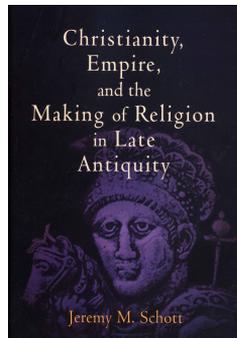


○ **REVIEW OF JEREMY M. SCHOTT, *CHRISTIANITY, EMPIRE, AND THE MAKING OF RELIGION IN LATE ANTIQUITY***

(DIVINATIONS: REREADING LATE ANCIENT RELIGION. PHILADELPHIA. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS, 2008)

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This work explores the role of Christian apologetics, but views apology not as a genre aimed at explaining Christian doctrine to outsiders; rather Jeremy Schott argues that Christian writers like Justin, Lactantius, and Eusebius are best understood as practitioners of imperial historiography. These writers are engaged in the same culturally explorative and, in Schott's account, exploitative pursuits as writers such as Herodotus or Plutarch. Informed by Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and an awareness of the power of constructed knowledge to create and maintain difference, Schott examines patterns of historiography in Greek writers and traces how those patterns are chosen by Christian apologists. Schott brings to bear the insight that while the origin of imperial power may lie in the exercise of physical force, such power subsists and constructs anew by the use of rhetoric. Schott writes, "the discourse of Christian imperialism was effective precisely because it developed out of, rather than erased, earlier imperial discourses" (10). It is Christian use of the rhetoric developed by earlier imperial writers in apologetics, rather than Christian attacks on such rhetoric, that allows for the eventual Christian domination of public and civic culture in antiquity.

Schott's work in this book makes clear that the patterns of historiography Christian writers adopted are specifically tied to the construction of ethnicity and the conjuring of a transcendent identity. While previous studies of Christian apologists have insisted on the theological distance between Christians and their opponents, Schott argues for the similarity in rhetorical structure and categorization of the world between writers like Theophilus and Justin on the one hand and Herodotus on the other. In the first chapter, "Philosophers, Apologists, and Empire," Schott describes how the cross-cultural research of early Greek historians projected two worlds: the transcendent universal wisdom of "religion" and the particular ethnic ideas of individual cultures.

Their search for the universal was facilitated by either the recognition of euhemeristic principles behind the peculiarity of barbarian wisdom or the collection and categorization of barbarian traditions, passed through the filter of a ecumenical ideal. This sieve separated out the rough particularities to produce a universal truth, available to those able to read with a Greek lens. Later, in the hands of Platonist writers like Plutarch and Numenius, this method located Greek culture explicitly in the center: it was the lodestar around which barbarian culture circled and to which barbarian culture was drawn. This kind of interpretation had its place in the culture of empire. As Schott explains, “by reading barbarian texts *in Greek* and interpreting them *for a Greek readership*, these philosophers were engaged in a process of intellectual despoliation homologous to the Roman conquest of peoples and territory” (27).

While Christians themselves were, at first, characterized by this kind of writing as ethnically different, they very easily picked up these markers of center and margin, putting them to quick use. Schott’s book focuses on the efforts of Christian writers to claim the universal transcendence of religion for Christianity by plugging Christian identity and expressions of divinity like the logos into the place held by universal wisdom. The audience for such claims was both academic and political. That is to say, Christianity in its first few centuries was working for acceptance on two fronts: political legitimacy in the Roman empire and academic respect among philosophers, who yet hewed to Greek ideals. These efforts were successful enough at reproducing the historiographical argument to have gotten the attention of Greek writers. Schott argues that Celsus’s substantial and engaged response to Christian claims of universality shows us just what was at stake: “Celsus’s reaction to Christian exclusivity makes it clear that the Christian mimesis of ecumenical philosophy among the early apologists threatened Roman imperialism as well as Greek philosophical hegemony” (48). Put shortly, Christian writers were quite good at the game.

*Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion* makes several significant contributions to late ancient history, but first among these is Schott’s extensive and clear account of the conversation that takes place in Christianity as result of another philosopher’s case against the Christians. In the second chapter of the book, “Porphyry on Greeks, Christians, and Others,” Schott begins by describing how Porphyry used the tools of Greek historiography to move *himself* from margin to center: though born as one “Malchus” in Tyre, in Syria, the writer transforms himself “from Syrian provincial to Greek philosopher” through his education and his skill at writing (62). This remade student of Greek philosophy turns his attention to the emergent Christian tradition. Porphyry argues that Christians, while they have access to universal wisdom – just as any educated reader would, through judicious reading of barbarian sources – nevertheless have mistaken the special and the ethnic for the universal. Porphyry relies on several kinds of information to make his case, but perhaps the most interesting is the use of oracles and their interpretation to showcase the flaws of Christianity. It is significant, for Porphyry also faults Christians for the misuse of their own religious texts. In neglecting to extract from the stories of the Hebrew Bible cultureless truths and in understanding a human being to be the one and perfect God, Christians show themselves to be confused about methods of discovering universal wisdom and the nature of their own identity. For Porphyry, what he does right is precisely what Christians do wrong.

Of course, this attack of Porphyry’s generates a number of defenses. Schott details one of the most influential of these in his third chapter, “*Vera Religio* and *Falsae Religiones*: Lactantius’s *Divine Institutes*.” Lactantius was one of several Christians to respond to Porphyry – historians of late antiquity lament the loss of Methodius’s *Against Porphyry* and Eusebius’s work of the

same name – but he was, among them, certainly the most politically well-placed. Part of Diocletian’s court and a rhetorician, Lactantius adopted Porphyry’s style of argumentation to make a case for a universal and indeed, imperial, Christianity. Defending Christianity with the tools of his opponent, Lactantius first “imitated Porphyry’s own uses of oracular sources to argue that Christianity, not Porphyry’s philosophical paganism, [was] the one true religion and philosophy” (81). Deft interpretation, it seems, is the key to uncovering the universal, and as Schott points out, Lactantius was poised to surpass Porphyry in his use of oracles. Additionally, Lactantius turned to the narrative of universal wisdom to show that while others may have their specific, even ethnic, knowledges, Christian tradition occupied the center. *Divine Institutes* was important as a work in its own right, but Schott argues that it was also important for its influence on Constantine and his own defenses of Christianity. Thus Porphyry’s anti-Christian work begins a conversation that links several thinkers: some provincials, some courtiers, some rulers. The thread of what Porphyry began ends not with Lactantius, but the imperial throne. Because of Lactantius’s influence on Constantine, Schott proclaims, Constantine himself went about “actively creating an ideology of empire based on arguments drawn from Christian apologetics” (125).

Even though the conversation that had begun with Porphyry had reached to the highest levels of political power, this does not mean that Christians ceased to write responses to Porphyry: indeed, the conversation continued along at all levels unabated. However, it was another court writer whose work is best known: alongside Constantine, Eusebius actively created his *own* history of the empire and emperor, which he wove together with a story about Christianity’s universal wisdom. In the fifth chapter of the book, “From Hebrew Wisdom to Christian Hegemony: Eusebius of Caesarea’s Apologetics and Panegyrics,” Schott lays out the final product of these rhetorical and cultural maneuverings between pagans and Christians. Even though Eusebius wrote his *Preparation for and Demonstration of the Gospel* when moved by Porphyry’s goading and the general attack against Christians during the time of Diocletian, Eusebius’s works “would come to serve as the basis for an ideology of Christian empire for future generations” (136). And, as Eusebius creates his narrative of Christianity, wisdom, and empire, he comes to prevision a modern concept. Citing Talal Asad, Schott illustrates how Eusebius’s understanding of “theology” as a universal and non-ethnic form of wisdom presages the term “religion” as used by contemporary academics: something free from the particular and something left to stand against the “secular” (142). Thus Eusebius’s work comes to reify and categorize the kind of universal wisdom that early Greek historiography attempted to filter from ethnic discourse and that Porphyry found lacking in Christian tradition.

The presence of such extended conversations among Christians, politicians, philosophers, and Christian politicians and philosophers leads to one major difficulty with Schott’s book. To be fair, the problem is not his alone – Schott’s issue is the historian’s issue: how should we write the history of a conflict based on sources conserved primarily by one side? Scholars of Christianity in late antiquity have long adjusted to the realities of the sources: the works of two of the most influential anti-Christian writers, Porphyry and Celsus, come to us only in quotation by later Christians. Schott follows the accepted practice of rest of the field; that is, it is inconceivable to write a history of apologetics without accepting what survives from these writers as basically accurate. Schott’s book, though, goes further in its reconstruction of the conflict than some historians are willing to go. In his fourth chapter, “What Difference Does an Emperor Make? Apologetics and Imperial Ideology in Constantine’s *Oration to the Saints* and Imperial Letters,”

Schott uses the *Oration*, preserved in some manuscripts of Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, to make a case that Constantine took up the practices and forms of his court rhetorician, Lactantius. Though Schott nods to those who have doubts about the provenance of the *Oration*, he argues that in reading it against Constantine's letters, we have the tools by which to recreate a lifelike portrait of that authoritative voice of the emperor in this conversation. *Oration* makes the case for Christianity as a "revealed *paideia*. Unlike Greek *paideia*, which is the province of philosophers and intellectuals, the Christian *paideia* has been made available for all people" (117, citing *Or* 11.5). The problem here is manifest: an emperor takes up the rhetoric of a Christian rhetorician who is himself mimicking a Greek historian? And this, preserved in the panegyric life of the emperor, written by a Christian historian well-known for his complex relationship to his sources? The situation is what it is – that is, readers will either recognize the *Oration* as a legitimate Constantinian sermon or they won't – but I was surprised that Schott hesitated to draw out the rich complexities of this situation. With the tools of post-colonial theorists to hand, he may have exhumed and examined the preservation of this text in the voice of the emperor, given life by a Christian court recorder, particularly because this emperor was himself a figure on the borders: "converted" to Christianity, whatever that might mean, but baptized only on his deathbed.

Perhaps I am too quick, though, to criticize Schott. For to follow that track – emperor who adopts rhetoric of rhetorician, preserved by Christian historian, but in the service of an empire perhaps only nominally Christian at first – may have alienated some. One of the strengths of Schott's work is that it manages to re-vision the field of apologetics without losing the traditional audience for scholarship on apology. Christian apologetics stands right at the crossroads of two academic discourses: the first discourse is traditional, philological, and follows – generally speaking – the categories of theological education. The second, more open to critical theory, sees itself as one citizen among many in the humanities. (A glance at the North American Patristics Society annual meeting schedule, or say, the lineup of the Society for Biblical Literature's annual meeting can make my point: there are two worlds of inquiry here that interact more than intersect.) Schott addresses both constituencies with grace, sharply argued and philologically astute writing, and an ability to see connections between ancient conversations and contemporary discussions of power and rhetoric. His book renders the contest of words and ideas between pagan philosophers and early Christian apologists clear and accessible to multiple audiences.