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RIGORISM AND MORAL LAXITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN  
HERETICAL MOVEMENTS BASED ON *DIVERSARUM HERESEON*  
LIBER OF PHILASTRIUS OF BRESCIA

**A b s t r a c t.** The objective of the article is to illustrate the two extremes represented by the broad assortment of movements: the ascetic rigorism and moral laxity. The primary source of text is the first Latin catalogue of heresies, written between 380 and 388 by the Bishop of Brescia, Philastrius. The source selection was dictated on twofold grounds. The treaty contains the most numerous descriptions of heretical groups, yet at the same time is the least known of its kind. The information enclosed in Philastrius' work, summarized in a comparative manner with the descriptions found in other patristic catalogues of heresy – by Epiphanius, Theodoret of Cyrus, John Damascene, Augustine and Isidore of Seville – lead to the following conclusions:

1) for the most part heretical movements followed the ascetic radicalism, motivated most habitually by an exaggerated literal exegesis of the biblical texts (eg. Gnostics, Encratites, Discalced); 2) the few of the laxative-approach movements operated on moral promiscuity (eg. Simonians, Carpocratians, Symmachians), the extent of which is difficult to assess due to the raised issues with the objectivity of Philastrius' work – undermined by the use of invectives and the apologetic attitude of the author employed in order to defend the orthodox doctrine and morals; 3) paradoxically, there existed also groups that combined inconsistently promiscuity with the elements of asceticism (eg. Borborites, Adamites).

**Key words:** early Christian heresies, rigorism, moral laxity, Philastrius of Brescia.

In the Church of the Patristic era, heresy was understood primarily as a deviation from “the rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) in matters relevant to Christian doctrine. According to St. Augustine, representing a mature stage in the development of theology of the Fathers of the Church, heresy is a new view, containing a bad image of God, insulting faith and destroying unity in the

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Church.<sup>1</sup> Apart from erroneous doctrinal views, and independently of them, attitudes contradictory to Christian morality, deviating from everyday life practices characteristic of a typical Christ's follower, were born. The patristic catalogues of heresy, both Greek<sup>2</sup> and Latin<sup>3</sup>, mention many movements that are contrary to the moral norms and ascetic practices adopted in the Church. This is also the case of the first Latin catalogue of heresy written between 380 and 388 by the Bishop of Brescia, Philastrius.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, this work became the model for a later catalogue of heresy of the Bishop of Hippo.<sup>5</sup>

The treatise *Panarion* written by Epiphanius of Salamis<sup>6</sup> a few years earlier is considered to be the most comprehensive and detailed presentation of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De fide et symbolo* 10, 21; IDEM, *De haeresibus*, Epilogus 3. See J. De GUIBERT, *La notion d'hérésie chez s. Augustin*, "Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique" 31(1920), pp. 369-382; V. GROSSI, *Eresia – Eretico*, [in:] *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, vol. I, ed. A. Di Berardino, Genova: Casa Editrice Marietti – Casale Monferrato 1983, card 1187-1191; A. Le BOULLUEC, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque (IIe et IIIe siècles)*, vol. I-II, Paris: Études Augustiniennes 1985, passim; M. STACHURA, *Heretycy, schizmatycy i manichejczycy wobec cesarstwa rzymskiego (lata 324-428, wschodnia część Imperium)*, Cracow: "Historia Jagiellonica" Press Association, 2000, pp. 15-20; M. FIEDROWICZ, *Teologia Ojców Kościoła. Podstawy wczesnochrześcijańskiej refleksji nad wiarą*, transl. W. Szymona, Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2009, pp. 387-391; N. WIDOK, *Ortodoksja, herezja, schizma – wyjaśnienie pojęć*, [in:] *Ortodoksja, herezja, schizma w Kościele starożytnym*, ed. F. Drączkowski, J. Pałucki, P. Szczur, M. Szram, M. Wysocki, M. Ziółkowska, Lublin: Polihymnia Publishing House, 2012, pp. 28-32.

<sup>2</sup> Por. EPIPHANIUS, *Panarion*, ed. K. Holl, Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller [hereafter: GCS] 25, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung 1915; GCS 31, Leipzig 1922; GCS 37, Leipzig 1933; THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haeticarum fabularum compendium*, ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Graeca [hereafter: PG] 83, Paris 1864, card 335-556; IOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Liber de haeresibus*, ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. V, Berlin: De Gruyter 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, ed. R. Vander Plaetse, C. Beukers, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [hereafter: CCL] 46, Turnhout: Brepols 1969, pp. 266-345; ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *De haeresibus liber*, ed. A.C. Vega, Patrologia Latina Supplementum 4, Paris: Garnier Frères 1970, card 1815-1820.

<sup>4</sup> FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, ed. F. Heylen, G. Banterle, *Scriptores circa Ambrosium 2*, Milano–Roma: Biblioteca Ambrosiana – Città Nuova Editrice 1991. Due to this issue, I keep the spelling of the term *heresis* instead of *haeresis*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. BARDY, *Le "De haeresibus" et ses sources*, [in:] *Miscellanea agostiniana: testi e studi*, vol. II, Roma: Tipografia poliglotta vaticana 1931, pp. 397-416; G. BANTERLE, *Introduzione*, [in:] FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, p. 11; J. MCCLURE, *Handbooks against Heresy in the West, from the Late Fourth to the Late Sixth Centuries*, "The Journal of Theological Studies. New Series" 30(1979), pp. 186-197.

<sup>6</sup> Epiphanius wrote his most famous work most probably in the years 373-378. Cf. M. GILSKI, *Epifaniusz z Salamin i jego "Panarion"*, [in:] EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, *Panarion. Heresies 1-33*. Greek and Polish version, translation and introduction by M. Gilski, editing and commentary by A. Baron, Cracow: Pontifical University of John Paul II Press, 2015, p. 13.

20 pre-Christian heresies and 60 early Christian heresies at that time.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, *Diversarum hereseon liber* by Philastrius of Brescia contains a much more laconic description of a much larger number of heterodox movements: 28 sects of Judaism and 128 sects of early Christianity. This is not the result of the fact that Philastrius had greater knowledge or erudition than Epiphanius, which Augustine doubted, who had bad opinion of Philastrius's educational background,<sup>8</sup> but rather the effect of a broad understanding of the concept of heresy as any *error*, meaning a departure from the truth proclaimed by God since the creation of the world, as well as the wrong way to behave, different from the one adopted in the Church. While Augustine made a clear objection in his catalogue that not every mistake is heresy, although every heresy is a mistake,<sup>9</sup> Philastrius did not specify the limits of the errors described. He only stressed their diversity, also on the moral-ascetic level.<sup>10</sup> Because he presented many erroneous life attitudes, described as heretical, and also because his catalogue of heresy is not yet sufficiently well known, as there is no Polish-language version (as far as modern languages are concerned, there is only Italian-language version available), I chose this treatise for analysis. I will confront Philastrius's opinions with the descriptions contained in other early Christian catalogues of heresy, supplementing them in particular with information about heresies that he did not mention.

Although Philastrius and other authors of early Christian catalogues of heresy do not explicitly refer to this, the essential criterion for recognizing life attitudes and the model of asceticism as orthodox was the principle of "moderation" or the "golden mean" (*mesotes*), originally derived from Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical tradition, rather than evangelical radicalism. It consisted in maintaining moderation and avoiding extremes manifested in exaggerated asceticism or laxity characterized by the pursuit of excessive pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion on the meaning of the term *heresy* in *Panarion*: E. MOUTSOULAS, *Der Begriff "Häresie" bei Epiphanius von Salamis*, "Studia Patristica" 7(1966), pp. 362-371; F.M. YOUNG, *Did Epiphanius know what he meant by Heresy?*, "Studia Patristica" 17(1982), no. 1, pp. 199-205.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *Epistulae* 222, 2; see G. BANTERLE, *Introduzione*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, Prologus 7.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, Praefatio 1: "De hereseon diversa pestilentia variisque erroribus qui ab origine mundi emerunt et sub Iudaeis defluerunt et ex quo venit dominus noster Iesus salvator in carne pullulaverint, dicere oportet."

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. SZRAM, *Cnota pokory w nauczaniu greckich Ojców Kościoła IV wieku*, Lublin: KUL Publishing House, 2014, pp. 12-14, 205; D. ZAGÓRSKI, *Recepcja Arystotelesowskiego ideału „me-*

The research objective of the article is to verify to which attitude – of rigorism or of laxity - the Christians classed as heretics in early Christian Church tended more often; what were the reasons for such attitudes; whether it was attempted to combine extreme behaviors in one movement, and whether Philastrius is the only author of catalogue of heresy who expresses criticism over these behaviors, contrary to other authors, sometimes suspected by researchers for apologetic overzealousness and rhetorical exaggeration in assessing the behavior of the dissenters.

#### HERETIC MOVEMENTS WITH A RIGORISTIC APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND MORALITY

The type of piety dominating in the first centuries of Christianity, focused on following the suffering Christ, largely conditioned by the historical and social situation in which the persecution of followers of the new religion played an important role, favored a rigoristic approach to Christian doctrine and morality. The attitude of rigorism was also prompted by the monastic movement developing from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, propagating sophisticated forms of asceticism. The political and cultural climate of the gradually decaying Roman Empire also encouraged people to take up various forms of the *fuga mundi* (flee the world), sometimes close to exaggeration and even quirkiness.

Among the heretical movements described by Philastrius there is no lack of such attitudes, which are examples of excessive rigor. They can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of all groups formed on the Gnostic basis, combining contempt for the material world and divine powers responsible for its creation, with disregard of the body in everyday life practice. In addition to the best-known Basilicans,<sup>12</sup> Valentinians<sup>13</sup> and Marcionites,<sup>14</sup> Philastrius mentioned the Patricians operating in Rome at an unspecified time. They condemned the human body as created by Satan,

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sotes” w doktrynie Klemensa Aleksandryjskiego. *Problem definicji*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 51 (2004), no. 4, pp. 5-42; IDEM, *Jak posiadać, by nie przekroczyć miary? Realizacja ideału “mesotes” w posługiwaniu się dobrami materialnymi według Klemensa Aleksandryjskiego*, [in:] *Historia świadectwem czasów*, ed. W. Bielak, S. Tylus, Lublin: KUL Publishing House, 2006, pp. 599-612.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 45.

which consequently led some followers of this heresy even to voluntarily delivering themselves to death.<sup>15</sup>

The followers of early Gnosticism were the Manicheans, founded by Manes of Persia. Philastrius emphasized the dependence of their teaching on the views of the two greatest activists of the Gnostic movement from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: Valentinus and Marcion.<sup>16</sup> Philastrius did not describe Manichaean life practices. He only pointed to the basic element of this erroneous doctrine, also present in the above-mentioned Patricians' thought: the conviction that only the soul comes from God and the body comes from the devil.<sup>17</sup> Other authors of early Christian catalogues of heresies described the way of conduct resulting from these doctrinal premises. These were: Theodoret of Cyrus on the Greek ground and Augustine of Hippo on the Latin ground.<sup>18</sup> Augustine, who knew the Manicheans from personal experience,<sup>19</sup> pointed out that they considered themselves to be clean, opposed marriages and the act of sexual intercourse, did not eat meat, and did not drink wine.<sup>20</sup>

The second group of rigorous heretical movements described by Philastrius includes commonly known formations, combining the tendency to excessive asceticism and the conviction of being chosen by God with an incorrect understanding of the doctrine of the Church and the sacrament of baptism. These were the Novatians, the Montanists and the Donatists. All these movements of a schismatic nature shared the belief that they belonged to their own Church, including true saints.

The Novatians started their activity in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century after the persecution of Christians, organized by Decius. They fit into the early Christian discussion of the permissibility of the so-called second repentance (*paenitentia secunda*) after baptism.<sup>21</sup> Irritated by the fact that many of the faithful fell (*lapsi*), and then were accepted into the Church community after doing the appropriate penance, the Novatians split off, proclaiming that after

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, 26; AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. DOBKOWSKI, *Augustyn i jego wiedza na temat manicheizmu*, "Studia Religiologica" 46(2013), no. 1, pp. 55-63.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> See the classic study on the second repentance. B. POSCHMANN, *Paenitentia secunda. Die kirchliche Busse im ältesten Christentum bis Cyprian und Origenes*, Bonn: Hanstein 1940; see W. ZAWADZKI, *Bernhard Poschmann – warmiński badacz wczesnochrześcijańskiej pokuty*, Olsztyn: "Hosianum" Seminary Press, 1998.

baptism there is no room for any penance. Describing the Novatians, Philastrius made a mistake that was typical of the historical literature of the first centuries of Christianity. Namely, he confused the real founder of this schism, the Roman presbyter Novatian, with the continuer of his views in North Africa – the deacon Novat.<sup>22</sup>

Acting at the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries in Phrygia, the Montanists (named after their founder Montanus) are mentioned in Philastrius's catalogue as "Cataphrygians," which indicates the place of their activity.<sup>23</sup> Philastrius emphasizes their strong focus on the role of prophets in the community. Montanus, as well as the women accompanying him – Priscilla and Maximilla – were considered their prophets through whom the fullness of the Holy Spirit was given to their community and not to the whole Church.<sup>24</sup>

Widespread at the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in North Africa, the Donatists (named after their founder Donatus) are referred to by Philastrius as the Parmenianites (named after Parmenianus, one of the successors of Donatus) or the Mountaineers (*montenses*).<sup>25</sup> In his work *De haeresibus*, Augustine clarified that the latter was the name of the faction of the Donatists operating in Rome, headed by a bishop from Africa.<sup>26</sup> However, Isidore of Seville explained – it is difficult to say how much in accordance with the historical truth – that the name "mountaineers" resulted from the fact that members of this movement were hiding in the mountains during the persecution, which became an opportunity to split them off from the Church community.<sup>27</sup> The main feature of the Donatists, according to Philastrius, was to give members a new baptism that surpassed the baptism given in the Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>

The aspirations of all three formations mentioned above to be the Church of saints suggest that their members should follow the principles of asceticism perceived in a more rigorous way than in the whole Church, considered sinful. Probably that was the case, at least in the sphere of verbal declarations, but the authors of early Christian catalogues of heresy did not mention this fact. On the contrary, Philastrius wrote that Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla "were living a vain and unfruitful life (*vitae tempus vanum et*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 69, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *De haeresibus liber*, 43; IDEM, *Ethymologiae*, VIII, 5, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 49.

*infructuosum*).”<sup>29</sup> In the case of this statement, it can be assumed that it does not fully correspond to reality, and is a kind of rhetorical tool designed to disgrace orthodox Christians of the activities of the Montanists. Also, regarding the alleged habit of mixing child’s blood with a sacrifice<sup>30</sup> during the Passover, one may suspect using such a means of expression. Similar accusations against the Montanists are also found in Augustine’s catalogue of heresy,<sup>31</sup> but it was modeled on the aforementioned treatise of Philastrius.

In the case of the third group of rigorous heretical formations, described by Philastrius, we deal with typical movements practicing exaggerated asceticism, resulting from erroneous premises, most often based on inaccurate, too literal exegesis of some biblical texts. In these movements, there are no elements of erroneous doctrine typical of heresies. One may get the impression that Philastrius reliably described the spirituality and everyday life of the members of these groups without offending and accusing them of questionable practices. Perhaps these movements were not – in his opinion – such a great threat as the Montanists.

A common feature of these movements was an exaggerated deviation from everyday ordinary human behavior, motivated by contempt for the material and related to the visible world, in which one can see a clear Gnostic background. These movements differed in the degree of radicalism of the asceticism undertaken. The following groups should be considered as the mildest and relatively harmless to the environment: Discalced, convinced that people should walk without shoes, because the Lord said to Moses: “take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5), and blessed Isaiah wandered barefoot three years (Isaiah 20:3);<sup>32</sup> or the so-called Passalorynchites, that is, silent, practicing constant silence.<sup>33</sup> Much more dangerous to life both inside and outside society were probably other movements described by Philastrius that promoted excessive abstinence: the Aerians, also called the Encratics,<sup>34</sup> that were ac-

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 81.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 76; AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 72; AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 53; ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *De haeresibus liber*, 20. Augustine adds to their attitude the elements of misleading teaching introduced by the founder of the sect, Aerius. Aerius accepted some of the theses of the Arian doctrine, and because of a deep sense of regret that he was not ordained a bishop, he proclaimed that there was no difference between the bishop and the presbyter. Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 53.

tive in Pamphylia, and the Abstainers, also known as “Those Who Fast,”<sup>35</sup> operating in Gaul, Spain and Aquitaine. Both groups not only practiced extreme poverty and fasting, but also condemned marriage and urged spouses to divorce. Even greater fear must have been evoked by the so-called *circuitores*, that is, “wandering around” who were crossing the territory of North Africa and forcing people to plunder them, or even kill them, because they wanted to suffer martyrdom.<sup>36</sup>

With reference to the words of Epiphanius, John Damascene mentioned two more groups. One of them is the sect of the Valesians who had the center of their activity in Bakat, the main village in Arab Philadelphia. The village gathered eunuchs who castrated both their guests and random passers-by.<sup>37</sup> The second group of rigorists mentioned by John Damascene are the Hierachits operating in Egypt. They proclaimed that marriage should be forbidden and accepted only ascetics, virgins and widows to their community.<sup>38</sup>

It is surprising that Philastrius does not mention the Messalians, also called the Euchites, or Those Who Pray.<sup>39</sup> They were one of the biggest formations, extensively described by other early Christian authors of catalogues of heresy. Only a few pages of the catalogue of John Damascene from the end of the Patristic era, were dedicated to this subject,<sup>40</sup> while all other heresies are described in several lines, which may prove the Messalian activity during the late Christian antiquity. Hence, the lack of description of this heresy in Philastrius’s catalogue is difficult to understand. The Messalians combined the characteristics of the two early Christian rigorous movements described by Philastrius. They preached the erroneous doctrine of baptism and formed the kind of their own church of saints, and at the same time attributed the exaggerated role of prayer practiced in their community. According to John Damascene, the Messalians believed that every man should remove Satan from his interior and receive the Holy Spirit, which can be ex-

<sup>35</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 84. Theodoret of Cyrus attributes the same views to Tatian the Assyrian, considering him, like his followers, as aquarians, who sacrificed the water instead of wine during the Eucharist. Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haeticarum fabularum compendium*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 85. They were also called *circumcelliones* - “peddlers,” or “wanderers.” See ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *De haeresibus liber*, 47. Augustine adds that they were hated by many Donatists who dissociated from them. Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. IOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Liber de haeresibus*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. IOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Liber de haeresibus*, 80.



perienced with our senses only during individual prayer, and not through the sacrament of baptism. They also despised physical work and helping people in need. They were a showcase of ill-conceived asceticism, based on one's own efforts, excluding God's grace and the sacraments of the Church.<sup>41</sup>

The above-presented groups with a rigorous approach to asceticism, sometimes combining such an attitude with the doctrinal elements of erroneous sacramentology or ecclesiology, take a lot of place in Philastrius's catalogue of heresy, as well as in other early Christian works of this kind. Significantly less is said about the opposite attitude in these works.

#### HERETIC MOVEMENTS WITH A LAXISTIC APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND MORALITY

In the early years of the Christian era, laxity, or broad interpretation of moral principles, aimed at striving to achieve carnal pleasure was associated with a sinful attitude, which was appropriate to the followers of wrongly interpreted Epicureanism rather than to Christians guided by the Gospel. Nevertheless, such ways of conduct appeared, regarded by Philastrius as inspired on the theological level by Satan, who is the father of all falsehood, and on the ideological level by the ideas derived from ancient philosophy, mainly Epicurean hedonism or Pythagoreanism.

It is difficult to provide a true account of these groups, because the authors of early Christian catalogues of heresy used a lot of invectives and made many accusations to discredit them. In case of general terms such as "abomination", "wickedness", and "vice", it is difficult to say what exactly these offenses would involve. On the other hand, when it comes to detailed descriptions of these behaviors, one has to be critical of their likelihood and coherency.

Few movements of a laxistic nature – if one believes Philastrius's account – were not purely practical, not referring to erroneous doctrinal theories, but were associated with the erroneous approach to important dogmatic issues, unlike rigoristic attitudes. Here Philastrius included movements originating from Simon Magus, who in early Christianity was regarded as the "founding father" of Gnostics.<sup>42</sup> The paradox is that Gnostics usually despised matter

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 29

and flesh, so they were the perfect material for rigorous ascetics. Apart from such a natural attitude, there were, however, opposite attitudes, the motives for which could be twofold. First, since people who belong to the most perfect group of pneumatics believed that they would be saved by nature, asceticism became pointless in their opinion. Second, if the God of the Old Testament, responsible for creating the material world, was evil and unjust, it was not necessary to obey the laws He established.

Philastrius says that Simon Magus practiced wickedness, together with Helena of Tyre, who was a harlot.<sup>43</sup> He must have been convinced that he did not have to apply any moral restrictions, because he considered himself the incarnation of God's power (*dynamis*), and Helena – the personification of God's wisdom (*Sophia*). Theodoret of Cyrus adds that the Simonians cultivated some magical ceremonies and drank love potions.<sup>44</sup> Lack of details in the descriptions of customs of members of this sect makes it difficult to accurately assess the extent of alleged moral laxity or check whether these allegations were reliable.

Another group of a similar character, mentioned not only by Philastrius but also by other authors, were the Carpocratians. Philastrius called them the Florians. They combined both dogmatic and practical errors. They questioned the final judgment and resurrection, claiming – according to Philastrius – that all resurrection consists in bearing sons from unlawful intercourse. Philastrius's description of this movement combines serious moral accusations with the rhetoric of invective: "in their church, after the sunset, after extinguishing the candles, they did not hesitate to have intercourse with women as they believed that the Law was being fulfilled: «Be fruitful and multiply» (Genesis 1:28). They aimed at obedience more towards Judaism and unrighteous pagan customs than towards Christian truth. Rather, they were like irrational animals (2 Peter 2:12; Hebrews 10).<sup>45</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus added the philosophical argumentation of these behaviors, referring to Pythagoreanism, no less strange and unbelievable than the aforementioned description of Philastrius. According to Theodoret, the Carpocratians believed in the passage of souls to subsequent bodies, but not in order to serve a sentence and purification, as the Pythagoreans believed, but in order to al-

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.* Augustine is a witness to the strange religious syncretism of Simon Magus, who regarded himself as both Christ and Jupiter (Zeus), and Helena as Minerva (Athens), see AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 57, translation mine.

low all possible forms of promiscuity. It is difficult to believe in such absurd and non-Christian attitude. Theodoret himself, however, commented on this issue, which proved it was a presentation of historical facts rather than a malicious invective. In order to authenticate his description of the Carpocratians, which – as he pointed out – might have aroused the suspicion of being made up, he referred to the statement of the first book of *Adversus haereses* by St. Irenaeus. Irenaeus wrote that it was difficult for him to believe in such ungodly, monstrous and prohibited acts, but the Carpocratians themselves have mentioned this in their writings, citing the secret teachings of Jesus given to His trusted disciples.<sup>46</sup>

Philastrius mentions one more heresy related to laxity, namely the Symmachians.<sup>47</sup> The description of the sect is very casual. The Symmachians rejected of the idea of the final judgment, which resulted in their indulgence. A certain surprise is aroused by inconsistency in their views, because the Patricians, whose followers were supposed to be the Symmachians, according to Philastrius had a completely different approach: they fought the weaknesses in the body.<sup>48</sup> Such illogical behavior, that could have actually taken place, will be discussed.

In Theodoret's catalogue of heresy, there are two other groups propagating sexual promiscuity which Philastrius did not mention. The description of the customs of these groups seems credible, because it is quite detailed, and is based on the writings of Clement of Alexandria. The first group were the followers of Prodicus of Ceos, who was the successor of the Carpocratians. They believed that women are common property and during meals with the light turned off they had sexual intercourse, treating this kind of promiscuity as a mystical experience.<sup>49</sup>

The second group were the Antitactae who considered the Decalogue to be a set of rights given not by a good God, but by one of His creatures that opposed the Father. The consequence of these views was the conviction of the necessity of acting contrary to God's law, expressed in the commandments, for example "Do commit adultery" instead of "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Hence the name of the group is from the Greek verb *antitatto* for

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, 5; IRENAEUS, *Adversus haereses*, I, 25, 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, 6; CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata*, III, 30, 1.

“I oppose, I am contrary.”<sup>50</sup> In John Damascene’s catalogue, the Ethicoproscopae (their name is from the ancient Greek for “fighting with morality”) were described in a similar way. They slandered the teachings worthy of praise, and followed the attitudes worthy of rejecting, and recognized them as useful. It is difficult to say whether it was about the same heresy described under two different names. However, it is a fact that authors writing about the Antitactae did not mention the Ethicoproscopae, and vice versa.<sup>51</sup>

Laxity was also attributed to the Nicolaites. They were the alleged successors of one of the first seven deacons, Nicholas. They were active especially in the areas of Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira. Philastrius did not mention laxistic behaviors of the Nicolaites, but Isidore of Seville wrote about them at the end of the Patristic era. In his opinion, which cannot be verified, Nicholas himself had lofty intentions, as he left his wife because of the pursuit of perfection, and his followers regarded this attitude as a premise to slackening of morals and practiced harlotry, exchanging each other’s wives.<sup>52</sup>

### 3. HERETIC MOVEMENTS COMBINING RIGORISM WITH LAXITY

In *Diversarum hereseon liber*, there are descriptions of early Christian heretical movements that were inconsistent in their views and behaviors, or at least they appear as such in the light of the accounts of the author. The first contradiction occurs in the description of the Manicheans. According to Philastrius, on one hand, they believed that the body was evil, because it was created by the devil, and therefore should be fought, but on the other, they worshiped demons.<sup>53</sup> This contradiction can, however, be apparent. The term *demon* (Greek *daimonion*, Latin *daemon*) in ancient Greek,<sup>54</sup> but also in the writings of some Christian authors,<sup>55</sup> could refer to both evil spirits and good spirits, not only Satan and other fallen angels.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, 16; CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata*, III, 34, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. IOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Liber de haeresibus*, 96.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. ISIDORUS, *De haeresibus liber*, 6; TENZE, *Ethymologiae*, VIII, 5, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum haereson liber*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> See the case of Socrates, who was convinced that a divine “daimonion” spoke through him that was a guardian spirit warning him against mistakes. See. PLATO, *Apologia Socratis*, 31, 40b.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. ORIGENES, *De principiis*, I, Praefatio 8.

Another heresy which paradoxically combined laxity with rigorism, were the Borborites. According to Philastrius, “they were pleased with the injustices of this world, they served the evil lust without expecting a future judgment, and praised the temporal lust of the flesh.”<sup>56</sup> Seemingly, they were a typical sect with immoral tastes. Interesting, however, was the motivation they gave to their behavior and the resulting further practices. They were convinced that God’s creature was irreversibly doomed to immoral behavior, because the defects of mankind came not from human will but from the consent of God’s law. They manifested the tragic fate of human nature, reminiscent of antique fate, in a rigorous way, lubricating their faces and other body parts with mud.<sup>57</sup> Paradoxically, they combined promiscuity with exaggerated ascetic demonstration of the state of human nature, reminiscent of the supposedly Hyllic status of Gnostic views determined by God.

Yet another heresy the exaggerated asceticism of which could more or less consciously lead to moral laxity, were the Adamites. Philastrius does not mention this group, but the accounts of them appear in other important catalogues of heresy, for example, St. Augustine’s catalogue<sup>58</sup> and Isidore’s catalogue.<sup>59</sup> In light of these descriptions, the Adamites, referring to the Paradise state from before the original sin, practiced a kind of asceticism, performing all activities naked, also during the prayer and the celebration of the sacraments. Although these authors do not write about it, there may have been moral abuses during such practices. Similarly, not all the ascetics living in the original Church in the company of women, called the Agapettes, managed to preserve carnal purity.<sup>60</sup> Certain reminiscences of these customs can be seen in the behavior of the Heiket sect, of which the only source of information is the treatise *De haeresibus* written by John Damascene.<sup>61</sup> They were ascetics who kept the orthodox doctrine, but lived in monasteries together with women. They practiced a common liturgy with dancing, referring to the procession of dancers that was arranged before Moses to celebrate the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea (see Exodus 15:20-21).

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. FILASTRIUS BRIXIENSIS, *Diversarum hereson liber*, 73, 1, translation mine.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *De haeresibus*, 31

<sup>59</sup> Cf. ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *De haeresibus liber*, 34; IDEM, *Ethymologiae*, VIII, 5, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. A. GUILLAUMONT, *U źródeł monastycyzmu chrześcijańskiego*, transl. S. Wirpszanka, vol. I, *Źródła Monastyczne* 37, Cracow: Tyniec Publishing House, 2006, pp. 55-66.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. IOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Liber de haeresibus*, 87.

## CONCLUSIONS

A comparative analysis of the first Latin catalogue of heresies, written by Philastrius of Brescia, as well as other writings of this type by Epiphanius, Theodoret of Cyrus, John Damascene, Augustine and Isidore of Seville revealed the existence of early Christian heretical movements – rigoristic or laxistic – motivated by erroneous exegetical or doctrinal premises. There were also such groups that, in a paradoxical way, combined promiscuity with the elements of asceticism. Laxistic movements represented a decided minority, and it is difficult to provide their true picture, because the credibility of Philastrius's description is weakened by the use of flowery invectives combined with the apologetic character of his treatise towards the orthodox doctrine. Philastrius's catalogue of heresy is also a historical source not very useful to know the temporal and geographical scope of activities of particular groups, because the author briefly describes erroneous doctrines and life practices, without paying attention to the dates and places where heresies were spreading.

In the light of Philastrius' treatise, early Christian heretical movements appear to be a kaleidoscope of strange and illogical behaviors. They are dominated by attitudes characteristic of various forms of Gnosticism and behaviors resulting from the literal exegesis of the Old Testament texts, which Philastrius opposed, as he considered it one of the basic sources of many moral heresies.

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The preparation of the English version of Roczniki Teologiczne (Annals of Theology) no. 4 and its publication in electronic databases was financed under contract no. 753/P-DUN/2017 from the resources of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the popularization of science.