

BOOK REVIEW

Religion and Competition in Antiquity. Edited by DAVID ENGELS and PETER VAN NUFFELEN. Brussels: Éditions Latomus, 2014. Pp. 307. Paper, €51.00. ISBN 978-2-87031-290-3.

Emerging from a workshop held at the Royal Library of Brussels in October 2010, this collection of twelve essays offers a wide-ranging investigation of religious competition in the ancient world. The focus throughout is not on the contestation of theological claims as such, but rather on the social, cultural, and political processes in which religious conflict was embedded.

In their introductory essay, the editors provide an illuminating overview of their approach, outlining the intersection of religious competition with other aspects of civic life. They discuss, moreover, recent scholarship that identifies contact and competition among different groups as an engine of religious change.¹ In particular, the editors call for an analysis of the so-called “market metaphor,” which assigns a greater role to individual choice than traditional models, and its applicability to the ancient world. The essays take up this challenge, some more explicitly than others.

Tom Boiy seeks to explain the emergence of the sky-god Anu as the patron deity of Uruk in the early fifth century BC. Boiy posits a political motivation, arguing that Uruk sought to challenge the supremacy of Marduk—the patron deity of Babylon and head of the Mesopotamian pantheon—by elevating Anu over its traditional patron Ištar.

Esther Eidinow rejects the traditional view that Greek oracular sanctuaries competed with one another and with independent seers, arguing instead that they

¹ See, for example, J. North, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, edited by J. Lieu, J. North, and T. Rajak (New York: 1992) 174-93; A. Bendlin, “Looking Beyond the Civic Compromise: Religious Pluralism in Late Republican Rome,” in *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy: Evidence and Experience*, edited by E. Bispham and C. Smith (Edinburgh: 2000) 115-35; A. Chaniotos, “Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults,” in *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, edited by S. Mitchell and P. Van Nuffelen (Cambridge: 2010) 112-40.

were part of a diversified “market of futures” in which cooperation was the key dynamic. The argument combines a range of literary and material evidence with a critique of the notion of religious economies, particularly the idea that oracular sanctuaries were capable of implementing a coherent strategy of competition.

Aikaterini Lefka considers the persecution of some famous Greek philosophers for “impious beliefs.” Lefka argues that most examples of such intolerance were motivated by a combination of personal and political concerns, rather than by religious sentiment alone. Greek religion, she concludes, was characterized by “liberty and tolerance.”²

Dominique Briquel argues for the generally harmonious integration of Etruscan divinatory practices into the Roman ritual system. Despite expressions of distrust and disputes between *haruspices* and Roman officials, the institutional position of haruspicy was never seriously questioned. In late antiquity, some Romans even presented the discipline as a native alternative to Christianity, its claims of divine revelation, and its promise of a better afterlife.

Françoise Van Haepelen employs material culture to question traditional narratives of competition in late antique Ostia. Focusing on the Lararium in the Mithraeum of the Snakes, she argues first for the coexistence of “native” and “foreign” deities. Second, she claims that the destruction of pagan buildings is “scarcely visible” in the material remains, despite an emphasis on antagonism in later Christian texts. Given this tantalizing evidence, Van Haepelen’s conclusion that the archaeological record “sheds little light” on religious competition feels anticlimactic.

Peter Van Nuffelen refutes Richard Lim’s suggestion that the orthodox hierarchy successfully eliminated public disputation as a way of settling doctrinal differences after the fourth century AD.³ Drawing on a variety of orthodox authors, Van Nuffelen demonstrates that late antique Christians continued to view debate as the proper way to establish the “truth” of their position, even if the ideal of a fair and open disputation was rarely (if ever) realized.

Focusing on the *Religious History* of Theodoretus, Veit Rosenberger analyzes three modes of competition among late antique ascetics. Monks are depicted as contending against the temptations of the devil, competing with God for entrance into paradise, and vying with one another in their ascetic practices. Competing dis-

² See, by way of contrast, S.J. Larson’s “The Trouble with Religious Tolerance in Roman Antiquity,” in *Religious Competition in the Third Century CE: Jews, Christians and the Greco-Roman World*, edited by J.D. Rosenblum, L.C. Vuong, and N.P. DesRosiers (Göttingen: 2014) 50-9.

³ R. Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: 1995).

courses of food and drink are particularly prominent. The ascetic *agon*, Rosenberger suggests, gained momentum when competition through martyrdom was no longer possible.

In the first of two essays examining competition and the Christianization of the Greco-Roman city, Ine Jacobs argues that Christian authorities sought to integrate traditional civic practices into an emerging secular sphere by removing (or neutralizing) overtly profane elements such as sacrifice and images of the gods. While most Christians accepted this compromise, more ascetic church leaders criticized all forms of traditional entertainment, promoting instead Christian monuments and ceremonies as the proper focus of communal identity.

Aude Busine, on the other hand, explores how late antique Christians initially appropriated pagan mythology and thereby integrated themselves into the traditional civic and intellectual culture of the Greek *polis*. Beginning with the reign of Justinian, however, cities forged new, specifically Christian communal identities by replacing pagan foundation myths with local histories based on biblical stories.

David Engels investigates the construction of “salvation histories” as a tool of self-definition and as a missionary strategy in Greco-Roman, Jewish, Christian, Manichaean, and Muslim apologetic literature. The tendency of each tradition to project itself into the past – the famous *Altersbeweis* (“argument from antiquity”) – resulted in interrelated Messianic narratives. Christianity, for instance, depicted itself as the teleology of paganism and Judaism, while Muslims argued that the gospels foretold the coming of Muhammad. In each case, claims of supremacy were articulated in relation to competing traditions.

The volume closes with an interesting historiographical essay by Danny Praet discussing the views of Ernest Renan and Franz Cumont on religious competition between Christianity and the so-called “Oriental” cults.

This collection succeeds in highlighting the diverse and complex nature of religious competition in the ancient Mediterranean. The essays are uniformly stimulating, though specialists may debate some conclusions in their own fields of expertise. Despite some distracting misspellings and grammatical errors, *Religion and Competition in Antiquity* is a valuable publication about an important topic.

MEGHAN DILUZIO

Baylor University, meghan_diluzio@baylor.edu