

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Role of the Bishop in Late Antiquity. Conflict and Compromise.* Edited by A. FEAR, J. FERNÁNDEZ UBIÑA and M. MARCOS. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. x + 270. Hardcover, \$130.00. ISBN 978-1-7809-3217-0.

This volume contains thirteen contributions presented at a 2011 conference in Granada on the role of bishops in late antiquity. Eight of the contributors are scholars from Spain, the rest are from elsewhere. All the contributions are brief case studies. I wish I could say that I have found them interesting, thought-provoking or original, but I have not. What I have found, instead, is what one encounters all too often at international conferences on late antiquity. Totally traditional questions are answered in a totally traditional manner.

Among the topics touched, in order of importance, are the repression of Donatism (Chapters 2, 3 and 6), the Roman bishops' unsuccessful attempts to exercise the authority of an actual pope (Chapters 5, 8, and 9), the complex relationship between Hispanic bishops and their Visigothic and Byzantine masters (Chapters 12 and 13), Augustine's ambivalent attitude toward religious intolerance (Chapters 4, 7 and the chapters on Donatism), Priscillianism (Chapters 5 and 7), the ecclesiastical rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople as seen in Gregory Nazianzen's autobiographical writings (Chapter 1), and the use of Christianity by the Roman government as a tool for cultural imperialism beyond the frontiers (Chapter 11).

This last topic is discussed by Andrew Fear in what is, in my opinion, the best article in the volume. But Fear overstates his case. He neglects to mention the importance of slave raiding (in the northern frontiers above all) and deportations (in the Persian frontier) in the spread of Christianity outside the empire. The Roman government may indeed have attempted to use Christians in Gothia, Persia and elsewhere for its own purposes. But more often than not, the presence of Christians beyond the frontiers of the empire was a symptom not of imperial strength but of weakness, since those Christians (or their parents, as in Wulfila's case) had been taken there against their will.

“Conflict and Compromise” is the subtitle, but conflict figures far more prominently than compromise in these studies. This reflects our primary sources, of course. Conflict makes for headlines, whereas compromise is often tacit. But as a job description for late antique bishops this is misleading. We need to remember that there were hundreds of bishops in the empire at any given time and we know next to nothing about the vast majority of them. It is unlikely that they were in any way comparable to Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, etc. Instead, everything points to studied mediocrity. We know the exceptions. Let us not confuse them with the rule.

A similar warning is necessary regarding the role of emperors. It is often stated—here and elsewhere—that the emperors from Constantine onwards desired nothing more than religious unity, the “peace of the church.” That is indeed what imperial documents declare in all sincerity. But the emperors also declare tirelessly that nothing is more important to the Roman state than civic councils, the same civic councils that their policies are constantly eroding. Their actions, or at least the predictable consequences of their actions, belie their words. Whether the emperors were sincere or not, an ongoing empire-wide theological controversy seems to have been positively encouraged by an autocratic imperial system aiming at centralization. It gave the emperor endless opportunities to choose sides, to reward and punish. It drew the provinces to him. Stubborn theologians who felt that any theological compromise whatsoever threatened their own identity knew that every victory and every defeat would only be temporary.

The attentive reader of this book will find interesting things. Things such as Consentius’ fascinating letter to Augustine with its tragicomic twists, or a priest from Thasos on a mission at Constantinople to buy marble for his church who ends up using his money to support Gregory Nazianzen’s enemies. But this is a very expensive book. It is surely time for conference proceedings to be published online and be accessible to everyone free of charge.

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