VOX
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INTRODUCTION

If you ask for your change, someone philosophizes to you on the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you ask the price of bread, you are told, "The Father is greater and the Son inferior." If you ask, "Is the bath ready?" someone answers, "The Son was created from nothing."

These words of Gregory of Nyssa describe one of the most characteristic phenomena of the later Roman Empire: popular concern for difficult theological questions. If we are to believe only a fraction of what the sources tell us, laymen in all the great cities of the East were deeply involved in the religious controversies of the time. And their interest did not always end with opinions and words. On many occasions words led to deeds and churches and whole cities were engulfed in bloodshed. Christians attacked one another in the streets, imperial soldiers rushed willfully upon unarmed believers, and groups of dissidents set fire to the churches of their enemies in the dead of night. Religious violence became endemic—on one occasion over 3,000 lives were lost in an assault on a church—and the emperor frequently had to turn away from political and military affairs to deal with the problem of factionalism in the cities. Ultimately whole groups of the faithful openly disobeyed the orders of the emperor and the "truths" of orthodoxy, thus paving the way for the partition of the empire and important geographical losses to the Arabs.

The present study is an analysis of these interrelated phenomena of violence and popular sentiment in the religious controversies of late antiquity. More specifically, it asks four basic questions:

1. Why did presumably uneducated laymen become so passionately involved in the complicated theological issues of the day?
2. Why did some individuals support one theological position rather than another?
3. What effect, if any, did popular religious opinion and action have on the ultimate resolution of the controversies?
4. What was the role of violence in these events?

The ancient authors themselves realized the importance of urban unrest, and they attempted to explain it in their own terms. Most authorities, perhaps taking Thucydides or Tacitus as their models, felt that it was in the "nature" of the crowd to rebel and cause violence: the *sordida plebs* acted perversely or from a selfish and shortsighted desire to make their lives more pleasant and luxurious. On rare occasions the ancient authors praised the motives of the crowd as noble and enlightened, but this was simply when the author approved its actions. In other words, for the ancient sources—pagan and Christian alike—the motivation of the crowd was a simple question. If, as was normally the case, the crowd did something that was disliked by the upper-class literary observers, its motive was base; if, on the other hand, the result of popular involvement was good, then the crowd was praised as reflecting collective wisdom and a love of the truth. The judgment was always a moral one and deeper analysis was rarely sought.

It is a truism that our historical inquiry is limited by the information provided by our sources and in the present instance the difficulty is particularly acute. In the first place, the sources were frequently hostile to popular opinion. We can, perhaps, trust a source when it tells us that a crowd did a particular thing; but we are on terribly shaky ground when we try to analyze the motivation for that action, since we have at best only a secondhand account of that motivation, usually from an authority who was far removed, both educationally and temperamentally, from the individuals involved. One has to rely on circumstantial evidence and follow a complex argument based on probabilities and one's own idea of how people in the fifth century actually thought. Obviously, the danger of error and misinterpretation is great: the minds of the "ordinary people" of antiquity are normally far removed from our own. The opportunity for understanding, however, is also great and worth the difficulties involved.2

Until the beginning of this century, historians had not advanced much beyond the simplistic views of the ancient authorities. In fact, it has only been relatively recently, in part as a result of Marxist thought, that historians have paid any really serious attention to the crowd in antiquity: the powerful in society, almost by definition, were the ones who made history "happen," and they were the proper subject of historical inquiry. In describing the religious controversies of the early church, for example, Edward Gibbon assigned little importance to the urban crowd, and he described their motives as base superstition, fanaticism, and blind
obedience to unscrupulous leaders. But Gibbon, just like the authors he followed, made some exceptions to this general condemnation. For the most part, the actions of the crowd were base—because he did not agree with them—but Gibbon admired Athanasius, and he praised those who wisely followed the popular bishop of Alexandria.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the great political historians, such as Bury and Seeck, were simply not interested in the actions of the crowd. When the course of events forced them to mention popular involvement in religious questions, they evaded the issue by observing that the crowd was moved by a concern for correct religious belief and practice.

At the beginning of this century, a few historians became more interested in the actions of the crowd. Scholars such as E. L. Woodward agreed with their predecessors that the majority of the people of, say, Alexandria in the fifth century cannot have understood the theological issues clearly. However, Woodward argued, this did not mean that they were acting irrationally or perversely. Instead, he saw the phenomenon of popular involvement in the theological disputes not in religious terms, but as a symptom and an outlet for more secular concerns, particularly a growing nationalism and discontent with Roman rule. Thus, the Bagaudae in Gaul, the Donatists in North Africa, and the Monophysites in Egypt and Syria were acting from a desire to identify themselves as culturally and nationally distinct and to overthrow the oppression of Rome in favor of local custom and government.

In the years since its formulation, Woodward's thesis has been subject to much skepticism and opposition, and no one today would accept it without considerable modification. Yet, like many other attractive theories which have been "disproved," the ideas of Woodward have remained current not only in textbooks and college lectures but in the works of such responsible scholars as Ernst Stein, J. Maspero, E. R. Hardy, and the authors of volume 4 of Fliche-Martin's Histoire de l'Église. Proceeding independently, W H. C. Frend arrived at similar conclusions in his influential study of The Donatist Church.

Nevertheless, most research carried out in the years since the Second World War has generally moved away from the theory of Woodward. In part, this is because of the greater sympathy which has developed for the essentially religious attitude of the later empire. Scholars in the past, affected by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, were hesitant to believe that religion could play any positive role except perhaps on the level of developed theology or ethics; popular religion, equated with base superstition, was to be despised or ignored. Such an attitude meant that secular motives and explanations were to be preferred whenever they could be found. Today, perhaps because of the failure of the social sciences to live up to expectations or because of the ultimate irrationality of
much of modern life, historians are much more willing to perceive the importance of religion in other ages. Reasonable men could, indeed, have been moved by religious sentiments. Most significant and influential in this regard was an article by A. H. M. Jones in which he discussed the work of Woodward and Frend and suggested important methodological guidelines for the evaluation of heresy as a social or political phenomenon. In the end he concluded that heresy in the early church was genuinely religious in orientation and that it could not be explained by supposedly secular motives.

Nevertheless, even if we accept Jones' arguments, as most authorities have done, we must still be bothered by the original questions: Why did most people become passionately interested in these complex theological disputes? Did they really understand the issues? Furthermore, why did different individuals support different theological positions? In other words, while he was certainly correct in rejecting Woodward's simplistic social and political analysis, Jones did not fully come to terms with the question in all of its aspects.

It is unfortunate, but completely understandable, that historians have not taken advantage of the vast sociological and anthropological literature dealing with religious belief and practice. For example, even a superficial reading of Durkheim suggests applications of his theories to the religious developments of the early Christian period. In general terms, Durkheim argued that religious experience is conditioned and formed by the society in which it exists. Weber and more recent authorities, such as Smelser and Bryan Wilson, have gone far beyond Durkheim to suggest how religious changes can be linked to specific changes in society. Wilson, for example, has claimed that changes in religion are to be explained by changes in the economic and social status accorded to certain groups and by the failure of society to accommodate the needs of these groups. Such a "maladjustment" model has become widely accepted, not only among scholars, but even among the general public. Some authorities, however, have found reason to question this hypothesis, and, while not denying the basic conclusions of Durkheim, they explain the evolution of religion by reference to different aspects of the social system.

Mary Douglas is one of the most influential of recent proponents of this view, and she has made a persuasive case in arguing that religious phenomena (stability as well as change) are to be explained as results of the characteristics and innerworkings of the individual social system. In addition, she has made some extremely important observations about the nature of belief and the ways in which symbols (both verbal and nonverbal) conceal or reveal differences in attitudes among people. Although she has not addressed herself to the controversies of the fifth century, one can easily see the usefulness of her approach. For example, one of the primary difficulties in our understanding of the phenomenon of
crowd involvement in the christological disputes is the complexity of the theology involved. We find it hard to see how ordinary people could have understood the issues clearly enough to have an opinion. Douglas has shown, I think, that "understanding" the issues is not always the point of importance. Theological positions, like all forms of communication, are powerful symbols which stand for a person's own identity or aspirations. Theologians and historians have all too often seen these positions as a "system of ideas, corresponding to some determined object. . . . nature, the infinite, the unknowable, the ideal, etc.," while Douglas would argue that they should correspond only to how the individual sees himself in the (mostly social) universe around him.

These are all reasonable ideas and they raise important issues for consideration, but how is the historian to take advantage of them, particularly in dealing with a society that is so imperfectly known as that of late antiquity? Social scientists, of course, normally examine contemporary societies in an attempt to discern the universal tendencies behind human behavior, while the historian must often approach such issues from an ad hoc basis in which he is pleased if only he can determine what happened in a particular instance. In the present study, I have tried to be aware of current thinking about the nature of religious change, but I will approach the material with no particular hypothesis about the nature of the religious experience and, hopefully, with no more bias than any other citizen of the twentieth century.

In looking at the phenomenon of crowd behavior (as opposed to religious change) historians have increasingly profited from the work of sociologists and political scientists. Further, the immediacy of contemporary terrorism, urban violence, and popular political action has naturally stirred our interest in similar phenomena in the past. In particular, the pioneering work of George Rudé has set the study of the crowd on a new level of understanding and significance. Clearly, the approach of the ancient historian must be shaped by the nature and the quantity of the evidence available, and he is not so fortunate as to have court records or accurate demographic information. For this reason much of the methodology developed in modern studies of the crowd is of little value in dealing with premodern phenomena, nor should we expect analysis that is so detailed or conclusions that are so secure.

Nevertheless, Rudé's overall approach to the crowd and the kinds of questions that he asks are useful starting points for historians of any period. More specifically, the historian should set out to examine the crowd as he would any other historical group—without prejudice or monumental misconception—and he should be prepared to find that a given crowd acted reasonably, and perhaps according to a set purpose, in response to certain historical circumstances. This would counter the view of the crowd as essentially senseless (and thus historically unknowable), a
formless mass which had no direction or purpose other than a love of faction, a group blown in one way or another by deceitful leaders or outside agitators. On the other hand, one should probably be suspicious of any simplistic view of the crowd and its motives. While admitting the possibility of rational popular behavior, the historian should not fall into the error of thinking that each individual within a given group felt exactly the same about all issues. Even more should he avoid the temptation to assume that “the people” as a whole acted according to some ideological preconception: unless there is evidence to that effect, one should not assume that the historical crowd represented the proletariat struggling consciously against an unjust social and political system.

The analysis of Rudé has taught us what we should have known long before: many different individuals with many different, and possibly conflicting, motives and goals made up the historical crowd. It should, therefore, be our purpose to investigate what Rudé calls “the faces in the crowd,” to discern as far as possible, the kinds of persons who expressed themselves on the various issues of the day and to distinguish the motives of different groups and the bonds which held them together.

Largely because of the paucity of the evidence, few students of the ancient world have attempted to come to terms with the phenomenon of crowd behavior, although a few important works have made contributions in this direction. A. W. Lintott’s Violence in Republican Rome, for example, deals primarily with the question of why the Romans of the late Republic (especially the nobiles) were willing to resort to violence, which ultimately destroyed their own political system. Lintott frequently mentions the urban crowd, but his treatment is legalistic and political rather than social, and few of the larger questions of concern here (for example, the motivation of the crowd) are discussed fully. Z. Yavetz’s Plebs and Princeps is more instructive for the present study. Yavetz is concerned with problems such as the composition of the crowd, its relationship to the emperor in the Julio-Claudian period, and its motivation. He analyzes several events in considerable detail and then draws useful conclusions from them, much in the style of Rudé. He concludes that the Roman plebs, while not motivated by any particular ideology, normally had some purpose to its actions, which were thus not merely capricious. Moreover, he observes, the successful early Roman emperor took the plebs into account and made some provisions to appease it.

The works of Lintott and Yavetz deal with the Republic and the early empire, and they do not concern themselves with religious questions. On the urban crowd of late antiquity, Wolfgang Seyfarth’s Soziale Fragen der spätrömischen Kaiserzeit im Spiegel des Theodosianus presents some brief but useful analysis. More specific is Hans Peter Kohns’ Versorgungskrisen und Hungerrevolten im spätantiken Rom. As the title
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suggests, Kohns is concerned with a particular phenomenon—the food riot—which is well documented in the writings of Ammianus Marcellinus and Symmachus. Although he does examine a number of events in some detail, the nature of his problem frequently led him to say more about the food supply of the city than about the crowd and its actions. Finally, Ramsay MacMullen, in his Enemies of the Roman Order, devotes an interesting chapter to urban unrest but says little about religious questions.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to provide a few working definitions. First, the subjects of our inquiry—the people of the cities of the late Roman East. The problem in arriving at a definition of the crowd is twofold, having to do with semantic confusion in both English, on the one hand, and Greek and Latin on the other. All of these languages have a number of words which can roughly be translated as “the people.” How are we to distinguish among them and which are we to use? More importantly, whom do we wish to identify, for such an identification sets the conceptual form for the whole of the study. Generally speaking, I wish to set my sights as wide as possible, so as not to exclude any individuals or groups that might be important.

Most investigations of the religious controversies of this period have approached the topic either by examining the development of theology or by tracing the political maneuverings of the great secular and ecclesiastical figures. The present study, however, will focus on those individuals who were not leaders, who were distinguished from the leaders in that they had no institutionalized large-scale authority (which is power that society defines as legitimate). Thus, while obviously admitting the historical importance of such individuals as the emperor and his court, the commanders of the army, and the bishops, we should focus our attention on all those other persons who had no obvious means to change the course of events in any direct way.

In my use of the term, most of “the people” in any city would, of course, be poor, but economic or social status is not the most important criterion. In fact, many wealthy individuals would have to be grouped as members of “the people” simply because they had no effective institutionalized authority. For example, an imperial official who had been removed from power, to the extent that he could not depend on former ties of friendship and/or loyalty, would find himself without authority. In a similar way, many women, even though their husbands might have important posts, must (as individuals) have been relatively powerless. In most cases, it will be relatively easy to distinguish between “the people” and the leaders of society, but the monks and the leaders of popular organizations (such as the guilds and the circus factions) are more difficult to categorize. The question is probably whether the authority they possessed was of sufficient magnitude to allow them to influence events as a matter of
course. In the interests of simplicity, the leaders of popular organizations are normally classed along with "the people," while the monks are accorded a kind of special status. Clearly, an important abbot was a leader of society whose words and actions carried special weight; an ordinary monk, on the other hand, normally had little power (although even he might influence events in a special way). Because of the difficulty in placing the monks in any particular category and because of their importance in forming popular opinion, I will discuss their actions fully wherever appropriate.

All this is not to ignore the actions of the leaders of society or to attempt to write history "from the bottom," by assuming that the actions of the people really caused events to happen in the way they did. Instead, the study analyzes the dynamic interactions between the institutionalized leaders of society and those whom they tried to lead. Furthermore, a term such as "the people" does not imply any value judgment; it has no favorable or perjorative connotations nor does it indicate anything significant about the composition of any group. Likewise, it should not be assumed that all of the people of any city had to agree on any given issue or that popular opinion has any simple general definition. On the contrary, various groups of people in any city might support different religious positions and this was, in fact, more often the case than not. Indeed, it is one of the primary goals of this study to attempt an understanding of the divisions of opinion which frequently arose. It will be particularly instructive to see whether these divisions of opinion corresponded with other known social, economic, or political groupings within the city.

In the terminology of this study "the people" and "the crowd" are nearly synonymous in that neither is meant to have social, economic, or ideological overtones. "The crowd," however, often has a more specific, particular meaning. Thus, while one can speak of certain "people" thinking this and others that, the implication is vague (and is meant to be so); to say that one "crowd" did something while another did something else is more specific—there were observable collections of individuals which engaged in some specific acts.

The problem of definition is further complicated by the language and the literary conventions of the sources. As we have said, Greek and Latin have a number of words which can be translated as "the people" or "the masses," or "the many," and it is extremely difficult to know exactly what a given author had in mind in a particular passage. This problem ultimately involves the sociological perceptions of the ancient authors and further lexical analysis may someday contribute to an understanding of both the thought-world and the social reality of late antiquity. But the problem is confused by the traditions of classical literature which often demanded the use of a word for reasons of style rather than content or
meaning. Thus, an author might suddenly switch terms simply because he wished to vary his vocabulary or to avoid using the same word twice in a row. When faced with a passage such as this (as we often are in the pages that follow), the historian is tempted to throw up his hands in dismay: did the author mean to indicate some change in the composition of the crowd, or was he merely trying to write better Greek? The choice of terms might also reflect moral judgments rather than historical or sociological differences; thus *demos* was generally neutral or slightly favorable, while *ochlos*—which might be translated as "the mob"—had definite perjorative connotations. In fact, the greatest difficulty probably surrounds the meaning of *demos*, which has been translated (in both the singular and the plural), as "the people," "the city," "the circus factions," "the urban militia," and a host of similar words or terms. Context sometimes helps in determining what meaning to assume, but the problem frequently remains. At a number of points in the study we will pause to reconsider this problem as it relates to a specific event, and I will regularly include a transliteration of the original terms, along with an English approximation, so the reader may have an independent opportunity to judge.

Similar difficulties arise in connection with the words for "riot" or "disturbance." Generally speaking, *tarache* refers to some kind of a disturbance, which might range from a confusion of mind to a violent riot, and it is frequently difficult to tell exactly what a particular author meant. Thus, when a text reads that a sermon or a certain teaching caused a great *tarache* in a city, does this mean that people actually went into the streets to give vent to their feelings, or was there outward calm disturbed only by mental confusion and concern? Normally a *stasis* seems to have referred to a more serious incident, but it is difficult to be more specific without additional information from the context.

Finally, whenever violence is mentioned in this study, it refers simply to any action which threatened or actually resulted in bodily harm. This violence may have been carried out by the crowd against the leaders of society or by one crowd against another. Likewise, individual leaders may have employed violence against other leaders or, by calling in the soldiers, against the crowd itself.

In an analysis of the role of violence and popular sentiment in the religious controversies of late antiquity, two approaches are possible. The first involves a narrative or synthetic treatment of all the evidence from all of the religious disputes of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. This approach, which has been used by most of those who have examined this question before, is attractive in that it will yield neater, more generalized conclusions based (hopefully) on a full analysis of all the information. The difficulty, of course, is that there are many incidents of popular involvement ranging over a wide geographical and chronological span.
Any synthetic approach will, at best, overlook the peculiarity of individual events, while at worst it will present conclusions based upon what is, in fact, incomplete evidence. In other words, the volume and disparity of the evidence almost preclude a synthetic approach to the problem.

Instead, I have decided to analyze as fully as possible a limited number of events, all of which took place in the cities of the East in the first half of the fifth century. The advantage of this approach besides making the material manageable, is that specific actions are placed in their appropriate historical contexts, and the conclusions are based on a firm body of evidence. The disadvantage of such a “case study” approach, of course, is that, even if the material is carefully selected, there is a danger that the particular events chosen for study were not representative, thus making the generalizations questionable. Further, because of the unevenness of our information, the conclusions may frequently be negative; that is, we may not always be able to answer the appropriate questions as fully as we would like. Nevertheless, the great strength of history as a discipline is that it considers the particular first and it bases its generalizations, not upon a preconceived model, but upon the accumulated data from specific individual events. Even though such an approach involves difficulties, it appears to be the only methodologically sound way to tackle the problem. In addition, the focus on the cities of Constantinople, Alexandria, and Ephesus gives the study a certain rational unity by allowing us to concentrate on the dynamic urban world of early Byzantium, while excluding the interesting, but very different, conditions in the late Roman countryside and the struggling Western population centers.

The first event involves the episcopacy of John Chrysostom (A.D. 397-404), and more particularly his deposition, when a large section of the population of Constantinople strongly demonstrated their affection for the bishop. From the time of Chrysostom the focus advances a number of years to the episcopacy of Nestorius and the Council of Ephesus (428-431). Throughout this period, both in Constantinople and in Ephesus, Nestorius and his teaching met with considerable popular opposition. Later, confusion and political maneuvering characterized the dispute over the teaching of Eutyches (448-449), which ended in violence at the so-called Latrocinium in Ephesus. Finally, by the time of the Council of Chalcedon (451) popular opinion in Constantinople appears to have come to favor the new policy of the emperor Marcian against the views of Eutyches and Dioscorus of Alexandria. The deposition of Dioscorus by the council, however, met with determined popular resistance in Alexandria: although the bishop never returned to Egypt, his followers resolutely defended his memory against the troops of the emperor and a series of Chalcedonian bishops.

Three of these events were important episodes in the christological
controversy, while the fourth (the deposition of Chrysostom) had little theological significance. This contrast allows us to trace the development of popular attitudes toward contemporary theology, while reserving one event as a kind of "control." Further, it is possible to compare the growth of popular opinion in a complicated theological dispute with that when the issues were clear and simple (involving only moral and canonical questions). In each instance, Constantinople is a major focus, while events in Alexandria and Ephesus encourage comparison. From this evidence, the study examines the extent to which people in different cities were influenced by the same concerns. Then, since we will investigate popular opinion in Constantinople over a period of fifty years, it is possible to identify and analyze consistency and change over this time: did the people of Constantinople maintain a single theological position throughout this period, or did they vacillate? Ultimately, the answers to some of the questions will have significant consequences for our understanding of the nature of late Roman Christianity and the ultimate division of the empire between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians.

1. Gregory of Nyssa, De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti (PG 46, 557). All translations are by the author unless otherwise specified.
2. On these considerations see the illuminating comments of Cyril Mango, Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror (Oxford, 1975).
3. Gibbon said that the people of Constantinople opposed Nestorius because of a superstitious veneration of Mary, while the supporters of Dioscorus were simply fanatics (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 47.5). "A chosen society of philosophers, men of a liberal education and curious disposition, might silently meditate, and temperately discuss in the gardens of Athens or the library of Alexandria, the abstruse questions of metaphysical science. But after the Logos had been revealed as the sacred object of faith... the mysterious system was embraced by a numerous and increasing multitude in every province of the Roman world. Those persons who, from their age or sex, or occupations, were least qualified to judge, were the least exercised in the habits of abstract reasoning, aspired to contemplate the economy of Divine Nature: and it is the boast of Tertullian (Apol. 46) that a Christian mechanic could readily answer such questions as had perplexed the wisest of Greek sages" (Decline and Fall, 21.1). See also the comments of Miriam Lichtheim, "Autonomy Versus Unity in the Christian East," in The Transformation of the Roman World, ed. Lynn White, Jr. (Los Angeles, 1966), pp. 119-22.
5. A. H. M. Jones, "Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?" JTS 10 (1959), 280-96. See also P. R. L. Brown, "Religious Dissent in the Later Roman Empire," History 46 (1961), 83-101; and W. Liebeschuetz, "Did the Pelagian Movement Have Social Aims?" Historia 12 (1963), 227-41.


14. J. R. Martindale's "Public Disorders in the Late Roman Empire, Their Causes and Character," (B.A. thesis, Oxford 1960) is comprehensive and useful, although by nature it is shallow and not analytic; David Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1973), on the other hand, is too general and suffers from serious conceptual problems.