

RICHARD PAUL VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 'The Oxford Early Christian Studies', xxv+425 p (ISBN 0-19-814678-7)

For scholars of Early Christianity, the fourth century is a corner stone. Any further inquiry into the religious and cultural history of Late Antiquity is shaped by the understanding of the infinitely complex beginnings of the Christian Church, and of what R. P. Vaggione calls 'the Nicene Revolution'. One hardly needs to recall too many historical events in order to justify this statement: two ecumenical councils held at Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), as well as the local synods gathered at Rome (340), Antioch (341), Sardica (343), Sirmium (347, 351), Ancyra (359), Seleucia (359) and Constantinople (360). They were happenings more or less related to the theological and the administrative problems raised by the Arian crisis. The fourth century is not only the crucial formative period of the Christian theology (when the scriptural canon and theological dogma were set up), but also the inceptive time for the establishment of liturgical rites and disciplinary regulations (Gangra in 340, and Carthage in 348). Stemming from the gloomy era of civil persecutions, the Christian Church became in the age of Constantine more interested than ever in defining the dogmatic and moral boundaries of the concept of 'orthodoxy' *versus* 'heresy'.

For all these good reasons and many others left unmentioned here, the fourth century has become in the last decades a constant focus of research for many academics. Apart from the countless number of articles published by various historical and theological journals, 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' have been mapped in some indispensable monographs. First, mention should be made of M. Simonetti's *La crisi ariana nel quarto secolo* (Rome, 1975), which is now a classic, along with R. Williams' *Arius. Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001²). Regarding the second half of the fourth century, the rare book of Th. Kopecek (*History of Neo-Arianism*, 2 vol., 1979) still remains unsurpassed in its almost complete coverage of the topic. Nor should we forget the outstanding work of the British scholar, R. P. C. Hanson, who has provided an impressive panorama over the long struggle for orthodoxy in the fourth century in his *opus* of nearly nine hundred pages called *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988). Needless to say, the recent process of editing the works of the main orthodox combatants (e.g.: Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa), and of their adversaries (e.g.: Arius, Aëtius, Eunomius), has been invaluable in providing a better image of the theological controversies of the fourth century.

Among the scholars who embarked on such archaeological excursions, Richard Paul Vaggione distinguished himself with the excellent (almost pedantic) edition of Eunomius of Cyzicus, whose *Extant Works* were published in 1987. This philological restitution of Eunomius' writings anticipated, in fact, the present book under review. Issued as part of the distinguished series 'The Oxford Early Christian Studies' (General Editors: Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth), this book targets the maximum. Splendidly written, in the exquisite Victorian style, Vaggione's monograph rivals the lavish style of Eunomius' foes (among whom St Gregory of Nyssa is chief). The author pays such a great deal of attention to aesthetic effect, and displays so many loose historical details, that a neophyte cannot get the gist of his book. It is certainly not an introduction to Eunomius' thought, and the reader is expected to have some acquaintance with the subject. But all students of Patristic Theology or Religious Studies who are interested in the problem of Christian 'orthodoxy' should place Vaggione's monograph on their list of compulsory reading.

The first two chapters presents Eunomius' biography, his eager search for education in the '340s, his trip on Bosphorus and his temporary settle in Antioch (by 346). Passionate by rhetoric, Eunomius found there Aëtius, who became his life-long master in philosophical theology. In the third chapter, Vaggione takes pain to describe the Nicaea's aftermath, in its very

political and ecclesiastical aspects, but in the presentation of Eunomius' thought one finds little diachronic references. The reader interested in the genesis of Eunomius' three remnant books can refer to Vaggione's comprehensive introduction of the *Extant Works* (OUP, 1987). It is probably enough to say that Eunomius' *Apologia* was written around 359, and then *Apologia Apologiae* in 378/9 and 382/3. The 'exposition of faith' (*ekthesis tes pisteos*) was delivered at the Emperor Theodosius' request by 383. The last work of Eunomius shows in particular his desperate but tardy attempt to shift from a metaphysical theology (which changed the Trinitarian name of 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' into an abstract ontological description of 'the first essence, the second, and the third one') to a more biblical confession.

The understanding of Christ was determinative for Eunomius' consequent philosophical options. One of his most striking claims was, probably, that human mind can grasp God's essence by the concept of 'ungeneracy' (*agennesia*). Eunomius was looking for a divine attribute, in which the Son ('generate' by definition) could not take part, while he excluded any possibility for a theology of the natural unity and personal difference in God (implementing a *non-numerical* idea of Trinity). One could say that Eunomius undermined by far Arius' 'hymnic theology' (R. Williams), when he pretended that the human mind can know God's nature (a possibility excluded *ab initio* by Arius, even in reference to Christ). This dogmatic statement against the triune God of Nicaea determined Eunomius to change even the baptismal practice, opting for just one immersion into water (symbolising Christ's death) instead of three (calling God as 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit', Matthew 28: 19). The Nicene theologians saw in Eunomius' readiness to modify the service of initiation into the Christian mysteries as a proof of his disrespect towards the authority of the Scriptures, and against the One who gave the commandment. For Eunomius, the Son did not exist 'before his own coming to be' (*Apol.* 12. 10-12), which went directly contrary to the Nicene expression 'begotten before all ages.' Consequently, Eunomius' Trinitarian theology becomes not only subordinationist, but also mythological, since it introduces temporality into the realm of the divine. Christ then could be called the Son of God only by adoption, and this enfeebled his dignity of 'Saviour' (only formally recognised).

Chapter five and six offer a narrative history of Eunomius' evolution among the theological actors of the late 350s and early 360s, when imperial policy wedded ecclesiastical interests. Chapter seven describes the historical circumstances following Constantius' death (361), and their implications for the ongoing battle between theologians. Vaggione suggests that Eunomius' fall (along with the oblivion of Aëtius) is the result of his incapacity to address issues of potential popularity. On the other hand, 'Aëtius and Eunomius were looking to shock, and they succeeded' (256). His abstract, non-biblical terminology and great appeal for dialectic can be contrasted with the Cappadocian Fathers' rhetorical skills and immense knowledge of the Scriptures. Nicene theologians held only two types of 'divine names'. The first category includes names that are not interchangeable, and which refer to God *ad intra* (since 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' tell about the inner mode of existence of the Godhead). The second category includes names that refer to God *ad extra*, describing his activities in the world (perceived, of course, through the lens of religious belief). In both cases, names express relation not essence. Yet Eunomius could defend an entirely opposite idea. The reader can sense his unprecedented epistemological arrogance by reading one of Socrates Scolasticus' reports (the perusal of which Spinoza or Hegel might have interested). 'God – said Eunomius – does not know anything more about his own essence than we do, nor is that essence better known to him, and less to us; rather, whatever we ourselves know about it is exactly what he knows, and, conversely, that which he knows is what you will find without change in us.'¹

¹ SOCRATES, *HE* IV. 7 (PG 67. 473B-C), ET in VAGGIONE (1987), 178; compare with SPINOZA, *Ethica* II, §47: 'Mens humana adaequatam habet cognitionem aeternae et infinitae essentiae Dei'.

The book ends up with a large map of conclusions. Vaggione finds the flexibility of language of the advocates of Nicaea (who did not always communicate very well, if we think of the relationship between Athanasius and the Cappadocians) being the source of their popularity and eventual success. Vaggione does not seem to be convinced that the Cappadocian Fathers and the Neo-Arian theologians were defending two fundamentally distinct *types* of theology, which, one must say, had in mind two different images of Christ. By identifying in the *Apostolic Constitutions* the liturgical ethos of Eunomius' theology, Vaggione suggests that, practically, the differences between the heretic and the orthodox Christians were, by the end of the fourth century, almost negligible. Yet, I suspect that this hasty approximation has too much of a modern understanding of what an ecumenical Christian theology could tolerate. The changes of the baptismal formula, the omission of any reference to prayerful knowledge or mystical contemplation, and the scarcity of scriptural inspiration in Eunomius' writings, meant for the Cappadocian Fathers as much as his degradation of the ontological status of the Son and of the Spirit.

Regarding the more difficult question about 'how the Nicene revolution was possible', Vaggione – following M. Polanyi's epistemology – suggests that the answer cannot be found in the explicit propositional disagreements. The framework, which could breed views against the theological principles of the Nicene, has its roots far beyond the start of the controversy (possibly connected to Lucian of Antioch and his exegesis of Scripture). Nicaea included formulae (such as the famous 'ek tes ousia tou Patros') which were withdrawn later, at the Council of Constantinople. This shows the readiness of Athanasius and of the Cappadocian fathers to be more fluid in their terminology, though very strict in emphasising the essential unity between the Father and the Son, which was fundamentally rejected by Eunomius. As with R. P. C. Hanson's history of the theological disputations in the fourth century, Vaggione's envisages the process of achieving 'orthodoxy' as an experiment of trial and error. (This is pretty much the same scheme as that of I. P. Culianu, applied in his account of the genesis and development of Gnosticism in Mediterranean culture.)

Vaggione's historical documentation is most impressive, and his writing seductive. (In particular, I enjoyed the opening of his book, describing the climate and the geography of Cappadocia.) But the expansive literary style is sometimes too expensive and can never find universal acclamation. By following the norms of narrative history, Vaggione mingles too easily in one single chapter, for example, insightful philosophical digressions with overtly psychological portrayals of his subjects. Besides, his theologically correct position leaves the reader confused about the value of his scholarly ratings, and especially of his assessment of the Nicene theology, which is still being represented by a wide range of theologians in the traditional Christian churches. Obviously, Vaggione wrote his book under the motto '*audi partem alteram*', but this should have not prevented him from a more incisive and clear-cut evaluation of Eunomius' inconsistent ideas.

Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution includes an excellent appendix listing 'the theologically significant passages of Scripture used by Non-Nicene' (382-395). The author could also have designed a chronological table, to guide the reader through the very dense bulk of data displayed in every chapter. One might also like to learn about the modern reception of Eunomius' theology, but the book does not include a bibliography (separate from the footnotes), with this information. Some readers could object likewise that, occasionally, the references given in the footnotes do not entirely cover the meaning of the main text (see his anachronistic use of St Augustine on behalf of the Nicene theologians², indealing with the old-testamentary

² VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, especially the footnote 345, page 135.

theophanies³). Meanwhile, his discussion of Eunomius' ideas does not give sufficient consideration to the philosophical and theological criticism mounted by Gregory and Basil on the orthodox side. Perhaps one of the most disappointing deficiencies of Vaggione's book is the expected discussion of Eunomius' historical and conceptual relationship with Neoplatonism and Aristotelism, which would have required a discussion of modern scholarship (one cannot ignore the studies of J. Daniélou, R. Mortley, Th. Kobush on this topic).

The objections made above cannot undermine the qualities of Raul Paul Vaggione's outstanding contribution to the understanding of this very important chapter in the history of the early Christian Church. Vaggione's width of knowledge and subtle hermeneutics approach makes his book the best written on the subject. Though not an easy reading, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* is an indispensable reference for any student interested in the formation of the concept of orthodoxy, with central references to the personality of one of the most significant religious figures of the fourth century.

Mihail NEAMȚU
(University of Durham, UK)

³ It is well known that Augustine (*De Trinitate*, 3.1.3) thought that the subject of the old-testamentary theophanies was not only the Logos, but of any of the persons of the Trinity. This assessment had serious consequences for the formation of the Western doctrine about *visio Dei*, and differed substantially from what the Eastern monastic held as true on the same subject. Cf V. LOSSKY, *Vision of God* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Press, 1983); Lossky's insights have been brilliantly developed by A. GOLITZIN, 'The Form of God and Vision of the Glory: Some Thoughts on the Anthropomorphic Controversy of 399 AD', translated in Romanian by Ioan. I. Ică Jr. in A. GOLITZIN, *Mistagogia: Experiența lui Dumnezeu în Ortodoxie* (Sibiu: Deisis, 1998), 184-267; see also, R. TESKE, 'St Augustine and the Vision of God' in F. VAN FLETEREN (ed.), *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue* (NY: Peter Lang, 1994), 287-308