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Timo Nisula, Anni Maria Laato, and Pablo Irizar, eds.

Religious Polemics and Encounters in Late Antiquity: Boundaries, Conversions, and Persuasion

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The interface of polemics, religious identities, and communal boundaries has played a major role in late antique studies in recent decades. The edited volume under review, which is based on a conference by the same name that took place at Åbo Akademi University (Turku, Finland) in 2018, participates in this long-standing conversation, grappling with the polemical rhetoric early Christian literary authors—and, to a lesser extent, Jewish writers—used to negotiate their religious identities in contrast with diverse others (e.g., Jews, Romans, Pagans, Donatists, “gnostics,” Manicheans, and Muslims). The volume consists of a brief preface (with summaries of the individual essays), notes about the contributors, thirteen essays (the bulk of the volume), and two indexes (subjects and modern authors). Although the book does not include a general bibliography, each essay concludes with a more targeted “Modern Bibliography.”

In the first essay, Anni Maria Laato situates the presentation of “Abraham in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue*” (esp. *Dial.* 119–120) within its historical context, where it stands at the crossroads between the earlier intra-Jewish debates, represented, inter alia, by Paul’s interpretation of the Abrahamic faith (see Gal 3–4; Rom 4), and the later Christian supersessionist discourse that would reject any form of ostensibly “Jewish-Christian” practice (e.g., circumcision). For Laato, therefore, Justin approves of Jews who follow the Mosaic law (provided that they also believe in Jesus), though he ultimately interprets the Christian church as the true spiritual heir of Abraham.

Abraham again looms large in Erkki Koskenniemi's "Excellent, but How? Abraham in Josephus," which focuses on the particular ways in which Josephus presents Abraham (esp. in *Ant.* 1.148–256). Koskenniemi argues that Josephus's account of Abraham, while relatively faithful to the biblical account (especially when compared to other early Jewish writers), adds strange details (e.g., the mount on which Abraham offered up Isaac was in fact the mount on which *David* [!] would later build the Jerusalem temple), which suggest that Josephus might not have known the Bible as we as scholars have thought, and presents the patriarch primarily as a wise man and a great general.

The volume abruptly changes course with "Illusory Polemics: Clement and Irenaeus on the Gnostics," by Sami Yli-Karjanmaa, which reverses conventional wisdom about the early Christian discourse against "gnostics." This essay makes the case that both Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus often assign a positive valence to the term *gnostic* (primarily critiquing those who falsely bear the title). As part of this essay, Yli-Karjanmaa also argues that scholars should exercise caution when translating and conceiving of "emic" terms such as *γνωστικός* as "gnostic" (from an "etic" perspective) since Gnosticism and its cognates carry a range of misleading associations.

The volume returns once again to Justin Martyr with Sven-Olav Back's "Justin Martyr as a Polemicist," which examines Justin's polemical engagement with philosophers and heretics. This essay puts forward the argument that, although Justin frames poor philosophy, heresy, and Greco-Roman religion as demonically inspired, he praises to varying degrees the likes of Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics (who have the *logos spermatikos*). However, the wisdom of the latter (to the extent that they have it) pales in comparison to the primordial philosophy of the more ancient Hebrew prophets. Justin thus appropriates the so-called *πρεσβύτερον κρείττον*-argument in use among Jewish apologists already from the second century BCE.

In "*Mimus Religionis*, Mimicry, and Deviance: Late Antique Polemic against Religious Others," Maijastina Kahlos focuses on how early Christian writers such as Lactantius and Augustine framed traditional Greco-Roman religions as distortions or imitations of authentic *religio*. She especially attends to the *religio-superstitio* binary, arguing that Christian authors diversely appropriated Greco-Roman conventions, tropes, and metaphors in their attempts to separate genuine Christianity from non-Christian worship, whether Greco-Roman cults ("paganism") or heresy. According to Kahlos, mimicry constitutes the broader concept that orients the manifold ways early Christian authors characterized their religious opponents.

Anni Maria Laato's "Tertullian on Christian Converts and Clashes with the Pagan World" examines how Tertullian delineated boundaries between the Christian and the non-Christian in his discussions of topics such as the *regula fidei*, the Lord's Prayer, and baptism. She contends that Tertullian carefully negotiated the limits of proper and improper engagement with non-Christian culture, balancing an early version of religious freedom, his training in philosophy and rhetoric, a promotion of childhood education (even if it included pagan mythology), the admitted similarity

of Christian and non-Christian rituals, and a high estimation of family feasts (so long as Christians did not offer sacrifices), on the one hand, with a commitment to scriptural precedent, his own religious development (including his later participation in the New Movement), and an adherence to a pure Christian life (absent of all pagan cultic practices), on the other. According to Laato, Tertullian's approach to boundaries, especially among converts, thus allowed for selected participation in the activities of the world even as it promoted a theologically/scripturally based Christian rejection of all things pagan and idolatrous.

Siiri Toiviainen Rø's "Worshipping a False Go(o)d: *Praeparatio Evangelica* 7.2–4 through the Lens of Anti-Epicurean Polemics" contextualizes Eusebius's rhetoric on the origin of idolatry in *Prep. ev.* 7 within a broader world of anti-Epicurean polemics. Drawing on the work of Brook Holmes and W. H. Shearin, Toiviainen Rø approaches Eusebius's appropriation of anti-Epicurean rhetoric through the lens of "dynamic reading," whereby one privileges "the creative and transformative potential" (120) that Epicureanism (understood as a kind of "text") could engender, without fixating on the accuracy of the claims made relative to some putative original intention. This approach supports her argument that Eusebius implicitly drew on broader negative associations with Epicureans (e.g., the deification of pleasure, the mistaken belief in the mortality of the soul, and the rejection of providence) to frame Egyptians and Phoenicians—and, by extension, Greeks—as pleasure seeking and religiously corrupted. This negative, ethnic presentation served as a foil for the Hebrews and, accordingly, reinforced the Hebrew-oriented genealogical model of Christianity that Eusebius promoted among recent Christian converts.

Joseph Grabau examines "Anti-Donatist Polemic and Biblical Hermeneutics: Questions of Ecclesiology in Augustine of Hippo's *De Doctrina Christiana*." He contends that Augustine appropriates classical ideas about exemplarity as he instructs his readers to incorporate sound biblical theology based on Christology and ecclesiology over polemics into their preaching and teaching. Augustine, in Grabau's reading, promotes a hermeneutic of restraint, *caritas*, and *unitas*, instructing would-be polemicists to focus on uplifting opponents rather than disgracing or humiliating them.

Timo Nisula's "Talking with the Enemy: Fictitious Polemical Dialogues against the Donatists in Augustine's *Sermones ad populum*" investigates the role of Augustine's "brief chats" (*sermocinationes*), with "fictitious or absent personalities ... independent of the boundaries of time and place" (164–65) in his polemic against Donatists. Nisula argues that, rather than depicting the actual views of the Donatists, this approach to dialogue—including biblical interlocutors—presented his theological opponents and their views to his congregants, who might encounter such Donatists, in a way that was entertaining, ridiculing, memorable, and didactic.

Eetu Manninen's "The Challenge of Shame for Philosophical Dialogue in Augustine's Early Writings" examines the role of shame and embarrassment (cf. the Latin *pudor*) in Augustine's early

dialogues. Manninen underscores Augustine's didactic use of embarrassing mistakes of reason—including in his dialogue with Evodius—to encourage readers to participate in a common search for truth even at the expense of admitting one's errors. As part of his analysis, Manninen also notes the development of shame in Augustine's writings, shifting from a negative emotion connected to wounded feelings to a more ambiguous emotion, often functioning in its negative sense as a component of concupiscence with overtly sexual connotations. Despite this development in Augustine's writings, so argues Manninen, it is possible that some of the later elements were already present in Augustine's earlier thoughts on shame.

Pablo Irizar's "The Grace of Merit and the Merit of Grace: Dialogical Ambiguity in Augustine's *Sermons*" attends to Augustine's biblical sermons that engage with the "rhetoric of the image" with an eye toward the grace/merit dialectic. Irizar argues that ambiguity characterizes the strategy of Augustine toward grace and merit, diversely shaping his emphasis on one or the other, their differences from each other, and at times even their conflation with one another in dialogue with his respective concerns and contexts (e.g., the different phases of the Pelagian controversy). According to Irizar, the result of Augustine's rhetoric in these sermons is "to *address* the audience such that the *address* challenges the audience to negotiate the limits of its self-understanding in new creative ways" (231, emphasis original), neither becoming indifferent to godly action due to determinism nor placing undue confidence on the goodness of human nature.

In "The Rhetoric of Appropriation and Dissociation in Evodius' *Aduersus Manichaeos*: A Case Study of Anti-Manichaean Polemics," Aäron Vanspauwen examines Evodius of Uzalis's *De fide contra Manichaeos*, which uses biblical/doctrinal arguments to attempt to convert Manicheans to Christianity. As part of this line of persuasive argumentation, Evodius presents God in a way that would presumably appeal to Manicheans (e.g., connecting God with light) and engages in polemic that consists of both "appropriation" and "dissociation," taking over and redeploying Manichean tropes such as light, darkness, and blindness against them (appropriation), while also separating the Manicheans in his audience from their founder, Mani (dissociation).

The volume concludes with "Threat of Conversion in the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam?," by Serafim Seppälä, which investigates Syriac anti-Islamic rhetoric from the seventh century CE. Seppälä contends that Syriac Christian literature initially did not focus on Muslims or on Islam but on the Arab conquerors; this theological component, however, increasingly developed (especially from the Abbasid period) and engendered an interest in apocalyptic motifs to explain the present situation. The early Syriac evidence, moreover, suggests that many who converted to Islam did not do so based on Islamic doctrine but on account of economic and social factors: the onerous religious taxation levied against non-Muslims; marriage to Muslims; social prestige; and quotidian relations with Muslims (e.g., drinking parties).

There is much to praise about this volume. Each of the essays provides interesting approaches to identity and polemic among Christian literary authors, demonstrating in detail how the authors rhetorically construct the differences between themselves and Others—in most cases, Christians and non-Christians. One gains a particularly rich understanding of Augustine’s polemical rhetoric, as it stands at the analytical centers of the essays by Grabau, Nisula, Manninen, and Irizar. The essay by Sami Yli-Karjanmaa also serves as a useful cautionary reminder of the significant role that scholarly categories such as Gnosticism can play in our historical reconstructions of ancient polemics. In short, the papers in the aggregate productively attest to the finer dimensions of polemical rhetoric that Christian authors—and, to a lesser extent, Jewish writers—deployed during late antiquity as they negotiated the limits of their faith in a complex and competitive late antique religious landscape.

At the same time, the volume has shortcomings. From an organizational perspective, it would have been useful for the editors to provide section divisions for the essays in this volume. As I have already hinted at above, the volume lacks a coherent structure, moving back and forth across theme, time, and religious tradition. In light of the goal of tracing “encounters between different religious traditions in Late Antiquity” (vi), which resided at the center of the conference on which the volume was based, one might have also expected at least one essay that grappled with religious boundaries in lived religion or in material culture. Such an analysis would have offered the reader a better understanding of the degree to which rhetorical conventions among literary authors might have had an impact on (Christian) congregations more generally. How did congregants respond to the rhetorical musing of, for instance, Augustine? Did any of these rhetorical persuasions work among those who heard them? One gains from this volume very little sense of how religious polemics played out in lived practice.

Such relatively minor issues notwithstanding, readers of this volume will certainly benefit from a wealth of useful information about religious polemics among selected early Jewish and, especially, Christian rhetors who practiced their literary craft during late antiquity.