

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** ÉRIC REBILLARD, *TRANSFORMATIONS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN LATE ANTIQUITY*, TRANS. AARON PELTTARI, VARIORUM COLLECTED STUDIES, CS1028 (FARNHAM: ASHGATE, 2013), XII + 346 PP. ISBN: 978-1409451587

I first came across the work of Éric Rebillard in the mid-1990s while working on a doctoral dissertation exploring the role of cosmology in Augustine's sermons. Toiling away for some years, I was confronted by the relative paucity of deep, scholarly engagement with this bishop's sermons as a means both to better understand Augustine himself and to expand our understanding of popular religion in North Africa. My supervisor, the late Professor Gerald Bonner, encouraged me to take notice of a recently published dissertation focusing on Augustine's sermons on death (which he reviewed very favourably in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 47 (1996), 682-85). I admired and benefited greatly from that work then, and its author continues to offer significant and engaging research, enhancing our understanding of Late Antiquity.

Divided into three main sections, Rebillard's *Transformations of Religious Practices in Late Antiquity* begins with a very brief foreword followed by nine articles on 'Pastoral Care and Conversion in the Age of Augustine', four articles on 'The Construction of Orthodoxy and the Pelagian Controversy' and five articles on 'The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity'. The work finishes with a brief index containing primary sources, late antique figures, modern scholars and some of the major geographic and civic regions.

One is initially surprised by Rebillard's choice for the opening article of this compilation. For a collection such as this, which by dint of publication acknowledges the author as a major contributor to

the field, one would expect one of his more ground-breaking articles to lead the way. Professor Rebillard has not chosen to begin by focusing on his own core accomplishments. Instead, he leads with a 1999 review article of several of Peter Brown's important books from the 1990s (*Power and Persuasion*, 1992, and *Authority and the Sacred*, 1995), which situates him and his agenda in a broader context of reconciling intellectual and social history. This signals his commitment in the selection of articles for the rest of compilation, which, he writes, 'sets the theme of the transformations of religious practices into its wider social context' (p. ix). Such a choice also acknowledges the role of Brown's work in his thought. This is both exemplary and commendable, demonstrating the sort of intellectual humility and recognition of one's dependence on others which sometimes prove elusive in academic circles.

These articles demonstrate the sea change that has occurred with regard to the view and use of sermons since the time when Rebillard began his work. Unfortunately, the change is not readily transparent within the volume (a note in the foreword might have suited this purpose). Editors and translators of Augustine's sermons in the last century attempted to date them according to various criteria set out by apparent references to other works, intersections of core ideas in Augustine's thought which might be datable to a certain time period and the like. What has become particularly clear in the last decade is that one cannot readily trust such dating (see Hubertus Drobner's studies on this in particular). Unless one finds a clear and distinct historical citation to an outside event, any date offered should be treated as highly provisional and even suspect. A number of Rebillard's essays in the present volume date from the period when many of us accepted the dates offered by editors and translators of the last century and, hence, offer comments or context which might not now fully stand up to further scrutiny (e.g. 'Interaction between the Preacher and his Audience: The Case-Study of Augustine's Preaching on Death', 1997, p. 19; 'Catechumens and the Delay of Baptism in the Preaching of Augustine', 1998, p. 41). In contrast, his more recent articles demonstrate Rebillard noting problems of dating and demonstrating much greater nuance in deciphering matters of date and context (e.g. 'Augustine and the Cult of Statues', 2010, pp. 55, 56; 'The Christian Mob and the Destruction of Pagan Statues: The Case of North Africa in the Age of Augustine', forthcoming, p. 80, n. 24; "'To live with the heathen, but not die with them": The Issue of Commensality between Christians and Non-Christians in the First Five Centuries', 2010, p. 140). This is an important issue as it deals with the central problem of how one interprets sermons and makes substantive use of them as historical artefacts.

The problem here is not Rebillard's own work, to be sure, but rather with the ways in which such volumes are conceived. After all, he evolved in his thinking in a manner we all hope for ourselves; there is no fault to be found there. By presenting the articles without further reflection or comment and arranging them thematically rather than chronologically, methodological and historiographical developments are harder to detect. Readers unaware of particular matters, such as the debates around the dating of sermons, are thus put in the awkward position of accepting the author's earlier interpretive approach and not being made aware that such an approach is no longer considered warranted. With regard to projects like *Variorum Collected Studies*, it would aid reading to begin each

article with a note giving its original publication details (and not to limit this information to the table of contents), and even to provide a few historiographical reflections from the author placing the article in its context and outlining the current state of the question(s). This would remind the reader of the circumstances of publication rather than ignoring the scholar's development or any differences driven by the context for the publication.

Rebillard is on his mettle when offering close textual, philological and historical analysis. He is rightly regarded as a leading historian of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, and many of these articles particularly demonstrate the sort of subtle and incisive analysis which has rightly established his reputation. Articles showing him at his best include 'The Christian Mob and the Destruction of Pagan Statues: The Case of North Africa in the Age of Augustine' (forthcoming) and 'Church and Burial in Late Antiquity (Latin Christianity, Third to Sixth Centuries CE)' (1999). The articles on death and burial represent work where he has significantly advanced our understanding by focusing a lens on matters that had been treated previously in rather superficial ways, because we did not fully realise how much we missed until Rebillard brought his keen interpretive skills to bear. One of the notable qualities of this work is that his approach does not allow one to think of death and burial practices as particular idiosyncratic matters which only a few specialists need take note of; it encourages one to recognise their part in the much larger concern of understanding the evolving place of Christian communities in the late antique world. On the challenging matter of how one should treat sermons as a historical artefact, 'The Sacred and Christian Identity in the Age of Augustine' (2012) offers a particularly trenchant and engaging presentation of the sorts of historical insights that sermons uniquely reveal, which otherwise are (and until recently have been) lost to us if we focus too narrowly on Augustine's many books (see especially pp. 145-50).

Rebillard's articles, true to the opening review article described above, integrate both intellectual and social history, offering both insight and coherent analysis. One article that approaches his subject rather differently, employing linguistic and social theory to interpret a theological debate, is less convincing, however. In 'Deviance Theory and Orthodoxy: The Case of the Pelagian Controversy on Grace' (2000), Rebillard uses the 'sociology of deviance' for analysing both the mechanisms of exclusion within the Church and the formation of heresies' (p. 159). The central section of the article develops for the most part along the lines of a more traditional study of the emerging differences in recourse to authority, hermeneutical practices and scriptural citation separating the two camps – all of which is quite beneficial. This is book-ended, with a few interspersing comments, with analysis dependent on deviance theory. The work did not persuade me that such an approach in isolation particularly aids one in understanding the development of doctrine and reactions to alternative approaches – either orthodox or heterodox – as a process. By rationalising the differences as a reaction to the outsider who breaks societal norms, the approach inherently discounts the subjects' commitments – evident and grounded in the sources – to discovery of what they hold to be guiding truths via deductive exegesis (within a tradition, to be sure). There is a further question as to whether social theories designed to analyse large data sets and large groups of individuals can be adequately reduced and deployed to deal with the concerns of a small population and a narrow set of particular

individuals. This sort of reduction is methodologically suspect and unduly undermines the integrity of those individuals without warrant. While we can expect that all the theological combatants involved had multiple motives, only some of which are enunciated, this approach focuses the lens too narrowly, effectively disallowing their stated goal of discerning what is true or their particular concerns about the practical, pastoral implications of defined doctrinal commitments. In the case of the Pelagian controversy, Peter Brown's description in *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967, rev. 2000, p. 342) of Augustine's reaction to Pelagius's letter to Demetrias – in the earliest stage of the controversy – still merits consideration: "This message was simple and terrifying: "since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory." [*de gest Pel.*, iii.9 and 11]. Whatever one makes of the doctrines and debates, one should recognise that Augustine the bishop and preacher reacted to a teaching he thought highly damaging for all the individuals in the community. Sublimating these concerns on the individual level eviscerates the real differences, which drove some of the arguments. This consequence is not, I think, Rebillard's intent, as the core section of his argument actually follows a less reductive approach in its analysis of the use of scripture and notions of authority in the Pelagian debate.

A few of the articles selected for this book were originally written in English; most were authored in French. Aaron Pelttari's translations are for the most part fluid and engaging; there are some infelicities in language that occasionally disrupt the reading. These instances may result from a desire to preserve words and phrases more common in French and perhaps better at conveying the author's intent where no one word in English would quite do the job (e.g. the use of 'commensality' in the title "'To live with the heathen, but not die with them': The Issue of Commensality between Christians and Non-Christians in the First Five Centuries' and throughout this article). There are also some translation choices which could obscure the author's intent. The use of the term 'deconstruction' at the outset of 'The Church of Rome and the Development of the Catacombs: On the Origin of Christian Cemeteries' (1997), even though virtually identical to the original French, allows the reader to infer that the article depends on theoretical analysis related to contemporary linguistic theories, but in fact it offers straightforward, empirically based historical analysis.

These particular critiques aside, this compilation demonstrates why Rebillard's large body of work is justly noted as offering outstanding scholarship that is nuanced, dexterous and models how one ought to ground a close reading of the sources in their historical context. We are indebted to him for his careful work, which further opens up the world of Late Antiquity.