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Voting about God in Early Church Councils

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Ramsay MacMullen

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Ramsay MacMullen. *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Gaye Strathearn

In his latest monograph, Ramsay MacMullen, emeritus professor of history at Yale University, takes a wonderfully fresh look at the early Christian councils. At the beginning of his study, MacMullen recognizes the primacy of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), whose definition of the Supreme Being forms the basis of the majority Christian view on the nature of God. The Nicene Creed was “made formal and given weight by majority vote and supported after much struggle by later assemblies, notably at Chalcedon (AD 451)—likewise by majority vote. Such was the determining process. Thus agreement was arrived at, and became dogma widely accepted down to our own day” (vii). Although MacMullen recognizes that this process has been “studied to death,” in this work his approach is to “focus on those persons who made up the great mass of any council”; “it is the whole contributing mass that I like to understand—how people, lots of people, really behaved. . . . In the making of any event such as emerged from Nicaea or Chalcedon, figures great and small, high and low, had all to contribute. . . . It is for readers of history then to decide who counted the most, or perhaps whom they find most interesting” (viii).

Before analyzing the councils, the author includes five introductory chapters. The Introduction proper encourages readers to imagine that they are visiting from Mars and come to the subject at hand from an objective distance, “taking nothing for granted” (1). MacMullen provides a useful table identifying the councils that were convened during the three centuries between AD 253 and 553. The table includes dates and locations and attempts, where possible, to indicate in parentheses the number of bishops in attendance (2–4). The bishops who attended came from a variety of social, educational, and economic backgrounds. Some, like Ambrose,

could count imperial senators among their acquaintances. Others (a small percentage) could not even sign their names. Some were extravagant in their displays of wealth and power. Some were well schooled in rhetoric or philosophy and used their training in their formal speeches. However, the records also reveal that there was also “a great deal of common speech” on display (8–11).

Chapters 2 through 5 address four “shaping elements” that influenced the way the councils came to their conclusions: the democratic element, the cognitive element, the “supernaturalist” element, and the violent element. The democratic element describes how the Church councils functioned in a manner similar to “the secular decision-making groups or assemblies,” such as the Roman Senate and town councils. The interplay between the local aristocracy, the clergy, and the populace was critical in the outcome of the Church councils. The aristocracy possessed political clout, “but their power was never absolute” (21). The clergy enjoyed an important aura of religious awe, but their position was dependent upon the confirmation of the crowd. The populace had numbers and made use of the practice of chanting, the frenzied practice of which would sometimes turn to violence, to ensure that their position was also considered in the debates.

The cognitive element centered on theological debates. Different Christians interpreted scriptural passages in different ways. The development of the concept of heresy in the second century meant that there were increasing debates over orthodoxy (“correct beliefs”). Sometimes the issues were so subtle that only a select few of the clergy were able to grasp the nuances of the debates, thus creating a gulf “separating the elite (as they may be called) from ordinary Christians” (34). Nevertheless, the ordinary Christians became a part of the debate through two means: the use of song and the use of sloganeering names and phrases. The songs were “aimed at changing minds [and] also at confirming and inspiring the converted; or they were used, perhaps invented on the spot, in contests over doctrinal wording, ‘praise the Father *in* the Son,’ and so forth” (38). MacMullen quotes Brent Shaw to show that slogans were developed, “reducing beliefs . . . to ‘aberrations’ of one individual. . . . The intent is . . . ‘margin-alizing’; but it is also didactic. It encapsulates a cluster of ideas in a single word, . . . thus providing a neat convenient handle by which occasionally to recall with veneration, or more often to offer for attack, or to throw away in disgust, whatever the named individual had defended” (39).

The “supernaturalist” element explores the impact of the divine on the council voting. “Wherever there is debate, there must be force in majority. . . . Democracy teaches the equation, many = good; therefore, more = better. Yet a truer understanding of the Christian community suggests

instead, or also, the equation, many = God. In voting, a power beyond the human might assert itself" (41–42). But if there was the possibility of divine favor, there was also an awareness of the opposite, the influence of the devil. It was divine favor that brought about a majority of votes. To acknowledge or supplicate the *pneuma* (Spirit), a copy of the Bible became a prominent fixture in the councils. "Theological argument that went off the tracks invited God's rebuke" (47). Thus Arius's ignominious death was viewed as God's retribution for his heretical teachings. In contrast, a person who performed miracles was viewed as someone who enjoyed divine favor. Thus, in an anti-intellectual wave that swept through the Church, monks, whom bishops had sometimes viewed as being "insubordinate or worse: thugs and fanatics" (53), began to wield considerable power, and by the Constantinopolitan council (AD 532), they were "sitting together with bishops in large numbers; [and] more generally, from the sixth century on, in the East, bishops were recruited only from monasteries" (54).

In the fifth chapter, MacMullen explores the violent element: "Our sources for the two and a quarter centuries following Nicaea allow a very rough count of the victims of creedal differences: not less than twenty-five thousand deaths. A great many, but still only a small minority, were clergy; the rest, participants in crowds" (56). The majority of these deaths were the "targets of fury"; only a handful were bishops who died "in the custody of secular powers" (56). A major spark for the violence was episcopal elections, where creedal preferences "could be at least a contributing factor, sometimes really the only one, in street fights, stabbings in the church, brawls in the public squares, and general ruff stuff" (59). If the general populace objected to an appointment, armed forces were often brought in. But violence also was stirred up from the pulpit. Sermons were often designed to agitate the populace against someone who taught "heresy." "Chrysostom recommends, no doubt to applause, that his listeners should not hesitate to give a good punch in the face to misbelievers" (63). It was with the violent element, or the fear thereof, that the power of the emperor was most evident in the doctrinal debates.

In the final two chapters, MacMullen integrates all of these elements to examine the events leading up to, and encompassing, the Council of Chalcedon. His analysis describes the maneuvering to bring together two seemingly divergent goals: ecumenicity and ensuring that the "right" people were in the majority. After all, to ensure that the decision of the council was lasting, it must be recognized to represent the whole Church, but issues like the choosing of the site for the council, the wording and distribution of the invitations, the seating arrangements at the council, and

the voting blocks were all orchestrated to make sure that the vote was, to a large extent, predetermined.

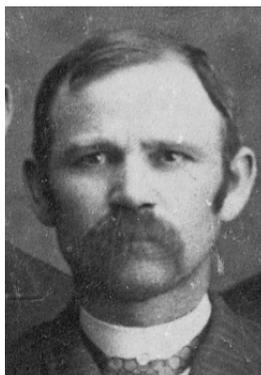
This book is a must read for anyone interested in the early Church councils. The author has an excellent grasp of the primary sources. His use of firsthand accounts to illustrate his arguments adds life to his analysis. Likewise, he is conversant with the scholarly debate surrounding the councils. He relegates, however, most of this aspect to the endnotes. Thus, both scholar and lay reader will find this volume a treasure trove to be savored and enjoyed.

Gaye Strathearn (who can be reached via email at byu_studies@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. Strathearn received her MA in Near Eastern Studies at BYU and her PhD in religion from Claremont Graduate University. Her publications include "The Gnostic Context of the Gospel of Judas," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 27-34.

Erratum



Amelia Fillerup
(Hutchings)



Mayhew H. Dalley

In *BYU Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008), page 116, we mistakenly identified Amelia Fillerup (Hutchings) as Mayhew H. Dalley. In the images above, Hutchings and Dalley are identified correctly.