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Levieils, Xavier

Contra Christianos: La critique sociale et religieuse du christianisme des origines au concile de Nicée (45–325)

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How Greeks and Romans reacted to the emergence of a certain new sect called Christianity is usually not in the focus of studies of the history of early Christianity, although some particular aspects (e.g., the role of oracles) are now studied by classicists. The book under review, Xavier Levieils's doctoral dissertation, directed by Pierre Maraval and submitted at the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne in 2003, attempts a comprehensive treatment of this matter. The subject is vast, to be sure, and Levieils delineates four main fields on which Christianity was criticized and partly criminalized: (1) its emergence from and more or less close connection with Judaism; (2) its perception as a (new and foreign) superstition; (3) the charge of atheism and/or impiety; and (4) hatred of humankind.

In the first chapter ("La perception de la relation judaïsme-christianisme," 15–164), Levieils traces the complex process during which Christianity separated itself from its Jewish roots and how this process was perceived by outsiders who could, to a greater or lesser extent, apply their anti-Jewish prejudices to Christians as well. After some general considerations, Levieils takes a geographical approach, which is a very good way to avoid generalizations. Thus he separately studies the process of separation in Syria (48–74), in Asia (75–82), and in Macedonia and Achaia (83–90) as it can be traced in the sources—from the narratives of Acts to texts such as 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius (he does

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not enter into the discussion about their authenticity and dating) to documents from the time of the Easter controversies in the late second and early third centuries. In Syria and Asia, Christianity continued to be under strong Jewish influence, while in mainland Greece the separation from Judaism seems to have taken place by the late first century. The next two subchapters are quite remarkable: As for Egypt (90–101), Levieils sees the origins of the Christian community in the Jewish *politeuma* and then rightly emphasizes the significance of the diaspora revolt of 115/117, which virtually led to the destruction of the Jewish community in Alexandria. Levieils reads the Epistle of Barnabas as a document of the aftermath of this revolt. Comparing Celsus's *True Discourse* with Alexandrian documents of anti-Jewish polemics, Levieils demonstrates that after 115/117 Christians took the place of Jews as the target of the same kind of literary polemics and of mob violence. In Rome (101–17), there seems to have been Jewish-Christian influence until the third century, that is, the Easter controversies. Levieils devotes much space to a detailed and instructive discussion of the date and content of Claudius's edict expelling Jews from Rome, as well as the charges against T. Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla. Finally, for Africa (117–21), Tertullian's and Cyprian's works show that, in the late second and third centuries, Judaism and Christianity were not (yet) perceived as two entirely distinct religions.

Next, Levieils studies how the connection between Christians and Jews was perceived in the writings of "outsiders." Tacitus is aware that, even geographically, Christianity comes from "Iudaea," and, although he most probably knows Christianity as a distinct entity, he applies some polemic topoi (*odium humani generis*, *superstitio*) to Christians and Jews alike. As far as Suetonius mentions Jews and Christians at all in his biographies of emperors, they appear as a threat to public order, although Suetonius seems to be more precisely aware of messianic beliefs (if one can interpret his reference to "Chrestus" in that sense). Somewhat earlier, Epictetus (*Diss*. 2.9.19–21) seems to be aware of the difference between the proselytes' baptism (which the rabbis hardly mention) and the Christian (para-)baptism, which does not imply a change of ethnic allegiance. On a "geographical approach," Lucian of Samosata's *Death of Peregrinus* connects Christianity with its origins in Palestine. In Asia Minor of the mid-second century, Aelius Aristides (*Or*. 46), too, could apparently designate Christians as "impious people in Palestine" and compare them to Cynics. Similarly, Epictetus (*Diss*. 4.7.5–6) could possibly call Christians "Galileans"—although this interpretation is not without its difficulties, as the detailed discussion shows.

Finally, Levieils presents two authors who criticize Christianity for its Jewish roots and heritage. Celsus in his *True Discourse* introduces Judaism as something illogical and immoral, yet time-honored, then denounces Christianity both for having such roots and for turning away from them. Similarly, the third-century philosopher Porphyry in his well-informed critique could exploit the dialectical relationship of Christianity to Judaism.

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The second chapter ("Le christianisme superstition," 165–330) is the longest and covers the widest range of prejudices about, reservations toward, and accusations against Christianity. After some basic clarifications on what constitutes superstition (fear of the divine and a perceived need of expiatory rites), Levieils contextualizes Christianity as a foreign (and, what was worse, a new) religion in the Roman Empire, where foreign deities were normally integrated into the pantheon as long as the cult was conducted in an orderly way and under official control. Tolerance was obviously more limited in times of crisis, such as the mid-third century. In a further step, Levieils examines the critique of Christianity on an intellectual level as a "folly" that is not up to rational scrutiny but is at home with less-educated people. Finally, he comes to the content of this "superstition" (274–330). Here he presents a number of accusations brought forward against Christians: magic, cannibalism and orgies, as well as worship of Jesus as a convicted criminal, of the sun, or of a donkey's head. Where appropriate, he relates these accusations to prejudices already held against Jews.

The third chapter ("Athéisme et impiété," 331–91) is about quite the opposite of superstition. Again, Levieils begins his presentation with terminological clarifications and then briefly studies the charge of atheism (or rather, the practical refusal to worship the gods) as leveled against Jews—founded on the conception of God's transcendence and the prohibition to depict God or to pronounce his name. Then he shifts the focus to "atheistic" Christian practice and thought, based on Acts of martyrs as well as on literary polemics against Christians. This vast topic is divided up into "practical atheism" (i.e., the refusal to participate in the public cult, which was considered as a kind of antisocial behavior—Levieils stresses the importance of the "cité" as a political and religious body)—and "theoretical atheism" (that is, the philosophical critique both of the forms of traditional religion and of the conception of the gods that was at the basis of that religion). A somewhat different approach is taken in the last part of the chapter, "La colère des dieux" (368–91), which is about the charge that Christians—by their theoretical and practical atheism—provoked the wrath of the gods that expressed itself in the (natural, military, and political) disasters that struck the Roman Empire in the late second and even more in the third century, as well as in the perceived fact that the oracles seemed to have fallen silent.

The fourth chapter ("La haine du genre humain," 393–503) covers one of the most general accusations against Christians. It comprises four fields in which Christians allegedly manifested their hatred of humankind. The first one, in close connection with what was said in the third chapter, is nonparticipation in social and religious events (the two dimensions were impossible to separate) as well as reservations toward certain professions (e.g., school teacher). The second field is martyrdom, with regard both to the apparently perverse readiness of many Christians to die for their faith and to the

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veneration of martyrs (that is, legally, of convicted criminals). The third field is the destabilization of families, understood in the larger sense of the *domus*/οἶκος that also comprised slaves and freedpeople; the opportunities Christianity offered to women and to slaves would have been more than disturbing in a patriarchal society. The fourth field is the fear of a Christian conspiracy against the political order, which was nurtured by Christians' refusal to participate in the imperial cult and, more generally, by the eschatological perspective of Christianity that tends to relativize worldly powers.

These four chapters are followed by a general conclusion (505–10) with some sociological/psychological reflections on the phenomenon of the persecution of a minority—whether Christians in the Roman Empire or Jews in medieval Europe. In the appendix one finds reproductions of two graffiti (one is the famous graffito from the Palatine mocking the Christian Alexamenos as worshiping a crucified donkey) and an inscription from Didyma (CIG 2883d) with a reference to Christians. The volume concludes with a list of abbreviations (513–15) and the bibliography (517–48).

Levieils has chosen a vast subject for his dissertation, and it is by all means impressive to see how he manages the sheer amount of source material and contextualizes the accusations against Christianity in ancient Greek and/or Roman thought. Thus the reader gets a sense, for example, why the refusal to participate in the public cult was at all a problem. However, sometimes one can get the impression that he reads texts such as the Acts of the Apostles or Lucian's *Death of Peregrinus* in a more "straightforward" way as historical sources than the genre of these texts allows. What is more, many of Levieils's sources are Christian reactions to anti-Christian polemics, but there is no explicit reflection on the historical value of these texts and on the problem of mirror-reading.

Another problem comes with the vast scope of this study. This wealth of information obviously requires some organization. Levieils has chosen a topical structure with the four fields outlined above. This is certainly a good possibility, although overlaps cannot be avoided, such as between the fields of atheism and impiety (ch. 3) and hatred of humankind (ch. 4; see 394, with regard to reproaches against Jews: "La haine du genre humain était le prolongement naturel de l'athéisme"). The topical structure can also create the impression that the three centuries covered by this study were one homogeneous period without much development. To be sure, Levieils is aware of developments and trends, such as the "effort intellectuel qui accompagna la Grande Persecution" (214). But nevertheless the basic approach seems to be a synchronic one.

Despite these criticisms, Levieils has produced a commendable piece of work. It may not be the kind of book one reads from the first to the last page, but—also due to its topical structure—it does make a huge wealth of information easily accessible, especially because

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Levieils includes many quotations from sources. It will be a good idea to consult this book if one is interested in ancient polemics against Christians.

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