

**Die Väterhermeneutik der Aachener Synode 809**  
**Einen analyse aus östlicher Sicht**  
**Aachen September 24<sup>th</sup> 2009: Dr Marcus Plested**

I have heard it claimed that the spell-check facility in early versions of Microsoft Word failed to recognise the term *filioque* and suggested instead the term ‘fallacy’. Would that all ecumenical discussions were so simply resolved. The seemingly interminable *filioque* dispute is perhaps the single most depressing chapter in the whole sorry saga of estrangement and misapprehension that has sundered Greek East and Latin West. It is an acute and painful irony that endless hot air on the subject of the Spirit should have produced so little real appreciation of the actual operation of the Spirit – indeed the opposite effect, estrangement from the Spirit, is more often in evidence in the *filioque* debates.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly one of most depressing aspects of the *filioque* dispute is the mode of patristic reception that it encouraged. The Fathers are all too often treated not as a treasury but as an arsenal, not as storehouses of wisdom but as sources of theological artillery. Passages from their works are de-contextualised and de-personalised, torn from their scriptural foundations and thrown at the enemy with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Such an approach manifestly betrays the very nature of the patristic theological enterprise and renders sincere ecumenical engagement impossible.

I exaggerate slightly in my image of patristics as ballistics – but only slightly. What I want to do in this paper is to approach the patristic hermeneutic of the Council of Aachen as a particular mode of reception: specifically a *non-iconic* mode of reception. An alternative paradigm of *iconic* reception will also be advanced. I shall do this, in accordance with my brief, from an eastern perspective.

The *Decretum Aquisgranense* represents a new departure in patristic reception. Patristic authority had long been appealed to in conciliar settings – indeed the very notion of ‘the Fathers’ emerges out of the claim to continuity with earlier councils. The iconoclast and iconophile councils of 754 and 787 each claimed extensive

patristic support as a key dimension of their claim to ecumenical status. But the Council of Aachen is unprecedented in the way in which it presents the Fathers as an indiscriminate and univocal force whose authority is both pre-determined and incontrovertible.

The mode of reception adopted by the council may be illuminated by comparison with the closely-connected *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum (Libri Carolini)*.<sup>2</sup> This work, which can (after Freeman) be attributed in large part to Theodulf of Orleans, presents King Charles' riposte to the council of 787, the council received as the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The *Opus Caroli regis* cites patristic authorities in accordance with a pre-determined list of accepted authors, that of the pseudonymous *Decretum Gelasianum*. The testimony of anyone not on that list could therefore be safely ignored: the *Opus* rules out St Gregory of Nyssa on these grounds. This was convenient in the context of the *filioque* debate given that Gregory of Nyssa might be used to support a *per filium* formula. Even within the writings of 'canonical' authors, any awkward or ambiguous material could also safely be ignored if it failed to conform with a pre-established construct of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And of course the Fathers cannot, by definition, controvert the teaching authority of the Petrine see and must mean something else even if they appear to do so. By extension (and in practice), if Rome itself has any doubts on the matter, then it must be helped to manifest its own self-evident orthodoxy. The *Decretum Aquisgranense* conforms very closely to this pattern of reception.

Certain other texts of the period betray a very similar approach, most notably the collection of biblical, patristic and conciliar material gathered by Arn of Salzburg. As will be well known in this gathering, Willjung has made a strong case for ascribing principal authorship of the *Decretum* to Arn precisely by comparison with this collection of pro-*filioque* texts. In all these works, a definite bias towards Latin writers is evident. This is a bias that goes beyond the mere question of availability of

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<sup>1</sup> As Sergius Bulgakov sagely remarks, 'It is remarkable that this filioque debate killed all interest in the theology of the Holy Spirit'. ET: *The Comforter* (tr. B. Jakim: Grand Rapids MI 2004), 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Das Konzil von Aachen 809* ed. H. Willjung (MGH Concilia 2.2) (Hanover 1998); *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum (Libri Carolini)* ed. A. Freeman (MGH Concilia 2.1) (Hanover 1998). On patristic reception in the latter see especially W. Otten, 'The Texture of Tradition. The Role of the Church Fathers in Carolingian theology' in I. Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West* (Leiden 1997), 3-50.

texts. But the *Decretum* does make a serious attempt is made to recruit Greek writers to the cause, notably Athanasius and Cyril. The case with Athanasius is particularly flimsy given that it depends on the pseudo-Athanasian creed. In his authentic works, Athanasius has relatively little to say on the Holy Spirit and his Trinitarian framework remains more dyadic than triadic. With Cyril, none of the extracts given in the *Decretum* speak unambiguously of anything but the temporal mission of the Spirit, put forward within the broader programme of stressing the inseparability of consubstantial Son and Spirit.<sup>3</sup> The appeal to four ecumenical councils highlights the universal pretensions of the Frankish Empire. The Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 553) was of particular interest for the Frankish theologians in that it included a condemnation of Theodoret's work against Cyril which could be taken to encompass a condemnation of Theodoret's critique of *filioque* language in Cyril. The claim in the *Decretum* that the general approbation of Augustine and other Latin Fathers at the Fifth Council conveyed approval of the *filioque* doctrine is tendentious at best. Of course, the Sixth Council is not appealed to given the ongoing controversy over the status of that council. The Second Council is referred to only obliquely, if at all. Overall, it must be said that the *Decretum* hardly succeeds in marshalling the authority of the said councils for the *filioque* cause.

Mention of the pretensions of the new western imperium points to a further element of novelty in this council. Councils that had previously sanctioned some form of *filioque* doctrine: Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410,<sup>4</sup> Toledo in 589, or Hatfield in 680 had done so without polemical intent and with no suspicion that *filioque* language was in any way a contentious issue within the context of Nicene orthodoxy. Aachen was quite different. Just as Charlemagne's empire laid claim to the political mantle of Rome, so his theologians laid claim to Christian Rome's theological inheritance – and that meant, above all, the Fathers, Eastern and Western alike. The Carolingians could

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<sup>3</sup> The principle of extrapolation from economy to theology, from divine operation to divine nature, has never had significant purchase in the Christian East.

<sup>4</sup> This was the council that received and upheld the Nicene profession of faith. In the West-Syrian (Miapysite) recension (which de Halleux has convincingly argued to be original), the council confesses 'the living and holy Spirit, the living Paraclete who is from the Father and the Son'. The later East Syrian (Church of the East) version simply has, like Nicaea, 'and in the Holy Spirit'. See S. Brock, 'The Christology of the Church of the East' in G. Dragas (ed.), *Aksum-Thyateira* (London 1985), 125-42. Thanks to Richard Price for drawing my attention to this intriguing council. It is striking that this council is almost unknown – even among scholars of the *filioque* controversy.

hardly claim direct continuity with Rome or the Fathers but they were unhesitating in seeking to appropriate both.

None of this intended to deny the existence of substantial patristic testimony favouring some sort of *filioque* doctrine and precluding an absolute monopatrism position. It is, rather, to draw attention to the very limited and static mode of reception employed here. Now given that the Council of Aachen's forthright espousal of the *filioque* is inescapably intertwined with Carolingian rejection of the iconophile council of 787, it is surely not fanciful to seek a theological connection between the two. The position articulated in the *Libri Carolini* and upheld by the Council of Frankfurt in 794 argues for a middle way between iconoclasm and iconodulism, rejecting alike the Councils of 754 and 787. Following Gregory the Great, images are to be regarded as educational and edifying but not as objects of veneration or worship. Leaving aside the question of the mangled reports of 787 on which the Carolingian theologians were basing their objections, it is apparent that the possibility of a participatory relationship between icon and archetype was explicitly ruled out. The icon might serve to recall some figure or story to the viewer's mind but its significance was firmly restricted to the material world.<sup>5</sup> An icon could not in any real sense be said to offer a means of access to eternity for the temporal believer, to proclaim the incarnation in its very materiality, or to manifest Christ and the saints in the world. Even the image of God in man was a somewhat nebulous concept that had few practical implications.<sup>6</sup> By ruling out any properly iconic theology, the Carolingians were effectively closing a door between heaven and earth. Or, to use the language of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, disenchanting the cosmos by blocking the ingress of the wholly other.

The Carolingians could hardly be expected to have developed any very subtle grasp of iconophile theology given that the whole controversy took place well outside their borders. But the supremely confident rejection of the council of 787, against the wishes and teachings of the elder Rome, speaks of a theological culture determined on self-sufficiency. In this self-sufficient culture, the Fathers become tools for use,

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<sup>5</sup> *Libri Carolini* 1.17. See the discussion in C. Chazelle, *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era* (Cambridge 2001).

<sup>6</sup> *Libri Carolini* 1.7.

weapons in the battle against those perennial heretics, the Greeks. And it is precisely this objectification of the Fathers that I wish to characterise as a non-iconic mode of reception.

A non-iconic mode of reception, in short, brings the Fathers down to earth, cutting the connection between their works and their persons. Their writings become an archive which may be accessed and utilised on demand. For all the reverence given and authority ascribed to them, they are, ultimately, just objects for our use.

By contrast, an iconic mode of reception is revealed in the nature of the icon itself. The material becomes a means of manifesting immaterial realities: ‘heaven in ordinarie’ as the poet George Herbert has it. An iconic approach to the Fathers looks to them as living saints and teachers: it is in essence personal and relational. An iconic mode of reception is dynamic, not static. In this mode, the Fathers are ultimately subjects, not objects.

If we examine the history of the *filioque* dispute we see that it is the non-iconic mode of reception that has prevailed. Seemingly ever more extensive collections of patristic material are thrown into the ring from the time of Photius onwards. Anselm of Havelberg, in his debate with Nicetas of Nicomedia in 1136, brings to bear Cyril and various Latin Fathers and claims never to have even heard of any *per filium* formula. The Latin delegates to the discussions at Nicaea-Nymphaion in 1234 brought with them a substantial battery of texts on the *filioque* which, so far as they were concerned, brooked no dissent. A wise protest from the Byzantines that their position was not strictly anti-*filioque* was brushed aside. In the run-up to the re-union council of Lyons (1274), Nicholas of Dyrrachium (Durrës) adapted and circulated a weighty anthology of patristic citations supporting the *filioque* which became the basis of Thomas Aquinas’ *Contra errores graecorum*. At the re-union council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-9), the Greek delegation was decisively outmanoeuvred when faced with such material. It simply had no answer to the sheer volume of patristic material with which it was faced apart from a rather weak recurrent charge of interpolation and falsification. Forced to fight on ground not of its choosing and in a mode essentially foreign to its own native mode of theologising, the Byzantines were boxed into a corner and forced into feeble capitulation.

But what might an iconic mode of reception mean in practice? Photius' answer when presented with reports of patristic support for the *filioque* is instructive. Photius does not expect inerrancy from the Fathers. To err is human and the Fathers are human. If we do encounter teachings inconsistent with the scriptural witness and the proclamations of the Ecumenical Councils in our Fathers, we should hide rather than expose their failings and not emulate Ham in failing to cover the nakedness of his father, Noah.<sup>7</sup> Photius, of course, is not working on the basis of any extensive knowledge of the Latin patristic tradition and can come across as unduly dismissive in what he calls, in the *Mystagogia*, 'your Fathers'. In this respect he can be quite as culturally limited as the Carolingians. Nonetheless, his point on errancy stands. Photius also quite correctly points out that much of what was expressed as a theological opinion is now being taught as dogma – a quite different proposition. Similarly, Vincent Damodos, the great Eighteenth-Century Orthodox theologian, was content to regard Augustine's statements on the Trinity as 'unguarded'. Both these estimations tally nicely with Augustine's own clear sense of provisionality with respect to his teaching on the *filioque*.

An iconic approach to the Fathers must, therefore, involve a recognition of their capacity for error. As human beings, their works are necessarily imperfect. We need have no obligation to follow Gregory of Nyssa in his universalism or Augustine in his more extreme anti-Pelagian positions. Again, as human beings, the Fathers do not speak with one voice – indeed some would barely speak to one another in their own time.<sup>8</sup> Here we may choose to supplement the notion of iconic reception with the distinction made by some Fathers between the image and the likeness.<sup>9</sup> The image pertaining to man in accordance with his creation, the likeness being the gradual process by which the image is realised and perfected. In their earthly lives, the Fathers are growing into the likeness: approaching perfection but not yet perfect.

This plurivocity is recognised in many of the ablest theologians of East and West. Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus allow for a *per filium* formula

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<sup>7</sup> *Mystagogia* PG 102 352A.

<sup>8</sup> Here we might think of Jerome and Ambrose or Epiphanius and Chrysostom.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Irenaeus of Lyons or Diadochus of Photice.

precisely so as to embrace both the Latin and the Greek perspectives on the Trinity. Gregory Palamas frankly confronts certain differences between certain Fathers but sees no underlying disharmony in their chorus. Although he squarely rejects the *filioque* doctrine (in his *Apodictic Treatise*) he willingly speaks of the Holy Spirit as ‘common to both’ Father and Son, and specifically as the pre-eternal rejoicing of Father and Son.<sup>10</sup> Such formulations plausibly owe something to his sympathetic reading of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* in the Planoudes translation. It would seem that Gregory will use *filioque* language in the context of the immanent Trinity – but not in respect of origination. It seems to me that this usage is of considerably greater significance for Orthodox appropriation of the *filioque* tradition than the compromise *per filium* formula.

Representing the West, John Scotus Eriugena substantially extended the range of Greek sources available in Latin, helping correct the woeful imbalance and limited range evident in the *Opus Caroli regis* and the *Decretum Aquisgranense*. He was certainly aware of the growing cultural and theological gap between East and West. To help bridge it, he proposed a bold synthesis of Denys and Augustine, one that expressed the underlying harmony of these two very different figures.<sup>11</sup> On the *filioque*, he adopts an Eastern position emphasising the causation of the Father but upholding procession through the Son, *per filium*. Eriugena also develops a dynamic understanding of authority which consists in the continuum of faith instituted by the Word incarnate and transmitted to the apostles and to their successors. Here he is speaking specifically about the authority of Maximus the Confessor.<sup>12</sup> Evidently, no one had told Eriugena that the patristic age was over.

The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard offer a seminal treatment of the fundamental convergence of apparently divergent patristic sources. Thomas Aquinas, for his part, is fully cognisant of the differences that exist among the doctors of the Church but is also frank about the possibility of error, for instance through excess of zeal in

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<sup>10</sup> *Capita* 36.

<sup>11</sup> See G. D’Onofrio, ‘The *Concordia* of Augustine and Dionysius: Toward an Hermeneutic of the Disagreement of Patristic Sources in John the Scot’s *Periphyseon*’ in B. McGinn and W. Otten (ed.) *Eriugena: East and West* (Notre Dame 1994), 115-140.

<sup>12</sup> See J.C. Marler, ‘Dialectical Use of Authority’ in B. McGinn and W. Otten op. cit., 95-113.

combating particular heresies.<sup>13</sup> But he is convinced of the underlying harmony of the holy doctors in accordance with both scripture and reason. That said, Thomas will tolerate no disharmony on the matter of the *filioque* in that this is a matter of papal authority. Here, I fear, we are back in the distinctly non-iconic realms of the *Decretum Aquisgranense*.

In the modern period too we can trace a number of promising instances of iconic reception. Speaking just of the Orthodox tradition, the whole revival of Orthodox theology in the Twentieth Century is built around the creative re-affirmation of the Fathers: Georges Florovsky's so-called Neo-Patristic synthesis stands as a particularly fine example. This re-appropriation requires not repetition but a 'new creative act'. It is too rarely recognised that a patristic revival also lies at the centre of the awesome theological achievement of Sergius Bulgakov.<sup>14</sup> Bulgakov's treatment of the *filioque* is a fine case in point. After some very extensive patristic and historical explorations, he concludes that both East and West are wrong but for different reasons. The West is guilty of having reduced the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity to mere relations (and more specifically to relations of origin). The East, for its part, is culpable in its consistent failure to recognise the fundamental inadequacy of the Western position and engaging in debate on these false terms – hence the sterile stand-off between *filioque* and anti-*filioque*.<sup>15</sup>

But I must now bring my paper to a close. I trust I have given some flavour of what I understand iconic reception to be. An iconic approach enables us to engage with the Fathers in a dynamic mode, learning from them as living teachers and saints. It also underlines their historicity, spurring us to explore their *Sitz im Leben*. The iconic mode encourages us to expand our notion of patristics beyond dogmatics and thereby give full credence to the scriptural, liturgical, and mystical dimensions of the Fathers'

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<sup>13</sup> For the Fathers in Thomas see L. Elders, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Fathers of the Church' in I Backus (ed.), op. cit., 337-66. On the Greek Fathers in particular see also G. Emery, *Thomistic Essays*.

<sup>14</sup> This is an impression not helped by Boris Jakim's decision to abridge much of the patristic material cited and discussed by Bulgakov in *The Comforter*. This decision mars what is otherwise a brilliant and lofty translation.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., 127-29. Paul Evdokimov also deserves a mention for his fertile suggestion that the *filioque* should be balanced by a *spirituque*. I doubt, however, that this would have quite satisfied Bulgakov's call for a breakout from debates over origination. For Bulgakov, the theology of Sophia was the way of out of the impasse.



theological enterprise. It allows for plurivocity, error, and harmony. It precludes an archival proof-text approach and subverts any static notion of authority. In short, the iconic mode of reception is precisely the opposite of what is presented in the *Decretum Aquisgranense*.

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