

Otto H. Linderborg

## 'The Firstborn of Satan'

### The Origins of Heresy in Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*

#### Abstract

Taking its lead from Walter Bauer's classical work *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, this paper proposes that the specifically Christian concept of 'heresy' (αἵρεσις) developed from early Christian notions relating to a range of essentially undifferentiated forms of socio-religious evils (κακά/χαλεπά). The modern conception of heresy, in the sense of an unorthodox corruption of true faith in Christ, is clearly recognisable in Christian texts from the late second century onwards. However, when turning to the earliest extant Christian literary sources, one encounters evidence of a way of conceiving of social and religious evil, in which objects of moral and doctrinal concern are judged equally with regard to their disruptive force. It is hypothesised that this way of blurring the distinction between different socially and religiously disruptive dogmas ('proto-heresies') and habits ('proto-sins') may be conceived of as characteristic of a pre-normative religious order. A close reading of the original Greek and Latin text of the Letter to the Philippians – an early second-century work traditionally ascribed to the Christian martyr Polycarp of Smyrna – forms the textual basis against which the theory of the origins of heresy is weighed.

**Keywords:** History of Religious Ideas, History of Religious Discourse, Early Christianity, Origins of Heresy, Apostolic Fathers, Polycarp

#### 1 Introduction: The question of the origins of heresy

It was Justin Martyr who (according to his own account) in his lost *Syntagma* began the tradition of 'heresiologies' (see Just. *Apol.* 26:48)<sup>1</sup> – i. e., the recording of different forms of Christianity that were conceived of as corrupting with regard to a true faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The roots of the Christian

1 ἔστι δὲ ἡμῖν καὶ σύνταγμα κατὰ πασῶν τῶν γεγεννημένων αἵρέσεων συντεταγμένον ('we have also composed a work against all the existing heresies').

2 Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* (second century) and Epiphanius' *Panarion* (fourth century) are the two best-known early 'heresiologies' that are still extant. For recent scholarly accounts of early Christian heresy lists, see Smith 2015 and Berzon 2016.

concept of heresy can be traced to even earlier texts, however. In Paul's *First Corinthians*, the Greek noun αἵρεσις ('choosing') occurs for the first time in a clearly negative sense – namely, in the sense of parties prone to disputes (11:19).<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, in the epistles ascribed to the early Christian martyr Ignatius of Antioch, we find αἵρεσις being used as an antithesis to the conception of a well-ordered communion (εὐταξία) (Ign. *Eph.* 6.2). In these earliest Christian usages, αἵρεσις is still far from having acquired a definite sense of a corrupted form of Christian teachings and beliefs, however. On the contrary, the meaning of the concept lies here close to other Greek terms denoting a more general idea of strife – e.g., στάσις and σχίσμα – and does not really seem connected to the earlier, vis-à-vis later, dominant meanings of αἵρεσις: choosing or school of thought (in classical Greek) and false confession or heresy (in Christian contexts).<sup>4</sup>

How could it be, then, that the originally neutral concept of αἵρεσις – which in Hellenistic Greek, and still well into the Roman era, could be applied to any philosophical or doctrinal school, whether conceived of as good or bad<sup>5</sup> – developed into the highly charged, and specifically Christian, conception of a distortion of 'true belief in Christ'?<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, last century's scholarship on the beginnings of heresy has been shaped by the assumption of Walter Bauer as laid forth in his 1934 book: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* ('Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity'). Bauer's theory was that in several parts

3 δεῖ γὰρ καὶ αἰρέσεις ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι ('there must be divisions among you').

4 Cf. Paulsen 1982, 204–205. The concept of αἵρεσις as referring specifically to corrupted forms of Christian dogmas is prefigured in the *Second Epistle to Peter* 2:1. Here, the reference is to ψευδοδιδάσκαλοι ('false teachers') who introduce αἰρέσεις ἀπωλείας ('damnable teachings'). For a discussion of this passage, see Le Boulluec 1985, 23–24.

5 The neutral use of αἵρεσις is encountered in early Christian texts as well. See, e.g., Act. Ap. 5:17, where the 'party' (αἵρεσις) of the Sadducees is referred to in a neutral way. See also Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.10.

6 In his recent account of the origins of heresy, Robert Royalty has identified a nascent heresiological discourse already in some sectarian texts of Second Temple Judaism (e.g., in the *Halakhic Letter* stemming from the so-called Qumran Community, second century BCE–first century CE). See Royalty 2015, 50–52. The reason why Royalty's analysis allows for this postulation of a pre-Christian origin for the notion of heresy is that his outlines of heresiological rhetoric (involving the ideas that 'salvation depends on belief' and that 'disagreement is Satanic', as well as a 'doxography of opposing beliefs', an 'importance of received tradition' and an 'universalized web of oppositions') do not include ideas relating specifically to Christ. Cf. Royalty 2015, 26–27; 174–175. The present investigation, in contrast, assumes a notion of heresy that *does* presuppose ideas relating expressly to Christ: cf. Thomas Aquinas' definition of heresy as a 'species of unbelief, pertaining to those who profess faith in Christ, but corrupt his dogmas' (*Et ideo haeresis est infidelitatis species pertinens ad eos qui fidem Christi profitentur, sed eius dogmata corrumpunt*, *Sum. Theol.* 2.2.11.1).

of the early Christian world different forms of heresies – or proto-heresies – predated orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, Bauer proposed that the congregation in Edessa had originally been Marcionite, whereas the earliest predominant form of Christianity in Egypt had been a kind of Gnosticism.<sup>8</sup> As Bauer hypothesised, it was in fact first towards the end of the first century that the development towards a more unified Christian confession even began. This transpired, so Bauer presumed, when the Christian congregation at Rome began to ‘broaden its sphere of influence’ (‘Einflußsphäre zu erweitern’) – starting with the Roman congregation taking control of the inner affairs of the Christian congregation at Corinth.<sup>9</sup>

Among more traditionalistic historians of Christianity, Bauer’s theory, however, soon became a favourite target of criticism,<sup>10</sup> and eventually the exact contrary outlook – one suggesting that some form of geographically widespread Christian proto-orthodoxy (‘normative Christianity’) may be recognised as early as in the Apostolic age (first century) – was also proclaimed.<sup>11</sup> This earliest orthodox Christianity would include, then, the ideas that Christ lived in the flesh, that he was crucified and raised from the dead; and that he remains the sole redeemer of humanity and the inimitable watcher of God.<sup>12</sup> In truth, at least as far as the centuries immediately succeeding the very earliest Christian era goes (i.e., the second and third centuries), it now seems that this alternative approach – stressing early Christian unity rather than disunity – has begun to dominate the field (at least in an Anglo-American setting).<sup>13</sup> The question that remains, however, is how well the latter orientation stands against evidence.

7 See Bauer 1934, 2: ‘Vielleicht, ich betone vielleicht, sind gewisse Erscheinungen des christlichen Lebens, welche die Kirchenschriftsteller als Ketzereien abtun, ursprünglich gar keine solchen gewesen, sondern, wenigstens da und dort, die einzige Form der neuen Religion, d.h. für jene Gegenden das Christentum schlechthin. Auch die Möglichkeit bleibt bestehen, dass ihre Bekenner die Mehrheit bilden und mit Hass und Verachtung auf die Orthodoxen heruntersehen, die für sie die Irrgläubigen sind.’ A decade later, this idea of a widespread diversity with regard to early Christian forms of belief was collaborated by the discovery of previously unknown Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi.

8 Bauer 1934, 6–80.

9 Bauer 1934, 100–103.

10 Bauer’s theory was first thoroughly criticised for an alleged dearth of supporting evidence by Völker 1935 and Turner 1954, and finally for the full scope of its content by Flora 1972. Others, however, have been much more sympathetic. See, e.g., Koester 1965, 279.

11 Hultgren 1994, 1.

12 See Hultgren 1994, 2–3. Of course, proto-orthodoxy of this kind would still be far removed from a fully-fledged Trinitarian conception of Christ – since the former does not necessarily include the idea of Jesus as a pre-existent incarnated deity, merely as a resurrected and (then) exalted human. Cf. Dunn 1990, 230–231.

13 See King 2008, 69–70 and Eshleman 2011, 191.

Indeed, one would expect that an installation across the early Christian<sup>14</sup> congregations of a broad dogmatic unity would have had as its consequence an expressed tolerance for a range of diverging proclamations of faith. However, when surveying the extant Christian literature from the first and early second centuries, one finds nothing even remotely resembling this kind of clear-cut distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable varieties of worship and faith.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, among these texts, one stumbles on the exact opposite of any such delimitations; namely, on a blurring of all kinds of moral and doctrinal deviations into one disruptive force, conceived of as destructively opposed to true belief. This way of fashioning socio-religious harm is made evident when considering the evidence provided by the moral and religious admonitions contained in the sole preserved work ascribed to the early Christian martyr Polycarp of Smyrna: the *Letter to the Philippians*.<sup>16</sup>

The interpretation of the Polycarpian epistle conducted in this article begins with an overview of those doctrinal positions contained in the text that may be analysed in terms of a prefiguration of a scrutiny of heretical thought. After this, the more general types of socio-religious evils that could be recognised as prototypical conceptions of sin will be interpreted. The article closes with a reading of the notion of righteousness which the Polycarpian text sets forth as the effective opposing force to the variant – but essentially undifferentiated – socio-religiously disruptive tendencies ('proto-sin' and 'proto-heresy') dealt with in the letter. Finally, the discussion turns to the implications of the present research's findings with regard to the much-discussed question of the early history of heresy.<sup>17</sup>

14 In the present investigation, I do not go as far as to shun the terms 'Christian' and 'Christianity' altogether when referring to the 'Christ cults' of the first to third centuries – although this exact approach has been adopted by scholars eager to underline the absence of a unified Christian creed in this period. Cf. Royalty 2015, 14–17. I do, however, carefully avoid the definitely anachronistic term 'the Church' and instead refer to various Christian communions in the plural – except for when attention is directed to a specific congregation. The reason why I prefer to maintain the terms 'Christian' and 'Christianity' is that the term *χριστιανός* ('Christian') appears already in the later layers of the NT. See Act. Ap. 11:26.

15 Cf. Dunn 1990, 372–374 and Royalty 2015, 54–60.

16 For a recent overview and reassessment of the perennial question of the authenticity and unity of the letter ascribed to Polycarp, see Linderborg and Johansson 2021.

17 A number of more recent accounts of the early history of heresy have brought attention to how Christian proto-orthodoxy was established through a prior fusion of a substantial manifoldness of proclamations of faith and congregational varieties. See, e.g., King 2003, Brakke 2012 and Lieu 2015. (This is what Alain Le Boulluec referred to as 'la réduction idéologique de dissensions internes qui a pour fin d'imposer la maîtrise d'un modèle unique de cohésion', Le Boulluec 1985, 19). The present study aims at amending these

## 2 Idolatry and elements of proto-heresy in the Polycarpian letter

The occasion for the moral admonitions contained in the *Letter to the Philippians* were the misdeeds of a specific ‘sinner’ – those of a former ‘priest’ (*presbyter*)<sup>18</sup> in the Christian congregation at Philippi: Valens. However, that it was exactly the deplorable conduct of Valens that was the target of the exhortation is only revealed towards the end of the text (11), and even then we are not told more precisely what the infamous Philippian actually had done.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the conclusion is certainly warranted that Valens’ misconduct must have been something out of the ordinary – so strong is the disconsolation given expression to in the passage where the name of the former priest is first revealed:<sup>20</sup>

*Nimis contristatus sum pro Valente, qui presbyter factus est aliquando apud vos, quod sic ignoret is locum, qui datum est ei. moneo itaque, ut abstineatis vos ab avaritia et sitis casti veraces. abstinete vos ab omni malo. qui autem non potest se in his gubernare, quomodo alii pronuntiat hoc? si quis non se abstinuerit ab avaritia, ab idolatria coinquinabitur et tamquam inter gentes iudicabitur, qui ignorant iudicium domini.*

I am extremely sad for Valens, once a presbyter among you, that he should so misunderstand the office that was given him. Thus I urge you to abstain from love of money and to be pure and faithful. Abstain from every kind of evil. For if someone cannot control himself in such things, how can he preach self-control to another? Anyone who cannot avoid the love of money will be defiled by idolatry and will be judged as if among the outsiders who know nothing about the judgment of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

Although the above accusations are vague to say the least, we may derive from them that Valens – as he strived to satisfy his ‘love of money’ (*avaritia*) – had seriously misused his position as a preacher in the Philippian congregation.<sup>22</sup> This deplorable avarice is then put on a par with *idolatria* – i. e., with worship of false gods.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is even implied that incurable

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valuable investigations by focusing on how a state of intra-congregational disunity, which allegedly must have preceded any kind of (even locally manifested) Christian concord, contributed to the formation of the notions of orthodoxy and heresy.

18 We do not know what *presbyter* actually stands for here. At this point in time – at Philippi and elsewhere – the office may even have been overlapping with that of the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος). Cf. Hartog 2015.

19 See Pol. *Phil.* 11.

20 As chapters 10–12 and 14 of the Polycarpian letter have been preserved merely in Latin MSS, quotations from these passages cannot be given in the original Greek.

21 Pol. *Phil.* 11:1–2. For longer quotations from the *Letter to the Philippians*, I provide Bart D. Ehrman’s translations from the latest Loeb-edition of the Apostolic Fathers.

22 Lohmann speculated that Valens had stolen from a congregational fund: see Lohmann 1989, 191. According to Oakes, he may even have compromised his Christianity in order to escape financial hardship: see Oakes 2005, 369.

23 In a similar vein, Eph. 5:5. and Col. 3:5. equate greed (πλεονεξία) with idolatry.

love of money and idolatry should be punished in the same way: by exclusion from the religious community.

Of what kind, then, could the ‘idolatry’ deemed especially blameworthy in the Polycarpian text be? The answer is provided earlier in the text – in the form of an unusually fierce condemnation directed especially against an allegedly false and extremely corrupted form of Christian worship:

Πᾶς γὰρ ὃς ἂν μὴ ὁμολογῇ, Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθέναι, ἀντιχριστός ἐστιν· καὶ ὃς ἂν μὴ ὁμολογῇ τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ σταυροῦ, ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν· καὶ ὃς ἂν μεθοδεύῃ τὰ λόγια τοῦ κυρίου πρὸς τὰς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας καὶ λέγῃ μήτε ἀνάστασιν μήτε κρίσιν, οὗτος πρωτότοκος ἐστὶ τοῦ σατανᾶ.

For anyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist; and whoever does not confess the witness of the cross is from the devil; and whoever distorts the words of the Lord for his own passions, saying that there is neither resurrection nor judgment – this one is the firstborn of Satan.<sup>24</sup>

The form of Christian faith under attack here is ‘docetism’ – i. e., the doctrine according to which the true nature of Christ was divine pure and simple, and his human form a mere illusion.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, something akin to a recognition of heresy in the proper sense of the word may be divined in the above lines – so strong is the condemnation of the opposing proclamation of faith. However, the vehement words employed to counter the conceived-of danger inherent in the docetist point of view also clearly reveal the underlying absence of a uniform theology; when it came to matters of ‘Christological interest’ the Christians – at least at Philippi – were still far from being united under one creed.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, as there was no unified Christian belief, there could be no real recognition of orthodoxy and heresy either.<sup>27</sup>

The second part of Chapter 7 reinforces the impression of an accomplishing of doctrinal unity and of concomitant congregational cohesion as much-desired end-points – rather than as stations that have already been

24 Pol. Phil. 7:1. The first part of the passage seems to echo 1 John 4:2–3: πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐστίν, καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ μὴ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ οὐκ ἐστίν· καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου. (‘Each spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, whereas each spirit not acknowledging Jesus is not from God. The latter is the spirit of the antichrist.’) Cf. Hartog 2013, 127–128.

25 Cf. Ulrich 2010, 246–249. Irenaeus’ claim (which was also propounded by P.N. Harrison 1936, 268) was that Polycarp had directed the words ‘firstborn of Satan’ (πρωτότοκος τοῦ σατανᾶ) specifically against Marcion. See *Haer.* 3.3.4. However, it might just as well have been an epithet used against various opponents of ‘true faith’ who disbelieved in Christ’s human form – i. e., against docetists in general, as it de facto is in this *locus*. Cf. Hartog 2013, 75.

26 Cf. Gillhus 2015, 156.

27 Cf. Bauer 1934, 63.

reached, and which merely need to be retained. Here, the text urges the Philippian Christians to leave the 'false teaching' (ψευδοδιδασκαλία) of the docetists behind, by turning to the 'word that was given to us from the beginning' (ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἡμῖν παραδοθέντα λόγον). Hereby, one should stay 'sober in prayer' (νήφοντες πρὸς τὰς εὐχάς) and 'persistent in fasting' (προσκαρτεροῦντες νηστείας) – since only thus may divisive 'temptation' (πειρασμός) be avoided.<sup>28</sup>

However, with regard to the prospect of attaining congregational harmony in a wider – social as well as doctrinal – sense, we find that the *Letter to the Philippians* singles out a whole plethora of conducts and dispositions as especially counterproductive. As will be seen in what follows, the avoidance of each of these harmful habits is presented as a necessary precondition for the redemption of the individual believer, as well as for the docility and orderliness of the congregation at large.

### 3 Πάντων χαλεπῶν ἀρχή: The conception of socio-religious evil as proto-sin

We first encounter an enumeration of the mind-sets and behaviours true believers ought to avoid to effectively prove their faith in Christ at 2.2 in the Polycarpian text:

ὁ δὲ ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐγερεῖ, ἐὰν ποιῶμεν αὐτοῦ τὸ θέλημα καὶ πορευώμεθα ἐν ταῖς ἐντολαῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν, ἃ ἡγάπησεν, ἀπεχόμενοι πάσης ἀδικίας, πλεονεξίας, φιλαργυρίας, καταλαλιᾶς, ψευδομαρτυρίας.

But the one who raised him from the dead will raise us as well, if we do his will, walking in his commandments and loving the things he loved, abstaining from every kind of injustice, greed, love of money, slander, and false witness.<sup>29</sup>

In the following chapters, these and other inadmissible dispositions are further expounded on – beginning from 4, where the disruptive habits (πλεονεξία, φιλαργυρία etc.) are first also brought to bear on the question of unity.

Chapter 4 of the *Letter to the Philippians* begins with the assertion that love of money (φιλαργυρία) may in fact be counted as the root of all evil

<sup>28</sup> Phil. 7:2. Cf. 1 Pet. 4:7.

<sup>29</sup> Pol. *Phil.* 2:2. The five nouns in the genitive singular ending this list do indeed bring forth a pleasant rhythm and rhyme in the Greek text, as has been pointed out by Berding 2002, 165. Peter Steinmetz was of the opinion that the vices (*Haustafeln*) mentioned by Polycarp must all have had a bearing on the specific situation at Philippi that Polycarp was addressing. See Steinmetz 1972, 69. This could well be the case, since other comparable lists included in the NT are lengthier. See, e.g., Rom. 1:28–32 and Gal. 5:19–20.

(Ἀρχὴ δὲ πάντων χαλεπῶν).<sup>30</sup> In this connection, the (male) members of the congregation are reminded of their inability to bring any of their material belongings with them when they die. Moreover, only when freed from excessive greed, it is said, will the Christians be able to teach the women of their community to live in ‘faith, love and purity’ (πίστει καὶ ἀγάπῃ καὶ ἀγνείᾳ) and for the women, in their turn, to teach the children ‘the culture of the fear of God’ (τὴν παιδείαν τοῦ φόβου τοῦ θεοῦ).<sup>31</sup> The chapter ends with a few more admonitions specifically concerning widows: every widow is an ‘altar of God’ (θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ), and hence it is particularly important that the widowed women would be taught to restrain themselves with regard to ‘all evil’ (παντὸς κακοῦ) – e. g., defamation (διαβολή), slander (καταλαλία) false witness (ψευδομαρτυρία), as well as love of money.<sup>32</sup>

Chapters 5 and 6 continue the story of the different evils varying members of the congregation ought to guard themselves against. Targeted here are especially deacons (διάκονοι) (5:1–2), young men (νεώτεροι) (5:3) and priests (6:1). For their part, both deacons and priests are instructed to fend off their money-loving tendencies in particular, but the deacons are also warned especially against slander and insincerity (διλογία) and the preachers against anger (ὀργή) and different forms of prejudice (προσωποληψία). With regard to the admonitions directed specifically towards the young men, the modern liberal-minded reader may be struck by the letter’s out-and-out condemnation of all forms of ‘sexual aberrations’ (τὰ ἄτοπα).<sup>33</sup>

Chapter 6 ends with a cautioning addressed to the Philippian congregation at large (6:2–3). Given the extremely prohibiting tone of the preceding chapters, the theme of forgiveness coming to the fore here may seem somewhat ambiguous: εἰ οὖν δεόμεθα τοῦ κυρίου, ἵνα ἡμῖν ἀφῇ, ὀφείλομεν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφιέναι· (‘if we ask the Lord to forgive us, we ourselves also ought to forgive’).<sup>34</sup> However, the radical shift in expression at this juncture may be explained by the longed-for uniting of the Christian congregations: the ones

<sup>30</sup> Pol. Phil. 4:1. There is likely to be a dependence here on 1 Tim. 6:10. See Hartog 2015, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Pol. Phil. 4:2. Cf. 1 Clem. 21.6–8.

<sup>32</sup> See Pol. Phil. 4:3. Cf. 1 Tim. 5:3.5. Ignatius, too, underlined that the leaders of the Christian communities had a specific duty to guard widows. See *Smyrn.* 13.1 and *Pol.* 4.1. Steinmetz, on the other hand, thought that Polycarp’s targeting of widows was a pointer to the fact that this specific social group had played some role in the scandal caused by Valens at Philippi. See Steinmetz 1972, 72. However, the parallels in NT and in Ignatius support the conclusion that Polycarp was here simply employing a *topos* that was highly common at the time of writing in this social milieu. In a chauvinistic society, widows as independent women were naturally represented as posing a particularly serious threat to the community order.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9.

<sup>34</sup> Pol. Phil. 6:2.

whose deeds and ideas work against harmonisation must of course be condemned – but once the scoundrels have been freed of their evil ways, they should by all means be reunited with the community.<sup>35</sup>

In truth, this eagerness to condone forms a sharp contrast to the kind of intimidations allegedly practiced by some Christian congregations a century or so later. In Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiae*, e.g., we read of the Roman Natalius who had changed his αἵρεσις (here used in the original neutral way) on account of wanting to become bishop of a diverging congregation – but who then, after having received threatening dreams and been scourged by holy angels (ὕπὸ ἁγίων ἀγγέλων ἐμαστιγώθη), decided to return to his old religious community.

According to Eusebius' account, it was Christ himself that had sent these terrifying visions and punishing angels. Supposedly, the reason Christ had ordered this was his concern that 'a witness of his suffering' (μάρτυρα τῶν ἰδίων παθῶν) would perish as a result of having been cast out of his congregation (ἔξω ἐκκλησίας γενόμενον ἀπολέσθαι). In the end, Natalius is reported to have become so frightened that he approached his old congregation dressed in a sack and covered in ashes (ἐνδυσάμενον σάκκον καὶ σποδὸν καταπασάμενον). However, even though he had thus gone to the uttermost extremes to persuade his old fellows to allow him to return, he was nevertheless only scarcely granted a re-entry into his old congregation (μόλις κοινωνηθῆναι).<sup>36</sup>

Eusebius' story of Natalius allows for a glimpse of how in the early Christian world, inter-communal disunity first began to turn into a more clear-cut notion of heresy – as well as of the kind of consequences the formation of this notion could have for individual believers. However, an *inter*-communal development of this kind presupposes the prior formation of some kind of *intra*-communal confessional uniformity. In all likelihood, then – if indeed the above-related Eusebian story is at all to be trusted – the locally manifested confessional unity, which was wanting in relation to the congregation of the Philippians, had in fact been obtained at Natalius' Roman congregation.

Polycarp's letter, in contrast, seems to be addressed to a congregation in which there had as of yet been no doctrinal settlement of any kind – or any form of dogmatic delimitation tantamount to the crystallisation of a dominant 'choosing'. What is strived for here is rather – *ante omnia* and

35 Cf. Pol. Phil. 11:4: *et non sicut inimicos tales existemetis, sed sicut passibilia membra et errantia eos revocate, ut omnium vestrum corpus salvetis* ('Rather than judge such people as enemies, call them back as frail and wayward members, so as to heal your entire body').

36 See Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.8–12.

*toto cælo* – the unification of a severely divided communion of faith. Consequently, all doctrines and dispositions thought to stand in the way of reaching such a unified creed, and concomitant harmonious co-living, are deemed in equal terms as κακά or χαλεπά – i. e., as grave evils, whether they would be of a kind that later Christian thought would cast as ἀμαρτίαι (sins), or as αἱρέσεις (heresies).<sup>37</sup>

Now, it may be noted, too, that the early Christian conception of sin that the above interpretation has identified – i. e., sin understood as dispositions directly hurting the religious community – is different from the notions of sin developed in preceding and contemporary Jewish thought. Indeed, in the Hebrew Scriptures, offences against a godly established order are frequently conceptualised as a stain or burden, alternatively as a debt to be paid at some later point.<sup>38</sup> What is more, morally defiling actions – particularly those consisting of sexual violations, bloodshed or idolatry – are here conceived of as accumulating.<sup>39</sup> They thus form a serious future threat to the community at large, since as a result of them the land as a whole is understood to become more and more defiled – a plight which might end in exile.<sup>40</sup> The κακά that the writer of the *Letter to the Philippians* reacts against, on the other hand, are of a type where the punishment is imminent; the consequences of an untruthful relation to Christ and/or lack of self-restraint are suffered directly

37 The Greek verb which is often translated into Latin as *pecco* ('I sin'), ἀμαρτάνω, has the original meaning of 'I miss a mark' or 'I go wrong'. It is in this general sense of 'doing wrong' that we find *pecco* used towards the end of Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*: *irascimini et nolite peccare, et sol non occidat super iracundiam vestram* ('Be angry and do not do wrong, and do not let the sun go down on your anger') (12:1). In the same general vein, we encounter the genitive of the noun form of ἀμαρτάνω, ἀμαρτία ('sin/wrongdoing'), being used at *Phil.* 3:3: ὁ γὰρ ἔχων ἀγάπην μακρὰν ἐστὶν πάσης ἀμαρτίας ('for the one who has love is far removed from all wrongdoing'). Cf. *Phil.* 8:1. In later Christian definitions, in contrast, we find the concept of sin already clearly distinguished from that of heresy. Thus Augustine, in his *Contra Faustum Manicheum*, defines sin (*peccatum*) as a deed, an utterance or a desire (*factum vel dictum vel concupitum*) that contradicts the eternal law (*lex aeterna*) of God, which in turn has been defined by divine will or reason (*ratio divina vel voluntas Dei*). Indeed, Augustine's definition implies that even when striving to break the law of God, the sinner may be seen to acknowledge the standards set by divine law. The Augustinean account in *Contra Faustum* identifies, however, also other types of more malignant wrongdoings. These kinds of misdeeds occur when one aims untruthfully to rewrite the law of God – i. e., in accordance not with the authority of God (*auctorem Deum*), but by means of one's own 'loathsome superstitions' (*nefariis suis religionibus*); i. e., when one is a heretic. See Aug. *Contr. Fau.* 22.27.

38 For a diachronic account of the conceptions of sin as a burden and/or debt inherent in the Hebrew Bible, see Anderson 2009, 15–39.

39 See Lev. 18:24–30, Lev. 19:31, 20:1–3 and Num. 35:33–34.

40 See Klawans 2000, 26–41. Cf. Sanders 2016, 146, for an account of the same ideas as recurring in Jewish *pseudepigrapha*.

by the individual as well as by the community – because such dispositions counteract true communion in Christ.<sup>41</sup>

As the counterparts to the later Christian notions of heresy and sin encountered in the Polycarpian letter have thus been dealt with, there now follows an account of the role played in the overall argument by the major unifying force assumed in the text: righteousness (δικαιοσύνη).<sup>42</sup>

#### 4 Δικαιοσύνη as the effective counteraction against ‘all evil’

Righteousness is first introduced into the discussion in Chapter 3, and here the necessary conditions for its fulfilment are also stated:

ἥτις [πίστις] ἐστὶν μήτηρ πάντων ἡμῶν, ἐπακολουθούσης τῆς ἐλπίδος, προαγούσης τῆς ἀγάπης εἰς θεὸν καὶ Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὸν πλησίον. ἔαν γάρ τις τούτων ἐντὸς ἧ, πεπλήρωκεν ἐντολὴν δικαιοσύνης·

This faith is the mother of us all, with hope following after, and the love of God, Christ, and the ones close to us. When anyone conducts himself according to these, he fulfils the precept of righteousness.<sup>43</sup>

The concept of δικαιοσύνη is then elaborated upon in the passages 4:1, 5:2, 8:1, 9:1 and 9:2 – all of which give emphasis to the dependence of the fulfilment of righteousness on a faithful, loving and truthful relation to Christ, as well as on a willingness to conduct oneself according to the standards set by the Lord. Thus in 4:1, the plea against φιλαργυρία and earthly possessions is amended with a call to arm oneself with ‘the weapons of righteousness’ (τοῖς ὅπλοις τῆς δικαιοσύνης) needed in order to properly proceed in the precepts of the Lord (ἐν τῇ ἐντολῇ τοῦ κυριοῦ). 5:2, again, urges the deacons to remain blameless in front of the righteousness of Christ (κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ τῆς δικαιοσύνης). In 8:1, on the other hand, Christ is presented as the actual award awaiting the one who remains righteous (ἄρραβὼν τῆς δικαιοσύνης). This promise is further developed in 9, where previous examples of saints having acted in accordance with the demands of faith and righteousness are presented. Here, it is concluded that these saints – i.e., Ignatius,

41 The ardent nature of the internal strife in the case of the Philippians may be partly illuminated also by such modern sociological studies of religious communities, which show that religious discord is most saliently felt in families where parent and child have a common religious affiliation. See Stokes and Regnerus 2009, 166.

42 Cf. Jefford 2005, 77: ‘Much like the teachings of Ignatius before him, Polycarp envisions righteousness as the most complete expression of Christian unity that exists throughout the Church.’ It should be duly noted, however, that this vision is not a view of a prevailing reality.

43 Pol. *Phil.* 3:3.

Zosimus, Rufus, and Paul – now deservedly take their place next to Christ (εἰς τὸν ὀφειλόμενον αὐτοῖς τόπον εἰσὶ παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ).<sup>44</sup>

It emerges, then, that the role played by the concept of righteousness in the *Letter to the Philippians* is that of a positive correlate to the more specific admonitions directed against the dispositions – doctrinal or behavioural – deemed especially disruptive with regard to the prospect of achieving Christian unity.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the letter assumes that righteousness plays a part whenever one manages to curb one's disruptive predispositions – since it is exactly δικαιοσύνη that provides the armoury with which these hurtful habits can be fought. Furthermore, the letter's recurring underlining of the need to adjust one's mind in accordance with the precedent established by Christ – at the same time as the correct faith in his true shape is continuously emphasised – suggests that there actually is no qualitative distinction made in the Polycarpian text between purely doctrinal and more general social, moral and religious concerns.

Consequently, it is not correct either to interpret the Polycarpian text as if it would present its main antagonist Valens in the shape of an ordinary sinner – i. e., as freed from the more serious charges of heresy.<sup>46</sup> This would be a viable reading only if we were to project later Christian conceptual distinctions on the representation of sin and heresy as they appear in the text.<sup>47</sup> However, in the *Letter to the Philippians*, these categories are not really distinguished from each other. As already noted, the text even explicitly states that the one who fails in controlling his deplorable urges should be judged according to the same measure as the one harbouring false religious beliefs.<sup>48</sup>

## 5 Conclusion: The origins of sin and heresy in pre-normative Christianity

According to the famous and much-disputed hypothesis of Walter Bauer, heresies were originally not illegitimate aberrations from an at the outset undivided orthodox mainstream – as the earliest orthodox Christian writers, e. g., Hegesippus, Irenaeus and Eusebius, would have us believe. Instead,

<sup>44</sup> Pol. *Phil.* 9:2.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Holmes 2007, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Pace Steinmetz 1972, 67 and Royalty 2015, 137.

<sup>47</sup> See n. 37 above.

<sup>48</sup> See Pol. *Phil.* 11:2: *si quis non se abstinerit ab avaritia, ab idolatria coinquinabitur et tamquam inter gentes iudicabitur, qui ignorant iudicium domini* ('Anyone who cannot avoid the love of money will be defiled by idolatry and will be judged as if among the outsiders who know nothing about the judgment of the Lord').

they were descendants of earlier forms of Christianity (principally from varying schools of Gnosticism), radically different from that from which an orthodox Christian order finally emerged.<sup>49</sup> The contrary scholarly outlook holds that the earliest form of Christian orthodoxy – which Bauer thought had originally been present exclusively at the Christian congregation in Rome<sup>50</sup> – would have had its predecessor in a much more widespread socio-religious determination (based in commonly approved ‘Christological’ notions, such as that Christ lived in the flesh and died on the cross) for which the term ‘normative Christianity’ has been applied.<sup>51</sup>

This paper, on the other hand, has proposed a view according to which the notion of heresy had its origins in a state of intra-congregational disunity – which could be termed ‘pre-normative’ Christianity (a condition characterised by severe internal division, e.g., exactly with regard to questions such as if Christ lived and died in the flesh or not). In truth, a state of this kind would entail a much more serious division than what is usually admitted with regard to the early history of Christianity – even by those scholars who, following Bauer, maintain that diversity was the norm for Christian worship and faith well into the second century. According to the theoretical model proposed here, the notion of heresy actually developed in a social context, in which any kind of confessional unity was yet to be obtained – even locally. Under these social conditions, then, both sin and heresy were naturally put on a par with each other. Indeed, they were conceived of as qualitatively undifferentiated variants of highly disruptive social evils – which required a firm footing in (true) Christ-inspired righteousness in order to be effectively resisted.<sup>52</sup>

49 Cf. Bauer 1934, 1–5.

50 See Bauer 1934, 99–114.

51 See Hultgren 1994, 3–5. Correspondingly, this school of thought would oppose the Bauer thesis with the original proto-orthodox notion conceiving of heresy as essentially a ‘post-apostolic’ corruption.

52 In what way, then, are we to imagine a religious community in which the boundaries for acceptable and non-acceptable forms of worship and faith are yet to be determined? Unfortunately, none of the preserved early Christian texts offers us anything akin to an objective view of how the debates relating to the ‘right Christian choosing’ were actually conducted; obviously, due to these texts all being written from the point of view of a specific confession. From the information our earliest sources allow us to gather we may deduce, however, that one specific dispute aroused the strongest of feelings: the question of the nature of Christ in his earthly existence. What was most vehemently contested, then, was if Christ as man had come in the flesh or not: see esp. 1 John 4:1–3, 2 John 7–11 and Ign. *Smyrn.* 1–7. According to the theoretical model proposed in this paper, this dispute then became a kind of focal point for the establishment of varying representations of Christian orthopraxis and its opposites. However, in these earliest *représentations hérésiologiques* (to borrow a term from Le Boulleuc), the socio-religious dangers inherent in the opposing

At least in the context of the moral, social and religious thought attested in one of the earliest preserved Christian texts – the *Letter to the Philippians*<sup>53</sup> – it thus does seem justified to posit an original interdependence between the notions that would later develop into the distinct (Christian) categories of sin and heresy. In truth, it is easily imaginable as well that narrow doctrinal and wider social and moral concerns continued to be considered more or less equivalent throughout the Christian world – and that they were dealt with under the same banner of congregational consolidation – until some form of Christian unity was finally reached. Indeed, one may surmise that it is first after the establishment of a more widespread Christian orthodoxy – as well as of a unified Christian social order – that varying forms of social and religious evils began to be distinguished qualitatively; as either disruptive in a more conformist fashion (sin), or potentially dangerous with regard to the religious-social order as such (heresy).

Incidentally, the theoretical model for understanding the origins of the Christian notion of heresy proposed in this paper does not lie very far from the views originally defended by Walter Bauer. Indeed, in addition to arguing for orthodoxy having been universally preceded by heresy, Bauer also underlined that the earliest forms of Christian worship must have been of such a kind as to be unable to recognise both orthodoxy and heresy properly speaking:

Ich vermeide nur deshalb einen Augenblick den Ausdruck ‚Ketzer‘ [...] weil es Ketzer eigentlich nur da geben kann, wo sich rechtgläubige Christen von ihnen abheben oder ihnen zum Hintergrunde dienen, nicht jedoch da, wo es solche überhaupt noch nicht gibt, weil alles Christentum, von einem bestimmten späteren Standpunkt aus betrachtet, ‚häretisch‘ gefärbt ist.<sup>54</sup>

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confessional ideas were felt to be more or less equal in kind to more general wrongdoings. This was due to none of the competing ideas of Christian orthopraxis having yet managed to establish itself as an actual orthodoxy, and consequently all oppositions were represented equally as order-defilers.

- 53 The question of the dating of the *Letter to the Philippians* is complicated by the fact that it is impossible to know with certainty of the authenticity of the letter. However, even if the latest date suggested in scholarly literature (161–169 CE) were to be correct, the text would still mark a very early source for Christian thought. For the dating of the letter during the joint reign of Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius, see Hilgenfeld 1853, 273–274.

- 54 Bauer 1934, 64.

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**Otto H. Linderborg**

Mittuniversitetet Sundsvall/Östersund

orcid.org/0000-0003-0222-2240

