I
INTRODUCTION
by MANLIO SIMONETTI

1. *The social and political background*

In the East the structure of the Roman Empire managed, albeit with difficulty, to withstand and overcome the grave crisis that, provoked mainly though not exclusively by the barbarian invasions, put an end to the Empire in the West and replaced it by the new Romano-barbarian kingdoms in the first half of the 5th century. The *pars Orientis* of the Empire had been less tried by that crisis than the Western part, since it was socially and economically more viable and overall less exposed to the invasions of barbarians from the north. On the Eastern frontiers loomed the danger represented by Persian aggression, but it was a danger that the Empire had now managed to live with, well or badly, for centuries. Even the internal danger caused, particularly at Constantinople, by the presence of mercenaries of barbarian origin, mainly Goths, was faced and gradually checked: in the mid 5th century, opening date of our treatment, under the sceptre of Marcian (450-457) the Empire's overall situation was, if not flourishing, at least reassuring. He and his successors, with no ambition to undertake resounding initiatives, preferred essentially to maintain the administrative and military *status quo* and sought to defend the frontiers more by sometimes burdensome negotiations than by fighting: substantially the most serious causes of disturbance and disorder were provided by the religious controversies that we shall look at shortly. It was because, thanks to this policy of containment, the overall structure of the Empire was once more enjoying good health that Justinian (527-565) was in a position to undertake a policy that was more ambitious in all senses, from administrative and religious reorganization at home to expansion of the frontiers in the West. Some results were outstanding and even spectacular: compilation of the *Codex iuris civilis*, construction of Hagia Sophia, reconquest of Africa, Italy and part of Spain. But by the time his long reign ended, the Empire was exhausted and incapable of maintaining that prestigious policy, so that much of the briefly reconquered territory was permanently

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lost, and his successors were forced onto the defensive by the ever-reviving bellicosity of the Persians and the appearance in the Balkan peninsula of new barbarians, Avars, Slavs and then Bulgars.

When Heraclius (610-641) assumed power, the situation was dramatic: the Persians occupied Syria, Palestine and Egypt and camped under the walls of Constantinople, while from the north the capital was invested by the Avars. Containing the danger of the latter, in a series of great campaigns Heraclius managed, after fluctuating fortunes, to inflict a final defeat on the Persians, reoccupying all the territories previously lost (630). With him began a complex and protracted work of social, economic and military reorganization that led to the setting up of new administrative and military divisions (themes) and, by safeguarding small properties (*Lex agraria*) and substituting militias for mercenary troops, ensured the survival of the Empire for many centuries and laid the basis that would lead to the glories of the Macedonian dynasty (9th to 10th centuries). In these years the process of complete Graecization of public administration was completed, with the substitution of Greek for Latin as the official language: of Roman, there remained only the name of the Empire (the term "Byzantine" is of modern origin). At that moment, however, a great new danger began to loom over the Empire, casting a pall over the final years of Heraclius' long reign: the Arabs, profiting from the weakness to which the long war had reduced both imperials and Persians, invaded Persia and the southern regions of the Empire, easily occupying Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Africa in rapid succession: Jerusalem was occupied in 638. At the time the loss of some of its richest regions seemed to have wrought irremediable harm on the Empire, but in the long term it would also have positive consequences, since the new frontiers were more compact and so more easily defended, while religious peace, which had been compromised particularly in Egypt and Syria, was restored internally. But these advantages would become evident only with the passing of time, and Heraclius' successors had to face grave dangers due to the bellicosity of the Arabs, who even laid siege unsuccessfully to Constantinople, and of the Bulgars in the West, while internally a sequence of intestine struggles and the rapid succession of a series of emperors aggravated the state of crisis.

Only with the advent of Leo III the Isaurian (717-741) was the situation restabilized: he and his son Constantine V (741-775), a great general, finally drove back the Arabs and Bulgars and consolidated the whole structure of the state, which was now essentially concentrated between Anatolia and the southern regions of the Balkan peninsula, since the Longobards had gradually reduced imperial rule in Italy to the southern regions, now also exposed to the threat of the Arabs and too often ignored by the central power, absorbed by other difficulties. But the

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security of the frontiers was offset by a grave internal crisis provoked by the struggle undertaken by the two emperors against sacred images: it was essentially a religious crisis and will be dealt with in its place; here we may just state that important elements of social order were also grafted onto it (conflict between city and country), and doubtless Constantine V made use of the struggle against images to try to diminish the excessive power of the clergy and especially of the monks. However the attempt did not succeed and, at the end of complex and agitated vicissitudes, in 787 the Second Council of Nicaea, called, at the prompting of his mother Irene, by Constantine V's grandson Constantine VI, definitively restored the cult of images.

2. *The religious background*

At the time when our treatment begins, in the middle of the 5th century, the presence of paganism was still considerable in the Greek-speaking East, especially in the rural areas, but also in the cities; but its capacity to oppose the spread of Christianity was by now reduced to nothing, so that, though it would long continue to vegetate and make its presence felt by the persistence of various rites, festivities and superstitious practices, it no longer represented a danger. For more than half a century the Christian religion had been the only one whose practice was legally allowed throughout the Empire and, though the publication of the edict of Theodosius (380) had by no means meant the cessation of the ancient cults, it had sanctioned the Christianization of the whole administration and made permanent the inextricable symbiosis between Empire and Church and the consequent continuous interference between their mutual activities. It has become customary to designate this regime of close synergy, particularly with reference to the Eastern Empire, by the improper term "Caesaropapism", and the negative connotation of the term intends to emphasize particularly the subjection of the Church to the Empire. But to understand rightly the significance of the emperor's pre-eminent position in the Church, it is necessary to bear in mind the tendency, general throughout the ancient world, to make the highest political authority coincide with the highest religious authority. So it is easy to understand why, once the Empire's long hostility to the Church had been transformed into open favour by Constantine, he was almost naturally considered as invested also with the office of supreme ruler of the Church; the union of the two powers in the person of the emperor was immediately justified, on the level of theory, by Eusebius of Caesarea. Facing the emperor, specifically ecclesial power was represented by the system of bishops, each the ruler of his own community. In the West, the bishop of Rome had already in the 3rd century begun to

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transform the primacy of honour that all Christendom traditionally accorded him into a primacy of power, jurisdictional in character: but the setting of the new course under Constantine threw this primacy, which was in no position to compete with the real power of the emperor, into the shade. In other words, as long as supreme political power was exercised validly and effectively by the emperor, the ambition of the bishop of Rome to rise to effective leadership of all Christendom would have found in that power an insurmountable obstacle. Given however that, in the West, that supreme power was first radically weakened and then collapsed altogether, the authority of the bishop of Rome, now up against the mere semblance of sovereignty represented by the last Western emperors and then the much more modest pretensions and ambitions of the Romano-barbarian rulers, went on gradually increasing, and by the middle of the 5th century he was universally considered the head of the Church in the West. In the East, however, things had gone very differently, since the prestige of the episcopal see of Constantinople, though increasing, was not such as to be seriously able to modify to the benefit of the local bishop his traditional position of subordination to the emperor. In the East the latter had kept all his prerogatives, and some emperors, like Justinian, had sought to increase them still further, so that his traditional position of power even over the Church had remained unaltered: in other words, in the East the head of the Church was the emperor. More than once his intrusions into more specifically ecclesial questions had aroused protests from the clergy, but no-one had ever seriously disputed his right to preside over the Church's destinies. In Novella VI of the *Codex iuris* Justinian theorized this relationship: the temporal and spiritual powers were distinct from each other and great was the prestige of the latter; but the emperor had a duty to watch over the peace of the whole Empire and therefore also of the Church, which was a primary and essential component of the Empire: from this it followed that the emperor had a duty to control the Church both in conduct and in doctrine.

As for ecclesiastical organization, by the mid 5th century this was already perfected in the East and no important modifications would subsequently be made to it. At the summit of the hierarchy were the four patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, destined however to be reduced to just that of the capital once the Arabs had taken Palestine, Syria and Egypt from the Empire. This wholly unforeseen contingency would contribute to further increasing the power of the bishop of Constantinople, who remained at the head of the whole imperial Church, just as the bishop of Rome headed the whole Church in the West: but in the East – as we have made clear – the power of the patriarch, however ample its breadth, would always remain in a position

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of subordination to the supreme position of the emperor. Below the patriarchs were the metropolitan bishops, below them the bishops of the local Churches, whose hierarchical organization had now been fixed for centuries. But the most striking and most influential component of the Church's structure now consisted of the presence of monks, in ever-growing numbers and ever more powerful even from an economic point of view, thanks to continual donations and fiscal exemptions. In the mid 5th century, for some time there had been initiatives aiming to regularize a movement that had initially shown a strongly antagonistic character even towards the ecclesiastical organization itself: the dependence of monks on the controlling authority of the bishops was confirmed, regulations mostly inspired by the rules of Basil were put in force in order to normalize and discipline community life, anchoretism tended to be considered a further degree of perfection accessible only to the most experienced monks. On the whole, more care was taken over the monk's instruction: here too the Arab conquest, by removing from the control of the imperial Church the monastic communities of Syria and Egypt, traditionally less sensitive to this aspect of monastic formation, would of itself favour the extension of the influence of the monasticism of the capital, altogether better organized and regulated and more aware of the appeal of Christian culture. But even in the 6th century, i.e. before the Arab conquest, the development of the Origenist controversy had made very clear the indiscipline of many great monastic communities of Palestine, capable of descending even to serious acts of violence. The content of some disciplinary canons, especially those of the Quinisext Council (692), has led some modern scholars to draw very pessimistic conclusions about the moral conduct of both laity and religious and so to hypothesize a condition of moral decline caused by the negative repercussions, at both individual and community level, of the difficult conditions of life induced by the succession of external and civil wars and calamities of various kinds. Yet we should ask whether such a generalization really hits the mark, given that the ecclesiastical legislator *pour cause* has always been led to emphasize the moral deficiencies of both religious and laity. In short, it has yet to be shown that on average the moral level was so much lower from the 5th century, i.e. in the period of time that concerns us. That council in any case, called by Justinian II, represented an important move towards the reorganization of the Empire's ecclesiastical structure to keep pace with the ever changing requirements imposed by the mutable practice of everyday life. It also contributed to increasing the distance between the Eastern Churches and those of the West, which would not accept it as normative. What the evidence in our possession allows us to see is the growth of violence and intolerance in doctrinal polemics, already

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mentioned in connection with the developments of the Origenist controversy in Palestine. This tendency to intolerance, always latent in the Church and destined to build up as it acquired power in the Empire, was subject to a sudden acceleration towards the end of the 4th century, especially in the East: contributing to it were the growth in anti-heretical sensibility because of the waste products of the long-drawn-out Arian controversy and at the same time the ever greater influence of the monks, whose conviction of being trustees of the most intransigent orthodoxy was nourished too often by ignorance and always by exasperated fanaticism. The spread and growth of this state of mind contributed to creating a psychological climate that was least suited to the aims of constructive doctrinal discussion, with the result that, wherever the conflict was not resolved drastically by the intervention of political force, it failed to reach a positive conclusion.

In the mid 5th century the Christological controversy was at its height: after the Apollinarist phase (late 4th century) and the Nestorian phase (420s and 430s) it had entered the Monophysite phase. The Council of Chalcedon (451) had tried to impose a compromise formula, inspired mainly by Theodoret and by Leo the Great's *Tomus ad Flavianum*, between the Christological divisiveness associated with Antioch and the strong unitive tendency of Alexandria: it had therefore affirmed two natures entire and complete, human and divine, of Christ, God the Logos incarnate, united without confusion in a single hypostasis (= person), that of the Logos. In the West, in any case only marginally affected by the controversy, this formula was considered the definitive expression of Christological orthodoxy; but in the East it had the effect of aggravating the conflict. Indeed the Monophysites, as their very name – of very late origin – indicates, considered non-negotiable the affirmation of a single nature of the incarnate Logos, in accordance with what had been Cyril's preferred formula. The affirmation came up against various interpretations of how this single nature should be understood: some maintained that, in the union of the Logos with the man Jesus, the human nature had been as it were absorbed by the divine nature, but others maintained with Cyril that by becoming incarnate the Logos had become man like any other man, but that this humanity was not entitled to the name of nature, which was reserved solely for the divine nature. It is evident that this latter conception was not at all incompatible with the Chalcedonian statement, as was recognized even at the time by some Latin-speaking Africans (Vigilius of Thapsus, Facundus of Hermiane) who were in direct contact with the controversy but did not get involved in the impassioned manner of the Easterners. Indeed the supporters of this doctrine, among them Severus of Antioch, the greatest theologian of the 6th century, entrenched themselves, beyond any possible

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explanations, behind the affirmation of one single nature and considered even the mere affirmation of two natures to be a sign of crypto-Nestorianism: in this sense they categorically refused to accept the Chalcedonian formula, since they held that it revived the abhorred heresy of Nestorius. In effect they tended to identify the concepts of concrete nature and hypostasis (= person) so that, as they affirmed a single hypostasis, i.e. a single subject, in Christ, consequently they made a single nature correspond to it. They therefore considered the Chalcedonian statement of two natures united in a single hypostasis as a sort of sham, which actually masked an effective Nestorianism: two natures = two Christs. To this reasoning, often set out in an extremely elaborate and sophisticated form, there corresponded on the popular level the passion of a movement of opinion fanatically attached to the Cyrillian formulae in the conviction that they succeeded in describing in the most rigorous and effective way the relationship of the incarnate Christ, the one Christ both God and man, with each of his followers, and therefore convinced that the mere affirmation of two natures meant dividing Christ and separating from sinful man the God who alone could save him. In particular a certain monastic spirituality, dominant in the monasticism of Syria and Egypt, of generally more popular extraction than elsewhere, felt comforted by the Monophysite formula, and the influence of the monks was decisive in orienting the mood of the masses. It is also undeniable that in these two regions, real strongholds of Monophysitism, religious passion was also nourished by a sentiment, at first latent and then ever more manifest, of a political and downright ethnic character: as had already happened for Donatism in Africa and Melitianism in 4th-century Egypt, religious motivation now favoured the coagulation of old resentments of the oppressed and exploited plebs, ethnically Syrian and Coptic, against the central power, felt, if not always rightly, as opposing Monophysitism in favour of Diphysitism and, more generally, as an expression of the dominant Hellenism: the nickname of Melkites (= imperials), by which the Diphysites were called from the 6th century, appears highly significant in this sense. At the time of the Arab invasion of Egypt, this anti-imperial feeling would lead not a few Monophysites to favour the invaders.

But even long before this event, in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon the Monophysite reaction, especially in Egypt, was unleashed with such violence that the Diphysite bishop Proterius was torn to pieces by the infuriated mob. Faced with such an attitude the imperial power, already wavering, necessarily accentuated this tendency, in search of a compromise solution or at least one that might prove the most painless. In this sense in 482, at the suggestion of Patriarch Acacius, the Emperor Zeno published the *Henoticon*, a declaration that set aside the

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Chalcedonian formula and replaced it with the twelve Cyrillian anathemas, a sort of foundation charter of Monophysitism, moreover avoiding a definite statement in a Monophysite tone. Like any compromise formula, the *Henoticon* attracted some support among the moderates, but left dissatisfied not just the convinced Diphysites but also the radical Monophysites, and provoked a break with the Roman see, which was of strictly Chalcedonian observance (Acacian schism). This policy continued until the Emperor Justin brought Diphysitism back into favour, made peace with Rome and in 518 deposed Severus, the greatest representative of moderate Monophysitism, from the episcopal see of Antioch. His successor Justinian continued this hesitant policy during his long reign, first making room for Severus, then drawing away again, and concentrating mainly on the attempt to work out a compromise doctrinal solution, which consisted in integrating the twelve anathemas into the Chalcedonian formula (Neochalcedonianism) so as to bring that formula's Diphysitism somehow closer to Cyril's Monophysitism, which was substantially also that of Severus. This new doctrinal approach was solemnly sanctioned by the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople of 553, which was devoted mainly to resolving the question of the so-called Three Chapters and the Origenist controversy. The question of the Three Chapters was also part of Justinian's policy aimed at winning back the Monophysites through varying degrees of concession: given the aversion they felt for Theodore of Mopsuestia, whom they considered Nestorius' teacher, and for Ibas of Edessa and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who had been firm supporters of Nestorius, he decided to have them condemned *post mortem*, obviously arousing all kinds of protest, especially in the West, starting with Pope Vigilius. As to the Origenist question, we need only mention that, despite the various condemnations that Origen too had incurred *post mortem*, his prestige was still very high among the monks of Egypt and especially Palestine, and some of his very disputed doctrines (pre-existence, apocatastasis) were still professed there in the version of them, in some respects more radical, given by Evagrius of Pontus. This state of things had provoked serious conflicts, even degenerating into physical violence, among the monks of Palestine, divided into pro- and anti-Origenists. The two questions had nothing in common as to doctrinal content, but in fact overlapped each other in various ways, so Justinian obtained from the council the condemnation both of the Three Chapters and of a series of Origenist propositions and their upholders, living and dead. From this derived the schism in the West called that of the Three Chapters.

Justinian's religious policy ended in complete failure: at his death Monophysites and Diphysites were in worse conflict with each other than before, and the emperors who followed each other on the throne

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after him tried fruitlessly to put an end to a state of things that was further weakening the already variously compromised stability of the Empire. Faced with this situation, Heraclius, having finally defeated the Persians and reconquered the lost territories, including Syria and Egypt, where the Monophysites were prevalent, tried a new way of compromise, worked out by Patriarch Sergius. The latter sought to get round the one/two natures opposition by focusing on the concept of *energeia* (= activity), i.e. by maintaining that, even if Christ's natures were two, there was only one source of activity and operation in Christ, since this derived not from the natures but from the one person (hypostasis), seen as the one subject operating in a divine and human way (= Monoenergism). Since this formula aroused various difficulties, it was modified so as to affirm of Christ not a single operation but a single will (= Monothelitism). In 638 Heraclius published the *Ekthesis*, a full profession of faith that mentioned the Chalcedonian formula only in passing and made it explicit in the assertion of one sole will in Christ, from which proceeded every operation, divine and human, of God the Logos incarnate. This official text attracted support from various quarters, but it aroused opposition especially among the Diphysites; the West rejected it and in the East it was opposed by Sophronius of Jerusalem and especially Maximus the Confessor: if Christ's two natures were entire and unconfused, as the Chalcedonian formula recited, neither of them could be without its own will, so that in the incarnate Christ there were two wills. Hence polemics and violence of all kinds, until in 648 the Emperor Constans published the *Typos* in which, faced with the impossibility of finding a reasonable solution, he prohibited in the most absolute way any discussion of one or two wills and operations in Christ. Against the opposition he proceeded with utmost resolve: among others, the price was paid by Pope Martin, exiled to the Chersonese, and by Maximus, mutilated and exiled. Moreover, when the *Typos* was published, the Arabs had already taken over the regions where the Monophysites were strongest, so that within the Empire the reason for contending had in fact died down. A new Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 681 by order of Constantine IV, took note of the new and now irreversible political and religious situation, and against Monophysitism and Monothelitism reaffirmed both Diphysitism and Dithelitism.

The final cause of conflict and violence was of another nature, since it pertained to the cult of sacred images, widespread throughout Christendom: measures were taken against it, starting more or less from 726, first by Leo III and then, at various times in various ways, especially by Constantine V, who in 754 had the condemnation of sacred images solemnly ratified by the Council of Hieria. We have referred above to the political and social implications of this conflict, which led to the

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destruction of innumerable works of art and provoked all sorts of violence. As to its religious aspect, it must be remembered that the Church in its origins, following the example of the Jews, did not admit sacred images, which it considered a form of idolatry; even in the 4th century Eusebius and Epiphanius would express the same view. But at a popular level the condemnation found very little echo, and over time Christian cemeteries and then churches were adorned with images, some sacred in content, and the tendency in favour of images clearly overwhelmed the opposition, which however never completely desisted. It received indirect support from the Arab conquest, since the Muslims, like the Jews, were decidedly averse to sacred images, and in 723 Caliph Yazīd ordered the destruction of all images, both in churches and in houses, throughout his empire. This condemnation is usually made to relate to the beginning of Leo III's iconoclastic activity and it is probable that there was a link, in the sense that the emperor and his religious advisers would have felt in a position of inferiority over the accusation of idolatry that could now easily be brought from all sides against the worshippers of sacred images. However that may be, the iconoclasts based their hostility to images on the authority of Scripture and tradition and maintained that the divinity could not be represented with material elements, these being transitory and inferior. Against them their opponents, of whom John of Damascus was the most illustrious, justified the cult of images by insisting on their merely symbolic value, so as to stress the fundamental difference between the image and its divine archetype, in itself not susceptible of representation. They further justified the image of Christ by virtue of his incarnation and consequently saw his representation in human form as confirming the reality and integrity of the humanity assumed by the divine Logos. In this sense modern scholars love to link the question of sacred images, in itself wholly independent, to the Christological controversy, as its final act. The imperial policy was at once opposed by the Roman see and, in the East, especially the entire body of monks. After alternating fortunes, often dramatic and characterized by acts of violence of all sorts, the long iconoclast controversy concluded with the Council of Nicaea of 757 which definitively restored the cult of sacred images.

3. *Literary production*

In the 4th century patristic literature in the East had enjoyed an exceptional flowering, which lasted into the first decades of the 5th, illustrated by a number of outstanding personalities, from Eusebius and Athanasius to Cyril and Theodoret, via the Cappadocians, Chrysostom and yet others. Thanks to these authors, accompanied by a rich array of secondary

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figures, the Arian controversy, which had raged for the best part of the century, polarizing general interest around itself, had nourished a very high level of theological speculation, while the need for an adequately refined form of expression, imposed by the new status as imperial Church, had been fully satisfied thanks to the efforts of some of the most important writers and orators of Greek Christian literature, such as Basil, Nazianzen and Chrysostom. Its chief but not sole beneficiary was oratory in its various forms, from the doctrinal homily to the panegyric in honour of the martyrs. In exegesis, the conflict between Alexandria and Antioch had nourished a literary output unsurpassed in quality and quantity. But by the first decades of the 5th century signs of fatigue are visible: the very mass of doctrinal and exegetical material already produced seemed almost to invite new protagonists to keep close to what had already been said and written rather than adding anything new. This tendency, despite the requirements of renewed polemic, is already evident in Cyril and Theodoret, two authors of considerable intellectual breadth, and still more in later authors. After them the tendency prevailed ever more clearly as time went on, and affected every aspect of literary output except hymnography: the ever growing demand for manuals, summaries and florilegia certainly did not favour the search for novelty and originality. The most obvious aspect of what, despite the demurs of some modern critical consciences, we cannot fail to call decline, and one that certainly contributed to accentuating this phenomenon, was the failure, after Cyril and Theodoret, of the great cultural centres of Alexandria and Antioch. The former had little vitality even in Cyril's time: tied to the tradition of the school that had been Origen's, a training ground of free research to the limits of recklessness, it could not survive decorously in a milieu now wholly conditioned by the excessive power of the omnipotent patriarch: Athanasius had still known how to value the singular figure of Didymus the Blind, but with Theophilus and Cyril any possibility of autonomous cultural activity was suffocated. At Antioch the cultural climate was certainly more capable of supporting life, but here the repercussions of the Christological controversy were felt to a devastating degree, especially since the local monastic milieu was largely won over to Monophysitism, genetically alien to the doctrinal tradition of Antioch: something of the Antiochene exegetical tradition survived for a while among the Nestorians, but in Persia, outside the borders of the Roman Empire. A certain flowering centred on Gaza (Palestine) between the 5th and 6th centuries (Procopius, Aeneas, Zacharias) could only modestly compensate for these losses, all the more since it was in this period, more or less, that the library of Caesarea in Palestine, also Origenist in tradition and spirit, not just a collection of texts but also a scriptorial

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centre enjoying great prestige for the accuracy of its transcriptions, lost all signs of life.

We may speak of physiological exhaustion, in the sense that a high-level literary activity can never, in the nature of things, be prolonged indefinitely, all the more since, after Justinian, distressing political events led to the intensification in the Empire of a climate of precariousness and uncertainty, certainly not favourable to the carrying on of literary activity. This was especially so for Egypt, Palestine, Syria and neighbouring regions, subject from the end of the 6th century to the invasion first of the Persians and then, permanently, of the Arabs. Lastly, in relation to Egypt and Syria, we must also consider the revival of local cultures, since literary output in Syriac and Coptic and then also in Georgian and Armenian could create an autonomous space for itself only at the expense of Greek literature. In the specifically doctrinal sphere, it must also be added that the Christological argument in the strict sense, i.e. the compatibility of a divine and a human dimension in the one subject of Christ, by putting the relationship between nature and person (hypostasis) at the centre of thought, left narrower margins for personal thought than did the Trinitarian argument, since, according as the stress fell prevalently on the concept of nature (Antioch) or on that of person (Alexandria), in each case a clear opposition was reached that left little room for conceptually constructive discussion and that allowed possibilities of compromise more on the side of form than of substance, as became evident in the formula of union of 433 and the Chalcedonian formula of 451. From this conceptual narrowness, given also the climate of fanaticism and intolerance in which the debates took place, various consequences ensued, none of them very positive: repetitiveness of formulae, attachment to words rather than concepts, a tendency on one hand to ever subtler and more abstract reasoning with little recourse to scriptural support (Leontius of Byzantium) and on the other to the use of argument from authority, both scriptural and patristic (Severus of Antioch). Even the writings of the greatest theologian of our whole period, Maximus the Confessor, active in the 7th century, are characterized by these limitations. In fact all these characteristics were strengthened still more in his time, i.e. in the final phase of the Christological controversy, that of Monoenergism and Monothelitism, given the basic abstraction of the question under discussion, i.e. whether Christ's acts originated from his one person or from his two natures; in reality the compromise thought out by Patriarch Sergius, based on the latter of the two solutions, was far from unreasonable, but by now the extreme sclerosis of the opposed ranks no longer allowed compromises of any sort: this was why the conflict found no positive solution and came to an end only because of radical

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changes in the political scene. Nor was the doctrinal content of the controversy over sacred images such as to be able to fuel a high-level theoretical debate: its most distinguished participant, John of Damascus, the last of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, was above all, in accordance with the taste of the time, an epitomizer and systematizer of earlier doctrinal thought.

We have mentioned above the importance of argument from scriptural and patristic authority. In the case of Scripture, it remained just what it had been since the distant beginnings of the Trinitarian and Christological controversy in the 2nd century, apart from an inevitable greater repetitiveness. The great innovation was patristic argument, in which, to the citation of scriptural passages in support of the doctrine professed, the protagonists of doctrinal debate also added the citation of authors from the past, mainly the 4th century, sometimes the 3rd, occasionally the 2nd. Basil in the 370s, treating of the Holy Spirit and finding little support for his argument in scriptural texts, had already appealed to tradition and furnished the final pages of his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* with a brief florilegium of passages taken not from Scripture, but from authors earlier than himself. But it was with the beginning of the Christological controversy that this new mode of polemical argument began to become usual, beginning with Cyril, who attached to the anti-Nestorian documentation sent to Rome at the start of the controversy a florilegium of passages by earlier authors on the incarnation; some years later this was echoed from the other direction by Theodoret with his important anti-Monophysite florilegium attached to the *Eranistes*. After them came a succession of florilegia, Monophysite and Diphysite, Monothelite and Dithelite, more or less vast and comprehensive, which could be structured and used in various ways: there were those, like Theodoret, who appended the florilegium to the treatment; but others, like Severus of Antioch, also used to intercalate passages of earlier authors continually throughout the course of their reasoning, as used to be done with scriptural passages; finally there were autonomous florilegia, in the sense that the patristic evidence presented had a value in itself, without any longer serving to support the original arguments proposed by a given author. Works favoured by the compilers of florilegia were those of Athanasius, Cyril and the Cappadocians, but they also sought elsewhere: Theodoret even used some passages of Ambrose, a very rare case of a Latin author translated into Greek. With these collections of passages the author-compiler aimed not just to reinforce his own point of view but also to discredit that of his opponent: for this purpose he also sought to present him as a continuator of the doctrine of some previously-condemned heretic and to this end he produced texts of that heretic compared with those of the opponent he was actually

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fighting: in this way, from the beginning of the Nestorian controversy, Nestorius' doctrine was accused of continuing the heresy of Paul of Samosata, and to support the accusation they circulated texts of Paul considered to anticipate this doctrine. Moreover, it was not always easy to find texts of this sort, so that very soon the need began to be met by the creation of fakes. Towards the end of the 4th century, the Apollinarians had begun doctrinal falsifications on a grand scale by circulating the works of Apollinaris under the names of authors of proven orthodoxy, including Athanasius, and by composing texts of a clearly heterodox content to be circulated under the name of Paul of Samosata, so as to present him as the anticipator of the divisive Christology with which they reproached their Antiochene opponents. The example was contagious, and fakes began to pullulate shortly before the beginning of the Nestorian controversy, continuing throughout the course of the Christological controversies and beyond. The confection of fakes was in itself an activity wholly independent of the assembling of florilegia, but in fact the two activities overlapped, since in compiling florilegia it was very easy and therefore inviting to intercalate, among authentic passages of doctors of a more or less distant past, falsified passages also alleged to be by this or that author. Indeed not only was it much simpler to falsify an isolated passage, which might be only a few lines long, than an entire text, but moreover, given the brevity of the text and its mingling with authentic texts, the falsification was detected with greater difficulty. So the modern scholar who occupies himself with the Christological controversy finds himself having to reckon not just with texts even of some length that are entirely falsified, e.g. an entire correspondence between Dionysius of Alexandria and Paul of Samosata, of Monophysite origin, but also with numerous fragmentary texts inserted into florilegia of every different doctrinal tendency. It must also be pointed out that, because there were so many fakes, modern scholars are easily led to consider them even more numerous than they were, and indeed they anticipate them in times when it does not appear that this hardly honest means of polemic was yet resorted to: I will confine myself to mentioning the rather unconvincing hypotheses of Richard on the falsification of the evidence relative to Paul of Samosata and that of Abramowski on the falsification of the evidence pertaining to the question of the two Dionysii.

The fashion of florilegia became so popular that, from the 6th century, it spread from the doctrinal to the exegetical sphere, with the result of rapidly reducing to zero even that little independent activity that had so far been, well or badly, preserved. But whereas the doctrinal florilegium had a precise polemical end, because the exploitation of the results of the theological thought of previous centuries by the doctors of the various

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conflicting parties had the aim of reinforcing their own position or weakening that of their opponent, this motive was not present in the field of exegesis, where instead, the harvesting of the exegetical wisdom of their predecessors meant merely an awareness of being unable to say anything more and better than had already been said. In other words, not only in the restricted world of writers but also in the wider one of their readers, there was now a clear awareness of a state of inferiority compared to what had been achieved in the field of letters in the past, so that the exegete, as often also the theologian and the moralist, first confined himself mainly to repeating under his own name what he read in earlier exegetes (Olympiodorus) and then, beginning apparently with Procopius of Gaza, went on to present directly, though summarily, what those exegetes had published. Indeed this was precisely the product that the readers he was addressing required of him. Exegetical florilegia are usually known by the name of Catenae ("Chains"), to indicate the continuity of their interpretation, which for each biblical book cited a number of interpretations by earlier exegetes, divided verse by verse, summarized and each provided with the name of the author. In this way they aimed to offer the reader a plurality of interpretations for each scriptural passage, usually putting together exegetes even of different tendencies so that the interpretative panorama would be full and diversified: given this variety, the choice made among so many 3rd-to-5th-century exegetes of differing exegetical and even doctrinal tendencies can be indicative of the cultural orientations and background of the compiler of the florilegium. It is obvious that, where today we can still read an exegetical passage in its entirety, e.g. of Chrysostom or Basil, the passages of it inserted in the Catenae are substantially useless to us: but much of the 3rd- and 4th-century Eastern exegesis is lost, so that for some authors prominent in their time, e.g. Apollinaris or Theodore of Heraclea, what little we know of them we get from the Catenae; even for the knowledge of an Origen, the contribution of the Catenae is important. But the other side of the coin is that the popularity of exegetical florilegia, if it did not cause, certainly contributed to the disappearance of the original redaction of so many works, especially very long ones, which people now preferred to know only in this disjointed and summary manner. A case apart, in the exegetical sphere, was the interpretation of the *Apocalypse*: in the East, unlike the West, this work encountered great difficulty in entering the canon of inspired New Testament books, in consequence of the 3rd- and 4th-century polemics over millenarianism, for which one of the points of support was in chapter 20 of this work: it was still being debated in the 6th century. In consequence, while in the West, exegetically so far behind the East, there had been a commentary on the *Apocalypse* by the end of the 3rd century (Victorinus

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of Poetovio), we have no knowledge of a complete commentary being written on this work in the East before the 6th century, though various authors, from Origen to Gregory Nazianzen, had had no demur about using passages from it in some of their writings. Precisely the lack of any earlier systematic Greek exegesis of it meant that its first commentators (Oecumenius, Andrew of Caesarea), while using these earlier isolated exegetical hints, generally produced personal work, in the manner of the exegetes of the past.

We have mentioned the great spread of monasticism, which in this period largely monopolized literary output. The theologians mentioned above were monks; the unknown catenists were mostly monks. Alongside this output that cannot be described as directly monastic, there was another output more specifically inspired by the ideals of the life of the hermitage and the coenobium, in the sense of being works that the monk was invited to read in order to draw teaching and example for his own spiritual progress. By now this literary output followed a traditional groove, and the new works can conveniently be divided into two groups: on one hand, what may in general be called works of spirituality, in that they communicated directly to the reader contents whose memorization would instruct him on situations, states and problems of the spiritual life; on the other, hagiographical works which, by perpetuating the memory of edifying persons, mostly of monastic extraction, provided the monk with examples that he was invited to imitate in some way. In writings of the first kind, under the necessarily approximate name of works of spirituality we group together works on various subjects written from different points of view, from the arduous philosophical and mystical synthesis, markedly Platonic in tone, the work of an unknown monk who, between the late 5th and early 6th centuries, sought to accredit his writings under the venerable name of Dionysius the Areopagite – but the pseudepigraphy was immediately detected – to John Climacus' *Ladder of Paradise* (6th-7th century), an itinerary of perfection in 30 stages that from virtue to virtue, renunciation to renunciation, detached the monk from worldly things and brought him close to God. Enough to mention also the *Instructions* of Dorotheus of Gaza, the *Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Perfection* of Diadochus of Photiké, which was part of the literary genre of "centuries" – i.e. collections of sentences grouped in hundreds, a genre widespread in the monastic world and practised by, among others, Evagrius of Pontus – and again the great collections of letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza. Among hagiographical works must be mentioned especially the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus (6th century), a collection of more than 300 accounts relating the deeds and miracles of mostly contemporary ascetics. More or less contemporary with him was Cyril

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of Scythopolis, author of various biographies of Palestinian monks slightly earlier than himself, those of Sabas and Euthymius being important. We are on the trail of what was now a well-tried literary genre, where the space allotted to the extraordinary and the supernatural does not mortify the properly historical dimension of the account. In this sense Cyril's biographies are a primary source for our knowledge of the events of the Origenist controversy in Palestine. The zeal of the monk was in itself little drawn to historiographical activity proper, i.e. a narrative genre that is dispassionate in its way, in the sense that in his account the author, while manifestly professing his ideas, manages to maintain a certain detachment from the facts he recounts: no wonder therefore that the great flowering of continuators of Eusebius in the first half of the 5th century should be followed by a period of stasis in ecclesiastical historiography: however, names like those of Zacharias the Rhetor and Evagrius Scholasticus (6th century) are worthy of respect, while the age's typical tendency towards the textbook is represented by the contemporary Theodore the Lector, who abridged the histories of Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, continuing the account into his own century. How far his work met the taste of the time is demonstrated by the Latin translation that Cassiodorus got made of it at Vivarium.

Christian poetry had never had great success in the East: to limit ourselves to the times closest to those we are treating, despite the isolated example of Gregory Nazianzen – Synesius was a case apart – there was very little here to compare with the great flowering of Latin Christian poetry in the last decades of the 4th century and the first of the 5th. On the other hand the liturgy was in continual development and was ceaselessly enriched, both that dedicated to the daily hours of prayer and that which celebrated the festive calendar. Chant had always had a large place in liturgical practice and, while initially it was provided for with chants taken from Holy Scripture, mainly the Psalms, by degrees the need was felt for chants more in keeping with the occasion on which they were performed. Thus by the 5th century and especially from the 6th, there was an uninterrupted production of poetic compositions intended for liturgical chanting. The metric of quantity, as it had been in classical poetry, became tonic, i.e. determined by regular sequences of stressed syllables, with a tendency to isosyllabism and homotony, in such a way that the verse came to correspond to a melodic base called the *hirmos*. In the liturgy of the hours very brief compositions prevailed, comprising a single strophe (troparion) or little more, but on other occasions much longer compositions were sung. Much in vogue in this period was the *kontakion* (a name of uncertain etymology), an acrostic hymn composed of a normally considerable

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number of polymetric strophes (troparia), whose musical and metrical structure were sometimes original, sometimes derived from earlier hymns. Later the use of the canon prevailed, another highly complex polystrophic poetic and musical structure. The subjects of these great poetic and musical compositions were nearly always narrative, taken mostly from episodes of the Old and New Testaments. Among the earliest poetic compositions must be mentioned the *Akathistos Hymn*, so called because it had to be sung standing up, dedicated to the Virgin, still in use in its entirety, despite its length, in the Byzantine liturgy. Among the poets who made their name in this type of poetry must be mentioned especially Romanus Melodus, but many other names deserve to be added to his, up to John of Damascus.

The limit that fixes the end of Greek patrology with John of Damascus has long been established, but from a literary point of view it is no less conventional for that; moreover, like any attempt at periodization in general, it poses problems and creates difficulties. The fundamental *aporia* lies in the lack of coincidence between the course of Greek so-called patristic literature and that of political history: this literature comes into being at the height of the Roman Empire and concludes well into the Byzantine era, so that its authors, considered in their merely literary aspect and therefore independently of content, come partly into classical and partly into Byzantine literature. It will be said that a patrology is a different work from a history of literature: but now that, in literary criticism, evaluation of contents tends to prevail over appreciation of merely formal values, the distinction becomes problematical. We may then ask whether it might not be considered methodologically more correct to confine ourselves to the distinction between Greek Christian literature and Byzantine literature: but then a new difficulty arises: when should Byzantine literature be made to begin? Byzantinists willingly fix its beginning with the foundation of Constantinople, so that the acme of Greek Christian literature would come to represent the beginning of Byzantine literature, something the student either of early Christian literature or of patrology will hardly be disposed to admit. Indeed, while in the West, even taking uncertainties and difficulties of various kinds into account, the collapse of the Empire somehow represents a watershed even in the literary sphere, in the East there was political continuity and consequently it is not easy to fix the transition from the ancient world to the Byzantine Middle Ages. As we see, the difficulties posed by the demands of periodization appear not easily surmountable in this case. This considered, it must be taken into due account that to make Greek patristics end with John of Damascus is not just an adjustment to Western periodization, where, with Bede, patristics come to an end on the threshold of the Carolingian era. In the East too, the conclusion of

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the era of iconoclasm brought an end to a historical period characterized on the religious and political levels by a succession of highs and lows that nevertheless, especially given the consolidation of the frontiers, in a way prepared for the recovery in grand style that was to lead to the apogee of the Byzantine Empire with the Macedonian dynasty: corresponding to it, by the repercussion on literary activity provoked by the insecurity of the political and religious situation, was a period of modest level from this point of view, whose conclusion was followed by a recovery specified by characteristics of its own. Therefore, even though there is no doubt that with Damascene we are in all senses well into the Byzantine era, it makes meaningful sense to conclude Greek patrology with his name.

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