

Introduction:

Power and Religion on the Frontier of Late Antiquity

Noel Lenski
University of Colorado, Boulder

Readers of this volume could have learned much about the relationship between power and religion had Augustine contributed an article. His discussions of the subject are remarkably sophisticated and share many of the insights of modern theorists. Like us, he understood that power was not simply physical force but rather some external agent that we can feel without seeing. Like us, he accepted the freedom of the individual will and its ability to accept or reject the power of religion. Also like us, he was convinced that the options to do either were very much more circumscribed than most would like to admit. Our free will is enmeshed in systems of signification that we can only begin to comprehend and from which we can never extricate ourselves; its acceptance of religious truth is perpetually shaped by constant pressure from the power exerted by religion. At times that power merely nudges us toward certain attitudes and behaviors; at others, however, it veritably shoves us, even beats us, into compliance.

It goes without saying that Augustine's notions of religious power also differed in fundamental ways from our own. Above all, of course, Augustine conceived of religious power and truth as being rooted in an immanent and transcendent god for whom modern and post-modern thinkers have little room in their critical toolkit. This meant that, in contrast with moderns, he understood truth as an essential rather than contingent category. Yet, for all that he inhabited a world separated by centuries from the disenchantment of us moderns, he was aware that human understanding perceived multiple "truths." He simply assumed that most such truths were, in truth, falsehood.

Augustine's example proves that, at a minimum, the groundwork for the ideas explored in this volume was already well laid in Late Antiquity. The essays presented here—including a much richer study of Augustine—approach the question of power and religion in the period of Late Antiquity, that is, the period from the late third through the early seventh centuries. They explore issues such as: What is the power of religion? How did the people of Late Antiquity conceive of it? Were their understandings of the interrelation of power and religion related to those of Augustine? Were they related to our own? How did the power of religion affect their lives? How did it shape their social, political, cultural, and familial relations? How did it inform their conception of their own world?

Power, Religion, and Late Antiquity as Frontier

To investigate these questions, we must begin by asking what power and religion mean in the broadest sense and how the two interrelate. We can start with the notion of power. Here the most pertinent insights are those of Foucault, who developed the ideas of Marxist and Structuralist thinkers in his lifelong quest for a universal definition of power. In his early work and particularly in his *Discipline and Punish* he elaborated the theorem that power is directly linked to economy.¹ It is a sort of capital whose value can be realized only in transactions between parties. This means that it is shared by all; no one individual has absolute power or even control over the essence of power. It is a dynamic that enmeshes ruler and ruled, sovereign and subject, and organizes behavior in ways unbeknownst to most and fully comprehensible to none. At least originally, Foucault insisted that power can and does operate independently of human agents. He came to acknowledge, however, that power does ultimately inhere in individuals. This does not deny that its essence is in shared relationships, but rather it takes account of the fact that, as with capital, it can be amassed or hoarded by certain social and political groups.

Power trades in discourses of truth or knowledge and operates by associating actions and relations with these truths, which it simultaneously formulates and enforces.² In Foucault's eyes, therefore, power is to be distinguished from violence, which does not entail a dynamic exchange between active agents but a static relationship of physical domination over passive individuals. As his thought developed, Foucault came to regard power as a link between individuals on the basis of what he called "government."³ This word must be understood in the broadest sense of "guiding" or "directing" not just of the state but also of behaviors, family relations, and communities. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. Foucault's power is thus necessarily exercised over free subjects: it is not physical domination but the persuasion of a group of individuals to bend to the authority that all recognize as collectively valid. By purveying the knowledge generated by the collectivity as truth, power convinces its subjects—largely subconsciously—to govern their actions and relations according to those truths.

If power governs the collectivity, religion in some sense defines it. This was certainly the conception of Émile Durkheim, who argued that religion is "a projection of the social values of society" or even "society worshipping itself." Fundamental to his definition is the dualist dichotomy between the "sacred" and

¹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, 1977).

² M. Foucault, "Power, Right, Truth," in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (New York, 1980) 92–108.

³ Summarized at M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1982) 145–62.

the “profane”: “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.”⁴ Insofar as religion is a reflection of society, the sacred represents society’s interests as embodied in communally recognized symbols; the profane, on the other hand, involves mundane individual concerns.

Roughly contemporary with Durkheim, Max Weber argued not so much that religion reflects social realities as that it shapes them.⁵ Rather than attempt to arrive at an essential definition of religion, Weber attended to the effects of religion on social structures and collective behavior. In so doing, he demonstrated the dynamic between belief and practice in a way that folds religion more thoroughly into the varied mix of collective behavior. Religion—which for Weber meant first and foremost systems of belief—has the power to alter social practice in fundamental ways.

Clifford Geertz made further progress in conceptualizing the category of religion as, “a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”⁶ Geertz thus combines Durkheim’s religious anthropology with Weber’s functionalist sociology and adds the insights of post-structuralism by attaching greater weight to the value and manipulation of symbols. For Geertz, such symbols constitute culture patterns that provide not only “models *of* reality” but also “models *for* reality,” that is, they construct reality even as they reflect it. Religion creates an understanding of the cosmos through the deployment and redeployment of signs to which society attaches a unique kind of meaning that governs individual and collective action.

Useful critique of Geertz as well as Foucault has arisen from the quarters of post-colonial theory, which has shown three things of relevance to the studies that follow. First, contrary to Foucault, violence and physical force cannot and should not be left out of explorations of the relations of power. The use of violence is not antithetical to power but one extreme on the continuum of social relations delimited by power; violence carries power to its utmost and thus fully discharges its capacity, with the consequence that it exhausts the effects of power, but only temporarily. The use of violence and above all the threat of violence thus remain crucial to the maintenance and development of relations of power. Moreover, coercion—both physical force and the domination of relations of production and

⁴ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K.E. Fields (1915; reprint. New York, 1995) 44.

⁵ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. S. Kalberg (1904–05; reprint. Chicago, 2001).

⁶ C. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” originally published in M.P. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London and New York, 1966) 1–46, then reprinted in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973) 87–125 at 90.

property-holding—are also crucial in governing religious activity and above all in delimiting the options for generating and transmitting religious knowledge.

Secondly, universalizing definitions of religion and indeed of power are fraught with difficulty precisely because the very urge to universalize strips such definitions of contextual meaning. Geertz's emphasis on symbols and belief underplays the importance of lived practice in generating religious truths, which cannot so easily be divorced from their historical situations. As subsets of cultural systems, religions are one of many contingent practices that can only be understood in their temporal, spatial, and historical contexts. Thus, while Geertz's definition remains foundational, it can only be made useful when applied to historically grounded narratives like those offered here.⁷

Finally, robust investigations of religious power must take into account “all players in the game,” not just those who dominate power relations but also those subject to domination. All participants in the social and religious collective are agents, and even those subjected to hierarchical or coercive authority exert surprisingly profound influence on the construction of religious symbols, truths, and ideologies.⁸

In their seminal work *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the Comaroffs argued that relations of religion and power are readily brought into focus on the colonial frontier:

Because frontiers are uncharted spaces of confrontation—spaces in which people fashion new worlds by negotiating hitherto uncommunicated signs—they are a prime context for exploring the relations among culture and power, hegemony and ideology, social order and human agency.⁹

The cultural confrontation generated by frontier situations requires societies to confront the taken-for-granted fabric of religious knowledge and rethink it in creative and revealing ways. In the effort to limit ambiguities of meaning and proliferations of power, frontier societies, and particularly ruling regimes faced with frontier situations, are pushed to define the nature of their power more openly and actively and, at the same time, to transform the basis of that power—the knowledge that underpins it—more freely and rapidly.

As “Shifting Frontiers” (the name of our conference series) implies, Late Antiquity is aptly viewed as a historical frontier. It was a period of cultural and social shift during which the pace of historical transformation was accelerated.

⁷ See T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993) with further bibliography. See also W. Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, 2007), for a strong defense of the semiotic model of power relations even in the colonial situation.

⁸ J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa, Volume One* (Chicago, 1991).

⁹ See Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 313.

Barbarian invasions, Christianization, political upheaval, multi-cultural interchange, imperial fragmentation, and theological crystallization all characterize this tumultuous period, rich in sources and problems, during which antiquity gave way to the Middle Ages. As the power of Rome exploded in the wake of external threats scattering its fragments across the Mediterranean basin and well beyond, religion in many ways filled the vacuum that Rome's political hegemony had once occupied. The kaleidoscopic plurality of religious cults once scattered across the ancient landscape gave way to a homogenization of religious power around the three interrelated Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These squeezed out competing religious traditions by successfully redefining religious truth along monotheistic and theologizing lines and—in the instance of Christianity and later Islam—by deploying the coercive force of the state as a way to valorize and enforce the truths they purveyed.

The frontier nature of late antique religion has of course been studied before, though perhaps not in these express terms. To take just three examples, Brown's famous article on "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man" has shown how the redefinition of religious truth along Christian lines created a need for the relocation of power away from the holy "places" of antiquity—its temples and shrines—and into the person of the holy man.¹⁰ This refocalization of power hastened and abetted the process of religious transformation by putting the collective religious understanding of the community under the control of the individual rather than vice versa. Secondly, Shaw's work on "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs" has shown how Late Antiquity witnessed a transformation in the definition of power and thus also the locus of power.¹¹ Building upon the Stoic valorization of self-control and endurance, Christians and Jews transformed martyrs, and in turn ascetics, from symbols of powerlessness into the standardbearers of power. The symbolic valence of suffering shifted from negative to positive, allowing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam to redefine the nature of power and power relations. Finally, Fowden's *Empire to Commonwealth* showed how the fragmentation of ancient political hegemonies in Late Antiquity coincided with the rise of monotheisms that were able to replace the power of the

¹⁰ P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971) 80–101 = Idem (ed.) *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1989) 103–52. See also Brown's retrospective on this article in Idem, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997," *J ECS* 6 (1998) 353–76. Much of Brown's work focuses on relations of power, most overtly *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI, 1992) and *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹¹ B.D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *J ECS* 4 (1996) 269–312.

state—particularly on the eastern frontier—but eventually also to supplement and redefine state power.¹²

Such examples of Late Antiquity as a frontier space in which power and religion were renegotiated could of course be multiplied and indeed are in the studies contained in this volume. These offer a rich and varied series of investigations that sketch out the boundaries of the power-religion dynamic and demonstrate how well these can be articulated using the abundant evidence that survives from the period.

Part I Religion and the Power of the Word

The volume is divided into eight sections. The first, on “Religion and the Power of the Word,” explores the intersection of religion, power, and text. In four case studies, it demonstrates the axiom that language is power and its corollary, religious language is religious power. The first chapter, by Emily Albu, examines how Fulgentius applied the tools of the allegorist to violently reshape ancient mythographic traditions. By first dismantling the heroic in his *Mitologiae* and then, in his *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae*, rehabilitating Vergil’s *Aeneid* as a *roman à clef* about the role of virtue in the life journey, Fulgentius reappropriated the power of the pagan literary past to suit a Christian west even as this territory ceased to fall under the political sway of Rome. This mode of inquiry not only relocated the power of the Classical myths and literature into a safe-zone for reuse in a sixth-century Christian context, it exerted tremendous influence over subsequent medieval approaches to literary interpretation.

In the second chapter, Josef Lössl shows us a world in which Christian exegetes struggled to gain control of the apocalyptic tradition by imposing their own readings on the book of Revelation. Two primary camps, historicist and allegorist, had emerged by the late third century. Lössl’s examination shows that an often neglected writer from the Latin west, Victorinus of Poetovium, played an important role in transplanting these debates into Latin Christendom. In his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, the first biblical commentary to survive in Latin, Victorinus takes a middle path between the two extremes. He was unwilling to part with the notion of a historical millennium, which indeed seemed to be playing itself out in the persecutions of his third-century world. Nevertheless, he imported much from the allegorist tradition, and particularly the notion of a “recapitulation” of creation’s paradisaic past in the last days. This would have lasting effects on later commentators like Tyconius and, above all, Augustine.

Giacomo Raspanti offers the third chapter, where he investigates the power discourse in Ambrose’s oration *On the Death of Theodosius*. After demonstrating that *clementia* and its various cognates like *indulgentia*, and *miser cordia* appear

¹² G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993).

throughout the speech as a sort of leitmotif, he goes on to show that this theme can be linked to a Classical intertext, Seneca's *De clementia*, at the lexical and thematic level. Ambrose's goal in referencing Seneca was to connect a pagan text and Roman historical tradition with his own Christian discourse and circumstances in order to prepare the Empire for a peaceful transition of power in the aftermath of the pagan–Christian conflict of 394.

The section culminates in the essay of Danuta Shanzer who investigates the one certain allusion to the Bible found in Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*, 3.12.22, whose intertext is Wis. 8:1. Having laid out a typology of allusions and applied this critical tool to all previously alleged biblical allusions in Boethius' work, she is able to show how shadowy are any hints of scripture, let alone New Testament scripture or Christian *Sondersprache*. Shanzer then goes on to posit that Boethius' careful avoidance of Christian discourse may represent a deliberate effort to create a double transparency that would have allowed various sorts of readers to see what they chose in his text. This approach resulted, she argues, from an Ostrogothic cultural microclimate that favored religious tolerance and avoided explicit theological discourse in order to facilitate the exercise of power in a multicultural and religiously divided world.

The discussion thus shows how language and power are inextricably linked and how language's ability to replicate and transform itself is tapped to revise and redeploy the power of the word in new contexts. From Fulgentius' use of Virgil, to Victorinus' use of Revelation to Ambrose's use of Seneca, to Boethius' use—and avoidance—of the Bible, text is brought into synergy with intertext to augment the power of both. The ability of all these late antique authors to control the reading of past texts enabled them to revive and redirect the power of others' language to add new meaning and power to their own contemporary texts and contexts.

Part II Power Over the Divine: Porphyry, Iamblichus, and the Struggle for the Philosophical Tradition

Neoplatonism and the debate over theurgy are the focus of the second section. The Neoplatonists of the third and fourth centuries understood well that religion, which they conceived of as *philosophia*, offers the means to tap into the power of the sacred. They were, moreover, in agreement about the source of that power, the One. Nevertheless, disputes arose over *how* to channel the power of the One and *who* could be granted access to it.

Elizabeth Diger opens the section by exploring the conflict between Porphyry and his one-time pupil Iamblichus over the return of the soul to the divine. Though both accepted the notion that there were three kinds of souls, each variously enabled to encounter the divine, Iamblichus' notion that ritual acts (theurgy) could provide a *via universalis* for all souls toward a higher ontological state met with serious objections from Porphyry. In his *On the Return of the Soul* and *Philosophy from Oracles* Porphyry contended that ritual was not only useless

but also potentially deleterious to the philosophical soul in its journey. Digeser goes on to argue that this flash point within pagan philosophical circles ignited a concomitant controversy with the Christians, whose own ritualized and materialist approach to salvation Porphyry criticized. Thus an esoteric doctrinal debate among Neoplatonist philosophers spawned as its byproduct anti-Christian feelings that helped foment the Great Persecution.

Investigating the same community of texts, Sergio Knipe argues in the sixth chapter that Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* was written as a theoretical justification of "the supernatural, coercive power of theurgy" against the objections of Porphyry. For this reason, Iamblichus is keen to demarcate the difference between legitimate and illegitimate ritual, for in the site of contestation that is spiritual discourse, it was crucial to stake out the high ground against attacks that might portray theurgy as a form of sorcery. Thus, while Iamblichus claimed access to the sacred via ritual, he carefully avoided any implication that he could manipulate the divine: theurgy could channel divine power but not control it. In this sense, Iamblichus' debate with Porphyry turned on the question of "who exercised ... supernatural power and in what way."

In the book's seventh chapter, Aaron Johnson moves to another Porphyrean text, the *Philosophy from Oracles*, and shows how it constituted a master reading of oracular texts qua esoteric philosophical pronouncements. Through a careful explication of this enigmatic work's fragmentary preface, Johnson reveals that Porphyry's collection (*sunagōgē*) of oracles is really an introduction (*eisagōgē*) for students designed to lead them to the deeper truths lurking behind these pronouncements. By asserting power over the texts in this way, Porphyry also assumed control over late pagan religious and philosophical interpretation. In so doing, he quite unintentionally steered it in new directions that would allow it to compete with Christianity and even to survive the coming assault that ultimately led both to the cessation of oracular consultation and the destruction of Porphyry's original works.

Taken together, this triptych of chapters shows a dialogue in which Porphyry and Iamblichus vied for authority over the Platonic tradition and over the very question of religious truth. Because both were trained in the same tradition, both shared a common framework for understanding the ontology of the sacred. They nevertheless fought bitterly for control over the practical means for accessing this shared truth and thus for control over the membership of their shared community. The consequence of their debate was a problematization of ritual and its proper role in religion that influenced the course of both paganism and Christianity in Late Antiquity.

Part III Emperors and the Deployment of Religious Power

The third section examines how religious, and specifically Christian, authority was inextricably linked with imperial power. Every emperor sought to amass capital

from the religious sphere even as every emperor also struggled to circumscribe the power of religion over his field of action. Judith Evans-Grubbs opens with a study of laws on infant exposure and how the attitudes of the Christian church affected imperial policy on this vexed question. She marshals a series of constitutions that show how Constantine took measures to prevent exposure, in part by equating it with parricide, in part by dissolving the parental rights (*patriapotestas*) of those parents who abandoned their children. While Constantine seems to have been directly influenced by Christian principles, his legal action had the unintended and arguably less than charitable consequence of making the enslavement of children easier. Indeed, by tracing church and state regulations on exposure through the reign of Justinian, Evans-Grubbs shows that the state continued to use its power to enforce Christian ideals, but always with similar unintended consequences that likely increased the incidence of exposure.

In the ninth chapter, Hugh Elton shows how complex was the process of imperial decision-making on religious matters. He focuses on the events between the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Formula of Reunion used by Theodosius II to draw recalcitrant bishops in Cilicia back into the church in 433. Elton outlines a complex network of players including bishops, civilian bureaucrats, and military officials that leaves much less room for influence to the traditional bugbears of the late antique sources: empresses, eunuchs, and barbarians. By adducing examples from across the reign of Theodosius, Elton shows that this emperor—normally thought to be a cipher—played an active role as the final arbiter and enforcer of major ecclesiastical decisions.

Charles Pazdernik then explores the loyalty oath imposed on governors by Justinian in 535 with his *Novel* 8. He shows how this law inscribes religious language and power into a text designed to enforce cooperation and limit corruption among a group of officials whose authority and autonomy every emperor struggled to control. Justinian ostentatiously stored this law among sacred vessels in the cathedral like some relic, and he demanded that officials invoke the dire curse of Cain upon their own heads for non-compliance with it. This strategy allowed him to borrow power capital from the religious sphere which he then invested in his secular authority in order to purchase the compliance of bureaucrats.

The section closes with Hartmut Leppin, who focuses on Justinian's encounters with four holy men. He shows how Justinian studiously avoided attacking each of them even when they behaved with pronounced effrontery toward him. On the contrary, Justinian regularly humbled himself before holy men both as a means to avoid any implications that he was persecuting those with spiritual gifts and to gain access to the religious power they possessed. Knowing that the essence of Christian spiritual authority lay in the conspicuous display of humility, Justinian humbled his imperial persona in order to tap into a source of power that won acceptance for him among subjects, soldiers, administrators, and ultimately also the clergy.

The post-colonial critique of Foucault's conception of power and of Geertz's definition of religion is crucial to the readings presented here. Power cannot be

described without due attention to the “power structure,” and religion cannot be divorced from politics. Modernist notions of a separation of “church and state,” a parceling out of the cosmos into neatly demarcated political and religious categories, seem implausible in the post-modern world and downright impossible in the ancient. What separates Late Antiquity from earlier periods of ancient history, however, is that the ruler downshifted from the embodiment of the sacred to the conduit to it. No longer did the emperor claim to *be* the divinity but to *represent* it and thus to offer access to the power of the sacred through the passage of laws, the definition of religious doctrine, the deployment of religious language, and the adaptation of a religious demeanor.

Part IV Ecclesiastical Hierarchies and the Limits of Religious Power

This series of studies contextualizes the power of the clergy within the limits of the social and political world. In every instance, the clerics are shown to be thirsty for power and to struggle to comprehend its manifestations. In every instance, their search for power is also shown to be limited by competing interests and their understanding of power to be shaped by these limitations.

In the twelfth chapter Sabine Huebner investigates the interplay between power and religion in the appointment and maintenance of the eastern clergy. Just as the late Roman imperial bureaucracy became increasingly comfortable with the notion that money would be exchanged as part of the process of conferring offices or conducting official business, the eastern clergy began expecting to pay to obtain posts. A sort of hierarchy of place and position developed that encouraged venality among the clergy, at the bottom because clerics made too little from their churches to support themselves without undertaking secular professions and collecting fees, and at the top because the desirability of key offices and prized locales created market demands that were ultimately arbitrated through cash payments.

Justin Stephens delves into the nascent political philosophy evident in John Chrysostom’s early writings and particularly the *Discourse on Saint Babylas*. He argues that Chrysostom presents a clear notion of what he regarded as the proper relationship between emperor and bishop already in the earliest years of his priesthood. For Chrysostom the bishop, as arbiter of divine law, had a superior claim to power over the emperor. Stephens uses this understanding to reassert the imperative that the line between secular and sacred can only be drawn provisionally. He goes on to show how Chrysostom later implemented his notion of episcopal power during the confrontations he experienced—and provoked—while serving as bishop of Constantinople.

In the fourteenth chapter, Gillian Clark offers a sweeping perspective on Augustine’s conception of power. She shows how little power Augustine possessed and how much of it was what might be termed “soft power,” *auctoritas*, the ability to persuade by his reputation or his words. In many ways his acute awareness of the limitations on his power induced Augustine to think more carefully and

extensively about the question of power. In the *City of God* he focuses on it quite squarely. Ultimately, Clark argues, Augustine's concept of power is founded in his experience of the world, for true power is based on the order (*ordo*) established for the universe by god—a notion not so far removed from that arrived at by modern sociologists, provided one substitutes “society” for “god.” Yet Augustine was in no way willing to concede that worldly power and religious power were synonymous. On the contrary, only true religion whose object was the glorification of god, could offer true freedom, while worldly power was little more than a pale reflection of the city of god and thus a distraction from the truth.

The power of penance in the *Eusebius Gallicanus Sermons* is then explored by Lisa Bailey. This collection of fifth-century homilies figures active penance as a necessity for the forgiveness of sins. In contrast with Augustine, whose preaching of unmerited grace encouraged a sort of active passivity, the *Eusebius Gallicanus* calls on congregants to become “their own most severe judges” in an effort to coerce a more engaged approach to forgiveness through fasting, almsgiving, and lamentation. In an environment where preachers had limited power over their congregants and more circumscribed rhetorical skills than Augustine, this approach allowed them to co-opt their flock into active participation in the project of salvation. It was, in other words, a subconscious but very real admission to the communal nature of religious power.

We are left with the conclusion that religious power is a site of negotiation between active agents: those designated as holders of religious authority are uniformly aware of the limitations on their power, and those they attempt to “govern” share control with them over their fate in the cosmos. The dialogue over the meaning of the sacred that is religious discourse has no truly dominant and submissive polarity but represents a collectivity of power shared between clergy and lay. Recognizing these limitations, religious authorities struggled mightily to induce their followers into compliance with the paradigms of religious truth they purveyed. They understood that, without the conscious and unconscious complicity of the masses in the shared project of religious self-definition, they were powerless.

Part V Constantine and the Power of the Cross

The three papers in this section turn attention to the famous vision of Constantine, a subject of considerable debate in the past decade. In one way or another all take as their starting point the groundbreaking article of Weiss, who has argued that Constantine's vision was actually a celestial phenomenon known as a solar halo witnessed by the emperor in 310.¹³ Nevertheless, each paper carries the argument

¹³ P. Weiss, “Die Vision Constantins,” in J. Bleicken (ed.), *Colloquium aus Anlass des 80. Geburtstages von Alfred Heuss*, Frankfurter althistorische Studien 13 (Kalmunz, 1993) 143–69,

in different directions, adding complication to Weiss's linearity and questioning the finality of his conclusions.

H.A. Drake approaches Weiss's argument with a simple but revealing contrafactual: suppose Constantine had never seen this halo phenomenon? Without denying Weiss's intriguing conclusions, he shows how the public propagation of Constantine's vision—or visions—fit into a broader context of the emperor's religious expression, which in turn fit into a broader context of imperial religious expression in Late Antiquity. By examining continuities in Constantine's behavior and self-representation and above all by showing the consistency of solar imagery, Drake reveals that the halo phenomenon could only ever have served to confirm Constantine's belief in his mission, not to create it.

Our sources for Constantine's vision are of course anything but uniform. Starting from an awareness of their differences, Jacqueline Long shows how the three portrayals of visions reported in contemporary sources are all rooted in quite specific historical and literary circumstances. Looking to allay fears of foreign invasion in the wake of the overthrow of Maximian, the panegyrist of 310 grafted Constantine into an artificially long lineage of imperial defenders and used the solar vision to shed the warm glow of divine light on the empire's new champion. In his *On the Death of Persecutors* Lactantius located Constantine at the endpoint on a continuum of divine justice against persecutors of the Church; for him the vision served as confirmation of the agency of god in Constantine's defeat of the persecutor Maxentius. Writing as much for Constantine's successors as the emperor himself, Eusebius of Caesarea made Constantine the subject of a quest for divine rulership who found god's approval manifested in the dual vision he attributes to him, halo and dream.

Jan Willem Drijvers also starts with the staurophany of Constantine and reinforces the argument that it allowed the emperor to transform what had formerly been a symbol of defeat into one of victory. He then goes on to examine two other celestial appearances of the cross, beginning with that in 351 reported by Cyril of Jerusalem. Once again, the bishop interprets the cross as a symbol of victory, specifically the anticipated victory of Constantius II over the usurper Magnentius, but also of power more generally and especially the power of Christianity over Judaism and of Jerusalem over its rival see of Caesarea. Finally, the appearance of a cross in the sky shortly after the earthquake which put a stop to Julian's rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in 363 was also interpreted as a sign of the power of Christ over the Jews.

The reign of Constantine thus ushered in a new symbol of religious power, the representation par excellence of Christian triumphalism, the cross. By focusing on this sign, this section offers a case study of how Durkheim and Geertz are correct to assert that religion is at its core a system of symbols. The papers demonstrate how dynamic this system can be, for Christianity not only caused a shift in the meaning

of the cross from a token of disgrace to a talisman of power, it also cast this talisman into a field of competing interests that attached their own varying nuances to its significance. In other words, the moment Christianity valorized the cross as a generic symbol of power, it brought this symbol into the field of competition for power with the result that its meaning instantly became destabilized once again.

Part VI Rome: The Center of Power

The sixth section examines the remaking of Rome from the imperial capital and bastion of traditional pagan religion into a Christian city and center of power. The abandonment of Rome by the imperial court and its gradual shift from pagan to Christian domination is described as a complex and dynamic transformation where Rome as space and symbol became a site of intense negotiation over power and religion.

Rita Lizzi Testa opens the section by questioning the notion that the Roman priesthoods of Late Antiquity were all but moribund. She shows how the amassing of multiple priesthoods by Roman aristocrats in no way indicated the undervaluation of these offices; she demonstrates that senatorials continued to seek such offices even past Theodosius' sanctions of 391; she shows that the famous "altar of victory" controversy involved fewer impediments to the practice and funding of the state cults than have previously been assumed. She then turns to the question of what precisely late antique priests—particularly *pontifices* and *augures*—did. A vast array of sources are adduced to demonstrate that, even in the absence of sacrificial rites, these continued to perform a wide variety of duties, including the inauguration of fellow priests, the consecration of public structures and spaces, and the regulation of much official activity. Far from witnessing a diminution in their power, late pagan priests saw a removal of imperial oversight and involvement in the state cults that left open the possibility to reinvent their functions and public roles.

Lucy Grig explores the semantic value of the Capitoline as a metaphor and metonym for the power of Rome, its empire, and its religion. Beginning with pagan texts of the fourth century, she demonstrates how the Capitoline retained its role as the quintessential signifier of city and empire deep into Late Antiquity. She then turns to a series of late fourth- and early fifth-century Christian texts that begin to destabilize this linkage and remake the Capitoline into a site infamous for its reputed associations with illicit pagan activity. Over time the martyrologies of the fifth century and later pick up on this idea and dramatize the Capitoline as a "heart of darkness" well suited to the bloody enactment of violence against the legendary believers of the past. The Capitoline was thus a powerful rhetorical locus for the debate over the nature of power and religion throughout the period of Late Antiquity.

Moving to late sixth- and early seventh-century Rome, Jacob Latham offers an investigation of the two seven-formed processions (*letaniae septiformes*) performed

under Gregory the Great in 590 and 603. He shows how these ceremonies were used to articulate the city's population along new social and religious lines dictated by the papacy. Gregory's success at "interpellating" the Christian subject into an ecclesially defined order eventually had broader repercussions when pilgrim itineraries appropriated the same routes and codified them as the spatial outlines of a Christian Rome. The *letaniae septiformes* thus augmented the power of the papacy to transform Rome from a classical into a Christian city, both socially and geographically.

Post-Marxist critique has shown how the control of space, both as a symbolic marker and as a physical entity, is crucial to the understanding of power.¹⁴ In classical antiquity Rome had always been the physical capital of the world, the *caput mundi*. By Late Antiquity, however, it had become a political and cultural isolate, an island of atavism. In response to this loss of power, it sought to perpetuate its status by restructuring the basis of its claims to authority along religious—and specifically Christian—lines. In this sense, this section may seem to be titled ironically, for late antique Rome lost its status as the world's political capital. But these papers show how it succeeded in refashioning itself into a symbolic capital through the reinvention of a new religious present that secured its place as a center of power into the future.

Part VII The Power of Religion in the Barbarian West

Rome's cession of power in the west to the barbarian successor kingdoms resulted in a renegotiation of religious meaning and a new sharing out of religious capital between the various ethnic and cultural groups that competed with one another in a less stable political world. Ralph Mathisen explores this problem by examining the religious expression—in the form of a church endowment—of a major fifth-century power holder. As we know from early modern drawings of a now lost mosaic, the barbarian general and patrician Ricimer dedicated a church to S. Agata in Rome. A closer look at the iconography and inscription revealed in these drawings demonstrates that in the process Ricimer made no effort to draw attention to his barbarian origins or his Arianism. On the contrary, he used the church and its dedication as a way to assimilate himself to Roman traditions of religious expression and to insinuate himself into the senatorial and imperial power structure. Indeed, by using the phrase *salus totius humani generis* in close connection with his own name in the inscription, Ricimer strongly implied that he stood in an analogous position to the emperor as the legitimate representative of heavenly power on earth.

Edward James delves into the question of why Gregory of Tours, who professed in his *History of the Franks* to be interested in describing the fate of heresy, devoted so little attention to the question of Arianism. Even the momentous conversion

¹⁴ H. LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991).

of the Visigoths of Spain from Arianism to Catholicism in 589 is distinctly underplayed. By isolating Gregory's discussions of Arianism, James is able to show how little theological argument most involve and how those few which do include debate implicate Gregory himself. The fact that Gregory felt compelled to style himself as a defender of orthodoxy in his *History* is attributed to Gregory's precarious position within his own diocese. This fragile situation compelled him to play up his achievements against Arians in his efforts to retain power.

A Merovingian plate buckle fashioned by an artisan named Landelinus forms the basis of the twenty-fourth chapter by Bailey Young. The iconography, a horseman atop an ithyphallic mount surrounded by religious symbols like the chi-rho, collects up artistic vocabulary from pagan as well as Christian contexts into a bricolage of effective signifiers designed to protect the owner from physical and spiritual harm. Young shows how the buckle fits into a type common across post-Roman Gaul in the period that displays a sort of "do-it-yourself" Christianity whose symbols and theology were driven from the bottom up. Frankish and Burgundian artists and patrons exercised their own power over the forms of Christian expression in their region—still very much a matter of negotiation—and in so doing tapped into Christianity's power by reassigning valences to religious symbols old and new.

Power and religion thus meet in productive ways on the barbarian frontier, much as the Comaroffs predict. The instability created by the collapse of Roman hegemony and the rise of competing successor states demanded a renegotiation of religious truth in the west. Where some, like Ricimer, sought to gloss over religious difference and graft themselves into pre-existing Roman modes of expression, others, like Landelinus, felt the need to interleave traditional pagan symbols with the new vocabulary of Christian art. Somewhere in the middle, Gregory of Tours found himself isolated on the barbarian frontier and turned for validation to a tenuous but vociferously asserted claim to "orthodoxy," the touchstone of religious truth and thus power.

Part VIII The Power of Religion in the Communities of the East

The final section continues to examine the power of religion on the frontier, this time in the eastern Mediterranean. The abundance of source traditions, and particularly sources in languages other than the Latin and Greek of the Roman metropolis, allow for an even deeper connection with post-colonial explorations.

In her essay on religious factionalism and space in late antique Antioch, Wendy Mayer offers two case studies, the cult of Babylas and the construction of churches under Justinian. In the first instance, she shows how the Babylas cult was exploited by Christians against pagans, by neo-Nicenes against their opponents, and ultimately by religious authorities against the emperor in a series of power plays for control of religious and political authority in the fourth century. Turning to the sixth century, she then demonstrates that Justinian and Theodora carefully

selected the saints' cults they chose to promote in Antioch—particularly those of Michael, Cosmas and Damian, and the Theotokos—in order to promote their own imperial authority in this important capital. In every instance power resulted from the control of space, by which one can understand both the control of physical places and the control of the discourse that gives places social meaning.

In the twenty-sixth chapter, Hagith Sivan portrays the creation of the Jerusalem feast of Mary's maternity on 15 August as a move by John of Jerusalem to promote his own power and the power of his see over against both the Jews of Palestine and the monastic Christians of Bethlehem. By placing this feast temporally on the same date as the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, the ninth of Av, John challenged the Jews for control of this solemn feast day. Similarly, by placing it spatially on the road midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, he also challenged the claim of that town and its monasteries—under the authority of his nemesis Jerome—for control of the title to Christ's birthplace. In the process, John introduced a new and more earthly Mary whose embodiment as birthing-mother anticipated the Theotokos controversy that would erupt in the decades to come.

John Weisweiler joins longstanding debates on Ammianus' attitude toward Christian religion but brings fresh insights to the problem using new observations and texts. He shows how Ammianus played upon the conventions of Latin literature and above all contemporary Greek and Syriac hagiography to deflate the claims of Christianity to have constituted a new source of power for the state. From his portrayal of the general Sabinianus frolicking among martyr shrines in Edessa while Shapur invaded upper Mesopotamia, to his innuendo that the bishop of Bezabde was complicit in that city's downfall, to his portrait of female ascetics as targets of Shapur's cozening concessions to Roman captives, Ammianus consistently undermines Christianity's pretence to being a bulwark in defence of the power of the empire.

Finally, Richard Payne closes this collection of studies with an examination of the letters of the seventh-century bishop of Arbela, Ishoyahb III, to the people of Nisibis. Standing as catholicos of the Church of the East in a period when eastern Christianity had lost its political center of gravity with the disappearance of the Sasanian state, Ishoyahb had to reconstruct his authority along new lines. He did so by deploying orthodoxy, and particularly the enforcement of the two *qnome* formally sanctioned by Babai the Great, as the rallying point for adherence to the faith and thus the touchstone of obedience to his sway. In his letters to the Nisibenes, Ishoyahb promoted his own relationship with the new Muslim power structure as a way to encourage adherence from the Nisibenes, and he courted the allegiance not just of Nisibis' clergy but of its venerable aristocracy. In so doing, he was able to mobilize a purge of "heretics" that simultaneously channeled power in his favor and redefined allegiance to the church on terms he could control.

As sites of military and political confrontation, frontiers are inherently a locus of cultural contestation. At the edges of its eastern empire Rome had always struggled to assert its power and identity against the cultural and political "other"

even as it sought to control and co-opt that other. These papers show that in Late Antiquity, as frontiers were further destabilized, the other became all the more difficult to define. The pagan power structure of the high empire had given way to Christian dominance in Antioch, scrambling the definition of religious truth and forcing pagans into subjection to what had once been the subject other. So too Jerusalem had shifted from Jewish to Christian capital, a destabilization of the city that created a space where Christians not only competed with Jews but also with one another for control of this sacred space and its meaning. The traditionalist Ammianus fought to hang onto his definition of pagan Roman power by subtly critiquing those—largely Syrian—Christians who were in the process of reappropriating religious power from pagans, and imperial power from Rome. And in the seventh century Syrian Christians in former Sasanian territory were challenged to redefine religious power in a world where the Muslim invasions had rocked traditional power structures and left the question of religious authority up for grabs.