RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

N. Belayche, S. C. Mimouni (edd.): *Les communautés religieuses dans le monde gréco-romain. Essais de définition*. (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences religieuses 117.) Pp. 350. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003. Paper, €45. ISBN: 2-503-52204-1.

What constitutes a religious community? This collection of seventeen articles is 'en quête d'une définition', and attempts to establish 'quelques tests sur les "marqueurs" d'une communauté religieuse'. N. Belayche (pp. 9–20) initiates the search. Alas, from Greeks and Romans to Jews and Christians utmost diversity obtained: in ethnic composition, internal organization, legal status. We encounter a bewildering variety of denominations (cf. S. C. Mimouni on the names of Jewish communities, pp. 21–28), and in the Graeco-Roman world the lack of *exclusivisme* further clouds the picture. Still, each religious community will possess a core of common concepts expressed either in ritual or in belief. A wide and porous net, and J. Scheid (pp. 61–74), discussing the *thiasoi* in Roman Egypt, extends it infinitely: in the Roman world every association was a religious association because all associations were organized around a common cult. The old distinction of Mommsen and Waltzing between the professional and religious associations does not obtain. W. Van Andringa echoes this claim with respect to *cives Romani consistentes*: 'nulle association sans culte' (p. 57). This may be true; but should it mean that every association 'with a cult' should be classified as a religious community? In practice, this procedure obliterates any difference between, say, a group of *cultores Larum* and a group of masons organized as a *collegium struc*[*torum*] (*CIL* VI.444) which happened to offer an altar *Laribus Augusti*[*s*]. A. Logeay (pp. 31–47), in her study of the attitude of the stoic Seneca to the religious communities, pursues this line of thought even further, and amalgamates participation in religious ceremonies with belonging to a religious community. Again this may often be so, but this procedure also exposes the root of confusion prevalent in the whole volume: the promiscuous use of the rather amorphous concept of 'community' with the stricter notion of 'association'. Thus let us approach the rest of the volume unencumbered with definitions. There is much to enjoy.

Most contributions deal with the eastern, Jewish, and Christian faces of the empire, less familiar to the students of the Roman *collegia*. M.-F. Baslez (pp. 75–92) discusses one of the associations revealed by the documents from Qumran, described as *yahad*, 'assembly', whose members practiced community of goods, and whose organization displayed features both of Semitic *marzeah*, 'drinking club', and Hellenistic *synodos*. The place of synagogues in the civic life in Asia Minor is illustrated by T. Rajak (pp. 93–105) on the basis of two inscriptions (*MAMA* VI.264 = CIJ 766, from Akmonia in Phrygia; CIJ 738, from Phokaia). These texts do not seem to me to present synagogues as very much 'ouvertes sur l'extérieur'. There was not much mingling in the Roman Galilee either: as N. Belayche (pp. 123–45) puts it, between Jews and 'pagans' there existed 'cohabitation . . . sans rencontre'. There were exceptions: in Tiberias it was at the baths that the Jews immersed themselves in pagan realities 'sans effet néfaste' (so did also the Christians throughout the empire: cf. the numerous late antique epigrams on the baths in the Greek Anthology).

Joining an association is either simple or involving a ceremony. The latter is also a

The Classical Review vol. 55 no. 2 © The Classical Association 2005; all rights reserved

https://doi.org/10.1093/clrevj/bni354 Published online by Cambridge University Press

signal of exclusion of the 'other' and impure. S. C. Mimouni (pp. 169–200) discusses the origins of one such ritual, the baptism; he traces it back to a Judaic source common to both Christians and Pharisees.

Internal disputes divide and describe communities. E. Main (pp. 149–67) focuses on the strife between the Sadducees and the Pharisees concerning the resurrection of the dead (the former denied it); A. Le Boulluec (pp. 107–22) tackles the ever-present (in Christianity and other religious groups too) accusation of heresy and the resulting misnomer of 'sects', mainly upstarts or losers in the quest for power (he does not put it quite in this way; cf. *JRS* 78 [1988], 207). Christianity itself started as an ultimately accursed sect within Judaism, but L. Vana (pp. 201–33) argues that the *birkat ha-minim* ('the benediction of the *minim*') was not (as often claimed) a prayer pronounced to exclude the Judaeo-Christians from the synagogue. Of magic (the best analysis of this politicized term is to be found in R. K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* [Chicago, 1993], pp. 3–28) one should beware, but Josephus was in this respect less combative than the Bible and the Mishna (R. Bloch, pp. 243–58). The Manichaeans were also persecuted, but a crop of new documents again illuminated this creed; J.-D. Dubois traces the vicissitudes of the Manichaeans in Egypt, and discusses two texts from the Dakhleh oasis (*P. Kellis Greek* 91; *Coptic* 7, I B). C. and F. Jullien (pp. 307–34) lead us beyond the border of the empire and to the Syriac *Acta Sancti Maris*, the apostle of 'Assyria, Babylonia and Persia'. As this collection makes evident, a student of ancient religions must ideally be *multarum linguarum peritus* or *perita*, and we salute those who are.

Ultimately death occurs, and, to control life, religious associations were always interested in *hora mortis*. Yet E. Rebillard (pp. 259–77) argues that burial separatism was not a prevalent phenomenon. Undoubtedly some mingling occurred between the alio-religionists, both living and dead, but the thesis of the cemetery embrace of Christians, Jews, and 'pagans', though enticing, does not appear persuasive.

In contrast to the official upbeat tone of the quest for a conceptual novelty, common to such assemblages, the concluding reflections by J. A. North (pp. 337–47) voice scepticism. Should we take 'belief' as a prerequisite? This concept is hardly helpful with respect to polytheistic religions. And any definition that would cover the whole range of religious associations is so vague as to be vacuous. This might appear 'bien négatif'. *Bien au contraire*.

Truth cannot be polite. Individual contributions are all most valuable, but the quest is futile. We should read Popper: the quest for definitions is the hallmark of scholasticism; science progresses when it asks how a thing behaves and not what it is. When we draw up a new and full corpus of all associations (cf. *CR* 54 [2004], 206), and investigate not what they were but rather what they were doing, we will find that the curve covers the whole spectrum from associations the primary goal of which was fervent worship of a single deity to those for which *ritus* and *cultus* were mere decorations; we will also find that no association or community ever existed in pure form, even as a product or object of imagination. Spiritual longings, power, and temporal goods are inextricably intertwined. This is also what the present learned and fittingly accidental collection vividly illustrates.

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill J. LINDERSKI
doi:10.1093/clrevj/bni354

https://doi.org/10.1093/clrevj/bni354 Published online by Cambridge University Press