

Blandine Colot

Lactance: penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin (Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa. Studi, 31), Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore 2016, xlviii + 356 pp., ISBN 978-88-222-6412-1, € 48.00 (pb).

Even though there is a lot of research on Lactantius (L.), Blandine Colot (C.) notes that this Latin writer did not get all the attention he deserves when it comes to the history of Christianity. She mentions that he was a very important figure of his time, especially because of his acquaintance with two emperors. She rightly points out that from the standpoint of theology, L. is considered to be somewhat mediocre, inconsistent or even archaic. If on the one hand some critics underscore his orthodoxy, others link his thought to gnosis. In both cases, the coherence of his thought seems nowhere to be found. C. then proceeds to explain that L. wrote before the dawn of orthodoxy. She also points out that the main recipients of the *Divine Institutes* (DI) were the pagans and, therefore, one can expect that theology be presented in such a way that the non-Christian readers could understand. C. then chose the rhetorical dimension of his work as a starting point. With Jochen Walter, she considers that L., at the “Constantinian moment”, claimed Christianity as the only possible way for pagans. Like Antonie Wlosok, C. sees the DI and *The death of the persecutors* (DP) as a diptych. She therefore thinks that when L. began writing the first part of this diptych, he already envisioned the victory of Christianity, victory found in the DP.

In the first chapter, C. discusses the context surrounding the writing of the DI as well as some facts related to L.’s life. She describes him as a high-level rhetoric teacher at the imperial court. As a response to the philosophers of his times, he brought this apologetic treatise to a whole new level. She suggests that he wanted to modify the politico-religious depiction of Rome by using an argumentation based on the Bible. She chose to keep the hypothesis that paganism was still going strong at the times of the DI, that L. wrote them in the midst of persecution, and that his work bears some traces of the “Romideologie”.

In the second chapter, C. studies some words used by L. in his apologetic work. She wants to single out the epistemological frame that he uses in order to render his debate convincing for pagans. Among many other terms, she analyzes the word *ecclesia*. She shows that L. defines this term as a community of believers that share the same faith. Nothing in the way that he defines *ecclesia* suggests that he has any kind of institution in mind. She then turns to the word *christiani* and points out that L. uses this word sparingly—when he has no other option—and only in few occasions, especially when he needs to differentiate the heretics from the Christians, or even, in rare cases, the pagans from the Christians. He prefers by far using the opposition *iusti/iniusti*. She then gives some attention to the very debated question of the structure of the DI.

In chapter three, C. argues that L. criticizes the very foundation of justice in the politico-religious space of Rome. For him, Christianity would be a better choice to achieve a universal space. The cruelty of the persecutions shows that paganism can only be considered as *iniustus*. The author proceeds to show the importance of Cicero in the *DI*. Even though L. was trying to respond to the philosophers of his time, it was only natural for him to refer to the Ciceronian authority when he spoke to Latin people. Furthermore, since the debate was strongly related to the legal philosophy, Cicero was the natural opponent. In the end, L. shows that only Christianity can establish in a universal manner true justice on earth.

The author turns to the question of political theology in chapter four. She shows that while L. is present at the court of Constantine, that doesn't mean that he is an adviser to the Prince. She says that L. surely didn't have any influence on any imperial decision. Along with the question of his relation to the emperor, C. also deals with the anonymous philosopher whom some identify with Porphyry: she rejects that interpretation. She then compares L.'s vision of the "victory" to that of Eusebius of Caesarea. This victory is used in reference to the Christianisation of the world. Although Christianisation was a very slow process, C. proceeds to show that even though the *DI* were written before the actual victory, L. envisioned the victory of Christianity before it took place. C. also singles out the difference between Eusebius and L. The theology of the first is related to a theocracy in which there is a link between political monarchy and divine monarchism. The thought of L. is quite different as he thinks of the emperor only as a protector. C. mentions that she doesn't go as far as saying that L. wants to present Christianity as a new civic religion, which goes against L.'s vision of the Church.

Chapter five presents the will of L. to think the politico-religious ideology of Rome in terms of Christian thought. This, in turn, is a way to affirm the political legitimacy of Christianity. L. uses history as a framework to question the religion of his adversaries, only to show that all religions emerge from the ancient times of the Bible. By doing so, L. also exposes that all men are *consanguinei* and share the same *maiores*. The past, in other term the history, was common to all *gentes*. The past was for L. a way to give Christianity a new status in the Empire.

Finally, chapter six studies the notion of *religio* in the *DI*. The starting point is the works of M. Sachot who wrote on the opposition of *religio* and *superstitio* in Christian writings. Right from the beginning, C. mentions that she doesn't think that it was a significant event when Tertullian uses *religio* to designate Christianity. She explains the way L. used the term was far more significant. The author notes that the use of *superstitio* to designate false cults comes precisely from L. and not from other Christian writers. She then compares the etymology of Cicero to that of L. The shared origin of the human community points to a universal link between humans that is also a link

they share with the divinity. The very existence of this link serves as a foundation for a universal religious institution on earth, a true religion on earth.

In the conclusion, C. comes back to her starting point, which was to give a coherent place to L. in the history of Christianity. She defines him as the instigator, on the epistemological and linguistic level, of the recognition of Christianity as a *religio* in Rome. She denotes the effort of L. to find a common foundation with the pagans to start this discussion. He used Latin words, such as *pietas* and *iustitia*, that were at the very foundation of the 'Romideologie' and gave them a Christian meaning.

This book offers a very good discussion on the political ramifications of the *DI* and was very much needed. Indeed, some recent interpretations went too far and C. tends to offer a more careful analysis of some difficult passages. It is the case with the anonymous philosopher of Book v of the *DI*. Some suggested that this philosopher was no other than Porphyry, but C. offers a much needed counterpart. By identifying and linking the questions of legal philosophy to Cicero, she offers a better alternative. Her vision of the relation with Constantine is also well balanced and probably closer to reality. We can only regret that she didn't investigate more on the *DP* since much of what is said in regards to Constantine's influence come from this book. The new study on this pamphlet by D. De Decker and J. Rougé (*De mortibus persecutorum: Un libelle au service de la propagande constantinienne*, 2013) is also absent. Nowhere does C. acknowledge the problems related to this pamphlet—meaning the situation of L. as a the herald of the emperor in *DP*—or states her position on the question.

Those who are familiar with C.'s works will recognize many themes she has tackled before. All of them were reorganized in a way that makes a coherent ensemble. The parts of the book are well organized in order to demonstrate that L. wanted to think the politico-religious ideology of Rome in terms of Christianity. The study of the term *ecclesia* in itself is very interesting and it becomes later relevant when C. compares L. to Eusebius. It is also relevant when she shows how L. uses history to make all men of the same origin. All men share the same *maiores* and therefore can be part of this same community of faith, the *ecclesia*. She finally links these two elements to explain the very idea of *religio* in the *DI*. Since all men share a same origin as well as a link to God, the *religio* should as well be based on this very link, which is the whole idea behind the famous etymology of L.

Although C. succeeds in explaining the very singularity of L.'s definition of *religio*, she seems to take it too far when she declares that L., not Tertullian, is responsible for constituting Christianity as a *religio*. Even though Tertullian should not be held responsible for this, it should be said that the notion of *religio* developed through time and through the many writings of the Fathers. The whole development on etymology is also peculiar since L. uses this etymology as a rhetorical proof, as it was always used

in Antiquity, and not as a linguistic effort on his part. Even L. probably knew that his etymology didn't stand the test of linguistics.

The methodological approach of this book is coherent with its end. C. always analyses the notion in regard to the recipients, the pagans, and this method helps explain some difficulties of the *DI*. C. demonstrates well that while some thought that L. was a mediocre theologian, he was in fact trying to reach to non-Christians by reinterpreting Roman notions as a way to find a middle ground.

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