BOOK REVIEW

Rhetoric & Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Edited by RICHARD FLOWER AND MORWENNA LUDLOW. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 287. Hardback, £75/$100. ISBN: 9780198813194.

This volume comprises a collection of papers from two international conferences (Exeter 2015 and 2016) on the intersections of rhetoric and religious identity in late antiquity. The chronological focus is admittedly "the long fourth century" (3), and the approach follows the scholarly revaluation of late antique rhetoric in recent decades, in response to claims that rhetoric had lost its practical function and was primarily concerned with public display. Overall, the contributors adopt a broad definition of rhetoric and explore its functioning in relation to religious identity in a wide range of contexts and media.

Despite the limitations of an edited volume, the coverage is impressive. Individual chapters are dedicated to lesser-studied areas such as magic (Kahlos), legal literature (Humphries), Christian chronicles (Van Nuffelen), visual culture (Jensen) and Manichaean literature (Baker-Brian) – and it will be a satisfying read for both students and researchers. Nonetheless, there is no discussion of the "ethnic discourse concerning 'barbarians'" (despite mentions of its relevance on page 1 and on the dustjacket) and, given the scope of the volume, the absence of a chapter on Eastern Christianity is noticeable (e.g. Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, etc.).[1]

Part 1 offers a critical discussion of key concepts such as "Semi-Christian," "religion," "paganism," and "Hellenism" (3).

In Chapter 2, Éric Rebillard outlines a genealogy of the concept of "semi-Christian," which he critiques by denouncing "the presumption of the unique relevance of a singular classification" (in the words by Amartya Sen). He moves on to explain the dangers of "groupism" and calls for greater attention to the individuals' plurality of identities and their working in relation to one another: Rebillard makes use of identity theory to introduce the concepts of "salience of an identity,"

[1] For instance, Ephrem or Aphrahat would be obvious candidates for Syriac. See e.g. the work of Flavia Ruani, Christine Shepardson and Naomi Koltun-Fromm.

i.e. "its probability of being activated in a situation," and "arrangement of category membership sets" (24-25), which he then applies to the case study of the religious and literary identities of Ausonius.

Aaron P. Johnson (Chapter 3) proposes an investigation into the use of religious labels by Porphyry and his early readers, most notably Iamblichus and Eusebius. He accepts that "late-antique pagans failed to articulate a common identity for themselves in terms of their religion" (28), but he also makes a case that Porphyry and his early readers "articulate religious identity labels indicating (or at least groping towards) a shift in religious conceptions, insofar as they formulate an ideal for pagan religious thought or practice" (30).

In Chapter 4, Douglas Boin uses Emperor Julian's vocabulary as a lens to explore the "in-group" nature of 4th-century religious rhetoric. He argues that Julian used the term *Hellenismos* (*Ep.* 22) as a "reclaimed epithet" from Christian discourse. In this case, he suggests that *Hellenismos* should be understood as a pejorative in-group description for Christians who acted "too Greek," to which Julian instead gave a positive spin. According to this reading, Julian should be placed within the broader 4th-century Christian debate on what it meant to be Christian in relation to Roman culture.

Part 2 focuses on agency and on "*who* is responsible for representations of religious identity in the fourth century" (3).

In Chapter 5, Shaun Tougher focuses on Julian's *Hymns to the Mother of the Gods*, which he brings into dialogue with two Christian hostile accounts of the same cult, by Arnobius and Firmicus Maternus. The analysis shows that Julian's aim was not merely to provide a Neoplatonic interpretation of the myth and the cult of the Great Mother, but that, when put into its context, Julian's drive was also apologetic and anti-Christian in orientation.

Susanna Elm (Chapter 6) uses Augustine's fantastic tale on "certain monstruous races of men" (*civ. Dei* 16.8) as a window into Augustine's *historialis cognitio*, in contrast and in competition with Pliny the Elder's (the likely the source for this very tale). While Pliny aimed to develop "the proper cognitive unit" to understand nature in its individual as well as extraordinary parts (with a concurrent emphasis on the "multidimensional power of the *pax Romana*"), for Augustine *mirabilia* are the "embodiment of divine design" (96): even extraordinary human bodies descend from Adam, and they ultimately attest to the unifying power of God.

In Chapter 7, Raffaella Cribiore extends Santo Mazzarino's "democratization of culture" to the field of rhetorical education: in her view, democratization of

culture in late antiquity was not limited to Christians but cut across religious boundaries. As evidence of this, she cites Libanius' and Chrysostom's complaints about the shrinking standards of rhetoric (when placed in relation to classical models). A few years later, Augustine proposed a new and less normative understanding of rhetorical training that moved away from the rigidity of the traditional classroom.

In Chapter 8, Nicholas Baker-Brian uses two Manichaean *Kephalaia* to explore the Manichaeans' engagement with religious debate in late antiquity (building on work by Averil Cameron and Richard Lim).[2] These texts, which at times take the form of dialogue and are rightly understood in the broader context of late antique dialogue literature and *erotapokriseis*, also contributed to the presentation of Mani as a successful debater in the context of religious competition.

By exploring how Christian leaders constructed narratives of a "magicless Christianity" in a wide range of texts (including *erotapokriseis* and Conciliar Acts), Maijastina Kahlos (Chapter 9) argues that "magic functioned as a boundary-making concept" in the articulation of Christian identity and orthodoxy (140). It was necessary for Christians to refute accusations of magic and to demarcate the activities of holy men (and women) and those of sorcerers – a strategy that should be understood in the context of competition among ritual experts in Roman society.

Part 3 asks "how religious identity was expressed" and constructed "within the educated culture of late antiquity" (7-8).

In Chapter 10, Mark Humphries explores the editorial principles that guided the compilation of the *Theodosian Code*, with reference to the construction of Christianity that emerges from Book 16. Features such as the preponderance of Theodosian legislation over that of earlier emperors, the deployment of the rhetoric of *superstitio* to condemn paganism, and the interpretation of Constantine as the starting point for the compilation (a view that is shared with Theodosian ecclesiastical historians) "yield a picture of Christianity in the Code that coheres with mid-fifth-century Constantinopolitan ideology" (152).

Peter Van Nuffelen's chapter (11) focuses on Christian chronicle literature of the long 4th century, of which some eighteen instances are known (in Greek and

[2] Cameron, Averil. *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity*. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University 2014; Lim, Richard. *Public Disputation, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

Latin). He argues that, in the 4th century, "the chronicle and not ecclesiastical history was the main historiographical genre for Christians": the chronicle is the foremost venue to explore "if and how religious identity plays out in historiography" (161). While ecclesiastical histories tend to focus on confessional conflict (particularly with Arianism), three case studies show that, in chronicles, "doctrinal identities are assumed […], but are not central to them. Rather, [chronicles] convey a more general Christian identity"; they place particular emphasis on the distinction from paganism and Judaism and reflect an emerging sense of local identity (177).

In the following chapter (12), Richard Flower moves onto heresiological literature. By focusing on the prefaces of Epiphanius' *Panarion*, Filastrius's *Liber* and Augustine's *De haeresibus*, he brings to the fore some of the rhetorical tools that were widespread in ancient technical literature (such as Pliny the Elder and Galen) and that were intended to construct the authority of these texts and their authors. Epiphanius, Filastrius and Augustine adopted a traditional "rhetoric of modesty," but they also independently engaged with Scripture and with "the specifically Christian rhetoric of divine inspiration" (197).

In an instructive chapter (13), Robin Jensen traces the history of sarcophagus iconography (both pagan and Christian) from the late 2nd to the 4th century. Scripture offered the subject for a stock set of recurring motifs on Christian sarcophagi; the limited visual vocabulary of these images, however, demanded from the viewers some familiarity with both the stories and their visual language: owners and viewers alike relied on a shared Christian *paideia* (215) that could be attained through oral forms of discourse such as sermons and catechesis.

In Chapter 14, Hajnalka Tamas presents the background and contents of the *Liber ad Renatum Monachum* by Asterius Ansedunensis, a short treatise on asceticism probably composed in the early 5th century. The text owes a debt to Jerome, and it uses Scriptural exegesis and the creation and fall narratives to make a case in favor of solitary asceticism as much as to denounce and condemn "false ascetics."

Morwenna Ludlow (Chapter 15) closes the collection with an exploration of "rhetoric about literary style" among Christian authors, focusing on the Cappadocians. She argues that "'rhetoric about literary style' was used in […] acts of self-definition" (231) and that "Christian authors shared the same kinds of concerns about 'stylistic decorum' as their non-Christian contemporaries and forbears" (241). The Cappadocians' discussion of literary style cannot be reduced to an opposition between 'plain' (Christian) style and 'elaborate' (classical) style;

rather, they were trained to observe and use the three traditional *genera dicendi* (slender, pleasant, sublime) with an awareness of literary appropriateness and in a context of rhetorical self-positioning.

The essays offer an excellent sample of the best and most recent work on rhetoric and religious identity during the long 4th century. They explore the domains and the functioning of rhetoric well beyond public display and, taken together, they showcase the effort and the strategies that went into the negotiation and the articulation of religious identities. This volume will be useful for a broad audience of students and researchers alike. It is well produced (with the minor exception of an issue with the Syriac text on page 170), and includes images, a general bibliography and an index.

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