

**Éric Rebillard and Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015). viii + 317 pages + indices + bibliography. ISBN 978-0-8132-2743-6. Hardcover \$65.00.**

*Carson Bay, Florida State University*

This volume, the work of the international research group at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt, applies the important heuristics of ‘individualization’ and ‘deindividualization’ to the religious identities constructed within the Roman Empire. ‘Religion’ ends up being a useful category to explore such questions, having performed in antiquity the task of ensuring social cohesion/uniformity *and* allowing a voice/place for marginalized groups. Moreover, the editors identify in the imperial period a “dialectical process” by which religious groups effectively replaced “dwindling...local political identities” as identity producers, thus contributing to “religious individuality (4).” Such a work is important in an academic climate that so often deconstructs long held notions of group isolation (e.g. Judaism) and stable confessional identities in late antiquity, yet still, as the editors note, reifies the homogeneity and solidarity of groups claiming to represent fluid and diverse identities. Rüpke in particular has been at the forefront of such discussions of late, and this volume adds other and new voices to the chorus.

Karl Noethlichs’ leading essay frames the “legal framework of religious identity” for subsequent essays. He first explains how Decius’ mid-third century sacrifice decree ended centuries of more or less localized religious autonomies. This centralized religious hegemony was later wielded by Constantine. However, Noethlichs describes Constantine’s policies as those of one determined “to persuade all the people of the empire to become Christians (18),” ignoring

potential exaggeration by Eusebius and the literary nature of his *Vita*<sup>1</sup> and, importantly, scholarship painting Constantine as being much more concerned with consensus than conversion.<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to describe the legalities of religious identity between Constantine and Justinian, relying heavily upon the *Theodosian Code*. While he claims to examine “how the emperors *expected* the citizens to behave (18, emphasis mine),” Noethlich actually describes confidently how imperial legislation created immense pressure upon heretics, pagans and Jews toward Orthodox Christianity. Evidence that such legal ideals were actually realized is lacking. Nevertheless, Noethlich’s essay highlights the exceptionally important legal component affecting religious groups and individuals in late antiquity.

Jason BeDuhn begins the book’s second section, treating religious individuals, by exploring the problem of the reality of religious diversity *vis-à-vis* religious authority, norms, and desire for unity. He explores the religious idiosyncrasies of Augustine of Hippo and Faustus and Milevis, in whose cases the authority of Christ, not philosophical bent, determined identity, but each added unique necessary components of Christianity to their constructs. Attention to notions of friendship which Augustine seems to have valued throughout his ‘conversion’ process would have been helpful here.<sup>3</sup> Taking a material turn, Kim Bowes has a chapter much in line with her recent book,<sup>4</sup> here showing how an aristocrat’s chapel outside the local Basilica and a requested

---

<sup>1</sup> Averil Cameron, “Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine,” 145–74, in M. J. Edwards and Simon Swain, eds., *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> H. A Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 157–60.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

self-communion outside of weekly Mass “elide or at least push the boundaries of institutionally defined ritual acts” in the sixth century (55). Closing this individually-oriented section, Susanna Elm deconstructs some traditional categories in illustrating Gregory of Nazianzus’ concept of *theōsis*. Influenced by Stoic cosmology and engaging thinkers from Empedocles to Julian, Gregory surprisingly agrees with these ‘pagans’ that the *telos* of the Christian life—deification—is exclusively accessible (to very few) through *paideia*. What Gregory adds is that such *theōsis* should be done *on behalf of the religious community*. Thus, a (Platonic? Biblical?) authority structure apparently underlies Gregory’s reconciliation of individual vs. community salvation. Elm’s close reading of Gregory’s neglected 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *Orations* exposes an important, creative, aggregative, idiosyncratic late antique treatment of the individual/communal tension inherent in religious discourse and practice.

Beginning the next section, on ‘Group Strategies and Individual Religiosity,’ Tessa Rajak’s wonderfully written account of the mother martyr in 4 Maccabees shows how this character could embody the power of national loyalty and piety. Informed by Greek tragedy and informing early Christian martyr accounts, 4 Maccabees employs the literary artistry of the Second Sophistic to heroize the famous mother of seven who, despite physical weakness and her sex’s supposed “irrationality,” became inscribed forever as the victorious athlete-warrior, but fighting *on behalf of her people*, in the struggle for unadulterated religious identity.<sup>5</sup> Continuing this martyrological vein, Judith Perkins expands upon her own earlier work,<sup>6</sup> demonstrating

---

<sup>5</sup> By including this 1<sup>st</sup>- or 2<sup>nd</sup>-century text, this volume takes the broader view of what ‘late antiquity’ covers, famously established in Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> See Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

through Perpetua how Christians defined themselves against the imperial state, by “coopting and redirecting some of the elites’ key identity indicators ... education and imitation (129).” This they did while remaining class inclusive.

A chapter by Kristine Iara attempts a happy medium between seeing late antique pagan aristocrats as religiously disinterested self-promoters, or dedicated, even evangelical, devotees. Methodologically important here is Iara’s concern not to “view religious and secular motivations as necessarily inconsistent” in pagan building projects and devotion (167). Such sentiment, in fact, received book-length resonance in E. J. Watts’ volume appearing about the same time as the present one.<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Spickerman’s following chapter tentatively explores certain initiatory (broadly construed) rites in the Cybele (-Attis) and Mithras cults of the 2<sup>nd</sup>- through 4<sup>th</sup>-century Empire, concluding that collective identity usually carried the day in such cults. This chapter is particularly valuable, not only because epigraphists are rare, but also because an appendix provides extensive texts of Latin epigraphs.

Part IV, on ‘Individuals, Identities, and Religion,’ begins with Jörg Rüpke’s ambitious reconstruction of the *Chronograph of 354* in an effort to clarify the codex’s socio-cultural context. Providing a helpful translation of the codex’s holiday list, Rüpke shows how the calendar conforms to Julian (Roman), not Christian (Easter cycle), standards. Notably, Rüpke identifies the *Chronograph* as a “private compilation, and its parts ... individual version of underlying tradition (265),” showing how religious themes prominent in the text evince an inclusivist aristocratic attitude uninterested in making ‘vulgar’ distinctions between, e.g., Novatian and orthodox, even Christian and pagan. Rüpke reinforces the kind of broadly

---

<sup>7</sup> E. J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015).

monotheistic mindset attributed to aristocratic religious individuality in the fourth century by scholars of late,<sup>8</sup> a position directly contradicting the older view that “the conversion of the emperor brought with it the disappearance of religious pluralism.”<sup>9</sup> Such pluralism is on display in Rubina Raja’s essay on St. Theodore, whose dedicatory inscription on a church in Gerasa casts him in multiple socio-religious roles. This essay is another epigraphically and archaeologically rich addition to this volume.

Finally, Éric Rebillard adopts Robers Brubaker’s method of beginning social/historical analysis *without* the assumption of groups, and thus seeks to analyze when, in the age of Augustine, “Christians do and do not activate the category of Christianness (294).” His media are letters and sermons of Augustine, through whose “dialogic nature” he seeks to apprehend Augustine’s audience’s “scripts” (self-presentations). Rebillard concludes that “Christianness was not the common frame of interpretation for everyday experience (314),” seeking to explode the axiomatic bifurcation of religious and secular, and questioning whether or how much ‘Christians’ in Augustine’s audience would have acted as a group after his sermons ended. By studying individuals, Rebillard turns “the group-making process” into an object of study. His conclusion should be quoted as a fitting and poignant technical contribution of this work:

Transferring our unit of analysis from the group to the individual thus yields some important results and invites us to begin rethinking some of the general assumptions we

---

<sup>8</sup> Even the ‘fixed and determinative’ binary categories of ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ are being traded for theories of fluidity by scholars like Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, “From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism in Early Christianity?” 1–26, in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 18; this argument being an extension of that pertaining to the preceding imperial centuries in John North, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” 174–93, in Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak, eds., *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1992). It should be noted that Rebillard cites the latter as a ‘seminal’ precursor to the present volume’s trajectory (293).

share about the period. It is not enough to refine the classical division between pagans and Christians and to posit “five overlapping categories,” as suggested recently by Alan Cameron: at the two extremes, committed pagans and committed Christians; then, center-pagans on the one side and center-Christians on the other; in the middle, a large group of people that “resisted straightforward classification.”<sup>10</sup> Such a scheme perpetuates the confusion between categories and groups and also ascribes to religious affiliation precisely the salience that it did not have (315).

Such theoretically oriented thinking applied to often-neglected, always-interesting material, emblematic of this volume, makes it a much welcome addition riding the tidal bore sweeping late antiquity into the academic center-stage and finer distinctions into the study of late antiquity.

---

<sup>10</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 176–77.