

Lisa Karen BAILEY, *Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul*, London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, VIII + 247 pp., ISBN 978-14-725-1903-0, £90.00.

This book asks an important question as to what the religious life of lay Christians in Late Antiquity looked like. The question is not entirely new. It is difficult to answer, firstly, because the evidence which tells us about religious beliefs, habits, and practices in this period is hardly sufficient (we know little about many aspects of even such basic Christian rituals as the Eucharist); secondly, because this evidence comes mostly from monks and clerics; thirdly, because the few lay people that we can see in the sources usually belong to a tiny elite and their religious behaviours are not really representative of the whole laity; and fourthly, because particular regions of Christendom differed in many respects and it is risky to reconstruct one image of religious life on the basis of scattered evidence, collected from diverse parts of the late antique world.

BAILEY (= B.) is conscious of all these problems and clearly did her best to address them. She focuses on one specific region, Gaul, on which she also worked in her earlier research¹. This part of the Christian world does not have such obvious advantages as papyri or graffiti, thanks to which we can hear the voices of normal people much better than usual, and the archaeological evidence from Gaul is not so very rich. But this region has decent literary evidence, with a number of lives of saints, the corpus of narrative works of Gregory of Tours, two substantial collections of sermons, a rich record of synodal activity, and quite good epigraphic evidence. B. has limited her study to the period between ca. 400 and 700. She omits the earlier evidence, but since this evidence is scant, this was a very low price to pay for leaving aside the period in which the process of Christianisation was just beginning and the situation was changing dramatically. 700 is a boundary as good as any other. Its advantage is that it stops just before the Carolingians.

B. is also aware that she is looking at lay people through the eyes of clerics and monks. Her evidence usually shows the laics as the clergy saw or wanted to see them, or just to show them. Needless to say, consequently the image of lay religious behaviours that we find in their writings is often distorted. That does not necessarily mean that they are idealised; in some sermons we can see people's habits presented in what is probably an undeservedly bad light. Still, B. argues, the late antique democratisation of culture puts us in a privileged position, for we can at least read what normal people were to read or hear, and this is not evident in the study of earlier periods. And even if we learn only what the preachers wanted to show to their congregation as hideous or laudable, this tells us something about the people who otherwise are mute in the extant evidence.

The first chapter of the book ("Laity, Clergy and Ascetics") deals with a definition of the laity. B. is interested in non-ordained and non-monastic Christians, but shows that the limits of this group are blurred. The very terminology used in late antique evidence is confusing. If the terms *laici* and *saeculares* were often used interchangeably, their meaning was not the same, for monks, or most of them, were technically *laici* in the sense that they did not receive holy orders and could not perform ritual acts reserved for the clergy, but they were certainly not *saeculares* or people of the world. Moreover, pious laics, sometimes called *servi dei*, who cannot be exactly categorised as monks, for they did not live in any monastic community, observe a fixed rule, or take vows, in fact led lives modelled on the monastic pattern. Also minor clerics did not have the same status and obligations as bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and in some respects were treated as lay Christians. Another liminal category were people serving or living in a church, at least temporarily, looking for alms or healing. The boundaries between these diverse groups are not always easy to grasp and

¹ L.K. BAILEY, *Christianity's Quiet Success: The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul*, Notre Dame, IN 2010.

can depend on the type of evidence. The self-definition of the clergy did not have to be the same as that which can be found in the secular laws. People's customs did not necessarily reflect their legal status. All these are important reminders that in late antique Gaul, lay and clerical religiosity was no more homogeneous than in any other period.

Chapter 2 ("Environments") deals with the spatial conditions in which Christians conducted their religious life. B. shows what we know, and what we do not know, about the organisation of space in churches. She argues that the separation of the laity and clergy was usually intended, but not always successful; that it started to be even more difficult as churches became multipolar, since the altar was not the only focal point of holiness and in the 7th century side altars appeared. B. presents a complex religious geography with urban churches which were quite strictly controlled by the clergy, monastic shrines, and private oratories in rural estates over which episcopal control was problematic.

The reflection on the space settings of religious life is continued in Chapter 3 ("Urban Case-Studies"). It deals with the civic and ecclesiastical topography of Arles, Lyon, Trier, and Tours, and shows that even in the 6th and 7th centuries we are very far from a unique model of a Christian city. Chapter 4 ("Rituals") is devoted to "formal religious acts that deliberately evoked separation from secularity" (p. 105), namely the Eucharist, processions, and rogations, a ceremony that appeared in Gaul in the middle of the 5th century and combined fasting, prayer and, in theory at least, involved the entire community of the city. B. focuses on those elements of the ritual which emphasised the unity of Christian people and those which differentiated clergy from lay people.

In the following chapters she copes with the most difficult task, namely an analysis of individual religious practices (Chapter 5) and the religious knowledge and beliefs (Chapter 6) of lay people. In the former chapter she draws pieces of information from diverse types of evidence. Hagiography, showing the secular period of a saint's life or presenting virtuous supporting characters, sketches a model of pious lay life. Sermons, though they focus rather on the failings of the laity, sometimes show model habits as well. Epitaphs, even if not necessarily written by lay people themselves, had to be approved by them. In Chapter 6 Bailey seeks to reconstruct the religious knowledge and beliefs of the laity, frankly admitting that we can see them almost uniquely through the eyes of clerics. More securely one can find out what the clerics wanted people to know and believe, and what the preachers expected would evoke disbelief or resistance.

Throughout the book B. argues that lay people had their specific religious needs and were able to find the means of satisfying them. These means, like some ways of using relics or an attachment to private cult places, were not always compatible with those which were promoted by clerics. The admonitions of preachers and synodal canons as well as some mentions in narrative texts show that the clergy were not entirely successful in fixing a model for the organisation of space, time, and religious customs of the faithful. The latter did not reject religion altogether, but tried to bend the rules and often looked for alternative solutions.

B. avows that her aim is rather to emphasise the partly independent character of lay religiosity and not to provide a complete picture of it (p. 18). This is an understandable choice. Still, it inevitably leaves some important spheres of religious life out of the focus of perhaps not so much the research as the systematic presentation. There is no separate chapter about the organisation of time. B. deals with this issue partly in Chapter 6 ("Behaviours"), but tells relatively little about participation in feasts, weekly churchgoing, and receiving communion (how common and often was it?). The cult of saints appears now and again, but the author does not try to say how important it was. She remarks that in some kinds of evidence it does not seem as important as one might suspect (Caesarius of Arles's sermons for instance, p. 123), but leaves this interesting question aside. The issue of the contacts between lay people and clerics or monks, an important element of the religious environment, is not discussed. These contacts were certainly not limited to listening to sermons and it is important to ask how strongly the laics and clerics were separated in daily routine. Also, if B. very perspicaciously shows that the border between these two groups was in many respects blurred, she leaves the reader with the impression that once this liminal zone is passed

we are on firmer ground, even if the levels of religious engagement remain different. This can, but does not have to be entirely true. Perhaps we cannot say much about the specific religious practices of the Franks or Visigoths, but it is worth asking whether we can distinguish any features of female religiosity. Some sources suggest so, usually presenting this religiosity in an unfavourable way. Is it just a cliché or something more? B. touches upon this issue (p. 67), but does not ask a general question. Of course, all the above is just a wish-list, made up of curiosity. The reviewer should not talk too much about the book which he would have written, but did not, all the more so as some of these issues were not addressed simply because there is no evidence. Still, it is worth naming them just to show where our image remains incomplete.

On a more general note, I would also ask the question of what the limits of the religious sphere of life in late antique Gaul were, or more specifically what the lay people considered to belong to the religious and to the secular domains². That the two zones were distinguishable is evident, but their limits are blurred. Was a funeral or a wedding a religious ceremony? How often was choosing and giving a name to a child a religious act? Was going to a healing sanctuary a religious choice?³

B. convincingly shows that there was no universal pattern of lay religiosity in Gaul. She writes about the “religious worlds”, not a single world. I wonder, though, how stable these worlds were. The author rarely tries to trace the evolution of the phenomena she studies. Does this mean that the customs and beliefs did not change much throughout the period of 400–700? This, again, is a very difficult question, as we are rarely in a position to compare the situation in the same region, with the same type of evidence, but in different moments of history. Yet this is not entirely impossible. And sometimes B. seems to take the long persistence of customs for granted. This can be seen especially in the chapter dealing with religious space. The author refers to the long history of conflicting attitudes toward sacred sites, going back to pre-Constantinian times (p. 54), but does not signal that, at the beginning of the period which she is studying, a profound and radical change took place when the very idea of the holy place appeared in Christianity. When she says that the first Christian churches had been rooms in private houses, she is right, but when she suggests that there is a continuation between this and late antique domestic worship (p. 67), she is not necessarily correct. We do not know anything about *domus ecclesiae* in Gaul in the pre-Constantinian period, and the earliest private chapels are attested only at the end of the 5th century.

It would also be interesting to ask more strongly how common the practices and beliefs attested to in the evidence were. One has to repeat once again that in most cases it is impossible to know. One type of evidence, however, potentially makes it possible to study this issue, at least up to a point. I am thinking about inscriptions. The massive character of this type of evidence has not been fully exploited.

All these issues do not change the impression that B.’s important thesis is convincing. There was a specific lay religiosity and its traces can be seen in the diverse types of late antique evidence. The image of this religiosity is not complete and never will be, but it can be a subject of historical research.

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² See studies collected in E. REBILLARD, C. SOTINEL (eds.), *Les frontières du profane dans l’Antiquité tardive*, Rome 2010.

³ See A. ROUSSELLE, *Croire et guérir. La foi en Gaule dans l’Antiquité tardive*, Paris 1990.