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The Forging of Orthodoxy in Latin Christian Literature: A Case Study

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Forging of Orthodoxy in Latin Christian Literature:
A Case Study

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Christian literary production of the post-Theodosian era is predominantly in two modes. The first is a creative and explicit rewriting of the Bible: in Latin of the period, *tractatio scripturarum*. The second is a creative and explicit rewriting of earlier non-biblical ("patristic") Christian texts: by modern analogy, *retractatio patrum*. Each of these procedures was governed by a set of more or less agreed-upon rules, in effect a rhetoric or poetics of doctrinal composition. *Tractatio scripturarum*, though not comprehensively theorized in the West until Augustine took up the matter in his treatise *De doctrina christiana*, has a history continuous with that of the biblical canon. By contrast, the main work of dogmatic *retractatio patrum* may be said to begin at the Theodosian moment itself, even if some of its principles do not emerge clearly until the Pelagian and Nestorian controversies of the earlier fifth century. Its first western theorist, as controversialists of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation were quick to recognize, was the Gallo-Roman writer Vincent of Lérins, whose so-called *Commonitorium*, written ca. 434 under the double impact of the Council of Ephesus and the recently "completed" works of Augustine, contained advice on determining from non-biblical—that is, conciliar and patristic—texts what had been believed "everywhere, at all times, by all Christians" (*ubique, semper, ab omnibus*).¹

[End Page 495]

The tracing of these developments in their detail will be the task of some future literary history of Christian doctrine.² The aim of the present essay is to convey a sense of what was at stake in the earliest phase of dogmatic *retractatio patrum*, and to hint at the complexity of material, technical, and ideological factors involved. I shall evoke the circumstances of one highly marked instance of patristic rewriting *de fide*, glance at the theoretical and practical contexts within which such events acquire their meaning for later readers (including ourselves), and attempt a provisional placing of this particular event in a longer, hypothetical narrative of Christian literary history. What is offered, then, is a "case study" in the forging of orthodoxy *in and as* Latin Christian literature. **[End Page 496]**

"The bishops of the Eastern Church had reached a consensus about the Christian doctrine of God. The bishops of the Western Church could find no compelling reason to disagree." On this resoundingly triumphant note the late R. P. C. Hanson ended his account of the fourth-century Trinitarian controversy.³ His narrative draws to a close in 382, the last rumblings of disagreement still audible in the west. At Constantinople in the summer of 381 the eastern bishops had reaffirmed the faith of Nicaea, an edict of the emperor Theodosius issued after their council requiring "that all churches [be] handed over to the bishops who profess Father, Son and Holy Spirit of a single majesty, of the same glory, of one splendour."⁴ At Aquileia later in the same year Ambrose of Milan had stage-managed a defeat of the homoean-as he represented them, "Arian"-bishops Palladius and Secundianus.⁵ A new ecclesiastical and doctrinal order was emerging. We might call it the "Theodosian" order, after the emperor whose decree signalled an end to the business begun by Constantine at Nicaea in 325.

In 382 a council composed mainly of Italian bishops met at Rome under Bishop Damasus.⁶ Among its acts was an anathema on the teaching of Apollinarius, a zealous anti-Arian who in stressing the divinity of Christ was thought by some to have neglected an essential aspect of his humanity. Apollinarianism had been condemned before at Rome and less emphatically at Constantinople in 381, but Damasus and his associates were still looking for a formula to exclude it.⁷ If we can trust a reminiscence [**End Page 497**] of a decade and a half later, this search was not without its special hazards.

When discussions were being held on the matter of reconciling the followers of Apollinarius [our informant writes], Bishop Damasus commissioned a certain friend of his, a presbyter and an extremely eloquent man who regularly...

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1. The epochal significance of this treatise has been well brought out by H. J. Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1979), 149–70. Vincent’s argument is grounded on the textual *factum* of the Nicene Creed as promulgated by Am-



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