Hagit Amirav, *Authority and Performance – Sociological Perspectives on the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2015, 233 p., Open Access book, ISBN: 9783647208688.

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In this book, the author tries to interpret the event of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) by making use of one of the most fundamental tools of sociological criticism, namely discourse analysis. Of course, different from those cultures sociologists generally focus on, the Council of Chalcedon happened within the boundaries of what is for us a dead culture: the Byzantine one. This raises the question whether this kind of approach is the most appropriate in this specific case. The author solves the problem in the only way possible: by centering his discourse analysis on the written text of the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon, which for him represent a *verbatim* report of how the events unfolded, as well as on those Council sessions where the social dynamics at play come to the fore, in his view, the first, second and sixth, the only ones discussed in this book.

In order to better understand the concept of “discourse analysis”, let us briefly analyze its constitutive elements; these are: *setting*, which refers to the time and place in which the discourse that is being analyzed happened; *participants*, or those who took either an active or a passive part in the discourse; *ends*, its purpose and goals; *act sequence*, that is, its specific form (among possible discourse forms the author considers the following: “preaching, lecturing, ordering, apologizing”); *key*, or the tone of the discourse; *instrumentalities*, or the media through which the discourse is communicated to its audience; *norms of interaction*, namely the behavioral norms that the participants in the discourse have agreed to comply with; *genre*, or the type of discourse, such as a sermon or a declamation.

By applying discourse analysis, the sociologist can achieve a relatively thorough interpretation of his object of investigation, which in the case of this book is the text of the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon. It is important to point out that the author interprets the Acts in the same way as a modern written text, since for him the antiquity of a text does not imply that the elements of its underlying discourse are different from those of a modern one. This principle is certainly true from a merely linguistic and sociological point of view (which are, again, the ones that the author of this

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book explicitly adopts) but is it so also from a theological one? Of course, this article is not the venue to answer this question, as it would require another study specifically devoted to this effort, but, in our opinion, the author's swift dismissal of the "theology, or rather theologies expounded at Chalcedon" risks to fail to consider the possibility that the theological dimension of the Chalcedonian discourse shaped it in ways that radically differentiate the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon from a modern (in the sense of secular) written text. The ecclesiastical delegates' objective to conform to God's will by formulating the tenets of the Christian faith on the basis of an orthodox interpretation of both the Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church, as well as the fact that their decisions would have had an impact on the religious cohesion of the empire, are elements that must have played an important role in shaping the Chalcedonian discourse that even a secular research approach must take into consideration. A further question would be whether the theological connotations of this type of discourse could be included among the elements of discourse analysis described above, with the consequence that, if this were true, the author's thesis according to which the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon can be approached in the same way as a modern (secular) text would be proved to be wrong. The same could be said for another of the author hermeneutical goals, namely that of interpreting the Council as "a real life-piece of theatre staged in several acts" because, even in this case, its theological dimension could (at least in the eyes of those who took part in it) have placed it in a context completely different from a secular theatrical representation.

The goals that discourse analysis can reach can vary greatly. In the case of this book the author, as already said, decides not to focus on the theological debates revolving around the true nature of Christ incarnated, but on the communication strategies used by the participants in the Council of Chalcedon, with the objective of shedding light on the social dynamics of this crucial event of the history of Christianity in particular, and of Western civilization in general. This means that instead of focusing on an analysis of the different types of alternative Christologies debated by the Council delegates, the book is interested in details of sociological importance such as: the fact that the imperial delegation, though belonging to the laity, had the power of presiding over the Council proceedings, to the point of giving and withdrawing the right to speak to the ecclesiastical delegates; the fact that it was the emperor himself who presided over the crucial sixth session of the Council, thus showing the religious connotation of his power and, especially, his will to reestablish the *pax Christiana* damaged by theological disagreement; the judicial nature of the procedural norms which the ecclesi-

astical delegates had to comply with; the specific titles given to the different categories of delegates; the seating position of the ecclesiastical and imperial delegates, which reflected their level of importance in their respective hierarchies; the importance of the book of the Gospel, interpreted sociologically as a “religious fetish whose presence was to ensure the right judgment of the delegates”; the fact that some of the ecclesiastical delegates were treated like defendants in a judicial process: this was particularly the case of Dioscorus, Bishop of Alexandria and organizer, on behalf of Theodosius II, of the Second Council of Ephesus, whose decisions were rejected by the Council of Chalcedon; the important role played by Anatolius, *magister militum* and representative of Marcian, the current emperor; and, of course, the linguistic strategies employed by the ecclesiastical delegates when they addressed Anatolius, the Council or the emperor himself, in order to make their own positions prevail over those of their adversaries.

In conclusion, this book represents a useful tool for those historians and theologians who intend to enrich their respective fields of studies with an innovative approach. Apart from the limit of not considering the theological connotation of the Chalcedonian debates, the research methodology applied by the author does not diminish but enhance the historicocritical investigation of the events that unfolded at Chalcedon in the year 451 AD.

The introduction describes in detail the methodology used and gives a brief historical description of the background within which the Council took place, including the aims and motivation of its convener, the Emperor Marcian. The author concludes the introduction with a description of the major socio-anthropological perspectives in reading ancient texts that mostly influenced his work. After a brief description of the social networks of the delegates to the Council, we reach the core of the book, which consists in the discourse analysis of session one, two and six, followed by the conclusions and by an interesting but brief assessment of the limits of a post-modernist, deconstructive, approach to the study of religion. The author points out that this would fail to interpret religion in the right way as it would be unable to take into consideration the fact that religious discourse is considered by those who take part in it as alien to any deconstructive critique, since it is for them the linguistic expression of metaphysical realities that lie beyond the grasp of rational criticism. The author rightly says: “However much we are entitled and obliged to find new ways of interpreting our own world, the question remains whether our eagerness to weaken existing structures does not pose a methodological fault when studying the lives of people who never knew that they would be living in a weakened, deconstructed world, a utopian world which is believed by some to be ‘beyond ideology’”. Do such

nihilistic notions actually promote our understanding of people who, like the ancients, still live in a metaphysical world and even, actively promote their religious ideologies by way of 'counter-secularization'? To be sure, for the greater part of modern humanity, let alone that of ancient times, the idea of God is far from being a 'weakened concept': it is still very much alive, and so is the sharp contrast between the Godly and the human, the divine and the profane, the good and the bad."

It is in light of what for us are these right considerations that we cannot agree with the author's choice of leaving theology out of the discourse analysis of the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon, which in our eyes probably represents the only limit of this book.