Zdravko Jovanović
Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade

St Irenaeus, Regula Fidei
and the Ecclesiological Context of Interpretation

In the dispute with the Gnostics in the second half of the 2nd century, referring to the biblical texts was, in and of itself, not sufficient anymore for the articulation of the authentic doctrine of the Church, because both sides in the debate, i.e., the theologians of the Church as well as the Gnostics, often referred to the identical written material. For this reason, that is, having in mind the emergence of the arbitrary gnostic interpretations of biblical texts, St Irenaeus of Lyons considered it necessary to set the problem in a broader hermeneutical perspective, i.e., in the context of the reality he called *regula fidei* (κανὼν τῆς πίστεως or *rule of faith*).[1]

Regula fidei represents the essence on the Christian consensus regarding the fundamental postulates of the faith, on the grounds of which it was possible to evaluate the credibility of the Christian exegesis and theological reflexions. In this sense, *regula fidei* is a predecessor of the later conciliar symbols of faith.[2] Regarding the content of the term *regula fidei*, it is consistent in various passages[3] in which Irenaeus explains it and it includes the description of the basic components or stages of God's economy of salvation, from Creation to the Resurrection, including the fundamental principles of the Christian faith, such as triadology and christology.[4] This fact, however, by no means implied incompliance[5] in the process of potential formation and articulation of *regula fidei* within new polemical and didactic contexts.[6] Namely, the very terminology used by

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[1] He was certainly not the only author to mention this term, but, beside Tertullian, he probably used it most commonly in his argumentation.

[2] Cf: R. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The Rule of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics", in: *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (J. B. Green, M. Turner, прир.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2000, 88-107.

[3] Irenaeus exposed the content of *regula* in several different passages in his writing *Adversus Haereses*, never in exactly the same way (1.9.4; 1.22.l; 2.27.1; 3.11.1; 3.12.6; 3.15.l; 4.35.4). *Against Heresies, Books 1-5 and Fragments*, in A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut (trans., ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr*, vol. 1 in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1885-7; repr. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987; *Contre les Hérésies*, Livres 1–5, 10 vols., A. Rousseau et. al., *Sources chrétiennes* 263, 264, 293, 294, 210, 211, 100.1, 100.2, 152, 153, 1965-1982.

[4] In short, Irenaeus presents the content of *regula* as follows: There is only one God who is at the same time the Creator of everything. This God permanently takes care of his creation, and he also called Abraham and Moses, gave the law to the chosen people and send them prophets. He is the Father of the only begotten Son, whom he sent for the sake of the salvation of the world and whom he resurrected from the dead. He also sent the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the fullness of our knowledge of God and the establishment of communion with the Son (all of this is most fully expressed in 1.22.1).

[5] Cf: P. Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis", *Trinity Journal* 28/1 (2007) 65-86.

[6] See *Adv. Haer.* 1.10.2-3. In this sense, when Tertullian speaks of "immovable and irreformable" *regula* he has in mind its theological content ("regula quidem fidei una omnino est, sola immobilis et irreformabilis", *De Virginibus Velandis* 1. 4, *CSEL* 76 (1957) 79-103.

Irenaeus in this process is not fixed and unchangeable, as it was the case with the later creeds.[7] However, the variability of emphasis and lexical composition did not give the impression of confusion and cacophony, but the impression of coherence and harmony,[8] owing precisely to the foundation of the terminological variations in the static theological content of *regula*.

By introducing the term *regula fidei* into the theological discourse, Irenaeus wanted to point to the unacceptability of the arbitrariness of the interpretation, which was a characteristic of the Gnostics who, whenever they found it suitable, placed their own attitudes above the authority of the Holy Scripture.[9] In this sense, *regula fidei* was supposed to set the process of interpretation into the unambiguous ecclesiological context, simply because the ecclesiological community is the primary *locus* of the authentic interpretation of the Scripture.[10] According to the absolutely identical hermeneutical principle, *regula* had the capacity to contextualize the whole of the theological reflexion, primarily because *regula* represented the essence of the complete teaching that Christ, through the apostles, delivered to the Church. For this reason Irenaeus insists on the fact that *regula veritatis* (κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας - the term is virtually synonymous with *regula fidei*) represents a reality that a Christian receives from the Church in the sacrament of baptism (*per baptismum – Adv. Haer*. 1.9.4). *Regula fidei*, thus, refers to the true, unique knowledge of God, based on God's revelation, which, as such, is diametrically opposed to the various "truths" of the gnostic sects. *Regula*, therefore, represents the true gnosis, as opposed to the false one created by the Gnostics, who speculate not in the context of the Revelation and experience of the Church, but according to their own conclusions.[11] In this context, in his *Adversus Haereses* 1.9.4, Irenaeus distinguishes between the heretical *plasma* or heretical fiction (figment) in the doctrine and the the concept of *veritate corpus* (body of truth).

The ancient apostolic kerygma has been constantly revitalized and reinterpreted through various forms of theological expression – through confession, through the liturgical chanting and doxologies, through preaching, interpretation and testifying.[12] Regarding precisely this reality, Irenaeus understands the concept of *regula*

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[7] P. Hartog, *Ibid.*

[8] Cf: P. Blowers, "The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith", *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997) 199-228.

[9] *Adv. Haer*. 4.33.7. Before the concepts of *regula* (κανὼν) or criterion (κριτήριον) became interesting to Christian theologians, they had figured within the philosophical discourse, mostly in the context of distinguishing between truth and the illusion of truth. Plato, for example, used the term κριτήριον when he, in *Theaetetus*, tried to explain Protagoras' man who is the measure of all things: „Ἦ καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ἔσεσθαι, φήσομεν, ὧ Πρωταγόρα, ἔχει τὸ κριτήριον ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ οἷα ἂν οἰηθῇ ἔσεσθαι, ταῦτα καὶ γίγνεται ἐκείνῳ τῷ οἰηθέντι;", Plato, *Theaetetus*, (J. Burnet, ed.), *Platonis opera*, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967 178c 1 (I.142a-210d). See also: „ἆρ' οὐκ ἐμπειρίᾳ τε καὶ φρονήσει καὶ λόγῳ; ἢ τούτων ἔχοι ἄν τις βέλτιον κριτήριον;", Plato, *Respublica*, (J. Burnet, ed.), *Platonis opera*, vol. 4, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1968 582 a 6 (II.327a-621d). According to Diogenes' testimony, Epicurus was the first philosopher who had a writing dedicated precisely to the theory of criterion or canon - Περὶ κριτηρίου ἢ Κανών, γ: *Diogenis Laertii vitae philosophorum*, 2 vols. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964 10, 27, 16. Cf: E. Osborn, "Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD," in R Williams ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, 40-61.

[10] Cf: R. J. R. Paice, "Irenaeus on the Authority of Scripture, the 'Rule of Truth and Episcopacy" (Part 2), *Churchman* 117/2 (2003), 133-152.

[11] *Adv. Haer*. 4.33.7.

[12] R. Wall, *Ibid.*

fidei as a coherent system whose *modus operandi* is the evaluation of all the expressions of the Christian faith, and whose fundamental goal, in the final analysis, is the preservation of the unity of the Church, which was seriously endangered by the emergence of the false and arbitrary doctrines and biblical interpretations.[13]

In this context it is possible to speak of a very close analogy, if not of identification, which exists in Irenaeus' theology between the terms *regula fidei* and *hypothesis* of the Scripture (*Adv. Haer*. 1.9). The term *hypothesis*[14] in Irenaeus points to the background or the structure established by God's initiative and economy of salvation, which, on the grounds of the consequent historical events that manifested this initiative of God, forms the coordinates of faith. This term, therefore, just as the term *regula fidei*, represents the guiding idea or the principle insight and motif of biblical texts.[15] In the context of Irenaeus' understanding of these concepts as the realities rooted and handed down within the experience of the ecclesial communion with God, it was quite clear that the Gnostics do not share this experience with the Church, i.e., that they have their own *hypothesis*, formed in accordance with presuppositions and priorities of a different kind.[16]

In the light of such an observation regarding the gnostic theology, Irenaeus wanted to take the theological discourse out of the sphere of speculation, and to set it in a context of the experience of the Church, which is reflected through the notion of *regula fidei* and biblical texts. Namely, the gnostic exegetical methodology was characterized by obscurantism and elitism, through which the process of interpretation was transferred to the jurisdiction of few, especially enlightened and, allegedly, by the apostles particularly informed individuals. Against this view, Irenaeus insisted on the public character of the evangelical message[17] and precisely this argument became one of the key ones in the anti-gnostic controversy, as well as in the affirmation of the ecclesial character of the interpretation of the Christian doctrine. In this sense, *regula fidei* by no means represents a private peace of information, or a reflection which is not available to anyone outside the special circle of the chosen ones. The key difference between the Church and the gnostic sects consists in the transparence of the doctrine and its availability to all the members of the community, regardless of their cognitive capacities or predispositions which would favor or single out any particular group from the others. This doctrine belongs to the whole Church, and the particular responsibility for its preservation and interpretation belongs to those who guide and preside over the churches,[18] who received this responsibility through the ordination to this particular episcopal and presbyterial service, in the context of the apostolic succession.

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[13] "...Those who give rise to schisms... who look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the Church... and divide the great and glorious body of Christ" (*Adv. Haer*. 4.33.7).

[14] This term also originates in the ancient literature and it represented the "plot" or "fundamental argument", in relation to which an author conceives the structure of his homily or writing and carefully arranges his rhetorical or literal strategies. Cf: J. Trigg, "The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists", in: *A history of biblical interpretation* - Vol. 1 *The Ancient Period*, (A. J. Hauser, D. F. Watson, eds.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2003, 304-333.

[15] In order to describe this, Tertullian used the term *ratio* - "rationis interpretentur", *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 9.6, *Sources Chrétiennes* 46, 1957.

[16] "…They build up their own hypothesis". *Adv. Haer*. 1.9.3. Cf. F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, Cambridge Univeristy Press, Cambridge 1997, 19.

[17] Which is also the experience supported by the very texts of the New Testament, e.g. Col 4, 16; 1 Thess 5, 27.

[18] *Adv. Haer*. 3.3.1: "…quos et successores relinquebant, suum ipsorum locum magisterii tradentes…".

The ecclesial experience or the experience of community is constituted through the apostolic kerygma and it is manifested both in *regula fidei* and in biblical texts in exactly the same way. Therefore only the truth professed by the Church is consistent and certain.[19] Precisely this truth represents the pledge of the authentic interpretative process, which culminates in the demonstration of the unity of biblical texts and the harmony of their parts (first of all of the two Testaments, but of all the individual books, as well). In this sense, the concept of *regula* works as a cohesive factor, introducing sense and the necessary order into the sometimes unclear *cumulus* of information, as well as leading towards an integral understanding of the Old and New Testament and of the divine *oikonomia*. An interpreter who fails to observe this reality and ignores *regula fidei* in his interpretation can never reach the true sense of the biblical text, given that he rejects the very methodological presupposition of the authentic interpretation (*eo quod ipsam inuentionis abiecerit disciplinam - Adv. Haer.* 2.27.2).

The disintegrative process of the gnostic interpretations represents the opposite of the ecclesial exegesis, for it is not able to reflect upon this unity, given that the methodology of their interpretation is not based on the grounds of the experience of the Church as a community, but on some individual and arbitrary hermeneutical principles. The ignoring of *regula fidei* is the main reason for which the Gnostics are not capable of observing the essential homogeneity and harmony of the whole Scripture, nor can they figure out those theological arguments which clarify the corresponding relationship among various books and narratives in the Bible. Therefore they "dismember and destroy the truth" (*Adv. Haer.* 1.8.1). *Regula fidei*, thus, provides the unity and coherence of the multitude of the biblical narratives, primarily in the context of Ireneaus' insistence on the unity and identity of God the Creator and God the Savior,[20] as well as, on these grounds, on the unity of the two Testaments, prophets and apostles, old and new Israel etc.[21]

The understanding of the unity of biblical texts opens numerous hermeneutical perspectives, among which is the possibility of interpreting the difficult and incomprehensible biblical passages in the light of those parts that are easier to understand and already affirmed through the thorough, credible and receipted exegetical procedure. The unity of polyphonic theological narratives, indicated by *regula veritatis*, forms, therefore, a basis for the patristic hermeneutical principle *scripturam ex scriputra explicandam esse*.[22] The reverse hermeneutical process, however, is a characteristic of the Gnos-

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[19] *Adv. Haer*. 5.20.2.

[20] *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.5

[21] Clement of Alexandria also insisted on the same point: "κανὼν δὲ ἐκκλησιαστικὸς ἡ συνῳδία καὶ ἡ συμφωνία νόμου τε καὶ προφητῶν τῇ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου παρουσίαν παραδιδομένῃ διαθήκῃ", *Stromata* 6.15.125, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 52(15),17, AkademieVerlag, Berlin 1960. The *Apostolic Constitutions* also say that it is necessary that bishops, when they interpret the Scripture, do this in such a way that they interpret the Gospel in accordance with the Law and prophets and *vice versa*: "ὁμοστοίχως τοῖς Προφήταις καὶ τῷ Νόμῳ τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον ἑρμηνεύων· ὁμοίως τῷ Εὐαγγελίῳ στοιχείτωσαν αἱ ἐκ Νόμου καὶ Προφητῶν ἑρμηνεῖαι", *Constitutiones apostolorum* 2.5.4, *Sources chrétiennes* 320, Cerf, Paris 1985.

[22] This is testified by Tertullian: "…incerta de certis et obscura de manifestis praeiudicari, vel ne inter discordiam certorum et incertorum, manifestorum et obscurorum…", *De Resurrectione Carnis* 21.2 in: *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection*, (E. Evans, ed. & trans.), S.P.C.K.: London, 1960, and Augustine: "…consulat regulam fidei, quam de Scripturarum planioribus locis et Ecclesiae auctoritate percepit…", *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.2.2, *PL* 34. 65. Cf: P. S. Grech, "The Regula Fidei as a Hermeneutical Principle in Patristic Exegesis" in: *The Interpretation of the Bible:The International Symposium in Slovenia*, (J. Krasovac, ed.), JSOT Sup 289, Sheffield 1998, 589-601.

tics who explain the easy passages by means of the unclear ones, i.e., losing sight of the general context, they favor certain extravagant and unacceptable interpretations[23] instead of "showing the entire body of the work of the Son of God" (*integrum corpus operas Filii Dei - Adv. Haer*. 4.33.15).

In the context of the application of the concept of *regula fidei* for exegetical purposes, it is certainly reasonable, at least in principle, to ask the question of the real nature of the relationship between these two realities. It seems, in accordance with Irenaeus' reflection, that this relationship is characterized by the complexity and complementarity which is grounded in the basic identity of the content they express. Namely, these two realities cannot be equated, nor simply reduced one to another, but it is, at the same time, necessary that we do not separate them in terms of value, but understand them as realities that exist in a close symbiosis.[24] *Regula fidei*, therefore, is not a simplified cannon of the Scripture, but a sort of a summary of the most important Christian doctrines, that are also present in the Bible. Further, *regula* is not an authority that is isolated, self-sufficient, let alone superior to the Bible, although we could be led to this conclusion by the fact that *regula* contains the capacity to be a criterion for evaluating the authentic exegesis. Such a conclusion would be made too early, because, for Irenaeus, *regula fidei* is primarily an indicator of an ecclesiological interpretative frame, within which we use the experience and intuition of the Church to judge the authenticity of an understanding of a text or a doctrine, as well as the possibility of weaving this text or doctrine into a harmonious and coherent whole of the ecclesial tradition. Irenaeus, therefore, did not consider the concept of *regula fidei* to be an entity rival to the Holy Scriputre, nor a surrogate which could completely replace biblical texts or make them superfluous.

In the aforementioned sense, the ecclesial context of *regula fidei* points to the fact that, for Irenaeus, it is not possible to allow the disbalance between the doctrine of the Church and the reception and interpretation of this doctrine (whether it is the interpretation of the Scripture, symbolic material or the oral tradition). This dimension is very important for Irenaeus, for it is obvious to him that the gnostic exegesis in the process of the practical realization of reception and interpretation can result in the non-ecclesial forms of initiation and, finally, in the formation of schismatic communities.[25] Therefore, not only does an unconscionable and arbitrary exegesis falsify and underestimate the scriptural testimony about God and his economy of salvation, but it, in the final analysis,

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[23] *Adv. Haer.* 2.10.1.

[24] Being resolute in the unity of the confessions of faith as well as in the harmony of the biblical doctrines in relation to the apostolic one, which was confirmed by the concept of *regula fidei*, had definitely, even if only implicitly, influenced the development of the concept of the cannon of sacred writings, which were later incorporated in the corpus of the New Testament. The *rule of faith*, therefore, had an impressive role within the efforts of the Church to recognize those biblical writings that testify about the identical narrative ("through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us" – *Adv. Haer.* 2.28.3). Cf: J. J. Armstrong, "From κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας to the κανὼν τὼν γραφῶν - The Rule of Faith and the New Testament Canon", in: *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Chruch: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ.*, (R. J. Rombs, A. Y. Hwang, eds.), The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2010, 30-47.

[25] In this sense Clement of Alexandria speaks of the *rule of self-control* ("τὸν κανόνα τῆς κατὰ λόγον τηρουμένης ἐγκρατείας", *Strom*. 3.11.71). More about this aspect of the inauthentic exegesis see in: E. Pagels, „Irenaeus, The 'Canon Of Truth', And The Gospel Of John: 'Making A Difference' Through Hermeneutics And Ritual", *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (2002), 339-371.

leads towards the distortion or even disabling of the relationship of God and man. In this context, *regula fidei* does not represent merely a phenomenon that is informative by its nature, in the sense of pointing to the authentic content of the apostolic doctrine and the Scripture, but it is, simultaneously, a phenomenon pointing to the imperative of the living within the ecclesial community.[26]

Regula fidei, thus, did not have a valid and authentic interpretation of the Christian doctrine as its only goal, for, no matter how great their importance was, they do not function as something that has its purpose in itself. The final goal of the interpretation is the initiation of man into the communion with God, as well as staying within this communion, in the context of the communion with Christ. In this sense, the exposition of the proper christology and clarifying of the most important questions regarding Christ's personality and his identity, represent a matter of primary interest of the concept of *regula fidei*, which is why it is discussed wherever the argument of the true faith is elaborated.[27] The essence of the narrative presented by *regula fidei* is christocentric and, accordingly, the authentic exegesis must have a christological, and, therefore, an ecclesiological basis and implications, as well.[28] The confession of Christ as the Lord is a hermeneutical precondition and, at the same time, the key for the authentic interpretation of the complete corpus of the Scripture.[29]

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The fundamental function of the concept of *regula fidei* (the same was the case with all the later symbols) is primarily to point to the authentic Christian identity, by means of testifying about the adequate reception and interpretation of God's economy of salvation in Christ, through the living ecclesial experience of the communion within the Body of Christ. This experience of communion with God is actually the decisive constituent of *regula fidei*, i.e., the reality in reference to which regula fidei operates as the criterion of reasoning and interpretation. The exegetical foundation in the concept of *regula fidei* is the only way to avoid falling into a vicious circle of the false interpretation, which works in the following manner – a false belief in God and a false understanding of his economy leads to a false interpretation, and this false interpretation of biblical texts, in return, deepens the false belief in God and the false understanding of his economy of salvation. In this sense, *regula fidei* is a fundamental presupposition of the Christian exegesis for it implies an interpre-

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[26] Owing precisely to such an understanding, Irenaeus formulated his famous attitude regarding the harmony of the faith and Eucharist, i.e., the harmony between the fundamental principles or hypothesis of the faith and the explication of this faith in the liturgical life of the Church. For the same reasons he insisted on the insight that the Tradition handed by the apostles is living and functional within the Church through the presbyterial (κατὰ τας διαδοχὰς τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις, *per successiones presbyterorum in Ecclesiis* – *Adv. Haer.* 3.2.2) and episcopal succession which possess a "certain charisma of the truth" (τὸ χάρισμα τῆς ἀληθείας ασφαλὲς, *charisma veritatis certum* - *Adv. Haer.* 4.26.2; cf. 4.26.5; 3.3.3; 3.4.1), as well as through the continuous presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church (*Adv. Haer.* 3.24.1). More in: A. Y. Reed, "Εὐαγγέλιον: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus' *Adversus haereses*", *Vigiliae Christianae* 56/1 (2002), 11-46.

[27] *Adv. Haer.* 1.22.1; 2.27.2; 3.11.1; 4.33.7. The passages regarding the Father of Christ: 1.22.1; 3.11.7; 4.11.4.

[28] Which was normally the basic characteristic of the patristic exegesis. Cf. W. C. Weinrich, "Patristic Exegesis as Ecclesial and Sacramental", *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61 (2000), 21-38.

[29] R. Wall, *Ibid.*

tative openness which presupposes God's initiative and his revelation as a precondition of every relevant statement.

Furthermore, this notion is not conceived nor perceived as a conglomerate of noetic propositions regarding the phenomenon of the Christian doctrine, which function regardless of the concrete experience and praxis. The concept of regula fidei is not to be understood as a reservoir of immediate and formerly prepared answers to all possible theological and exegetical concerns, but as a broader background which forms a creative space for the conforming of the mind to the rule of piety. In this sense, the ecclesial experience is a mutual matrix of both *regula fidei* and the Scripture (for their primary addressees and recipients are the members of the Church), but, at the same time, it is a basic symbiosis of these two realities in the process of searching for the authentic and relevant interpretation of the fundaments of the doctrine in each new generation of Christians, as well as in new socio-political contexts.