never the custom in the patristic era to level this charge, without objective warrant, against anyone from whom one happened to differ. Pains were always taken to substantiate one's own position from scripture; if this proved insufficient – either because the canon was disputed or because one text could be parried with another – the accuser's shibboleth would be some variant on the Augustinian maxim *securus judicat orbis terrarium*, 'the world may be trusted to judge' (*Against Parmenianus* 3.4.24; Augustine 1908). For Irenaeus, as we have seen, the 'world' was the concordant (though largely unwritten) teaching of the episcopate; after Constantine, it became the custom to summon councils as a means of gauging the mind of the episcopate. Once it was found that majorities were fickle, the numbers at Ariminum might be cited as an argument for its superiority to preceding councils, while a Nicene would rejoin that the First Ecumenical Council had been freer from dissent and imperial duress. Eunomius, who had neither an episcopal tradition nor a great synod in his favour, was obliged to fall back on his own interpretation of the scriptures. Once Nicaea prevailed (perhaps for no better reason than that Theodosius was later than Constantius), its authority and that of the theologians who had upheld it could be invoked in subsequent deliberations. Augustine himself, having neither scripture nor any consensus in Africa to plead against the Donatists, construed his own maxim to mean that the church could not be confined to one corner of the Empire. When this rule could not serve him against the Pelagians, he produced a constellation of authorities to reinforce his close exegesis of Paul. There were very few final and universal victories, no inventory of heretics to which all who stayed themselves subscribed; it was often the desired outcome that dictated one's choice of rules, but most of the combatants had the good sense to adopt rules to which their enemies would allow at least some force.

15 A note on primary sources

In the following list, some texts of which no critical edition yet exists have been cited from *Patrologia Graeca* and *Patrologia Latina*, two series of texts compiled by the Abbé Migne, which are usually cited without date or publisher and are now available on-line. The abbreviations ANF and NPNF refer the Library of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, both frequently reprinted by Eerdmans (Grand Rapids), and once again available on-line.

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