

BOOK REVIEW

Unfinished Christians: Ritual Objects and Silent Subjects in Late Antiquity. By GEORGIA FRANK. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. Pp. x + 193. Hardback, \$59.95. ISBN: 978-1-5128-2395-0.

“How might we study the experiences of ordinary Christians in late antique cities?” is the question that drives Georgia Frank’s latest book (91). Her answers—tuned to a particular historical moment but relevant to all ancient Mediterranean religions—apply lessons learned from scholars who, shying away from belief systems and institutions, have plotted pathways toward the study of religion as “lived,” as embodied in practice and ritual, as shared with objects and things and as expressed in affect or emotion. Frank, who has contributed much already to understanding the lifeways of late antique Christians, knows that recent years have seen ordinary Christians—the “nonordained, nonmonastic, and nonaristocratic” (2)—capture some of the attention long devoted to the age’s extraordinary figures: ascetic superstars, bishops and rhetorically clever preachers. *Unfinished Christians* shifts the spotlight onto “ritual settings . . . where ordinary Christians gathered” (2-3). Her concern is not to expose individual agency and interiority, often the focus of lived religion scholarship, but rather to assess the experience of the “laity,” especially as it congregated *en masse* in baptisteries, shrines, churches and city streets to participate in the group activities of late antique Christian life—baptisms, processions, festivals and nighttime vigils. Adapting trends in the study of contemporary religions, *Unfinished Christians* targets the “collective agency” of crowds as they perform choreographed gestures, process through the city, chant responsively, adore relics or carry lamps to contest the dark. To this end, with “precious few first-person accounts by ordinary Christians” to offer insight, Frank has elected to foreground liturgical manuals, festal hymns and above all sermons that paint “group portraits” of their audiences. This crucial decision is both the study’s great strength and its most serious challenge, for it empowers elites to speak on behalf of the undifferentiated Christians who are the book’s subjects. Sermons and hymns—descriptive and prescriptive texts largely composed by episcopal impresarios and

religious experts—are summoned to stand in for the lost and muffled testimony of the wan figures milling in “the back of the church” or shivering “in the dimly lit threshold of the baptistry” (97). To be sure, Georgia Frank is a perceptive reader of the sermons, songs and lectionaries she unpacks, but closing the gap between these texts, with their penchant for manipulating feelings and their investments in vivid *ecphrases* and ramped-up *energeia*, as Frank acknowledges, also renders them an imprecise gauge of normalized group experience (and an even cruder measure of individual affect).

The book’s first themed chapter, “Crafting the Unfinished Christian: Baptisteries as Workshops,” illustrates both the rewards of the study’s approach and its methodological conundrum. Painstakingly assembled evidence details just how often Christian preachers and teachers drew upon the ubiquitous realia of an economy of handicraft, small scale industry and apprenticeship to forge an arsenal of analogies, similes and metaphors for expressing both God’s crafting of humans and the iterative processes by which Christians were (re)crafted in the workshops of the catechumenate and baptism. With surprising frequency bishops figured baptismal preparation as craft training or represented catechumens as the raw materials of production, paralleling the apprentice’s maturation into a craft-master and the catechumen’s transformation into a Christian. Yet, while the chapter makes evident the ease with which religious specialists like John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus enlisted craft imagery in their instructions and homilies, we may wonder if these rhetorical moves do not speak most eloquently about how religious professionals preferred catechumens to think of themselves. Even if we can postulate that widespread familiarity with handicrafts and workshops would have made ordinary Christians receptive to such endorsements, demonstration lies beyond the horizon of these sources.

Similarly, although Chapter 3, “Processions and Portabilia,” reminds us of the centrality of processions (and the things carried in them) to civic and communal identity, it also relies heavily on descriptive literary accounts composed by elite impresarios and writers—sermons, funerary orations and hagiography—to make its case that spectating, processing or bearing sacred objects “embedded ordinary Christians into the urban landscape” (56). That is, for all Frank’s success in distilling from literary sources the multi-sensory atmosphere of ancient parades and the dense materiality of processions, its throngs of ordinary Christians remain impressionistically drawn. Two further chapters, “Liturgical Emotions and Layered Temporalities” and “Singing and Sensing the Night,” primed with delightful vignettes, continue the pursuit along similar lines. In these chapters—

by highlighting the “emotional whiplash” (62) perpetrated by Gregory of Nyssa’s nativity homily or by encouraging us to ride the “emotional rollercoaster” (74) of Cyril of Jerusalem’s Psalm-laden sermon for the Feast of the Ascension—Frank undoubtedly edges us closer to “reconstructing the feelings of ordinary Christians” (58). Observing how Romanos the Melodist’s night-vigil *kontakia* pushed congregants to identify through word and gesture with the “doubts, fears, and hopes of characters from biblical stories” (81) is to be recalled to other webs of memory spun by lamp-lit rituals staged in the depths of night. Continuous time, too, Frank is good at showing, was a restless force that preachers unleashed or tamed to affective purpose with verbal and emotional cues, cycling people through the liturgical year or pulling them to and fro between past, present and future. We gain considerable traction on a slippery slope from these re-routings.

Unfinished Christians is a humane, sympathetic and provocative study. It seeks to rehumanize marginalized people as well as rematerialize the past. It builds on a deep and broad foundation of dialogue with interdisciplinary partners, although these critical exchanges are relegated to endnotes requiring a second bookmark. And, by creating space for those who follow, it offers an irresistible invitation to take up anew an unfinished assignment. Frank, for example, explicitly sets out to explore “the sensory and affective dimensions of material spaces and objects relating to Christians who assembled for rituals” (14), yet the only image the book provides is the small ivory pyxis on its front cover. Of course, objects, glossed as “the pulse of ritual life” (91), appear throughout the book’s arguments—but only in verbal description. Necessarily, then, more remains to be said about “ritual objects and silent subjects” and epigraphy as well as visual imagery and objects should be ushered back into the conversation. In the end, this is an optimistic study. Although admittedly “imperfect” in its attempt to bring “to visibility people whose actual lives and desires were beyond the ken of those who addressed or described them” (97), *Unfinished Christians* models ways to answer the question that opens this review. Attention to affect, concentration on the generative capacities of ritual, recognition of the agency of things, all these (and more), as Frank demonstrates, should give us the confidence to step across the boundaries that separate us from them. Compensating for subjects whose voices have been muted by time, *Unfinished Christians* suggests above all how we can re-read even elite literary texts to gain insight into the “embodied experiences of ordinary Christians in ritual settings” (16).

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