

D. M. GWYNN, *ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA: BISHOP, THEOLOGIAN, ASCETIC, FATHER*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 230. ISBN 9780199210961. £60.00.

The series 'Christian Theology in Context', of which David Gwynn's study of Athanasius of Alexandria forms a part, is framed by its editors in explicitly Marxist terms: 'All texts have to be understood in their life situation, related to questions of power, class, and modes of production. ... [T]exts are also forms of cultural power, expressing and modifying the dominant ideologies through which we understand the world.' Despite this prospectus, this volume (like previous ones on Martin Luther and Origen) takes as its focus a single author, and Athanasius is provided with nothing more radical than an intellectual biography. Not that this is unwelcome. It is rare for a study of Athanasius to emphasize so prominently the necessary integration of his historical actions with his theological ideas, but G. must be right in his insistence that only by taking seriously both aspects can we grasp how Athanasius himself must have understood his career.

Following a brief introduction to his life and works, this integration is explored across the four rôles set out in the subtitle. There is no strict chronological progression and the rôles are not quite given equal weight — the chapter on asceticism is appropriately thin — but the point is to show that Athanasius need not be seen only as the fanatical campaigner against heresy he appears to be in the Greek and Latin historians of the Church and Empire. To make this abundantly clear, G. devotes a final chapter to the reputation of Athanasius not only in these traditions but also in Syriac, Armenian and Coptic texts, noting that in the last of these in particular he is remembered chiefly for his rôle in creating a semi-independent Egyptian church. This should hardly be surprising, but it is nevertheless an important reminder that when we encounter Athanasius the champion of orthodoxy engaged in battle with emperors and heretics, we are seeing him in only the most visible of his rôles — and that, like any other bishop, he was also frequently preoccupied with less glamorous local concerns. The effect is to bring Athanasius down to earth: to insist, rightly, that his career as a bishop be understood in terms of his rôle among his local followers as well as on the imperial stage.

For G., the 'true greatness' of Athanasius therefore lies in the way that 'through his pastoral dedication [he] won and retained the love and support of his church, of the monks, and of the people of Alexandria and Egypt' (131). The *Festal Letters* are the primary evidence for this pastoral dedication, although as letters from Alexandria, or from exile, they inevitably show a bishop exhorting his congregation more than engaging with them. G. insists on the sincerity of Athanasius' appeals to the people, however, and even makes the remarkable claim that he 'was not a theoretical or intellectual theologian' because '[t]he questions that inspired his teachings were those that concerned his congregations and the wider Christian people' (68). This emphasis on his demotic credentials, and on an unprovable sincerity, is a result of G.'s determination to prevent his Athanasius from being seen as a Machiavellian schemer, working purely in the interests of himself and of his theological faction. Certainly there have been accounts of Athanasius which present him broadly in such terms — and G. is right to seek to redress the balance, and to remind us of the varied commitments and responsibilities of even a controversial bishop of Alexandria.

The same motive seems to lie behind the repeated reference to the 'fundamental theological principles' (11) which Athanasius is said to have consistently applied — but here G. seems to be working against the approach envisaged by the series editors. The decision to present him as steadfast and sincere in his theological beliefs makes sense in a biography, in which the bias is always towards the creation of a consistent character. But it means that we are denied the chance of seeing those beliefs develop dialectically, in response to the political and intellectual as well as pastoral challenges he faced, and so to see them not only as interacting with their contexts but as shaped and conditioned by them. Thus in place of the dynamic interplay of text and context, we are given a rather static figure who arrives all but fully formed as a theologian — almost as in the story of the young Athanasius performing ratifiable baptisms, quoted by G., and not entirely rejected, at the beginning of ch. 1. Too often such stories are left to speak for themselves, as are many of Athanasius' claims about his own motivations, and at times I should have liked to see a shrewder and more sceptical approach. Yet elsewhere the volume is a model of judicious explication, as in the outstandingly close and careful attention with which (as in his previous work) G. traces the vagaries and contingencies of doctrinal debate in the Arian controversy. And

throughout, G. relates and interrelates the life and writings with exemplary sense and clarity. The details of his interpretations will no doubt continue to be hotly disputed — even today, Athanasius is never far from controversy — but historians and theologians alike will welcome this volume as a valuable introduction to Athanasius' ideas. Above all, it makes a powerful case for the value of grounding even grand theological systems in the day-to-day world of Late Antiquity.

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