

Ammianus' Definition of Christianity as *absoluta et simplex religio*

Abstract

The definition of the Christian faith provided in the second, negative, part of Constantius' necrology (21.16) testifies to Ammianus' familiarity with religious terminology in orthodox Christian circles. Constantius' *scrutari perplexius* clearly shows his heterodoxy, since the clear and simple truth should only be investigated in a pious way. *Perplexitas*, on the other hand, expresses the complexity of the objects of scientific and scholarly research, e.g. in the fields of philosophy and historiography. Ammianus' disapproval of Constantius' offences against traditional faith must have been well received in the Theodosian era. At the same time it was quite understandable to pagan readers who also preferred traditional *religio* to its perversion in the form of *superstitio*.

The definition in question (21.16.18) is probably the key passage for understanding Ammianus' intellectual attitude towards Christianity, but a thorough interpretation of its meaning and of its ideological and political purposes is not an easy task and has not yet been satisfactorily accomplished.¹ It is included within an overall judgement of Constantius II's ecclesiastical policy, at the end of the negative part of this elogium. It

¹ In Den Boeft *et al.*, 1991, some important texts have been added to the short selection of parallels I gave in Neri, 1985, 271-2, particularly Aug. *c. Faust.* 12.

is therefore firstly within this context that the significance of the definition must be circumscribed. The historical context which is referred to is the series of synods by which Constantius endeavoured to reach a compromise concerning the definitions of the essence of the Son and the Father. We cannot know how thorough Ammianus' information about this theological debate was, but he is likely to have known something about what he styles *concertatio verborum*. We can at least safely assume that Ammianus was aware that the synods he mentions concerned theological questions. Therefore the norm and the deviation, the *simplex religio* and the *superstitio* which serve to define Constantius' religious behaviour, are likely to refer primarily to the theological contents of Christianity. This apparently positive judgement on Christian theology should be associated with the other passage in which our historian, describing the blameworthy behaviour of the Alexandrian bishop Georgius, seems to praise Christian morality, *quae nihil nisi iustum suadet et lenē*.² The Christian doctrine, both in its theological and in its moral aspects seems to be appreciated without reservations. This is substantially the *communis opinio*. But the passage needs a deeper comprehension.

In order to define the meaning of the iunctura *absoluta et simplex*, a conclusive parallel is found in Aug., *c. Faust.* 12, the only occurrence known to me of this combination of adjectives in the contemporary literature,³ and the only one referring to Christianity: *nempe ipsi vos docere soletis, idcirco nihil esse curiosius exquirendum quia simplex sit et absoluta Christiana credulitas*. *Credulitas* is here used as an equivalent of faith, since the context does not suggest a derogatory meaning. It refers to the Christian doctrine accepted by faith. The couple of adjectives explains why there is no need of further inquiries into the catholic doctrine: it offers with absolute clarity all that one has to know about religion. *Absoluta* hints

² 22.11.5.

³ In Den Boeft *et al.*, Ciceronian occurrences of this iunctura are mentioned, particularly *Inv.* 2. 171.

at the completeness of the catholic doctrine, which does not need any changes or additions, whereas *simplex* means 'plain', 'unambiguous'.

Both in Augustine and in Ammianus *absoluta et simplex* refer to the Christian doctrine. This coincidence strongly suggests that the meaning of the iunctura is the same in both texts. This assumption can be strengthened by a closer analysis of the passage of Ammianus. First of all we have to take into account the parallel of Amm.

14.10.13, where the same phrase is applied to *veritas*, ironically enough by Constantius himself. Ammianus may have meant that in the theological field the Christian doctrine contains simple and sufficient truths.

We must now pay attention to the relation between this *absoluta et simplex religio* and Constantius' *scrutari perplexius*, which holds the key for understanding the whole passage. *Scrutari perplexius* designates clearly an activity inconsistent with an *absoluta et simplex religio*, since it could be carried on only by disregarding the simple evidence and the completeness of its doctrine. This sort of inconsistency is particularly stressed, as could be expected, in Christian literature, and it applies specifically to *perplexe scrutari*. A simple *scrutari* is often admitted. Augustine frequently stressed that the simple truths of the Christian religion could and even should be the object of an effort of comprehension, of *scrutari*.⁴ But this effort is never called *perplexe scrutari*. The *perplexitas* is seen as peculiar to the heretical way of disputing, imbued with pagan philosophy.⁵ Augustine frequently defines catholic *scrutari* as *pie* or *religiose scrutari*,⁶ a research where there is properly no truth to be discovered, because the study of the obscurities of the Holy Writ, stimulating as it is, reveals truths which are essentially the

same as those revealed in the simplicity of the Creed.

This opposition between the *simplex religio* and *perplexitas* is very likely to be the same as that between *religio* and *superstitio* in the same passage, since *scrutari perplexius* is presented as the key feature of Constantius' religious behaviour and therefore presumably as the cause of his passage from *religio* to *superstitio*. Ammianus is likely to have suggested that the correct attitude, the *religio*, consists in sticking to the simple truths revealed by the Christian religion, whereas the incorrect one, the *superstitio*, consists in *scrutari perplexius* these same simple truths.

This negative attitude towards critical research, *scrutari perplexius*, shows evident similarities with the Christian way of thinking, but it does not correspond to Ammianus' beliefs on the issue, which are in line with the basic principles of the classical way of thinking. Only in a few cases the truth is presented by Ammianus as self-evident, *perspicua veritas*, whereas scientific and philosophical truth is for him, as generally for the classical culture, an *arcana veritas*, which can be reached, sometimes partially, but always with difficulty, through a personal effort of critical research, a ζήτησις. The research of the truth is for Ammianus the peculiar task of the philosopher, *veritatis indagandae professor*.⁷

Just as in the definition of Constantius' mental activity concerning the Christian religion, the keywords describing this research and its objects are *perplexe* and *perplexitas*. This applies to Ammianus' own historical research (*perplexe interrogare*),⁸ the difficulties of a geographical research (*geographica perplexitate*),⁹ but particularly to Julian's discussion with the philosophers Maximus and Priscus about the sublimity of the soul (*perplexius disputare*).¹⁰ *Perplexitas* hints at the real complexity and obscurity of the objects of the research, whereas *perplexe* re-

⁴ Particularly meaningful Aug. *util. cred.* 18.

⁵ See particularly Aug. c. *Julian. op. imperf.* 1. 5.

⁶ See e.g. Aug. *serm.* 270. 1; c. *Faust.* 16. 11; *trin.* 3. 11. (Cf. *Quaest. hept.* q. 4 ante med. Tom. 4 (Léonant) *pie vero scrutans mens hominis altitudinem prophetiae velut hamo pisces Dominum Christum de profundo scripturarum levat*).

⁷ 22.4.1.

⁸ 15.1.1.

⁹ 31.2.12.

¹⁰ 25.3.23.

fers to the correct way of carrying it out, based on the awareness of this complexity and on the necessity of a critical attitude. Ammianus' negative attitude towards *scrutari perplexe* seems to concern only its application to the Christian doctrine, making of it a special case outside the mainstream of classical thought. Ammianus seems to distinguish two cultural areas, characterised by a different approach to the truth: the pagan area, marked by the awareness of the complexity of the research, and the Christian area which is convinced of the simplicity of the truth. In Ammianus' way of thinking, these basically different approaches to the truth lead to an essential difference between pagan and Christian religion as regards their relation with philosophical theology. The pagan religion can bear it, whereas the Christian religion by its very nature cannot. In all probability the awareness of such a distinction is not conceived in neutral terms. Ammianus was presumably convinced of the superiority of the pagan culture in the epistemological field, and of the pagan religion in the theological field. There is reason to think that a simple truth is for him a truth for the simple. When Constantius says *veritatis enim absoluta semper ratio est et simplex* he is addressing the soldiers, for whom simple words are needed, as Ammianus says on the occasion of the first speech to the soldiers of Julian as Augustus.¹¹

To some extent, this attitude of Ammianus towards the Christian doctrine is like that of practically all the pagan intellectuals who, from Celsus to Julian, have been concerned with the Christian phenomenon.¹² The definition of the Christian religion, primarily in the theological field, as an *absoluta et simplex religio*, which must not be investigated, recalls the observation, common among the pagans, that the Christian dogmata, unlike the philosophical doctrines, are to be accepted by faith without rational proofs. But unlike the pagan polemicists, who tended thereby to deny any theoretical value to the Christian doctrine and to ascribe

to the Jewish religion its few acceptable features, Ammianus seems to recognize a specific value to the Christian doctrine, both in the theological and in the moral field.

A relevant parallel of this kind of attitude could be found in the judgement on Christian doctrine given by the Egyptian Platonist Alexander of Lycopolis in his work against the Manicheans, written presumably towards the end of the third century.¹³ Like Ammianus, he defines the Christian doctrine as simple and he seems to imply that this was a current definition: Χριστιανῶν φιλοσοφία ἀπλὴ καλεῖται. Alexander gives to understand that this simplicity in his opinion, as well as in that of the milieu in which this definition circulated, consists mainly in its poor intellectual standard, its appeal to the emotions and, because of these characteristics, its diffusion among the lower classes.¹⁴ The term *philosophia* applies to Christianity not in its high meaning, but as a system of popular beliefs and values. In spite of his different terminology in designating the Christian doctrine, Ammianus' opinion is likely to have been the same. According to Alexander, the Christian philosophy is particularly concerned with moral issues, but even these are not systematically treated by the Christians and their approach is predominantly based on *παράινεσις*, although their teachings are to be considered substantially good. In this regard too, Ammianus' judgement is roughly the same: the Christian religion *nihil nisi iustum suadet et lene*.¹⁵ In Alexander's view, the achievements of Christianity, particularly in improving the moral standard of the lower classes, were spoilt by the spreading of *ζητήσεις*, which did nothing to settle the theoretical questions, but only created confusion and conflicts. This is essentially what Ammianus has to say concerning the consequences of the *scrutari perplexius* of Constantius II (*in qua*

¹³ See on this particularly Van der Horst and Mansfeld, 1974. The presence of Christian interpolations in chapter 24 has been recently suggested by Edwards, 1989.

¹⁴ Alex.Lyc. *Contra Man.* 1.

¹⁵ 22.11.5.

¹¹ 20.5.2.

¹² Cp. the recent survey by Wilken, 1984.

scrutanda perplexius ... excitavit discidia plurima). In conclusion, both authors define the Christian doctrine as simple and presumably both of them think of it as simple, because it refrains from facing the real complexity of the problems. Both stress the par-aenetical essence of the Christian moral teachings and the perverse effects of the research applied to the Christian simple doctrine. There is no reason to think that the attitude of Alexander of Lycopolis towards Christianity was personal and isolated. As we have seen, his words seem to imply that the definition of the Christian doctrine as ἀπλῇ φιλοσοφία was a current one (καλεῖται) and we have suggested that he was reproducing the current reasons which justified such a definition. We are not bound to assume that Ammianus knew Alexander, but it is conceivable that there were currents in the Neoplatonic movement more inclined than were Porphyry and Julian, to recognize a positive specificity in the Christian doctrine, although at an inferior level. This kind of attitude might have been typical of the Alexandrian school, to which Ammonios Saccas and Origen had belonged, and thus have affected the thought of Alexander of Lycopolis.

Although Galenus does not speak of the simplicity of the Christian doctrine, his attitude towards Christianity has much in common with that of Ammianus: both praise the contempt of death of the Christian martyrs, the strictness of the Christians in matters of food and drink, as well as their pursuit of justice.¹⁶ Also in this case, there is no reason to assume a direct dependence, but it is safe to presume the persistence of cultural trends which affected Ammianus' way of thinking. To some extent at least, Ammianus' definition of the Christian doctrine could mean that he shared this attitude towards Christianity, which can be defined as comparatively benign, unwilling to embark on a destructive criticism, but for all that firmly convinced of the inferiority of the Christian culture.

We have now to deal with the more com-

plicated and intriguing question of the relation of Ammianus' statement with Christian culture, of which something has already been said before. As a matter of fact, it is written in such a way that, both from a conceptual and from a verbal point of view, many Christians could have subscribed to it. The simplicity of the Christian essential truths, which are open to all regardless of their mental and cultural qualities, is a fundamental concept throughout Christian culture, starting from Mt. 11.25 par. The immediate evidence of these truths, which therefore do not need to be scrutinized, is stressed particularly in two fields of contemporary Christian literature, the polemics against the heretics and the catechesis. It is a commonplace of these polemics to accuse the heretics of being unwilling to accept the simplicity of the catholic truths because of their intellectual pride. A lot of examples could be produced.¹⁷ In this same context the *scrutari* of the heretics is frequently condemned, particularly when it concerns the essence and the judgement of God, by recalling chiefly Rom. 11.33 and Eccl. 3.22.¹⁸ As regards the catechesis, it is important to recall the similarities with Ammianus' definition of Christianity in the passage of Augustine where the Manichean Faustus of Milevi, addressing the catholic bishop, objects that the Catholics are used to teach that their faith is simple and there is therefore no need of inquiring into it. Given the immense spread of the Christian catechesis, such concepts and formulas are likely to ha-

¹⁷I confine myself to quote a few passages of the many which could be provided: Hil. *adv. haeres.* 2.27.1; Hieron. *in Abd.* 1.1; *in Hab.* 1.2; *in Mich.* 1.1; *in Ezech.* 6.18; *in Is.* 18.65; Ambr. *fid.* 1.42; Aug. *c. Julian.* 1.19; *gen. c. Manich.* 2.23; *de serm. dom.* 2.69; Greg. Naz. *or.* 36.2; Bas. *Eun.* 1. 1; Didym. *Trin.* 2.4. On the simplicity of the Christian faith cf. Hallström, 1984; Brox, 1972; Luhrmann, 1981.

¹⁸See e.g. Hieron. *in Ezech.* 6.18; Phoebad. *c. Arian.* 6; Aug. *c. Julian. op. imp.* 1.48; 129; Chrys. *prov.* 3.10. Perhaps it is not irrelevant that a great figure of the Syriac region like Ephraim styled the Arians with a term meaning *scrutatores* (Yousif, 1984-5).

¹⁶Cf. Walzer, 1949.

ve been known even outside the Christian area. Celsus himself had been acquainted with a Christian formula of this kind: *μὴ ἐξετάζε, ἀλλὰ πίστευσον καὶ ἡ πίστις σου σώσει σε*.¹⁹ Writing his definition, Ammianus is likely to have been aware of reflecting to some extent Christian concepts and formulas, which made his statement perfectly acceptable to a Christian audience.

It is true, many educated Christians were convinced that the Christian doctrine did not only consist of the simple truths of the faith and that every Christian, particularly those who were responsible for transmitting and teaching the Christian truth, the bishops primarily, should do everything they could in order to improve their comprehension of these truths.²⁰ Replying to the affirmation of Faustus of Milevi we have just quoted, Augustine pointed out that the catholic attitude his adversary was referring to concerned only the first stage of the Christian education, in which the believers, like babies, had to be nourished with milk before being able to receive solid food – a usual reference in this context, particularly in Augustine, to 1 Cor. 3.2.²¹ But on the one hand, the Fathers were realistic enough to be aware that, given the mass of the uneducated or unintelligent people or even of people who did not have enough time and leisure to devote themselves to such a difficult task, this principle was bound to have a limited application; on the other hand, the risks connected with this kind of intellectual activity were so high that most of the Fathers, particularly in the Latin West before Augustine, rather insisted on the simplicity than on the profundity and complexity of the Christian truths and of Scripture or stressed that this profundity was beyond the reach of the human mind. Anyway, Ammianus' definition of the Christian religion would have raised no objection within a

Christian audience, first of all because of the context in which it was uttered. The Catholics were used, as we said, to reproach the heretics for refusing to accept the simple evidence of the catholic truths and this is just what Constantius was doing in Ammianus' passage. Secondly, *perplexe scrutari* could never have been welcomed by any Christian, for whom *scrutari*, if it was admitted, should be carried out *pie* or *religiose*.

Also the other key elements of the passage had or at least could have a Christian meaning and could therefore be easily accepted by a Christian audience, starting from the couple *religio-superstitio*. In this specific context, which refers to the simplicity of the Christian basic theological dogmata, a Christian writer would have chosen *fides* instead of *religio* (I have found no occurrences in Latin Christian writers of the fourth and fifth century of *absolutus* and *simplex* in connection with *religio*).²² But the context shows clearly that Ammianus was using *religio* as an equivalent of what the Christian writers would have defined *fides*, the religious truths to be believed. *Superstitio*, which in the Christian literature had been used for a long time to designate the pagan cults, since the Theodosian era, both in the language of the Christian writers and in that of the imperial chancellery, marked any form of non-Christian catholic religion, including the heresies.²³ The expression *concertatio verborum*, which could be of Ciceronian origin, is like *pugna verborum*, frequently used in the polemics against the heretics, whose archetype could be traced back to the logomachia of 1 Tim. 6.3-5.²⁴ Even what could appear at first sight an unmistakable sign of the pagan irritation caused by the administrative and financial consequences of the Christian theological debates, the emphasis laid on the heavy

¹⁹ Apud Orig. *Contra Cels.* 1.9.

²⁰ On this vexed question of the relation between faith and reason in the thought of the early Christians see recently: Stockmeier, 1973; Piétri, 1980; Schulze, 1982; Pasquato, 1987.

²¹ Aug. c. *Faust.* 12.46.

²² On the meaning of *religio* in the early Christian literature see Sachot, 1985.

²³ See Salzman, 1987.

²⁴ Cic., *de Orat.* 2.68; *Tusc.* 2.30. For the Christian occurrences of the *iunctura*, see the texts quoted in Lampe's lexicon, p. 807 and in *Vetus latina*, 1975, 592-598.

burden on the *cursus publicus*, could have been a concern shared by pope Liberius, if we are to believe Theodoretus.²⁵

The relation with a Christian audience and the coincidence with Christian expressions and ways of thinking should of course be understood within the context of the Theodosian era, characterised by the emperor's policy, which first came to light in the famous constitution *Cunctos populos*,²⁶ of imposing one religion and one theology throughout the empire. The *absoluta et simplex religio* to which Ammianus refers could precisely be the catholic Creed as it was defined by the Theodosian constitution, the Creed followed by the Roman bishop Damasus and the Alexandrian bishop Petrus.²⁷ Constantius' ecclesiastical policy could have been condemned not only generically in terms of the catholic opposition to the heretics, but more specifically in the terms of the Theodosian ecclesiastical policy.

I think that these coincidences with the Christian vocabulary and thought are too numerous and too important to be considered fortuitous. Condemning Constantius' ecclesiastical policy, Ammianus was presumably addressing the Christian part of his audience, in which Theodosian officials could have been included. Therefore he wanted to write in terms acceptable to this kind of audience and he apparently managed to do so. By what means he achieved this, is anybody's guess, that is to say, we are not able to know whether he himself mastered the Christian vocabulary and thought to such a degree – which is not at all impossible – or had to rely on Christian sources, of course not only written ones. Nor is it possible to establish the precise identity of these eventual sources.

The whole passage is marked by a substantial ambiguity. Ammianus writes on Christian matters in terms acceptable to a

Christian audience, but in a way that neither he himself nor any pagan reader, even if they were well disposed towards Christianity, could totally accept. No pagan of course could admit that Christianity was in possession not just of simple, but of perfect, ultimate truths about God, and few educated Christians could admit that the truth should not be reached through a personal effort of research. The very terms and concepts which to a Christian audience could sound as an unqualified homage to the Christian religion, were likely to sound a bit differently when they fell upon pagan ears. The simplicity of propositions which must not be submitted to a rational analysis was likely to be for most pagans the mark of a superficial philosophy, good only for uneducated people.

The immediate aim of this ambiguity could have been of a defensive nature, that is to say, by praising apparently without reservations the theological and moral contents of Christianity, Ammianus could have felt at liberty to criticize some aspects of contemporary Christianity, presenting them as deviations. Acting thereby in the same way as the Christian moralists, he could have hoped to get the opportunity of being heard even by a Christian audience.

But we can assume the existence of more positive concerns. Ammianus and through him his pagan readers could recognize within the Christian religion the same opposition *religio-superstitio* that they were used to admit in their own religion. On the other hand, the Christians could be urged to admit this same basic opposition within the pagan religion when reading what Ammianus had to say about the *superstitio* of Julian.²⁸ The pagan and Christian *superstitio* are, in Ammianus' opinion, of a different nature, but in both cases norm is coincident with tradition, in the dogmatic field for the Christians, in the cultural field for the pagans. Ammianus' aim could have been on the one hand to help creating a mutual understanding between pagans and Christians, on the other to stress the equality between

²⁵ Theod. *HE* 2.16.18.

²⁶ *Cod. Theod.* 16.1.2.

²⁷ The couple *absoluta et simplex* could hint to the fact that the contents of the Christian faith were expressed by fixed formulas, as it was the case since the council of Nicaea. Cf. Hanson, 1975.

²⁸ Neri, 1985, 150-7.

the two public religions, thereby throwing out a political suggestion to the emperor: a correct religious policy should recognize and protect the tradition in both cases, condemning the deviation from it, the *superstitio*.

The other important aim Ammianus pursues lies in the field of historiography. The condemnation of Constantius' ecclesiastical policy presents the emperor as the opposite of what a Christian emperor should be. He is full of intellectual pride which prevents him from accepting the simple Christian truths, disregards the unity of the Christian church, the most important task of a Christian emperor, and is inclined to use bishops and synods as tools to impose his own religious views. A Christian audience could see in this negative paradigm the opposite of the pious Theodosius. By stimulating such a negative attitude towards Constantius, Ammianus could have aimed at reinforcing the persuasiveness for a catholic audience of the negative picture he had given of Constantius in the moral and political field, given the frequent equation in Christian thought of the judgement in religious and in political matters. The key feature of the characterisation of Constantius as regards his ecclesiastical policy, the *scrutari* which does not really aim at reaching the truth, but only at asserting his own power, is a key feature also of Constantius' political behaviour, recalled in this same overall judgement,²⁹ but also scattered throughout the representation of his reign. This *scrutari* is presented expli-

citly as *perplexo scrutari* in a passage in which it is presented as the hallmark of the *Constantiana tempora*.³⁰

Starting from the passage which is the object of the present contribution, a touch of a subtle irony against Constantius could be spotted in at least two places. Constantius displayed intellectual ambitions as far as the Christian truths were concerned and he did the same in the literary field. To these ambitions however corresponded poor intellectual qualities, *ingenium obtunsum*.³¹ The emperor refused to accept the simplicity of the Christian religion, but he himself, addressing the soldiers, had stated that the truth is *absoluta et simplex*. Like in other cases, e.g. when he purported to be willing to imitate the *civiles principes*, Constantius did not practice what he preached, *predicava bene e razzolava male*.³² Stimulating the complicity of a Christian audience against Constantius could have been the aim of these reminiscences, most of which could have been easily grasped, scattered as they were in the same chapter containing the judgement on Constantius' ecclesiastical policy.

With considerable historiographical skill Ammianus has formulated an ideological message, which could fall on fertile ground with readers of wholly different religious convictions and at the same time testifies to his own readiness to adapt his hellenistic and pagan outlook to honorable compromises.

³⁰ 15.6.4.

³¹ 21.16.4.

³² 15.1.3. See Neri, 1984, 24-27.

²⁹ 21.16.8.

