The art of disputation: dialogue, dialectic and debate around 800

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It has often been noted that argumentation in the early Middle Ages was mainly based on written authority, while dialectical modes of reasoning were held in suspicion. Towards the end of the eighth century, however, dialectic was back in vogue at the court of Charlemagne. Logical reasoning played a significant role in theological discussions initiated by the court. This article explores the 'rules of engagement' for conducting a debate, and addresses the question of whether public disputation and dialectical enquiry could (again) have a part in the proceedings of councils around 800, after their alleged demise in late antiquity.

In 799 Bishop Felix of Urgel was summoned by Charlemagne to appear before an assembly in Aachen to defend his divergent views on the nature and person of Christ.[1] Bishop Leidrad of Lyon, who delivered the king's summons in Urgel, gave him the guarantee that he would be granted permission to speak freely. When Felix later drew up his recollections of the event, he recalled how he was received respectfully in the palace. 'After I was led in the presence of our lord, the glorious and pious king Charles, and was presented before his countenance, I received his permission (*licentia*), according to the promise that the venerable bishop Leidrad made to us in Urgel.'[2] This *licentia* allowed Felix to present his statements before a gathering of bishops in the presence of the king. After Felix's views had been

[1] The best study of the Spanish Christology, commonly referred to as Adoptionism, of which Felix of Urgel was a representative, is J.C. Cavadini, *The Last Christology of the West. Adoptionism in Spain and Gaul, 785–820* (Philadelphia, 1993).

[2] Felix of Urgel, *Confessio fidei*, ed. A. Werminghoff, *MGH Concilia* II, Supp. 1 (Hanover, 1998), pp. 221–5, at p. 221. On *licentia* as a technical term to denote licence to speak freely, see the rhetorical textbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV.36–7, ed. H. Caplan, Loeb Classical Library 403 (Cambridge, MA and London, 1954; repr. 2004), pp. 350–9; Irene van Renswoude, *Licence to Speak. The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

rejected by the bishops, he drew up a declaration of his faith; a demonstrative act that was meant to end the dispute definitively. This declaration of faith, in which Felix admitted his defeat and professed his agreement with the other party, was sent to his supporters: the priests, deacons and clerics in Urgel. Felix told his addressees that his propositions demonstrating that Christ had adopted flesh when he became man were judged and rejected, but, he emphasized, this was not done with violence but with truthful argumentation (*ratio veritatis*) 'as it should be'.[3] Especially this addition, 'as it should be', indicates that Felix and his supporters had a clear vision of how issues of doctrine ought to be debated, and which method(s) of discussion would establish truth. Even if Felix did not voluntarily draw up this document but was coerced into writing it, this does not alter the fact that he appealed to the values of the recipients, his supporters in the Spanish March, when he referred to rational argumentation as a means to settle doctrinal differences. In this article I would like to explore what the preferred methods of discussion and the 'rules of engagement' for conducting a debate were at the time. What were the models for the procedures of public debates such as that held in Aachen in 799 and which modes of reasoning prevailed?

It has often been noted that debates in the early Middle Ages mainly proceeded from written authority, a practice of argumentation that became widespread after the Christological controversies of the fourth century. Differences of opinion were settled with the help of florilegia of scriptural and patristic statements, while logical modes of reasoning, derived from (Aristotelian) dialectic, were increasingly held in suspicion.[4] Indeed, some people regarded *dialectica* with mistrust (a mistrust that would pop up time and again during the Middle Ages), but overall it cannot be denied that dialectical or logical reasoning started to play a significant role in debates

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[3] Felix of Urgel, *Confessio fidei*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 221, ll. 28–9: 'non qualibet, ut dictum est, violentia, sed ratione veritatis, ut oportuit, excluserunt'. Felix makes this remark twice in his short *Confessio*, underlining its importance; see also p. 221, ll. 17–18: 'qualiter non in violentia, sed ratione veritatis, nostra adsertio rata iudicaretur'. The addition 'ut dictum est' in the first quotation suggests that rumour had spread that Felix had been persuaded by violence. Perhaps Felix was pressed to contradict this rumour explicitly in his official statement.

[4] R. Lim. *Public Disputation, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 23 (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 215 and 220 ('The living voice of public disputation was nearly silenced by the insistent voice of written authorities [. . .]'); A.J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation. Pedagogy, Practice and Performance*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, 2013), pp. 21, 22; D. Ganz, 'Theology and the Organization of Thought', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. 2 c.700–c.900* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 758–85, at p. 784. Ganz, however, also points to a growing use of logic and syllogisms in argumentation from about 800 onwards. On distrust of dialectic, see A. Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity*, Hellenic Studies Series 65 (Washington, 2014), p. 47; Lim, *Public Disputation*, pp. 205–26; J. Marenbon, 'John Scottus and Carolingian Theology: From the *De Praedestinatione*, its Background and its Critics, to the *Periphyseon*', in M.T. Gibson and J.L. Nelson (eds), *Charles the Bald. Court and Kingdom*, 2nd rev. edn (Aldershot, 1990), pp. 303–26; J. Fried (ed.), *Dialektik und Rhetorik im früheren und hohen Mittelalter: Rezeption, Überlieferung und gesellschaftliche Wirkung antiker Gelehrsamkeit vornehmlich im 9. und 12. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1979).

around 800.[5] To demonstrate this, I will focus on three examples. The first is the above-mentioned gathering of Aachen in 799, where Felix's views were refuted by 'truthful argumentation', the second a letter of Alcuin to a lady at the court of Charlemagne, written in the same year, in which he offered to teach her the method of dialectical interrogation. The third and last example is a transcript of a disputation held in 810 between envoys of Charlemagne and Pope Leo III on the wording of the Creed. I will discuss these three examples against the background of a growing interest in dialectic and syllogistic reasoning, which was applied to theological debates and controversies in the Latin west at the turn of the century, in particular at the court of Charlemagne.

Expectations

When Bishop Felix came to Aachen to engage in a disputation about his theological views, commonly referred to as 'Adoptionism', he received what was promised to him: licence to speak before an assembly of bishops, and he was allowed to bring his own proof texts – authoritative statements (*sententiae*) that he had culled from the sacred books in support of his doctrine.[6] Clearly, the terms of the debate had been negotiated beforehand, when Leidrad, Charlemagne's legate, had first come to meet Felix on his own terrain in Urgel. A few centuries earlier, Bishop Palladius of Rataria was not so fortunate. He arrived at the synod of Aquileia in 381, expecting a discussion of his views in an open debate, but found himself at a meeting that rather resembled a court hearing. Instead of being allowed the opportunity to discuss his views from a position of equality, Palladius was submitted to an interrogation. This example has often been invoked to show how the rules of engagement changed during the fourth and fifth centuries, when the classical tradition of public disputation, in which representatives of different schools of thought disputed with each other, gave way to a Christian 'management' of differences through court-like hearings before an assembly of bishops.[7]

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5   See J. Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre. Logic, Theology and Philosophy in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Third Series 15 (Cambridge, 1981), and *idem*, 'Alcuin, the Council of Frankfurt and the Beginnings of Medieval Philosophy', in R. Berndt (ed.), *Das Frankfurter Konzil von 794*, 2 vols (Mainz, 1997), II, pp. 603–15.

6   Felix of Urgel, *Confessio fidei*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 221.

7   N. McLynn, 'The "Apology" of Palladius: Nature and Purpose', *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 42 (1991), pp. 52–76; Lim, *Public Disputation*, p. 219; Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation*, p. 20. For criticism of this thesis see P. Van Nuffelen, 'The End of Open Competition? Religious Disputation in Late Antiquity', in D. Engels and P. Van Nuffelen (eds), *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*, Collection Latomus 343 (Brussels, 2014), pp. 149–72; Thomas Graumann, 'Altchristliche Synoden zwischen theologischer Disputation und rechtlichem Disput', in C. Dartmann, A.N. Pietsch and S. Steckel (eds), *Ecclesia disputans. Die Konfliktpraxis vormoderner Synoden zwischen Religion und Politik*, Historische Zeitschrift, Beihefte 67 (Berlin and Boston, 2015), pp. 45–9.

Procedures of taking decisions on doctrine were institutionalized and allowed less room for the open exchange of different points of view. Yet as Thomas Graumann has shown, there was no simple or linear transition from one procedure of truth-finding and decision-making to another. Rather, different expectations existed side by side of how a council should be organized and which methods of discussion could be used to establish orthodoxy.[8] These different expectations and models were not crystallized by the end of the fourth century, nor at the end of the fifth. As Graumann points out, the boundaries between the model of the judicial inquest and that of a theological discussion were fluctuating and permeable. I would like to argue that procedures to establish orthodoxy were not consolidated around 800 either. At the turn of the ninth century different views and opinions existed regarding the format of councils, the responsibilities and so-cial roles of the participants, and the question of what method of discussion was most suitable to find the truth.[9] Could dialectical methods have a part again in truth-finding procedures, notwithstand-ing the suspicions and objections that had become attached to the *ars dialectica* in the period between the fourth and the eighth cen-tury? Or was dialectical disputation only allowed during debates held outside councils?

Ratio veritatis

For Felix and his supporters rational discussion of doctrine was of vital importance. This is not only underlined by the declaration Felix sent to his supporters, in which he emphasized twice that their view had been rejected by *ratio*, but also by other letters that were exchanged between Spanish and Frankish bishops and scholars in the course of this particular controversy. A few years after the event, Alcuin directed a treatise against Archbishop Elipand of Toledo, who shared Felix's Christological views, in which he emphatically stated that Felix had been heard rationally (*rationabiliter auditus*) and

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[8] Graumann, 'Altchristliche Synoden', pp. 42 ff.

[9] On various types of councils, assemblies and meetings, and the shifting boundaries between them, see T. Noble, 'Kings, Clergy and Dogma: The Settlement of Disputes in the Carolingian World', in S. Baxter, C.E. Karkov *et al.* (eds), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 237–52; G. Althoff, '*Colloquium familiare – colloquium secretum – colloquium publicum*. Beratung im politischen Leben des früheren Mittelalters', in *idem*, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997), pp. 157–84; J.L. Nelson, 'Charlemagne and his Bishops', in R. Meens, D. van Espelo *et al.* (eds), *Religious Franks. Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms. Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong* (Manchester, 2016), pp. 350–69, who differentiates between 'task-oriented committees' and large-scale assemblies (p. 365).

refuted truthfully (*veraciter convictus*) by the bishops and great men at Aachen in the presence of King Charlemagne.[10] In Spain, the practice of disputation, in which the ruler acted as a referee, appears to have been a valued tradition.[11] This may explain why Felix, summoned to the court to defend his position, received the explicit guarantee that he would be allowed to argue his case before the ruler, and, as I would argue is implied by this explicit guarantee, that he would not be merely interrogated.[12] Whether logical modes of argumentation, based on the *ars dialectica*, were part of his defence and part of his concept of *ratio veritatis* is difficult to say. The term *ratio*, meaning 'reckoning' (as in 'rendering account') or 'reasoning' appears to be very significant in this context.[13] Yet it is difficult to establish the type of argumentation or tradition of discussion it may have referred to. Felix's confession mentions patristic authorities that were part of the debate in Aachen during the refutation of his position, and he also mentions his own dossier of *sententiae* that he brought to the meeting, but he does not indicate *how* these authoritative statements were discussed.[14] The fact that his opponents had knowledge of patristic texts that, as he wrote in his declaration, were previously unknown to him, appears to have played a more significant role in the refutation than logical argumentation, at least if we go by the account of the debate as represented by Felix's *Confessio*.

A war of words

For additional information about the proceedings of Aachen, we need to turn to another report of the meeting. According to the *Vita Alcuini*, written some twenty or thirty years after the event, the type of discussion

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[10] He also emphasized that Felix had come to Aachen voluntarily. Alcuin, *Adversus Elipandum* (c. 804), c. 16, *PL* 101, col. 252: 'Felix anno praefati gloriosi principis tricesimo secundo avocatus. Voluntarie veniens ad Aquis palatium ibique in praesentia domni regis et optimatum illius sive sacerdotum Dei rationabiliter auditus est et veraciter convictus . . .'

[11] J. Raaijmakers and I. van Renswoude, 'The Ruler as Referee in Theological Debates: Reccared and Charlemagne', in *Religious Franks*, pp. 51–71.

[12] According to Noble, 'Kings, Clergy and Dogma', p. 244, Felix was interrogated at least three times, but there is no indication in the sources for the meeting in Aachen in 799 that interrogation was part of the proceedings.

[13] For *ratio* as a method of argumentation (developing proof by rational deduction from facts), see H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric. A Foundation for Literary Study* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 1998), § 366, p. 167.

[14] See also Hincmar's account of the debate in Aachen, recorded some sixty years after the event, which underlines the importance of the discussion of patristic authorities during the debate. According to Hincmar, Felix bribed a young librarian of the palace library to corrupt a treatise of Hilarius of Poitiers, so that the (allegedly forged) proof text would support his thesis. Hincmar, *De praedestinatione*, ed. *PL* 125, col. 55 D.

conducted at Aachen was a public disputation.[15] Under the supervision of King Charlemagne, who explicitly ordered the disputants to argue *rationabiliter*, Felix crossed swords with Alcuin, who was chosen to represent the anti-Adoptionist view.[16] As the *Vita Alcuini* has it, the disputation lasted for six days in the presence of the king and the bishops, who were very impressed and listened in silence. The author of the *Vita* depicts the confrontation between Felix and Alcuin as a battle, with Alcuin piercing Felix with 'several arrows', and Felix fleeing from Alcuin's ferocious attacks, until he admitted defeat in tears. Interestingly, the author of the *Vita* mentions Alcuin's use of a quotation from Cyril of Alexandria as the final blow to Felix's defence, which Felix himself also brought up in his *Confessio* as a proof text that won him over to accept the other party's point of view.

The *Vita Alcuini* revels in military metaphors to describe the confrontation between the two disputants, which does not create the impression that rational argumentation was central to their engagement, as Charlemagne had ordered. We should, however, keep in mind that it was not unusual to describe a disputation in terms of war or a military clash, or to depict rational arguments as 'weapons that wound'. In fact it is a long-standing feature of western debate culture, up until today, to use military metaphors in reference to a controversy or debate.[17] The *Vita*'s metaphorical military description of the disputation between Alcuin and Felix, therefore, does not by itself indicate that the proceedings at Aachen were a mere show of force with no room for rational argumentation.

Preparation

In Felix's *Confessio* we find no mention of a public disputation between himself and Alcuin. Felix only speaks of bishops, plural, who weighed and judged his *sententiae*. We could take this as an indication that the story from the *Vita Alcuini* is a mere fanciful fiction, if it were not for the fact that Alcuin's letters confirm that a disputation was indeed part of the proceedings in Aachen in 799.[18] From a letter of Alcuin we also

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[15] *Vita Alcuini*, c. 10, ed. W. Arndt, *MGH Scriptores* 15.1 (Hanover, 1887), pp. 182–97, at p. 190. The Life of Alcuin was written in Ferrières after 821 and no later than 829. D.A. Bullough, *Alcuin. Achievement and Reputation* (Leiden, 2002), p. 21.

[16] *Vita Alcuini*, c. 10, ed. Arndt, p. 190: '[Carolus . . .] disputando rationabiliter confligere iussit'.

[17] Adelino Cattani, 'The Right, Duty and Pleasure of Debating in Western Culture', in M. Dascal and H.-L. Chang (ed.), *Traditions of Controversy*, Controversies 4 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 125–38.

[18] Alcuin to Arno (799?), *Ep*. 194, ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH Epistolae* 4 (Berlin, 1895), p. 322; Alcuin to Arno (800), *Ep*. 207, ed. Dümmler, p. 344: 'cum Felice heretico magnam contentionem in praesentia domni regis et sanctorum patrum habuimus'; Alcuin to Charlemagne, *Ep*. 202, ed. Dümmler, p. 335: 'in disputatione, quae in vestra veneranda praesentia cum Felice ventilata est'; Alcuin, *Adversus Elipandum* (*c*.804), c. 16, *PL* 101, col. 252 (see n. 9).

learn that he hastily attempted to acquire a copy of a text that recorded a debate between Felix and a Saracen, in all likelihood to prepare himself for the confrontation.[19] He was also keen to have his friend Bishop Arn of Salzburg present at the debate, and asked him urgently to confer about some points beforehand – points that were apparently too delicate to discuss by letter.[20] Alcuin's apprehensive preparation for his disputation with Felix confirms that the outcome of the debate was not a foregone conclusion,[21] or at least it suggests that he feared damage to his reputation and a diminished standing at the court if he did not argue as skilfully and persuasively against Felix as was expected of him.

Alcuin's acquaintance with different cultures of debate started much earlier, in the late 750s in Lombard Italy. As a young man he spent a few days in Pavia when a disputation was held between Peter of Pisa and a Jew by the name of Lull. This Peter of Pisa would later become teacher of grammar at the court of Charlemagne. Alcuin did not witness the disputation in person, but he heard the written account of their *controversia* as it was read out loud in the city of Pavia.[22] This may have been an occasion at which he got better acquainted with dialectical disputation, as classical culture was thriving in Lombard Italy at the time Charlemagne conquered the kingdom of Desiderius.[23] The story of the disputation between Peter and Lull was known at the court and may have shaped expectations of what a proper disputation should be like.[24]

The written debate between Felix and a Saracen that Alcuin searched for in 799 has not survived, but it is interesting to know that the text circulated at the time. Alcuin heard that Bishop Leidrad had a copy, which would be plausible since Leidrad had been the 'liaison officer' in the Adoptionist affair. Did Alcuin wish to read this text to form a better picture of Felix as a debater, and to get familiar with his methods of argumentation? Coming from different cultural backgrounds, the two disputants that locked horns in Aachen will have had a different frame of reference concerning the right procedure for establishing the truth, different sets (or versions) of authoritative texts to rely on, and different ideas of the

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[19] Alcuin to Charlemagne (799), *Ep.* 172, ed. Dümmler, p. 284: 'Disputationem itaque Felicis cum Sarraceno'. Alcuin heard that Bishop Leidrad might have a copy and sent a messenger to him in haste to acquire the text. He suggests he did not make this request for his own benefit, but because he wished to send it to Charlemagne.

[20] Alcuin to Arno (799?), *Ep.* 194, ed. Dümmler, p. 322.

[21] I thank Steffen Patzold for making this suggestion during the discussion of the paper on which this article is based, presented at the panel 'The Rules of Debate' at the IMC in Leeds in 2013.

[22] Alcuin to Charlemagne (799), *Ep.* 172, ed. Dümmler, p. 285.

[23] R. Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 18.

[24] As Alcuin tells Charlemagne, he surmises that 'his Homer', that is the courtier Angilbert, heard about the disputation from Peter of Pisa himself. Alcuin to Charlemagne (799), *Ep.* 172, ed. Dümmler, p. 285.

methods required. This brings us back to the issue of expectations. How did the participants of the meeting in Aachen in 799, that is to say the two disputants and the bishops who had been convened by Charlemagne to establish the orthodox point of view, prepare themselves for this altercation, and how did they establish the ground rules for the debate?

Models for debate and methods of discussion

In his *Institutes of Divine and Secular Learning*, Cassiodorus recommended reading the acts of the early Christian councils, and especially the acts of the council of Ephesus and Chalcedon, to find suitable strategies to combat heretical opinions. 'If you read them carefully', Cassiodorus wrote, 'the clever tricks of wicked men will never prevail over you.'[25] This is exactly what Alcuin did during the years he was involved in the controversy over Adoptionism: he consulted the acts of the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. A manuscript of a Latin version of the acts of the council of Ephesus shows marks in the margin where Alcuin indicated the parts he wanted to have excerpted to include in his (written) refutation of Felix.[26] In the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, scholars who were involved in theological debates turned to examples of disputation in the history of the early church, especially the ecumenical councils, to find authoritative arguments and models for their own debates. Those who were commissioned to draw up expert reports to reflect on contested or suspect theological theses frequently quoted from the acts of ecumenical councils in support of their argumentation for or against a thesis. In the acts they found the vocabulary and categories of thought to refute views they considered to deviate from the orthodox norms established by the Fathers of the early church. Furthermore, early medieval scholars got acquainted with dialectical modes of reasoning by reading debate texts from the patristic past, such as the dialogues between Augustine, Jerome and their heretical opponents. These dialogues, which transmitted shared social values concerning the function of disputation in settling and guarding orthodoxy, as well as notions of appropriate methods of discussion, may well have been consulted also for practical guidelines to conduct oral and written debates.[27] Manuscripts of their polemical works show

[25] Cassiodorus, *Institutes of Divine and Secular Learning* I.23, ed. R.A.B. Mynors, *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones* (Oxford, 1963), trans. J.W. Halporn, *Cassiodorus: Institutes of Divine and Secular Learning and On the Soul*, Translated Texts for Historians 42 (Liverpool, 2004), p. 156.

[26] B. Bishoff, 'Aus Alkuins Erdentagen', *Medievalia et humanistica* 14 (1962), pp. 31–7. On Alcuin's use of the acts of the council of Chalcedon in his tracts against Felix, see Cavadini, *The Last Christology of the West*, p. 195.

[27] On the importance of imaginary dialogues for 'real' debates, see the contribution by Robin Whelan in this issue.

marginal annotations where 'useful arguments against heretics' were marked.[28]

Sources from the early Christian past at the disposal of early medieval readers did not, however, always display a positive view of the usefulness or desirability of applying dialectical techniques to theological discussions. Late antique church histories, for example, revealed a rather negative image of dialectic, especially when it was employed during ecumenical councils. Narratives, such as Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and its continuation by Rufinus, or the *Tripartite History* of Epiphanius and Cassiodorus, present us with colourful stories about disputes between bishops holding opposing viewpoints, who engaged in verbal combat either before or in the middle of an ecclesiastical assembly. These stories can be read in support of the argument that disputation was not (or was no longer) considered the best way to establish orthodoxy and maintain unity within the church. As Richard Lim has argued in his insightful study of public disputation and social order in late antiquity, the fourth century witnessed a growing anxiety over the practice of disputation, which until then had pervaded late antique society. Disputations among bishops were seen to unsettle the peaceful atmosphere of the assembly and to stand in the way of reaching consensus on orthodoxy.[29] A plain statement of the truth, as passed on by the apostles and the church Fathers, was to be preferred over dialectical disputation and sophistic subtleties.[30] It even became a common rhetorical strategy to criticize one's opponent's facility with dialectic argumentation to imply he was heretic.[31] It was better to turn to written authoritative statements, such as the Creed of Nicaea, and hold fast to its precise wording when debating theological issues.

This picture, persuasively sketched by Lim, indeed comes to the fore in late antique church chronicles that evince a growing suspicion of *dialectica* and of those who were skilled in this art. It would, however, be going too far to conclude with Lim that the views presented in these chronicles on the importance of codified authoritative statements versus oral disputation and dialectical argumentation were shared by the entire Christian society.[32] Other sources, from around the same period, present

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[28] See for example P. Carmassi, 'Theological Issues and Traces of Controversies in Manuscripts Transmitting Works of the Church Fathers', in M. Teeuwen and I. van Renswoude (eds), *The Annotated Book in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, forthcoming). Also non-polemical works of the church Fathers were mined for their relevance to the art of disputation, see the article by J. Keskiaho in the same volume: 'The Annotation of Patristic Texts as Curatorial Activity? The Case of Marginalia to Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages'.

[29] Lim, *Public Disputation*, esp. chapters 6 and 7, pp. 182–229.

[30] Lim, *Public Disputation*, pp. 197–8.

[31] Lim, *Public Disputation*, p. 218.

[32] See the critique by Peter Van Nuffelen, 'The End of Open Competition'.

us with a more positive view of dialectic. The (literary) debate of Augustine with the Arian Pascentius made full use of syllogistic argumentation, and in Augustine's *Contra Crescionum*, the church Father presented Christ himself as a model of apt dialectical practice.[33] Boethius's *Opuscula sacra*, moreover, to which Alcuin had access in York, demonstrated how logical techniques served to clarify doctrinal issues and offered lines of dialectical argumentation to combat heresy.[34] The fact that respected authorities such as Boethius and Augustine had written about dialectic and had used it when arguing against heretics, did much for the standing of dialectical argumentation.[35] It should, however, be noted that when these authors promoted the usefulness of dialectic for the discussion of theological issues, they did not necessarily argue this point with reference to dialectical disputations held during councils. The aforementioned (literary) debate between Augustine and Pascentius, a dialogue text that circulated widely in the Middle Ages, was staged in the semi-public setting of Augustine's villa in Cassiacanum; their disputation was not imagined as taking place during a synod.

A dangerous art

Reservations about dialectical reasoning were not just typical for early Christian thinkers struggling with the question of how to deal with the classical heritage, but can be encountered in classical and late antique non-Christian authors as well. According to the definition provided by treatises on the liberal arts, pagan as well as Christian, *dialectica* was the discipline that helped to distinguish between true and false through disputation.[36] Although it was generally considered a useful tool to establish the truth, it was not per definition a 'friendly' art. There was something inherently disruptive about dialectic, given that its primary aim was not to reach an amicable agreement by gentle persuasion, but to force the opponent into surrender. The pagan author Martianus Capella (fl. 410–20),

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[33] L. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 114, with reference to *Contra Crescionum* 1.14.17–1.19.23. In his later work Augustine became more sceptical about the merits of dialectic. Augustine's dialogue with Pascentius was written in the early sixth century, but was considered to represent the actual debate. *Collatio Augustini cum Pascentio*, ed. H. Müller *et al.* (Vienna, 2008).

[34] G. d'Onofrio, 'Dialectic and Theology: Boethius' "Opuscula sacra" and their Early Medieval Readers', *Studi Medievali* 27 (1986), pp. 45–67; M. Garrison, 'The Library of Alcuin's York', in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 6 vols (Cambridge, 2012), I, pp. 633–64.

[35] For a complete overview of dialectical texts available in the early Middle Ages, see Marenbon, *The Circle of Alcuin*.

[36] See for example Isidore, going back to older definitions, *Etymologies* II.xxii, ed. W.M. Lindsay, *Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX* (Oxford, 1911): 'Docet enim in pluribus generibus quaestionum quemadmodum disputando vera et falsa diiudicentur.'

pictured his Lady Dialectica as a bellicose woman who drew people near with attractive propositions, but hid a nasty hook and vicious snakes up her sleeve to attack (and kill) her opponents in a disputation.[37]

The need was felt to balance the negative side effects of dialectical strategies of argumentation with advice for proper use. To prevent dialectic from either verging towards mere verbal violence or turning into a vain sophistical art that served to show off one's cleverness with words and facility with rational argumentation without necessarily leading to the truth, dialectic should be put to the service of a higher purpose. Christian authors, who tried to find new fields of application for the language arts inherited from antiquity, decided that the art of dialectic was best suited to the fight against heresy.[38] The art that according to some was the mark of heretics and schismatics, was now to be employed against them. Dialectic's ungentle nature, which could be taken to be at odds with the charity one owed to one's fellow Christian, was apparently less problematic when used against an enemy of the orthodox truth who threatened the harmony of the one undivided church.

Debate instructions: how to argue with a heretic

This brings me to the second case study. It concerns Alcuin's letter on the art of dialectic, addressed to a noble lady at the court of Charlemagne shortly after his disputation with Felix.[39] The letter highlights an interesting interplay between rank, gender and cultural standing. Its addressee was probably Gundrada, the half-sister of Adalhard of Corbie and cousin of Charlemagne. Alcuin praises Gundrada for her skills in dialectical subtleties and offers to teach her the method of dialectical enquiry (*disciplina interrogationes dialecticae*). This method, Alcuin assures her, is particularly helpful in refuting the viewpoints of those who adhere to the heresy of Adoptionism. To modern readers, the term interrogation has unpleasant connotations, yet Alcuin's *interrogatio* refers to a question-and-answer technique that is closely connected to the teaching dialogue.[40] Apparently Alcuin had no problem envisioning a woman of high rank engaging in a debate about doctrine. Is he worried that Felix's heresy has spread at the court, and is he handing Gundrada 'the weapons of dialectic' to fight the battle against Adoptionism, perhaps especially in

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[37] Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* IV.327–30, ed. W.H. Stahl, R. Johnson and F.L. Buge, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, 2 vols (New York, 1971–7), I, pp. 106–8.

[38] Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* I.23.

[39] Alcuin to Gundrada (?) (*c*.800), *Ep.* 204, ed. Dümmler, pp. 337–40.

[40] Alcuin, *Disputatio de rhetorica et de virtutibus*, c. 35, ed. C. Halm, *Rhetores Latini minores* (Leipzig, 1863), p. 543: 'Si me alius quis de scola palatii tui interrogasset, forsan ostendissem ei'.

the women's quarters?[41] Alcuin gives no further hints in his letter as to whether the setting he imagines is purely rhetorical (a mere subterfuge to show off his own knowledge in this field) or very real indeed. As John Marenbon has argued, Alcuin felt challenged by Theodulf's impressive display of logic in the *Libri Carolini*, and he wanted to establish his own reputation as a scholar who knew his way around the Categories of Aristotle.[42] And what better way of doing that than to demonstrate his skills in a letter to a lady of very high standing at the court, while showing off his familiarity with Charlemagne's kin at the same time.

Instead of the usual exposé of Aristotelian logic, such as Alcuin offered in his treatise *On Dialectic*, we find here practical examples of dialectical enquiry:

> One should ask whether every man that exists of a body and soul is a proper son of his father. If he says: yes, a proper son, then one should ask whether the soul proceeds from the father just like the flesh. If he says: no, then one should draw the inference: how is a man the proper son of his father if his soul does not proceed from the father, like the flesh?[43]

Alcuin lists thirteen such examples of dialectical questions that all have this same structure: a question should be asked (*interrogandum est*), and if the answer is affirmative or negative, the next inference should be drawn (*inferendum est*) until 'these things have been confirmed through a series of questions and answers so that nothing else remains but to confess that Jesus Christ is truly God'.[44] The method of discussion that Alcuin recommends stands midway between a questionnaire and a dialogue – perhaps not an open-ended dialogue, but nevertheless a dialogue based on reciprocity and response. Although Alcuin advises Gundrada on questions she should ask, including follow-up questions that are suited to different possible answers from the person who is being confronted, he clearly envisions a dialogue scenario where the collocutor asks questions in return. The instructions Alcuin gives Gundrada in the letter are not

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[41] On the position of women at the court, see J. Nelson, 'Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?', in J. Parsons (ed.), *Medieval Queenship* (New York, 1993), pp. 43–61.

[42] Marenbon, 'Alcuin, the Council of Frankfurt', p. 606.

[43] Alcuin to Gundrada, *Ep.* 204, ed. Dümmler, p. 338, ll. 34–7: 'Interrogandum est, si omnis homo, qui anima et corpore constat, proprius sit filius patris sui. Si dicit: proprius, item interrogandum est, si anima ex patre seminata sit sicut caro. Si dicit: non, inferendum est: quomodo proprius est in anima filius, si anima non est ex patre, sicut caro?' On Alcuin's treatise *On Dialectic*, see Marenbon 'Alcuin, the Council of Frankfurt'.

[44] Alcuin to Gundrada, *Ep.* 204, ed. Dümmler, p. 340, ll. 4–5: 'His ita conformatis per interrogationes et responsiones, quid superset nisi ut Christus Iesus verus credatur Deus.'

just about providing prefabricated answers that she needs to learn by heart, but rather are to teach her the principles of dialectical questioning. The basic technique seems to be to drive one's opponent into a corner by firing questions at him (or her), which he/she can only confirm or deny, until the opponent has no alternative but to agree with the unavoidable conclusion from the presented propositions. In his dialogue with Charlemagne On Rhetoric and Virtues, also written around 800, Alcuin warned against this type of crafty questioning that led to drawing involuntary conclusions, but apparently he considered it a fully acceptable strategy in a discussion with a heretic.[45] If there was lingering concern about the ethical aspects of dialectical reasoning, the end will have justified the means: this was for the greater good of leading a heretic to recognize and accept the truth, just as a teacher would lead an ignorant student to knowledge.

How to argue with a pope

But what if dialectical questioning was not used in a discussion with a heretic, but with a fellow orthodox Christian, and one of superior spiritual authority at that? What were the rules of conduct then? The third and last example I will discuss concerns a disputation of Frankish legates with the pope, the so-called *Ratio Romana de symbolo fidei*. Here we encounter the significant term *ratio* again, once more in reference to a type of discussion that was based, as I would argue, on a critical analysis of written authorities *and* dialectical reasoning.[46] In 810 Charlemagne sent envoys to Rome to dispute with Pope Leo III on the wording of the Nicaean Creed. One of these was Adalhard of Corbie, the half-brother of Gundrada, the lady who according to Alcuin was well versed in dialectical subtleties. The envoys had come to Rome to engage in a discussion with Pope Leo to persuade him to add the filioque clause to the Creed, so that from now on it would be stated there that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son.[47] The council of

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[45] Alcuin, *Disputatio de rhetorica*, c. 35, ed. C. Halm, p. 543.
[46] Although some have taken the term *ratio* to refer to the written account of the disputation, the text itself uses *ratio* in reference to the discussion itself. *Ratio romana de symbolo fidei*, ed. H. Willjung, *MGH Concilia* II, supp. 2 (Hanover, 1998), p. 287: 'Incipit ratio quae habita est de symbolo fidei in secretario beati Petri apostoli inter domnum Leonem sanctissimum [. . .] et missos domni Caroli imperatoris.' All extant manuscripts have this introduction. For a different interpretation of *ratio*, referring to a *libellus* of patristic citations that the legates had brought to Rome and that was read out on the occasion, see Noble, 'Kings, Clergy and Dogma', p. 249.
[47] For an introduction to the filioque controversy, see the in-depth study by P. Gemeinhardt, *Die Filoque-Kontroverse zwischen Ost- und Westkirche im Frühmittelalter* (Berlin and New York, 2002).

Chalcedon, however, had decided that no letter or syllable should be changed in the wording of the Nicaean Creed.

It is a fortunate circumstance that a 'transcript' exists of the exchange between the pope and Charlemagne's envoys, which according to the notary who recorded it was not a fierce verbal battle, but a harmonious, orderly disputation.[48] In fact this is emphasized so often, by the notary in 'voice-over', but also by the pope and the envoys during their discussion that we may assume that the notary did not merely record the altercation, but had an agenda with this text: he wished to drive the point home that these were the appropriate codes of conduct during a disputation. 'Would that questions such as these [. . .] would be discussed more often in this friendly manner', Pope Leo is recorded to have said, 'without malicious intention and obstinate competition'.[49] As the notary himself admitted, his rendition of their disputation was not a faithful word-by-word record.[50] Nevertheless it allows us to observe that the envoys used a comparable technique of dialectical questioning as described by Alcuin, with the difference that this was not an *interrogatio* in the manner of a teacher questioning a student, which would have been highly inappropriate in a discussion with the pope, but an equal exchange in which the discussion partners took turns in leading the dialectical questions. Although Pope Leo could not deny the validity of the propositions the envoys put to him, according to the notary, and although he agreed they were founded on sound interpretation of the writings of the church Fathers, he did not wish to draw the (in the eyes of the Franks: unavoidable) logical conclusion that the wording of the Creed should be altered. The canonized decision of the council of Chalcedon not to alter the text superseded any logical necessity. The envoys returned empty-handed. They had had a good and amiable disputation with the pope, but had been unable to persuade him.

Conclusion

Felix was not allowed to return to home after his views had been refuted at Aachen. He was put into the custody of Bishop Leidrad of Lyon, the same man who had come to visit him in Urgel and had promised him licence to speak freely before the assembly. Licence to leave, however, was not granted, although he had been given permission to return to Urgel on previous occasions. Would Felix have expected this outcome,

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[48] *Ratio Romana*, ed. Willjung, p. 291: 'amica altercatione [. . .] pro utrarumque partium quaeritur salute', 'familiari disputatione', 'pacifice'.

[49] *Ratio Romana*, ed. Willjung, p. 291: 'utinam, quotiens aliquid huiusmodi [. . .] quaeritur, ita per omnia pacifice sine perversa intentione nec non pertinaci contentione quereretur'.

[50] *Ratio Romana*, ed. Willjung, p. 288.

when he came to Aachen voluntarily, or was he unpleasantly surprised? Half a year later, Leidrad and Felix visited Alcuin at St Martin's in Tours. Alcuin wrote about their meeting in a letter to his friend Bishop Arn, saying that he was happy to see that Felix had mended his ways, was fully orthodox now, and had shown great love for his former opponent Alcuin. 'The hatred he once had towards me', Alcuin writes, 'has turned into sweet love.'[51]

It is difficult to say whether Alcuin and Felix made use of dialectical argumentation during their public debate in Aachen in 799. The sources emphasize that the discussion proceeded in a rational manner, but do not say whether syllogistic reasoning and dialectical questioning were part of it. Yet the fact that Alcuin, in the very same year, described the techniques of dialectical enquiry so precisely to Gundrada, emphasizing how suitable this type of enquiry was in a discussion with an Adoptionist, suggests that Alcuin employed the same techniques in his debate with Felix. But before we jump to the conclusion that dialectical exchanges were acceptable during conciliar meetings around 800, it is important to note that the meeting in Aachen in 799 was technically speaking not a council.[52] As Tom Noble has shown, between 792 and 810 Charlemagne organized several meetings with experts to discuss sensitive issues – meetings that were emphatically not synods or councils – in order to circumvent the formal rules, implications and restrictions of a conciliar gathering.[53] We should bear in mind that all three examples of dialectical exchange that I have discussed in this article took place outside any council. This may have opened up possibilities for other types of discussion and truth-finding procedures than would perhaps have been feasible in a formal council.

How did Alcuin and the Frankish envoys learn their dialectical techniques, and how did Gundrada first become acquainted with dialectic? Late antique church histories offered codes of conduct for theological

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[51] Alcuin to Arno (medio 800), *Ep.* 208, ed. Dümmler, p. 346, ll. 21–2: 'totumque odium, quod habuit in me, versum est in caritatis dulcedinem'. On Felix's solid return to orthodoxy see also Alcuin's letter to Leidrad and Nifridius (medio 800), *Ep* 202, ed. Dümmler, p. 333, ll. 18–19.

[52] Neither Alcuin's letters nor Felix's *Confessio* mention a 'synodus' or 'concilium' (or any other term that could serve as an equivalent) when referring to the events of Aachen 799, but only speak of a *disputatio* held in the palace in the presence of King Charlemagne and the bishops convened by him (see the quotations from Alcuin's letters in nn. 9 and 16, and Felix, *Confessio*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 221, ll. 13–14: 'in eius praesentiam in conspectu episcoporum, quos ad se ordinatione gloriosi principis nostri convenire fecerat'). Only the *Vita Alcuini*, written some twenty or thirty years after the event, speaks of a 'synodum magnam episcoporum in Aquisgrani imperiali palatio' as the venue for the disputation (*Vita Alcuini*, c. 10, ed. Arndt, p. 190). Some scholars refer to the 'acts of the council of Aachen' in the *MGH* edition, but what Werminghoff published in the *MGH* under the heading *Concilium Aquisgranense a. 800* are not acts at all, but the *Confessio* of Felix (*MGH Concilia* II, supp. 1, pp. 221–5).

[53] Noble, 'Kings, Clergy and Dogma'.

discussion, but not much in the way of practical guidelines on how to engage in a dialectical disputation. For the latter, the literary debates of the church Fathers were more helpful, while the acts of the ecumenical councils were a treasure trove in which to find suitable arguments against heretics. Yet there are some interesting parallels between the stories recorded in the church histories and the cultural rules for debate that seem to have prevailed at the court of Charlemagne around 800. One thing that stands out is the ideal that a discussion should proceed in an orderly and rational fashion, without any shouting and name-calling. A debate should not disturb the order and harmony of the church, but rather enhance it. This may be a reason why Alcuin felt the need to stress in his letters that Felix harboured no grudge against him. Even though Alcuin beat him in a disputation, there was love between them, he said – an assurance that restored orthodoxy went hand in hand with restored harmony. Also in the *Ratio Romana*, the notary emphasized on several occasions that the pope and the legate spoke peacefully with mutual respect. They explored the disputed issue to 'the benefit of both parties'.[54] The Frankish envoys and their discussion partner, Pope Leo, did not reach consensus, but they disagreed agreeably.[55] Such assurances of love, harmony and respect may have served to appease anxiety over the competitive, deceitful, combative and sometimes outright abusive traits of dialectical disputation in a social environment that was highly competitive anyway. As the fifth-century author Martianus so vividly pointed out, Lady Dialectica was not a peace-loving, harmonious woman, but a lady to fear. Yet around 800, scholars at the court of Charlemagne seem to have found ways of living with her contentious nature.

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[54] See n. 42: 'pro utrarumque partium salute'.
[55] This expression is borrowed from Noble's 'Kings, Clergy and Dogma'. This article has been a source of inspiration while I wrote this contribution.