

A POLITICAL HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY by Allen Brent *T & T Clark*, Edinburgh, 2009, pp. xviii + 326, £25; **A NEW HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY** by Charles Freeman, *Yale University Press*, New Haven, 2009, pp. xvi + 377, £25; **AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO: A LIFE** by Henry Chadwick, *Oxford University Press*, Oxford, 2009, pp. xx + 177, £8.99

The comprehensive study of the world into which Christianity was born demands the mastery of a challenging range of disciplines and types of evidence. The historian of ideas also needs to be able to enter, with intellectual humility, into minds very different from our own; only in that way will he or she grasp the significance of the mass of available bits of information. Most scholars, unsurprisingly, contribute only small pieces to the overall jigsaw. It takes someone exceptional to write an authoritative general account of early Christianity, let alone one capable of changing our fundamental understanding of the period. Allen Brent's *A Political History of Early Christianity* is such an account.

Brent has two key insights: first, that everyone in the ancient world took for granted the tight connection between metaphysical and theological, natural, and socio-political, peace and good order; second, that the shifts in interpretation of the human and political world, which thus reflected shifts in the understanding of the divine world, affected pagans and Christians in parallel and mutually interacting ways. Brent makes helpful use of twentieth-century parallels to illustrate the way that socio-political worldviews function. His hermeneutic proves remarkably fruitful, as again and again he is able to illuminate the significance of an obscure reference, whether from a canonical text or a little-known inscription. His attention to religious ritual, both pagan and Christian, is particularly perceptive.

The book focuses on the contrast between apocalyptic interpretations of Christianity and its relation to political authority, and those that seek some kind of accommodation with non-Christians. The first chapter argues, against gnostic or political readings, that Jesus saw himself as an eschatological prophet inaugurating a new and definitive reign of God. At the very least, this was the understanding of the Markan community, which lived in Rome in the 60s AD, Brent argues, under the threat of persecution, and believed in an imminent second coming, rather than a past resurrection, of Jesus. For this reason the community had no interest in engaging with or reforming the state; its oppression was simply to be endured. On the other hand, its interest in portents (e.g. Mark 13.24–25) would have suggested to the pagan authorities that it welcomed the breakdown of the metaphysical and natural order. The propitiatory rites of pagan religion were designed precisely to defuse such a thing. (Tacitus criticised Judaism for related reasons (*Histories* 5.13)).

Mark's apocalyptic was a direct challenge to the religious self-understanding of Augustus and his successors, which Brent brilliantly reconstructs, using, for example, the imagery of the *Ara Pacis*. Augustus, who saw his role as *augur* as central to his mission, had inaugurated the return of the golden age, the 'peace of the gods'; as a priest, he mediated the divine power that guided the ages as they revolved. Such ideas were undergirded intellectually by Stoicism. As the emperors, under pressure in particular from the cities of the east, were themselves gradually divinised, the author of Revelation responded with an uncompromising restatement of apocalyptic. This countered in detail the imperial cult with the image of the heavenly court: thus the elders around God's throne wear the same white robes and gold crown as civic ambassadors honouring a visiting emperor-god.

Meanwhile a quite different response to imperial power was being developed by Christians elsewhere. Both Luke and Clement of Rome looked for convergences between Christianity and the political theology of imperial peace. For Luke the *pax deorum* was inaugurated on earth too by the birth of Christ; for Clement,

Christians formed a *politeuma*, a civic body, which, so long as it remained internally peaceful, could be protected within the imperial order. He goes so far as to talk of the 'glory' and 'honour' given by God to the emperors – a striking contrast with the Book of Revelation. Ignatius of Antioch provides yet another form of realised eschatology, understanding clergy like himself to be ensuring cosmic peace by enacting a religious drama which, once again, mirrors in detail pagan ceremonies. His title 'theophoros' recalls the pagan priests who carried images of the gods on their heads in procession.

Brent then traces parallel processes of unification: in theology, as the apologists presented a hierarchical trinity that neatly corresponded to political structures; in ecclesiology, notably with Callistus in Rome in the early third century (here Brent's detective's eye is at its sharpest) and with Cyprian, developing the idea of a universal church structure; and in pagan political theology, as Caracalla granted universal citizenship above all for *religious* reasons, a policy continued by Decius, while rulers from Elagabalus to Aurelian to the young Constantine pushed a pagan monotheism culminating in the cult of Sol Invictus. This process was not smooth, as the troubles of the mid-third century saw a revival of both pagan and Christian apocalyptic; however, its trajectory led towards Eusebius' presentation of Constantine as the sole emperor of a unified, pacified, empire, who reflected the *Logos* as it ordered creation. Why then did Eusebian ideology, which is echoed for example in the mosaics of Ravenna, not become the dominant understanding throughout Christendom? Brent suggests an intriguing set of answers: the united Church had become too robustly independent; the New Testament could not support a completely realised eschatology; orthodox trinitarianism did not cohere with it.

Inevitably so rich a book leaves one asking questions: Where does Paul fit into this picture, with his expectations of the *parousia* combined with respect for the authorities? What worldview would have allowed the widespread acceptance of a canon that included both Luke and Revelation? Was the development of pagan monotheism independent of Jewish and Christian influence? Why was egalitarian Trinitarianism eventually accepted as orthodoxy against both the surface reading of many New Testament texts and the powerful pressure of a monarchian political ideology? (Brent is never crudely deterministic in his use of sociology for the history of ideas.) Unfortunately there is no space for more than a brief sketch of post-Constantinian developments; one would love to see Brent explore in detail Augustine's combination of detachment from and engagement with political structures. Finally, the book raises profound theological issues, in particular whether the post-Enlightenment separation of God, nature and society is adequate to the continuing claims of Christianity. Finally, one small regret: too often a looseness of style or minor errors of punctuation interrupt the reader's flow; the second edition of this fine book would be fittingly honoured by more rigorous copy-editing.

Charles Freeman also attempts to tell a new story about the early Christian centuries, from Jesus to Theodosius and beyond. However, where Brent is constantly attentive to the difference between ancient and modern ways of thinking, Freeman prefers to project contemporary judgements on his sources. The result is a thesis that is ironically old-fashioned in scholarly terms, though Freeman gives it a post-modern twist: the rise of Christianity, which imposed universally a narrow interpretation of dogma, entailed 'the closing of the western mind', to quote the title of another of his books. Before Theodosius, the world was full of open-minded scholars, pagan and Christian, accomplished in a range of philosophical and scientific disciplines. By the time of Justinian, the free play of learning was doomed. The dramatic change was made possible only because the emperors, for some reason that is not made clear, decided to use their political might to enforce orthodoxy. Freeman notes particularly the way in which the great variety of types

of Christianity of the early centuries was reduced, as heresies were defined and then extinguished. Underlying his account is his own conviction that the truth about such questions as the nature of Christ is unobtainable, therefore debate on such matters ought to be allowed to continue interminably.

Freeman provides plenty of evidence for the slow development of the structures of the canon and Church (as they were later understood); for the existence of many schools, sects and practices among Christians in the early centuries; for the popularity of 'subordinationist' Christologies before Nicea; for the narrowing of the range of acceptable theological opinions as orthodoxy was gradually defined; for the sometimes decisive involvement of bishops in politics and emperors in ecclesial matters; for a shift in focus from polytheistic to Christian literature; for the use of violence and underhand methods by some bishops and their congregations. None of this is new, but the vivid way in which Freeman brings together the strands of his story gives it some persuasive power. Sometimes he adds his own speculation to the mix; for example, in his desire to explain away the bodily resurrection he suggests that Caiaphas had arranged for Jesus' body to be moved and for one of his men (the 'angel in white' of Matthew's story) to tell the disciples to find Jesus in Galilee. He takes N.T. Wright to task for not considering this possibility in his magisterial volume *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. (A more careful reading of Wright might have helped Freeman avoid misinterpreting I Corinthians 15.)

Freeman has read a reasonable range of translated sources and of (often excellent) secondary literature. However, he lacks the imaginative sympathy to make sense of the motivations behind the events he narrates. He is not alone in tending to assume that both bishops and statesmen were driven primarily by ambition for power. Even if that were granted, what of the conversions of the philosophically-minded Justin and Clement? He has almost nothing to say about the prayer and liturgy that must have been the dominant element in distinctively Christian experience. He focuses on exegesis and philosophical argument, but his attitude to these is puzzling. On the one hand, he writes as if intellectual argument alone persuaded people to hold the views they did; on the other, he thinks that the great virtue of pre-Constantinian debate was precisely that it was inconclusive. It is hard to believe that his pagan intellectual heroes would have agreed with him.

The one-dimensional quality of Freeman's narrative leads to some idiosyncratic judgements: both Paul and Augustine, two of the villains of his story, are described as 'loners' (one thinks of the chapter in Peter Brown's great biography of the latter which begins 'Augustine will never be alone'); Greek historians from Herodotus were 'preoccupied with the problems of discussing their sources' (p. 73); Celsus, rather than Origen, is supported by Stoic philosophy in refusing to privilege human beings over other animals (p. 173). In general the detail is not reliable, a problem that is greatly compounded by the author's deliberate decision to reduce his referencing (even of quoted texts) to a bare minimum. So, for example, we are told that I Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians were attributed to Paul first by Marcion (pp. 98–99), while Ernest Renan (p. 8) and Mel Gibson (p. 328 n. 1) are cited as evidence for the 'Christian tradition'. Freeman tells us in his introduction that he was 'challenged' to write the book by his editor at Yale University Press. It seems a pity in a field that has so distinguished a tradition of accessible writing by outstanding scholars that an academic press should commission intelligent but non-expert popularisations.

It is a relief to turn from Freeman's Augustine to that of Henry Chadwick. *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* was discovered as a manuscript among Chadwick's papers. It was written in 1981, when he was asked to produce a text for the Past Masters series; in the event, he replaced it for Past Masters with a shorter and very different text (still available as *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*), which focused more narrowly on the development of his thought. This longer

version still includes lucid discussions of topics such as the Trinity and grace, but it also liberates Chadwick's gifts as a narrator, with an unrivalled knowledge of the details of Augustine's experience and a gift for bringing these to life. So, for example, his retelling of the famous conversion scene in the garden makes even a disputed manuscript reading exciting for the non-specialist reader.

Augustine's pastoral role is ever-present, as Chadwick shows partly by interweaving references from letters and sermons with discussion of more theoretical texts. 'Shouldering the initially highly unwelcome responsibilities turned him into a great man such as he would never have become had he remained a professor of rhetoric.' A bishop had to engage with ordinary people's lives, 'from dukes to dustmen' (pp. 75–76). Augustine's comments repeatedly reflect such experience: he 'wisely observes that in charitable giving it is a good thing to take your wife into your confidence' (p. 60); 'Augustine tried to wean his congregation from fortune-tellers, astrologers and amulets' (p. 124); 'At Hippo Augustine had difficulty in persuading his congregation to be civil to Donatist fellow citizens' (p. 104). At the same time, Chadwick's sympathy with his subject does not prevent him from detached criticism where it is appropriate, for example of some of the positions Augustine maintained in his dispute with Julian of Eclanum.

The characteristically limpid and lively prose makes the book a delight to read, and it is prefaced with a sparkling introduction by Peter Brown. This is the perfect introduction to Augustine, enabling the general public to share with pleasure the fruits of painstaking scholarship.

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ASCETICISM IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD by Richard Finn OP, *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 182, £16.99 pbk, £50 hbk*

This slim volume sheds valuable new light on the already popular area of early Christian monasticism, by adding material from pre-Christian philosophical traditions as well as from the Syrian east and Asia Minor, to be read along with the better-known texts from fourth century Egypt. It is a vivid and informative new slant on an area of great contemporary interest.

Chapter one presents a detailed and carefully expounded discussion of philosophical asceticism, by giving an account of the different practices and approaches to physical discipline of Cynic, Stoic, Neo-platonic schools of thought as well as in Graeco-Roman cults. This absorbing chapter is followed by an analysis of the more familiar area of Jewish asceticism, looking behind Philo to ascetic groups in Hellenistic and later Rabbinic Judaism. The third chapter gives a longer account of Christian asceticism, carefully suggesting the influence of both pagan and Jewish thought in this area. The author rightly stresses the complex nature of early Christian asceticism but comments that this has been 'too long ill-served by accounts which unduly privilege the Egyptian monks' (p. 7); a thought-provoking point of view, in which one might take exception to the words 'ill-served' and 'unduly privilege'.

Chapter four gives an account of the ascetic theology of Origen, stressing his extensive influence on the growth of Christian asceticism in relation to personal sanctity. Chapter five looks at areas of Christian asceticism in relation to personal sanctity. It looks at areas of Christian asceticism which the author suggests were independent of Origen's influence, in Syria and North Africa and among those (previously ignored because 'unduly privileged') desert fathers, not the hermits but monks in Pachomian monasteries. The author's 'final thoughts' constitute a reflection on the influence of early Christian asceticism on the church as a whole. There is a bibliography of primary and secondary sources and an index.