Chapter II

Defining Heresy

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Heresy's modern meaning – doctrinal deviance – took centuries to develop. *Haireis* began its Christian history as a relatively neutral term for faction. With the passage of time, as anxiety about criteria of belonging developed, *hairesis* had begun to denote unacceptable behaviour threatening common adherence. Gradually a network of 'catholic' Christian communities emerged, with common books and commonly revered martyrs, and a system of mutual recognition took shape. *Haireis* thus came to be seen as a body outside this network which must be teaching erroneous doctrine precisely because it was outside. In its early centuries the church needed to find ways of wedding a necessary element of continuity and stability to the disruptive element strongly present in Christianity's origins and literature. Thus Christians, who had been conscious of themselves as embodying conflict and contradiction, came to discover themes of universality and continuity in which doctrine mirrored the mechanisms of episcopal authority. As Christian leaders thus sought to reassemble a reliable world, heresy came to be seen as beliefs which threatened this. Fourth-century debates on heresy were carried on in terms of second-century concerns about disruption; the Arian debate reflected the earlier debate about gnosticism. These debates represent an ongoing task in Christian theology – to articulate the gospel with both scepticism and confidence.

*Haireis* as a faction or party

*Haireis* begins life as a relatively innocent term. In classical Greek, its sense of a 'school of thought' is widely attested
(for example in the field of medical theory), and it carries no pejorative connotations. Even in the New Testament, its sense remains neutral, a word that designates factions or parties: it appears in this way in Acts (5:17, 15:5 and 26:5), describing the Pharisaic and Sadducaic groups, and also as a Jewish term for Christians (Acts 24:5 and 14:28:22). In 1 Corinthians 11:18, Paul mentions the prevalence of hairesis among the Corinthian congregations, and, while deploiring factional bitterness, evidently considers a measure of variety among schools of opinion an inevitable and even, to some extent, a healthy phenomenon: only when a thousand doctrinal flowers bloom can truth be fully discerned, through the testing processes of debate. 'Heresy' is thus, at this period, not deviant and automatically suspect doctrine, but simply 'doctrine' itself, any teaching that is typical of one group over against others.

The rake's progress which brought hairesis to mean unacceptable deviance takes time to get under way. Second-century Christian usage preserves much of the earlier neutrality of sense. Justin Martyr, for example, speaks in precisely the same terms as the New Testament of hairesis as 'parties' among the Jews and of the Christian faith being described as a hairesis by its opponents. At the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria is still using the word in this way—though there are passages in which a more unfavourable sense may be at work. Two passages of Ignatius of Antioch, at the very beginning of the second century, have been adduced as evidence for an early sense of hairesis as deviant doctrine; but in fact this is not wholly clear. In Ephesians 6:2, Ignatius notes his pleasure that the Ephesian bishop Onesimus reports an absence of hairesis in his church; and in Trallians 6.1, believers are exhorted not to eat of 'strange herbage, which is hairesis'. The word clearly designates something undesirable, but it would make perfect sense to treat it as warning primarily against factionalism. Ephesus is free from hairesis apparently because all

...wish to hear about nothing but Jesus Christ. No 'parties' can appear. And in the Trallians text, I suspect that we should not read Ignatius as saying, 'Beware of strange herbage, i.e. heresy', but should treat hairesis as appositional to botane, herbage, so that the sense is, 'Beware of strange herbage, i.e. strange opinion'. This is certainly disputable, but it seems better not to presuppose a straightforwardly negative sense for the word quite so early. The same ambiguity probably lies behind Justin's use of hairesiotes. Not until Irenaeus do we have a clear identification of hairesis with false belief and hairesitikoi with dissidents from the Catholic faith as Irenaeus defines it.

This is not, of course, to say that first- and second-century Christians had no concept of doctrinal deviance or of unacceptable levels of hermeneutical pluralism. Ignatius certainly has plenty to say about false belief or teaching, especially as regards the nature of Christ's humanity. But one of the interesting aspects of Ignatius's rhetoric is precisely the idea that false belief has as one of its identifying symptoms deviant behaviour, some sort of offence against the tangible unity and coherence of the community. Ignatian dissidents either avoid or supplement the general gathering of the church around the bishop and his authoritative teaching; they have local loyalties of their own, alongside their membership of the 'catholic' church, the assembly that is for everyone. And this assembly is recognizable and validated in virtue of the presence of the publicly acknowledged teacher in its midst. Thus the 'factionalist', the hairesitikos, in this context is the behavioural deviant; but his or her behavioural deviance gives grounds for suspecting deviant belief as well. It is worth noting that Justin can use hairesitikoi for Christians who fail to keep the rules, who, for example, eat food offered to idols: faction is doing different things before it is disputing beliefs; but the former is easily taken as a sign of the latter, and the slippage of hairesis towards its familiar negative sense is already beginning wherever this association is made.

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2 Justin, Dialogue, 80.4: 108.2.
3 Clement of Alexandria, Stromates, 7.15.
4 Ibid., 1.19: 2.15.
5 Justin, Dialogue, 80.4.
6 As in the Greek fragment of Book III (iii.4) of Adversus Haereses preserved in Eusebius, HE, 4.14.
7 See, for example, Ignatius, Smyrn., 8.
8 Justin, Dialogue, 33.
**Haeresis** as deviant behaviour threatening understandings of belonging

The modern student is always liable to ask of religious groupings, past or present, what they are 'meant' to believe, in trying to establish the difference between 'normality' and 'deviancy'. But often, then and now, this can be a misleading place to start. It may be better to begin with a question like, 'What sort of behaviour is counted as showing that you belong?' Where people have a reasonably clear sense of how that can be answered for their community, they will frequently assume that non-standard ways of behaving imply the conviction that the community as such is defective or misguided, and will thus begin to look for beliefs that might be used to legitimate the conclusion that the community is wrong or inadequate. Where separatism appears, the question is raised of how that is to be justified; and even where a separatist group or individual may have little or no developed theory that is consciously at odds with the parent or rival body, the fact of separation (even in the form of the supplementation of 'standard' activities) tends to be used as evidence that something radically different is being taught or believed. The whole process results in a heightened self-consciousness all round of distinctive and distinguishable beliefs. In other words, the history of the early Christian period suggests less a pattern of primitive ideological protest against a clearly defined orthodoxy than a story of the gradual fragmentation of communities originally rather loosely defined as far as commonly accepted belief goes: the fragmenting of community life urges the question of how both unity and dissidence are to be understood and justified; and the long-term result is the familiar picture of separation understood as the effect of ideological protest or disagreement.

Modern patristic scholarship has rightly insisted upon the misleading character of the typical heresiological story which depicts Christian history as the record of a single coherent belief-community from which dissenting groups broke away because they believed different things. The literary evidence suggests that

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era was vastly diverse, and all the indications are that it took some time for Christians to be systematically excluded from various forms of Jewish ‘belonging’ (as opposed to being the occasional victims of political manoeuvring by the ruling priestly class, as in Acts and the records of the martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus). There is nothing odd or irregular about the participation of Paul in synagogue worship or even the Temple cult, in some of its aspects. But by the second century, Christians are the object of formal anathemas: it was well-known to Christians that they were daily cursed by pious Jews in their prayers. The birkath ha-minim, the Twelfth Benediction of morning prayer, associates Christians with apostates and hostile Gentiles; though even here we should note that what is at issue is not deviant doctrine but the rupturing or jeopardizing of the unity of the people of Israel. The word minim comes from a root that has to do with splitting or severing, and the traditional translation, ‘Benediction of the Heretics’, begs just the question we are here exploring.11 However, it is clear from what we know of anti-Christian Jewish polemic that ideas or teaching have begun to be an issue, as there is evident anxiety about exegesis as an area of conflict. Sharper behavioural definition throws into relief what had been half-concealed disagreements, and, in the process of arguing for the justification or illegitimacy of particular practices, divergent ideas are in turn brought to light.

**Hairesis turns to heresy: sectional interest challenges a network of normative communities**

Why then does a moment come when divergency of practice becomes a new kind of problem? It arises when traditional markers of identity have been challenged or destroyed. To ‘count’ as a Jew in the Second Temple period had to do with a range of criteria; but all of them were fairly public and unproblematic. There was the bare fact of birth, the association, a bit vague but very powerful, with the land of Israel, and the sophisticated interweavings of ideological and economic loyalties connected with the Temple and its priesthood, involving the ‘Temple tax’, the festival system and, within the territory of Judaea, the (often grudging) acknowledgment of the High Priest’s status as a sort of ethnarch. In the period after 70 CE, these markers have all been rendered ambiguous or inaccessible. There is no Temple; the Jews are, almost by definition, a scattered people; and there is a significant penumbra of ethnically Gentile sympathizers. Participants in a religious practice (synagogue worship) with practically no connection to the Temple anyway. The achievement of the Tannaitic period is to separate Jewish identity from the historical cult and reconstruct it on the basis of a particular style of legal observance, universalized and rendered almost timeless in quality.12 And exclusions become necessary because the criteria of belonging have shifted: the canopy beneath which certain kinds of pluralism once flourished has disappeared. In this process, the notion of ‘standard’ beliefs and actions inevitably develops; it becomes possible to speak about ‘heresy’ in the modern sense.

Plurality in practice and teaching is a problem where there has ceased to be an accessible pragmatic answer to questions of identity (one might compare the ways in which the identity of the Anglican Church has become problematic in the wake of the disappearance of the 1662 Prayer Book as a standard of usage; people suddenly become unprecedentedly concerned with the public scrutiny of moral and doctrinal purity). More emphasis will then be laid on the defining role of practices (including verbal formulae) which formerly had a place within a wider and looser spectrum. And where these appear jeopardized or compromised, there is a clear incentive to identify the possible or assumed rationale for deviant behaviour, and to classify the contents of this rationale as deviant. This is how hairesis turns into heresy: when a sectional interest

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or emphasis offends against hardening criteria of belonging, particularly in a period of general disorientation, the ‘faction’ or ‘school’ comes to be identified as an alien body— all the more dangerous for preserving some features of the ‘parent’ body that might lead the uninstructed observer to misunderstand the nature and identity of that body (Christians look like Jews, Gnostics look like Catholics and so on).

This is not to prejudge the question of whether the ‘factionalist’ (hairetikos) is or is not really engaged in deliberate reconstruction of formerly held beliefs. As far as early Christian history is concerned, the student can only say that some probably were and some probably were not. The opponents of Ignatius of Antioch hold meetings apart from the episcopally-chaired assembly; did all of them necessarily hold the docetic views he ascribes to them? There is no certain answer. In the mid-second century, there can be no doubt that ‘Catholics’ believed some significantly different things from—say—Valentinians; yet gnosticizing groups could and did claim at times to stand in some sort of authentic continuity with the beginnings of Christianity. Again, what we know of the beliefs of Montanists or, later, of Messalians, from the fragments of their own teaching suggests very strongly that some of the views ascribed to them by the heresiologists are extrapolations from eccentric and potentially subversive practice: if this is what they do, they must believe things we don’t, or disbelieve things we hold. At the same time, the literature we call gnostic is itself marked by challenge and refutation of beliefs held by other Christians: it is a crude distortion to say that heresiology is nothing but malicious propaganda.

The process we must imagine is, I believe, something like this. By 100 CE there exists a substantial number of groups in the urban Mediterranean world (as well as some more rural networks, inside and outside the Eastern frontier of the Empire) associating themselves with the name of Jesus. Their distinction from the synagogue has recently become more sharply focused as the Jewish communities in the same environment tighten their criteria of belonging and acceptability in the aftermath of the Jewish War. Many—though not all—of these groups are beginning to share a common literary deposit: texts are circulated through the various networks along major travelling and trading routes (Antioch through Asia Minor to Greece, Alexandria to Rome, Rome to North Africa, and—with rather different texts and traditions eastward to Edessa and Mesopotamia). As yet, there is no single common organization or ‘creed’: the identifying practices seem to include the initiation rite of baptism and the eucharistic meeting at which teaching is delivered. But anxiety about boundaries is beginning to take root. The coherence of these groups is fragile, and, under pressure from the state’s hostility to secret societies (especially secret societies in direct opposition to the state cult), it becomes important to secure links and exchanges of information, partly for encouragement, partly to guarantee means of recognizing and legitimating people, particularly teachers, moving from one community to another. The effort is under way to establish bonds that have something about them of the tangible and public character of the written law in the Jewish world.

The idea of the normatively Christian thus emerges in a cluster of practices that embody the exchange of information and recognition—not least in the exchange of the records of martyrdom. Sharing in the suffering of Christ is offered as a highly significant form of validation for the experience of a local Christian community: the martyred bishop in particular can be presented as united with the foundational sacrifice of Christ (hence the vivid eucharistic language that appears in Ignatius and in the account of Polycarp’s death, for instance). This is where continuity and recognizability can most dramatically be made visible. But this exchange of martyrdom narratives already presupposes the exchange of ‘routine’ experience, including advice about how to

11 Le Boulluec, La notion d’hérésie, 87. Origen has to explain in his refutation of the pagan apologist Celsus that there is a difference between orthodox and heretical Christian literature and that true Christians cannot be held responsible for gnostic views (Contra Celsum, 3.10ff.).

14 On the question of Montanism, see the excellent monograph of Christine Trevett, Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

13 I have outlined a similar scenario in ‘Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?’ (see n. 9 above), esp. 11–15.

16 For example, the letter of the Church of Smyrna describing the martyrdom of Polycarp, and the letter of the Gallic churches on the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne, preserved in Eusebius, HE, 5.1.

and it is not discerned that the legitimacy of wandering teachers. The Didache offers rules of thumb for testing the prophets. While still repeating traditional attributes, such as the exceptional authority of the true prophet, and all the increasing significance is given to the role of tangible links with the established traditions about Jesus and to the idea of a universal interpretation of Jesus' teaching, especially the well-known saying, 'The kingdom of God has already come.' This view does not mean that the church was not to become a community or a system of faith and practice. It was not in this way that the church established community. It continuously worked to harmonize the traditions with the received teaching of Jesus in the light of the new circumstances. At the same time, the church had to be acquainted with the specific language and practice. More particularly, the church had to feel the extension and the application of the Jewish identity in its own lifetime. The idea of Jewish identity was not restricted to the Temple or to its hierarchy, but rather to the collective identity represented by the people as well as by those who lived by the Temple and its rituals, who had the right to participate in the religious assemblies. The church did not only consider the situation of the Jewish people, but also the situation of the Gentiles. The church had to be considered as a Christian society, but it was also a society that was quite unrelated to the Jewish nation, because of the lack of social bonds as a Christian have to do with the world. The church was the people of God, who were not separated from the Jewish community, or even from the Jewish faith, as the same concern, as the church, was. The church had to be made an example of the people's faith, in the sense that it was the people of God, who were the people of Jesus, who were with him in his kingdom. The church had to be the people of God, who were with the teachings of Jesus, who were crucified as a people. The church had to be the people of God, who were crucified as a people, as the people of God, who were crucified as an example of suffering and rejection. The church had to be the people of God, who were crucified as an example of faith, as the people of God, who were crucified as an example of suffering and rejection. The church had to be the people of God, who were crucified as an example of faith, as the people of God, who were crucified as an example of suffering and rejection.

The content of Christian belief: disruption and continuity

So far all this has been used as a matter of sociological commonplace - how criteria of belonging and inclusion are met. But in order to understand the processes by which a person becomes a Christian, we need also to look at some issues of continuity. How are those processes at work in traditional contexts that are clearly continuous with the past, and not just a result of the past?

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world and the truth of Christian revelation, or whether there is another level of unity to be sought and discerned at a deeper level than hitherto. This latter option will, in effect, argue that the world can be 'reassembled' and that the appearance of rupture reflects prior error or distortion; now there is a new synthesis. The self-consistency and self-continuity of the community itself act as a kind of reassurance that order is somehow restored and honoured; the unity of the community and its history affirms the unity of the universe and of the divine source of its meaning. If this reading is correct, second-generation Christianity has a particularly strong investment in tackling issues of continuity and stability, if only to explain how it locates itself in a world decisively disrupted and contradicted by what has been revealed, yet manifestly continuing.

It is in this context that the theological polarizations of the second century may begin to make more sense. The cluster of systems we call 'gnostic' generally represent a commitment to the fundamental unreliability of the empirical environment and of the god responsible for it (for contingency, matter, history and human authority, including the human authority involved in Christian community life). They remain with the disruptive moment, but systematize it into a theory of what it is tempting to call 'anti-history': there is always and necessarily a gulf between the world and the truth, between appearance and reality, between wisdom and convention or communal life. It is a schism deeper than the one envisaged by the Cynics, between nature and convention (a schism whose traces some have discerned in the teaching of Jesus himself):

"it runs through what we think of as 'nature'. And in contrast the strategy typified in the apologists of the second century, for example, insists upon unsuspected unities, not only the unity of Christian revelation with the law of Moses, but its unity also with the theism of Socrates and Heraclitus; the history of divine action is one. And this dovetails neatly into the insistence on the unbroken witness of teaching and practice in the Christian community itself. It is no surprise to see the evolution side by side of the mechanisms of episcopal authority and the various 'rules of faith' that circulated in the Mediterranean churches by the end of the second century."

The formulae of these rules invariably insist upon the unity of the Christian God with the God of 'the law and the prophets', and also frequently appeal to their own unbroken ancestry and/or universality. Issues about authority and obedience are tightly interwoven with cosmology and hermeneutics. But in the second century it is in regard to Christology that the diverse questions around stability and meaning converge. For the 'gnostic', the redeemer must be a dual figure, essentially free from the material and historical environment even when using its phenomena as an instrument. He appears as what he is not: his identity is defined by something utterly other than the material world. In riposte, 'Catholic' polemic, from Ignatius onwards, can mount a powerful argument in defence of Christ's integral humanity (and thus real, historical suffering) as the foundation for order in the church and as an affirmation of the significance of the material and historical in general – an argument which receives perhaps its most sophisticated application in the eighth century debates about iconography, in which the trustworthiness both of material symbols of the divine and of the Byzantine political hierarchy is grounded in the brilliant syntheses of christological doctrine achieved in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Resident aliens attempt to recompose a world
Yet this counter-position to the radical dualisms of the Gnostics was always an uneasy settlement. The radical conversionism, the witness to disruption, in a Paul or a Mark was always present, the

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endemic mistrust of the world and its prince (and princes). Some of the difficulties of early Christianity arise from elements of non-negotiable tension in the Christian mind. And we should not forget just how socially odd the early communities were in the terms of the ancient world; prototypically sectarian groups with hardly any prior analogues because they isolated, for certain purposes, the criteria of cultic belonging from the ordinary criteria of social identity. They claimed to be able to tell you who you were independently of the ways in which the given socio-religious system told you who you were, and thus laid claim to a loyalty potentially at odds with that system. They made strong assertions about the universality of the community, its normative status for the future of the entire human race. Even those most preoccupied with unities and continuities were bound to labour at marking the divisions between church and not church with adequate sharpness, often using the language already present in Christian scripture of the 'resident alien' community (the verb paroikioē and its cognates). The theological polarity runs within what came to be called 'Catholic' Christianity as well as between this and its competitors, the groups defined as deviant.

'Heresy' in its familiar sense thus emerges as a concept in a specific historical situation: not only is there the problem of a community or network of communities faced with critical questions of self-definition; the community itself deploys a set of foundational stories and images identifying it as disruptive or discontinuous, and its social patterns are sectarist, subversive and universalist. For such communities to maintain a continuous and coherent social presence over time, this disruptive foundation had to be supplemented with a different conceptuality allowing the basic ruptures to be transcended or resolved in some way. And in this process, those who appeared to be reinscribing the primitive separatism in radical ways were inevitably the cause of anxiety to the emergent institution. Those who were struggling to establish a normative Christianity were, we could say, struggling to recompose

a world, a trustworthy social and ritual environment; heresy comes to be defined, tacitly or explicitly, as what splits this precariously achieved unity or coherence. Hence, as Christianity evolves through the third and fourth centuries, what makes people worried about various unfamiliar theological positions, and what is therefore the focus of polemic against them, is the possibility of making fissures in the universe — by dividing creator from redeemer, or old covenant from new; by emphasizing the distinction in Christ between divine and human agency; by dividing the Godhead into two archai (first principles); by dividing the created soul from the body; and so on. The second century is, in this sense, constantly being replayed. While it is part of anti-heretical polemic to insist that heresy is deliberate and malicious innovation, there is an equally powerful and regular convention of reducing a new doctrinal controversy to the terms of an older one: the same accusations are laid, and a genealogy of error is postulated — often to the great confusion of later generations of scholars, who have tended to assume that the heresiologist's analysis of the roots of a heresy is dependable history. There is a good example of this in the treatment of the origins of Arianism common in European scholarship well into this century; Alexander of Alexandria associates Arius with the Jewish-Christian Ebionite movement (about which we have very limited reliable information) and with the teachings of Paul of Samosata; neither association is plausible or demonstrable, but scholars regularly repeated the assertion, with notably muddling effects.

Distinguishing deviant doctrine (heresy) from deviant forms of belonging (schism)

However, before looking at this in greater detail, there is one further point to note. By the middle of the third century another shift has occurred. Whereas in the second century separatism of any kind tended to carry the assumption that there were deep doctrinal differences involved, it had become possible by the middle of the third century to distinguish heresy from schism — i.e. to acknowledge that there were ruptures in the life of the church

43 The word appears in the New Testament infrequently, though paroikoi designates Christian believers in Ephesians 2:18 and 1 Peter 2:11; by the early second century CE, paroikountes is becoming a standard term for Christians, used in a variety of literature (the Epistle of Clement and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, for example).

44 For some useful observations, see Rudolf Lorenz, Arius Judaizans? Untersuchungen zur dogmengeschichtlichen Enordnung des Arius (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 128–35.
which, while threatening and troublesome, and extremely problematic in relation to structures of authority, were not perceived as threatening the coherence of the believer’s imaginative universe, the ‘reassembled’ world of doctrine. In the famous debate between Cyprian of Carthage and Pope Stephen over the re-baptism of dissidents, Cyprian in effect assimilates the status of dissidents over disciplinary issues to that of rebels against the faith as such; but the Bishop of Rome, in contrast, evidently takes it that there is some kind of unity in faith, symbolized in the fact of a common baptismal confession, that can survive the breaking of visible unity. Stephen’s view generally prevailed among ‘Catholics’, and it suggests that the unity of the Christian community is being understood and constructed in a way slightly at odds with some of the assumptions of the preceding century. At one level there is less anxiety about the implications of separatism: the reconstructed universe depicted in the *regula fidei* and embodied in the sacramental system has become strong enough to withstand the threat posed by concrete division. Institutional loyalty to the ‘right’ authority certainly matters (enough to express itself in separation at the eucharistic table), and the proselytizing against this loyalty is regarded as cut off from the *actual* benefits of membership in the church. But such a proselytizing remains an *anomalous* Christian, still under the same canopy, not a ‘parodic’ Christian, as a second-century gnostic might have been seen. At the same time, the implications for the dissident are no more favourable; indeed, in a sense they are worse. The dissident is now an insider in a state of disobedience, subject to the law of the church, which may properly treat them as (so to speak) rebels against their acknowledged masters rather than citizens of an alien polity. The recognition of common baptismal faith and practice intensifies the dissident’s guilt rather than otherwise. This is the position finally articulated with great dialectical brilliance by Augustine in his anti-Donatist works, and was long to remain the foundation for canonical attitudes in the Catholic Church towards separatists of relatively ‘orthodox’ belief.  

So the distinction between heresy and schism does not signify a move towards greater ideological flexibility — if anything, the contrary. Christian identity can be described in terms of the acceptance of a scheme of beliefs rather more clearly than it might have been earlier, to such a degree that the sharing of beliefs can to some extent be separated off from the sharing of the common life. As Augustine was to conclude, it might be possible to hold Christian beliefs, yet to be without the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit’s love, *caritas.* Why exactly this development took place at a different rate in Rome and Carthage is by no means clear. Both churches had recent experience of theologies witnessing to the disruptive and discontinuous elements in Christian discourse. Marcionism in Rome left the Roman Church with a long legacy of suspicion towards any theology jeopardizing divine unity; Montanism, as a powerful presence in the North African churches, stressed the continuing importance of the prophet as against the regular congregational minister. It may simply be that, whereas Rome had faced and to some extent settled the issues about cosmology that Marcionism had raised, the African Church had had less experience of resolving strictly doctrinal debates and was therefore more likely to focus anxieties on the concrete ‘chain of command’ in the community. All this, however, is uncertain; what is important for this discussion is that part of the story of the development of the concept of heresy is the process by which deviant doctrine and deviant forms of belonging or loyalty gradually came to be distinguished from each other. And this fact tends to conceal from the student of the early Christian period the ways in which the agenda of doctrinal debate continued to be shaped, if not dominated, by questions about unity and stability.

**Disruption and stability in the Arian controversy**

This is best illustrated by examining the major doctrinal struggles of the Christian East in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the controversy provoked by the teachings of Arius at the beginning of the fourth century, it is very clear that the spectre seen by each side in the teaching of the other is residual Gnosticism. Arius accuses his bishop of implying either a Valentinian or a Manichaean view of God by teaching that there is a substantial continuity and co-eternity between the Father, the source of Godhead,
and the Son or Logos. If Bishop Alexander claims that such continuity exists, what he is actually doing is fragmenting the unity of God: the Logos must be either some sort of divine emanation— which is tantamount to Valentinianism—or a quasi-independent eternal principle—which opens the door to Manichaean dualism, the belief in two ageneta, two causeless first principles. For Arius, the theology of a co-eternal and consubstantial pair or triad of divine agents presupposes a degenerate, materialistic model of God, as a substance capable of division. In contrast, Arius himself argues for a wholly free and immaterial divine agent who elects to act directly in revelation by the voluntary creation of a perfect (though finite) image of his glory: the single fully divine person (the Father) works through a single, uniquely privileged, mediator, who alone has the maximal vision of God's glory possible for any created being.\(^{19}\) Arius consciously stands in a long and respectable tradition of philosophical and theological polemic against cosmological dualism.\(^{10}\)

But within a couple of decades, Arius's most sophisticated opponent, Alexander's successor Athanasius, could reverse the accusation. It is the 'Arians' who are reviving gnostic errors: by insisting that God must freely generate the Logos by an act of will, not as an eternal reflection of his own nature, they drive a wedge between the mind of God and the will of God; they imply that God cannot generate simply by the action of his eternal thought, but needs something further, a determinate, punctiliar act of will, to achieve his purposes. Is not this a version of Valentinianism, dividing up the acts and attributes of God into a plurality of pseudo-entities between God and the world?\(^{21}\) There are other arguments deployed by Athanasius, of course, about the risks of separating the work of redemption from the action of the creator in person, but this particular point is most germane to the present discussion because of its mirroring of Arius's own charges and its witness to a continuing concern in the fourth century over the agenda of the second. The interest of both parties in defending the simplicity of the divine nature is again bound up with the characteristic Catholic concern to affirm the unity of divine action in creation and redemption and in the orderly life of the church in the present so that the controversy over Arius's teachings is also and very importantly a conflict not wholly unlike that of Cyprian with his rivals in Carthage, charismatic and exemplary confessors of the faith: a conflict about the relation between exemplary authority (martyr, confessor, learned ascetic) and what we might call statutory authority (bishop). Does the unity of the church depend on a unified story of legitimate succession or on the unity of moral or spiritual performance with the foundational patterns and narratives of the faith?\(^{12}\)

At least one of Arius's supporters began to develop another model, influential for many centuries. For Eusebius of Caesarea, the unity of the cosmos is guaranteed by a hierarchy of monarchies, systems focused upon a single figure representing the higher order on which the system depends. The emperor is the focus of unity on earth, depending on his vision of the Logos, who is the focus of unity in the whole cosmos and in turn lives from his vision of the divine Father.\(^{13}\) But this did not at once commend itself to a church still liable to be at odds with emperors on the 'wrong' side of the theological debate. What is interesting is that we still encounter accusations of gnostizing in the later fourth century. Gregory of Nyssa, defending his brother Basil against the replies of Eunomius to Basil's attacks makes it clear that Eunomius was eager to convict Basil and his pro-Nicene supporters of (what else but) Valentinianism.\(^{4}\) The detail of the debate is quite complex: Basil had argued that human designations of God were not given directly in revelation but predicated on the basis of the acts of God in creation, and of the contrasts between what can be said of creation and what must be said of its transcendent creator. Thus we look back on the ages (aiōnai) past and see that God exceeds the range of all that can be remembered, and we look to the ages ahead and see that God can never cease to exist. On this basis we call God

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18 On anxieties over this, see Rowan Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism', Journal of Theological Studies, n.s., 34 (1981), 58–81, esp. 66–70.
20 Ibid., 181–98.
21 Athanasius, Oratio contra Arianos, 3.60, 64, 67.
THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTENDOM IN THE WEST

'without beginning' or 'without generation' or 'indestructible'. Eunomius objects that this drives a wedge between God's properties and God's nature: we cannot surely say that God possesses his properties of indestructibility and so on in virtue of his relation to the 'aeons' of cosmic history, for either these are temporally limited (in which case God is not eternally the same) or they are eternal (in which case God is being treated as one of two eternal principles, the other being the world of change). If the latter is what Basil believes, then he must hold the error of the 'Greeks and Valentinians'. Basil's casual use of 'aeons' here allows Eunomius the crude but potent debating point that Basil appears to be using typically Valentinian language about the self-diffusion of God's nature through the plurality of the powers of the cosmos which Valentinus had called 'aeons'. And more generally, Eunomius claimed that 'Valentinus, Cerinthus, Basilides, Montanus and Marcion' were the ancestors of Basil's doctrine of the ineffability of the divine essence in itself; and we know from the Apostolic Constitutions that this was an anxiety in non-Nicene circles beyond the relatively small group who supported the distinctive theology of Eunomius.

Second-century debates live on in the fifth

Thus in the most protracted and bitter theological conflict of the early centuries, we find the 'classic' themes of those initial conflicts in which heresy came to be defined surfacing again. To brand a doctrine heretical entails showing that it fragments the unity of God's nature or action: behind the disruption caused to the regular functioning of unifying authority in the church lies a deeper disruption, a threat to the restored and reconciled universe in which the dependability of God has been rather precariously rediscovered after the upheavals of a revelation of discontinuities and judgements. Further illustrations could be given of how heresy is identified as the postulating of division at various levels (Origen's belief in the separable soul would be a case in point; and it is intriguing to see how a skilful opponent of Origen's like Methodius can attach to him the charge of teaching two first principles); but one last instance is worth looking at before we conclude. One of the major anxieties around gnostic theologies in the second century was evidently to do with the frequently recurring idea that the fleshly identity of Jesus was illusory or, at best, incidental to his saving mission and divine power. Consequently there is a recurring fear of any doctrine that appears to postulate 'two Christs'. By the beginning of the fourth century, this has become a staple of accusations of heresy. Paul of Samosata is apparently charged with teaching this late in the third century; and it seems to have been revived in the charge sheet against Origen to which Pamphilus and Eusebius reply early in the fourth, with the association with Paul of Samosata itself now being part of the indictment. Marcellus of Ancyra is similarly accused, as is Asterius the Sophist; and the charge features very prominently, of course, in the christological debate between Cyril and Nestorius. Cyril in his second letter to Nestorius indicates what he sees as the risk of distinguishing between a man treated as divine and the Word of God who is by nature divine. Since Athanasius clearly associates the idea of two sons with gnostic theology (specifically with Valentinus), we can plainly see how the second century lives on into the fifth; how what counts as heresy is still specified in relation to what I have suggested is the basic anxiety of the second century, the fear of opening up again the gulf between the empirical world and the truth of God which just

19 Methodius, De Auteuxxia, 3 on the fallacies of two first principles; De Resurrectione, 1.27–28 on Origenian ideas that might imply the eternity of matter.
20 According to the surviving texts from the Synod of Antioch that condemned him: see Henri de Riedmatten, Les actes du procès de Paul de Samosate (Fribourg: Editions St-Paul, 1952), 146ff.
21 Pamphilus’s Apologia pro Origen, PG, 17.478C–597C for the accusations: Origen teaches that Jesus is purus homo, as coes Paul; and he implies that there are 'two Christs'.
22 Eusebius, Contra Marcellum, 2.4.24.
23 Athanasius, Oratio contra Arianos, 1.32; 2.37–38. For a list of examples of this and other stock charges, see C. G. Stead, Rhetorical Method in Athanasius’, Vigilae Christianae 30 (1970), 121–37, esp. 123–5.
24 Cyril’s second letter to Nestorius, 6 (in Lionel R. Wickham, ed., Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], 8–9); cf. the attached third letter, 5–8 (Wickham, 18–25), and the third to the eighth anathemas attached to this letter (Wickham, 28–31).
25 Athanasius, Oratio contra Arianos, 3.64.
milledarianism to Luther’s paradoxes about the hidden God to theologies of revolution and theologies of deconstruction. The actual Christian ‘norm’ is not so much in the steady overcoming of all this in a fully reconciled metaphysic, as in the continuing labour of engagement between the disruptive narrative and the conventions making for historical intelligibility – the institutionally positive aspects that make it possible to see the act of God in Jesus as fulfilling as well as overthrowing, aspects such as ministerial validation and succession, iconography, sacramental theologies and so on. Early heresiologists predictably represent their foes as malicious disrupters of a pre-existent harmony; yet they or their allies often tacitly or indirectly acknowledge (notably in the tradition of apophatic theology) that the defended tradition is distorted if its apocalyptic, utopian and discontinuous moments are wholly domesticated; in that sense at least, ‘heresy’ perpetually nudges the agenda of ‘orthodoxy’ away from inflexible ideological settlements.

A final reflection, pertinent to the whole question of mission in Western culture: Western Christianity, for a variety of reasons, ended up with a strong predisposition to emphasize the unsettlement of the Christian schema, expressing this first in the conflicts between papal and royal authority in the early Middle Ages, then in the Reformation, magisterial as well as radical, in the Enlightenment’s challenge to visible mediations of meaning and authority, and in the fragmented maps of modernity and after. The ‘heretical’ impulse has done much to shape a culture, in the sense that it has obliged Western Christendom to pursue an intellectual history of intensifying disunity and scepticism. Divorced from the gospel of a ‘saving’ or reconciling work achieved through the ruptures of systems of meaning and location, this becomes a more and more hectic and violent pluralism. The challenge that missiology now has to confront, a challenge of extreme delicacy and difficulty, is how the articulation of the Christian gospel holds together scepticism and confidence in a way faithful to its foundational history, how it speaks adequately of both terror and gratitude, both silence and praise. To become able to see our task in some such light is one of the results to be looked for from a serious and engaged exploration of how heresy and orthodoxy came to be defined by our Christian forebears.