

Michel-Yves Perrin: *Civitas confusionis: De la participation des fidèles aux controverses doctrinales dans l'Antiquité tardive (début IIIe s.–c. 430)*, Paris (Nuvis) 2017, 405 pp., ISBN 978-2-36367-032-8, € 27,–.

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The city is full of people in debate, the streets, the squares, the broad avenues and the neighbourhoods, the tailor, the moneychanger, the grocer. Ask if you can change some money and you will be taught about the Son Begotten and Unbegotten. Inquire about the price of bread and they will answer you that the Father is greater, the Son subordinate to him. Enquire whether your bath is ready, and they will explain to you that the Son is created from nothing.¹

The famous passage from Gregory of Nyssa's *Oratio de deitate filii et spiritus sancti*, preached in Constantinople in 383, appears in many studies of early Christian doctrinal development. In most cases it is used as a springboard to neat explanations of the various stands in the theological debates of early Christianity. Rarely does the spotlight focus on the ways the streets and their inhabitants were involved in these debates. *Civitas confusionis* does precisely the latter. The monograph appeared in 2017 from a *Habilitationschrift* defended at Paris IV in 2004 and is brought up to date as far as the extensive bibliography is concerned. Michel-Yves Perrin's aim is to take Gregory's purported exaggeration seriously and to examine how the masses were involved in the discussions and debates through which Christian doctrine developed in the earliest centuries. Between an elaborate prologue and encompassing epilogue, three parts discuss in nine chapters the heresiological *éthos* of the centuries between the beginning of the 3rd century and the death of Augustine (Part I); the arts of persuasion through preaching and polemics, through disputes and verbal debates, and through books, letters and public lectures (Part II); and, finally, the resorts ("champs de forces") in which the faithful were brought to exercise their ability to discern between what is right and what is not: their discernment ("discernement," p. 222; the concept of power of discernment is elaborately discussed in the first chapter of Part I, pp. 80–93).

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio de deitate filii et spiritus sancti* (GNO 10,2 121,3–14 Rhein): πάντα γὰρ τὰ κατὰ τὴν πόλιν τῶν τοιοῦτων πεπλήρωται, οἱ στενωποὶ, αἱ ἀγοραὶ, αἱ πλατεῖαι, τὰ ἄμφοδα, οἱ τῶν ἱματίων κάπηλοι, οἱ ταῖς τραπέζαις ἐφρονηκότες, οἱ τὰ ἐδώδιμα ἡμῖν ἀπεμπολοῦντες. ἐὰν περὶ τῶν ὀβολῶν ἐρωτήσῃς, ὃ δὲ σοι περὶ γεννητοῦ καὶ ἀγεννητοῦ ἐφιλοσόφησεν· κὰν περὶ τιμήματος ἄρτου πύθῃ, μείζων ὁ πατήρ, ἀποκρίνεται, καὶ ὁ υἱὸς ὑποχείριος. εἰ δὲ τὸ λουτρὸν ἐπιτήδειον ἔστιν εἰπῆς, ὃ δὲ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων τὸν υἱὸν εἶναι διωρίσατο. οὐκ οἶδα τί χρὴ τὸ κακὸν τοῦτο ὀνομάσαι, φρενίτιν ἢ μανίαν ἢ τι τοιοῦτον κακὸν ἐπιδήμιον, ὃ τῶν λογισμῶν τὴν παραφορὰν ἐξεργάζεται.

Disagreement on Christian faith and doctrine is of all time and starts with the founders of Christianity themselves. Not only did Peter and Paul fight the arch heretic Simon Magus—and successfully so as both the early Christian apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* and church historian Eusebius testify—they also fought each other on matters of doctrine and orthopraxis (Gal 2:11–14). Christians were widely known as a group in which *discordia* often overshadowed the love of and search for unity they claimed to be their biblical commission. Aiming for the vision of peace that Jerusalem symbolised, they often dwelled in the *civitas confusionis* of the detested Babylon (p. 21). Doctrinal debate was the order of the day in the earliest Christian centuries and the book's main aim is to find out how the *civitas* as a whole was involved in this combat, struggling to find peace but often wading through the mud of violence and bloodshed (the episcopal elections in Rome during the year 366 resulted in more than 100 fatal casualties, p. 22; the Arian controversy was marked by violence, p. 43).

The central question of the book is to re-examine the doctrinal controversies among late antique Christians as “un phénomène de masse” rather than “un affrontement des lettrés” (p. 47). One of Perrin's aims is to overcome the confessional deadlock that he dates in the 19th century, with Adolf von Harnack defending the statement that the Council of Nicea in the first quarter of the 4th century made an end to all popular involvement in the making of Christian dogma (“Der Sieg des Nicänums war ein Sieg der Priester über den Glauben des christlichen Volkes,” quoted on pp. 33–34²) and John Henry Newman stating the exact opposite: “The Catholic people . . . were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not” (quoted on p. 35³).

Between these extremes Perrin finds his position by a thorough scrutiny of the sources, some of them obvious to find in a book about this question (e.g. sermons), others more surprising and equally or even more revealing in the ways in which Christian lay people were kept up to date and even required to know the details of what was deemed heretic in order to hold them closer to the accepted doctrine on crucial matters. This twofold knowledge was central e.g. in baptismal catechesis, which consisted of (p. 81) a *pars destruens*, teaching what was considered contrary to the Christian truth that the catechist wanted to convey, and a *pars construens*, providing insight knowledge in what the baptismal candidate was supposed to assume as his or her own and to give back once the Easter baptism term was there. With this material, Perrin shows clearly that doctrinal

² Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* 2 (4th rev. and enl. ed.; Tübingen, 1909), 283–284.

³ John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London, 1890; repr. ed. Rowan Williams and James Tollhurst; The Works of Cardinal John Henry Newman 4; Notre Dame, 2001), 445.

debate was not a matter in which only the learned ecclesiastical elite took part, but also the Christian faithful—even those *not yet* initiated were already part of it.

How to define these Christian faithful? This central question is discussed in the prologue (as of p. 55), where Perrin underlines the inaptitude of the modern distinction between clergy and lay people for this period of late Antiquity. The term *fidèles* is chosen by Perrin in order to avoid the hierarchical distinction between those in and those without institutional ordination, the latter including e. g. ascetics who played such an important role in the formation of Christian orthodoxy (the fact that Martin of Tours and his dealings with the Priscillianists play no role in the discussion as of p. 232 is remarkable). Equally insufficient is the distinction between the learned and the simple. Perrin refers to work done by Alain Le Boulluec and Gregor Schöllgen to support his position, namely that the lexical usage of the term *simplex* is not to denote those unable to read and write but, much more polemically (pp. 62–63), to indicate those unaware of the doctrinal debates, even if they were able to read and write, as the true ἰδιόται (p. 295). The notion of literacy was considered anyway only one among many media that could spread right and wrong thoughts. Physical contact was supposed to be another, given the widely (and early: *Didascalia apostolorum*, p. 89) accepted notion that “heresies” were contagious and could spread even through the spoiled water in the *thermae* (p. 92–93).

In a lengthy study of the art of persuasion through the oral medium of cathedral sermons Perrin underlines the extent to which also illiterate church goers were experienced listeners because of the urban setting in which they were daily trained in perceiving the message through a rhetorical performance (p. 134, with reference to Jaclyn LaRae Maxwell [Cambridge University Press, not Princeton] and Carol Harrison⁴). The notion of participation of the faithful seems to be most present in these pages, where Perrin makes clear the continuity between ancient civic rhetorical practices and Christian cathedral preaching, however difficult it is for the 21st-century scholar to distil from the written account the originally spoken sermon (p. 137).⁵ Interesting is the notion of debate between preacher and audience (pp. 179–180). Equally appealing is the approach to liturgical hymns as persuasive performances (pp. 210–215). Although this is not new, it is important to imagine these hymns being sung also *outside* the church building, e. g. by women at their loom, or during processions.

⁴ Jaclyn LaRae Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2006); Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵ In this light, the 2018 volume in Brill’s New History of the Sermon can now be added: Anthony Dupont et al., eds., *Preaching in the Patristic Era: Sermons, Preachers and Audiences in the Latin West* (A New History of the Sermon 6; Leiden, 2018).

That a book like this needs chronological limitation is obvious. However, it is of course regrettable that the study draws to a stop “a year before” the third (and two decades before the last) of the first four ecumenical councils, as remarked by Richard Price.⁶ The chosen chronological demarcation also excludes the prolific preacher about issues discussed precisely at these councils, Leo the Great. Leo’s voice is often missed in the analysis, given the central role his sermons play in terms of “se détourner d’un adversaire” (p. 69), or what we could call the othering of the doctrinal opponent (particularly Manichaeans).

Civitas confusionis is the rewriting of a *Habilitationsschrift* and provides as such numerous exhaustive or near-exhaustive state of the art discussions of a large variety of topics related to the main questions. This is not the place to discuss in length the many topics raised in these highly valuable parts of the book, but the reader should be aware that much innovative material is to be found in the lengthy footnotes. Examples of particularly useful surveys, often accompanied by an invitation to further study of these topics, are p. 23 (note 28) on the ancient concept of religion; p. 99 (note 283) on the creation of an imperial heseriological discourse, starting with the *Theodosian Code*; p. 100 (note 287) on the walls and gates of church buildings as sign boards for doctrinal posters and debate.

Civitas confusionis is a rich work, even if there are some remarkable lacunae. The gender composition of the urban congregation, e. g., is smoothed over in the (along the standard in this publication) ultra-brief footnote 509 at p. 168, and would have deserved much more attention. The epilogue providing a view of the centuries to come, seems to leap (as is so often the case) from the early 5th to the 9th century, overlooking, e. g. the debates of Adoptionism in the later 8th century. From the perspective of reader-friendliness, the reference *voir supra* seems to be over-demanding in a book this size and should have been replaced by proper cross references. A few typos were noted, such as *a Age* (for *an Age*) in the title of Claudia Rapp’s book (p. 278 [note 906])⁷ and *Peasants* [for *Peasant*] and *Empire* in the title of Lesley Dossey’s book (p. 288 [note 951] and p. 332)⁸.

All in all, *Civitas confusionis* is highly recommended as an important study of the ways in which doctrinal Christianity and Christian doctrine developed from the heart of civic life and rhetoric.

⁶ Richard Price, review of Michel-Yves Perrin, *Civitas confusionis: De la participation des fidèles aux controverses doctrinales dans l’Antiquité tardive (début IIIe s.– c. 430)*, *JThS* 70 (2019): 401–402.

⁷ Cf. Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 37; Berkeley, CA, 2005).

⁸ Cf. Lesley Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 47; Berkeley, CA, 2010).