

BOOK REVIEW

Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire. By CARLOS R. GALVÃO-SOBRINHO. Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 2013. Pp. x + 310. Hardcover, \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-520-25739-9.

In this fascinating and innovative study, Galvão-Sobrinho analyzes the history and impact of the Arian controversy, a theological and political crisis that shook the Christian church and the Roman Empire for most of the fourth century CE. The crisis started with the teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, who affirmed the different nature and precedence of the Father over the Son. Rather than focusing on doctrinal or institutional issues, the author is concerned with the ways in which the definition of orthodoxy helped to establish bishops as the legitimate leaders of Christian communities. He examines not only the intellectual debates, but also the political strategies through which bishops tried to control their communities and the correct definition of God, while at the same time eliminating internal dissent from the Church. In the process, he draws a much more complex and realistic picture of episcopal authority in the Constantinian age, one in which violence and political assertiveness are just as important as charisma and moral standing.

The book is divided into three parts, followed by an appendix dedicated to issues of chronology and interpretation of the evidence. In the first part, Galvão-Sobrinho defines the historical background to the crisis, characterizing the way in which the establishment of episcopal power and the development of Christian theology went hand-in-hand before the fourth century. Due to its very uncertain and fluid nature, knowledge of God was a source of authority as well as a tool for questioning it (chapter one). In spite of their potential danger, doubts and discordances were dealt with through open debate, as Christian thinkers exchanged opinions and allowed considerable room for compromise when solving their disagreements (chapter two). It would be interesting to know whether debates taking place outside the Church (e.g. in intellectual circles) influenced these developments, and my impression is that the author could have explored the traditional character of Christian practices further.

Part two is dedicated to the eruption of the Arian controversy and the break-up of this conciliatory model. Galvão-Sobrinho moves from the social standing and political strategies of Arius and his rival, the bishop Alexander (chapter three), to the inhabitants of Alexandria and its environs (chapter four). He explores different types of social and political context, from the church of Alexandria and the remarkable diversity and autonomy of its parishes, to the different social groups (including sailors and millers) that were brought into the conflict. These are probably the most innovative chapters of the book, in which the social history of the great metropolis and its church is explored in great detail. The crisis soon spread around the Mediterranean, involving first bishops and their communities (chapter five) and later Constantine and the imperial court, an involvement that culminated in the council of Nicaea in 325 and the enforcement of an artificial consensus built around a new Creed, sponsored by the Emperor (chapter six). As the author shows, Christian bishops abandoned the earlier practice of open debate and compromise, adopting more effective ways of imposing their authority.

The third part of the book follows the collapse of the Nicæan settlement, when competing factions struggled to expel their opponents from their episcopal seats and redefine orthodoxy. Bishops employed unspeakable violence, coupled with political and economic coercion, as a means of enforcing their authority (chapter seven). The death of Constantine and the appearance of a new generation of bishops educated in the conflictual context of the previous decades, led to the appearance of a new type of religious leadership, more powerful and more assertive (chapter eight). Doctrinal intolerance prevented dialogue, while imperial intervention raised the stakes and offered new channels for opportunistic clerics to secure control over their communities and ensure the dominance of their factions. Rather than exceptional, violence and persecution became part of the repertoire of instruments available to bishops concerned with their own position within and beyond their communities.

The Arian crisis is a controversial topic, and our sources—frequently written by actors involved in these events—raise more difficulties than they solve. Galvão-Sobrinho handles these issues deftly: religious texts are considered not only for their content, but also for their performative power, their capacity to engage different groups and incorporate large parts of the population. As he points out, we cannot know the original content of Arius' teachings, nor how they evolved over time. But we can follow the ways in which he (and others involved)

reacted to each event, using words and actions as tools for the establishment of truth and power.

As religious enthusiasm and factional violence invaded different spaces of cities all over the eastern Mediterranean, imperial officials and pagans witnessed a radical historical transformation, when Christian religion and its leaders took center stage in the lives and preoccupations of the inhabitants and rulers of the Roman world. *Doctrine and Power* is an important book, a lively and stimulating account of a crucial period of Roman history. Galvão-Sobrinho succeeds in showing how much was at stake for the people involved, and how much we have to gain by considering the broader implications of religious controversies.

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