

Jan Willem Drijvers & John W. Watt (ed.), *Portraits of Spiritual Authority. Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 227p., ISSN 0927-7633, ISBN 90-04-11459-9.

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This book is the outcome of a workshop held in Cardiff during May 1998 and covers an important period of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Byzantine era, focusing the perennial question of the status of the “holy man” within the religious society under review. Divided into three main parts (“People and Portraits”, “The Struggle for Authority”, “The Representation of Authority”), the volume edited by Drijvers and Watt deals with a wide range of topics emerging in different geographical and cultural contexts: North Africa, Asia Minor, Palestine, and Constantinople.

The first author in the volume is the American scholar Elizabeth A. Clark, with her rather deceptive essay on “Rewriting Early Christian History: Augustine’s Representation of Monica” (3-26). After a long and tiresome ‘methodological’ introduction, which reminds us of the literary component of any historical account, Clark calls for a reading of Monica’s life as seen through the lens of the “intertextual play” of Augustine’s narrative. The suggestion is that a real Monica does not, in fact, exist, except as literary construction, and that in trusting the notion of transparency the reader is very likely to deceive himself. The same hermeneutics of suspicion seems to dictate the agenda of the following contribution, which attempts to map “the struggle for authority”. Why is that “authority” or “power”, and not “truth” or “reality”, should be the object of pursuit for the holy men in Late Antiquity we are not told. Alastair H. B. Logan writes about “Magi and Visionaries in Gnosticism” (27-44) by applying the grid of interpretation canonised by the contemporary social scientist R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge. The formation of any religious cult is supposedly explained through three models: the psychopathological, the entrepreneurial and the subcultural-evolutionary one. Christine Trevett deals with the “Spiritual Authority and the ‘Heretical’ Woman: Firmilian’s Word to the Church in Carthage” (45-62). It is an interesting episode from the third century (CE), drawing heavily on the epistolary corpus of Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote letters of pastoral advice to bishop Firmilian of Caesarea. Trevett reveals how the problem of “heresy” and “orthodoxy” was not always decided on the fringes of doctrinal controversies, but more decisively with regards to liturgical and sacramental practices. In this study-case one can understand the role played very early on in the Christian Church by the bishop, who was entitled to suppress the charismatic activities of women claiming prophetic insights. “The unnamed female prophet was already being described in categories which would in due course come to be markers of the heretical woman proper, and the reverse image of that compliant orthodox woman that the church had been promoting. She had been, according to Firmilian, in the public and not the private sphere, behaving disorderly and disrupting the ordered community, demonically wily and deceitful, usurping the rites of men, and sexually predatory” (*op. cit.*, 59).

Rowan Williams is the author of another attractive essay, offering a reflection on the “Troubled Breasts: The Holy Body in Hagiography” (63-78), dealing mostly with texts from the fourth and the fifth century. Starting from two anecdotes that evoke the mysterious power hidden in the body of the young Origen, and Lucian of Antioch’s breast become altar of sacrifice for his surrounding disciples, Williams moves on to discuss the general question of bodily sanctification through martyrdom. The main references include here the martyrdom of Polycarp (but not, surprisingly, the famous letter to the Romans by Ignatius of Antioch), and especially *De Vita Antonii* by Athanasius. Staying in conversation with D. Brakke (who in 1995 published his book on *Athanasius and Politics of Asceticism*), R. Williams notes that in this seminal story written by the Alexandrian bishop, “the martyr’s body and the saint’s living flesh are both dangerous ‘sites’” (*op. cit.*, 67). In fact, the issue of how God dwells in the saints’ bodies remains controversial since it can receive different theological accounts. Athanasius doesn’t seem to be very keen in response to the Arian challenge, on celebrating

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the later “orthodox” model of synergic activity. In Anthony we find not the harmony of two wills smoothly at work, but rather the passive reception of the enlightening grace coming from above. The body of the saint becomes, as it were, “the site of a struggle between divine and human will, a site marked by the cost and wounds of that struggle” (*op. cit.*, p. 68). This picture betrays clear Christological tenets of Alexandrian origin. A. Grillmeier called it the “Logos-sarx” Christology, in which the body taken by Christ becomes the mere “organon” of divinisation (*De Incarnatione* 52-54). In consequence, the process of universal sanctification is to be effected through bodily, indeed material agents, such as the Eucharist. Williams makes use of St Anthony’s recently published letters, which show us the patriarch of the Egyptian desert exhorting his followers to transform their bodies in living altars in which the divine flame, like in the burning bush (Exodus 3), will not be consumed. This popular and early Christian understanding of the presence of the Spirit on the earthly surface of human existence seems to be confirmed in the devotion received by the shrines, graves or relics of the first martyrs and, indeed, of Christ himself. In Williams beautiful prose, “touched by God, and so marked for good, the holy body that was once the site of divine action may be expected to continue to be as such, a tangible link among earthly things with the Creator’s power. The language may be a little extravagant, but it would not be too far wrong to say that the holy body in this context is a kind of *theatre* in which the same dramatic action may be ‘played’ in death as in life, precisely because the agent is the immortal God rather than the human saint in isolation; and the action is authoritative and recognisable in virtue of the holy body’s incorporation into the ecclesial body, by its location, its role in ecclesial devotion and ecclesial self-identification. We have already all the ingredients that will before too long lead to the placing of relics in or under the altars of all churches.” (*op. cit.*, 71). The Alexandrian position did not remain unchallenged and among the most astute Antiochean theologians, Theodore defends the idea the chalice of the Eucharist is not the inert container of an all-pervasive sacredness of God, independently of the doxological approach of the believer. God’s natural transcendence retains a freedom of manifestation that can always eschew substantialisation. In letting himself being eucharistically masticated, Christ immediately withdraws on a different plane of donation, such as the scriptural one. The Chalcedonian settlement in Christology brought the middle-way between Alexandria and Antioch, endorsing the theological principals of the later iconodule theology who, through a participatory device that implied both the subjective devotion and objective instalment of grace, located the holy in the essentially elusive character of the icons. From the understanding of the relationship between grace and materiality, of course, one can derive the grammar of devotion and also trace the borders of right worship, beyond which we encounter the realm of blasphemy. It is certainly true late that in the eighth century not only the bodies of the saints were passion bearers, but also the icons of these bodies were given mortal and indelible wounds. Needless to say, a mere Platonizing view, ironically invoked by the iconoclasts, would have never allowed the magnitude of this violent spectacle.

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Again about tokens of sanctity and materials of religious propaganda speaks J. Willem Drijvers in his article entitled “Promoting Jerusalem: Cyril and the true Cross” (79-98). We learn how, through a complicated strategy of promoting the cult of the Cross (found by the Empress Hellen, the mother of Constantine), Cyril of Jerusalem succeeded in making his bishopric influential in the context of the ecclesiastical relationships of the fourth century, Palestine. S. Mitchell analyses “The Life and the *Lives* of Gregory Thaumaturgus”, the famous disciple of Origen and source of inspiration for one of Gregory of Nyssa’s hagiographical work. An important feature of this life is the Trinitarian Creed ascribed by the bishop of Nyssa to Gregory Thaumaturgus. Mitchell contends against L. Abramowski that Gregory of Nyssa composed this Creed with the specific purpose to endorse the theological position of Basil of Caesarea against the Trinitarian heresiarch Atarbius by invoking the legendary authority of the wonder-maker martyr Gregory or, more generally speaking, to

back up the position of the Nicene theologians in the late controversy with the neo-Arian theologians. Apart from this theological judgement, Mitchell finds in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Gregory of Thaumaturgus* "a new type of hagiography" shaped by the central presence of the miraculous deeds. Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered: what was Gregory's literary model in writing this piece of hagiography? To what extent and at what expense does he depart from the biblical narrative of, for instance, the Acts of the apostles? Are we, modern scholars, not too quick in assuming that a sober character such as Gregory of Nyssa was ready to make up a story merely by using his pious imagination, meeting thus the naïve expectations of a credulous audience? Of course, these questions would bring us back to our objections to Elizabeth Clark's essays, commanding a re-assessment of the crude premises of the positivistic research done nowadays in Patristics. Here, the ontological tyranny of textualism is parallel to the deceiving certainties of the hermeneutics of intention, with the ultimate result that the grasp of reality emerges from the interaction with the words. "Words, words, words" – as the once the prince of Denmark put it. Beyond this, all meanings or the mere phenomenological possibilities are suspended. Against these academic taboos, one must continually exercise pressure and provoke embarrassment.

Han J. W. Drijvers writes on "Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa: Spiritual Authority and Secular Power", while John W. Watt deals with "A Portrait of John Bar Aphtonia, Founder of the Monastery of Quenneshre". "Babai the Great's *Life of George* and the Propagation of Doctrine in the Late Sasanian Empire" is the topic discussed by Gerrit J. Reinink, in his attempt to prove again how hagiographical material is expected to make a certain theological claim, in this case, favouring Nestorian Christology. Finally, Peter Hatlie makes a contribution to the study of Byzantine urban monasticism covering the period of Dark Age (650-800), a time in which monks seem to have already lost their distinctive character, being deeply embedded in the social institutions of the Empire. As a final remark, it should be said that all essays come with an impressive bibliography, and that the overall quality of the texts is good. The publisher of this book, and its editors alike, deserve admiration for their scholar achievement. Once again, the E. J. Brill collection "Religions in the Graeco-Roman World" coordinated by R. Van den Broek, H. J. W. Drijvers and H. S. Versnel (all professors in Netherlands) ranks among the best series in the contemporary study of Late Antiquity. Challenging and controversial, the papers gathered by Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt are worthy of attention for all students interested in the religious transformation of the Mediterranean world from the third up to the ninth century.

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