

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

116. Jahrgang

– Dezember 2020 –

Ahmed, Luise: Bilder von den Anderen. Christliches Sprechen über Heiden bei den lateinischen Apologeten. – Münster: Aschendorff 2017. (VI) 272 S. (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband, Kleine Reihe, 14), geb. € 46,00 ISBN: 978-3-402-10921-2

Luise Ahmed has written an important book about how theological authors with relations to North Africa described non-Christians in their apologetic works. A. contributes to and brings new perspectives and details into an ongoing research discourse on the relations between Christians and non-Christians in Late Antiquity. The leading scholars in this research discourse are Majastina Kahlos and Judith Lieu. A. describes this research discourse very well; she acknowledges other scholars in the field and positions her own work in relation to these. In this way, the reader helpfully knows from the beginning the context of the research presented in the book.

A.'s book opens with an introduction where she presents her research field and the methods she uses. In the following seven chap.s she analyzes apologetic works from authors connected to North Africa. These authors are Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Firmicus Maternus, and Augustine. The book closes with a comparative chap.

The introduction to the book is short, but vital, because A. outlines her methods and research questions. The introduction has three sections. The first section deals with the definition of the objective of the research – the image or depiction of the non-Christian Other as “painted” by seven early Christian authors. A. underlines strongly that she analyzes these literary images of the others, and not how these images relate to the historical reality. This is a simple distinction, but it is important to clarify this, because authors and readers very often confuse the literary and historical levels. This has been a major problem in prior research on early Christian apologetics. The second section in the introduction deals with the material she analyzes. First, she defines early Christian apologetic as a text's strategy and content and not a literary genre. According to A., apologetic content and strategies are found in many different literary genres. Next, A. outlines concretely which texts and authors she will analyze. She has decided to concentrate on Latin texts from North African writers or writers with connections to North Africa. This is a wise decision, because this delimitation of the material allows the author to go in detail with specific research questions. It also allows her to identify possible similarities in the early Christian apologetics connected to North Africa and avoid comparisons with the early Greek Christian apologetics, which would have complicated the work unnecessarily. However, this decision calls for a similar book on early Greek apologetics following the same methods as A. uses in the present book. In the third section of the introduction, A. explains how she will study the function of the images or depictions of non-Christians in the texts. As each text is a closed unit, it

is necessary that all seven texts are studied individually. I think that A. made the right choice here, even if this leads to a structure of the book with seven chap.s, where the same questions are asked to individual texts. A thematic approach would have blurred the specific profiles of the individual texts. The functions of the images of the others in each text are studied at three levels: the function in the text itself, the function related to the authors' ideas and intentions, and the function related to the Roman society. In the following I will try to give an impression of A.'s interpretation of the individual texts and authors.

Tertullian is the first of the seven authors to be studied. A. concentrates on his major apologetic work *Apologeticum*. In this text she finds four groups of Others: the governor and those related to him, the people, the philosophers, and the criminals. Tertullian describes these groups by help of their acts and way of life. All four groups are seduced by demons and therefore have irrational ideas about the gods. They are not sincere in their religious life, nor are they able to live morally well. One of the consequences of this is that they persecute Christians brutally. The function of describing the Others in this way is to create an image of Christians themselves as rational, lawful and morally good people. The aim of the *Apologeticum* is not only and perhaps not even primarily to convince the governors about stopping the persecution of the Christians, but to help Christians build and strengthen their own identity.

The next text to be analyzed is Minucius Felix' *Octavius*. This text is unique in several ways. Most important is that the text includes a spokesperson (Caecilius) for the position Minucius Felix argues against. Caecilius represents "the Other", who is characterized as uneducated, stupid, superstitious, immoral, etc. Minucius Felix also addresses another group of "Others" consisting of well-educated non-Christians. Minucius finds shared interests between Christians and this group, such as traditional education, shared moral values, etc. A. suggests that at the level of the text the function of the apology is to convert the group of Others represented by Caecilius, but at the level of the author the function might be to convert the more educated to Christianity or at least to convince them that they have shared interests with the Christians.

In Cyprian's *Ad Demetrianum* Demetrianus is, at the text level, "the Other". He is characterized by a false worship of the gods and persecution of Christians, but the Others are also a broader group of non-Christians, which Cyprian does not describe in the same hostile way as he describes Demetrianus. Unlike Demetrianus, they can still convert to Christianity. The function connected to images of the Other is multifaceted in this text. The negative image of Demetrianus is used to encourage the congregation of Christians to stick together, to be strong in faith and to wait until the enemy is overcome, while the function related to the broader depiction of non-Christians is to convince them that they can still convert to Christianity.

According to A., Arnobius' *Ad nationes* differs from earlier Latin apologetic texts because Arnobius does not seem to care about the moral life of his adversaries. His image of the Others only concentrates on their *impietas* and their aggression towards Christians. Arnobius' image of the non-Christians is so pejorative that it seems impossible that his aim was to try to convert them to Christianity. At the level of the text, the function of this depiction is to defend Christianity against the accusations of impiety made against them. At the author's level, the image documents that Arnobius himself really has left pagan religion and cultic practices behind and become a serious Christian.

For Lactantius (*De divina institutione*) the Others are the *cultores deorum* – those who worship the pagan gods. Lactantius divides these *cultores deorum* in two subgroups: the educated (the

philosophers) and the uneducated. Their worship of the pagan gods is caused by ignorance and leads to immoral life, which culminates in persecutions of Christians. A. argues the aim of Lactantius' *Divinae institutiones* is to teach true Christianity to the *cultores deorum* so that they reject their cult and convert to Christianity and thereby cease persecuting Christians. Implicitly, Lactantius also wants to support and strengthen the Christians by convincing them about the truth of Christianity.

De errore profanarum religionum written by Firmicus Maternus portrays "the other" as ill, confused and helpless worshippers of the pagan gods. As such, they are threatening the emperors and the stability of the society. In general, these "others" are destined for annihilation, but some of the "others" who doubt the truth of the pagan cult and gods can be converted to Christianity. However, according to A., conversion is not the aim of the treatise. The main aim is to draw clear lines between Christians and non-Christians and to comfort the Christians in their choice of religion.

A. discusses Augustine's *De civitate Dei* as her last example. This work is, according to her, not a typical apologetic work, but more Augustine's attempt to present a coherent description of reality as two cities: God's City and the earthly city. As part of this, Augustine constructs many images of "the others" who belong to the earthly city. These images are constructions which do not relate to historical realities. *De civitate Dei* is not merely the last example in the book, but also in A.'s eyes the closure of Latin apologetics and Christian Apologetics in general.

In the last chap. of the book A. sums up the results of her analyses.

The author of this review has enjoyed reading A.'s book, which has a solid methodological basis, almost consistently applied throughout the book. Furthermore, it has a clear focus on North African and Latin apologetics. The many detailed analyses of apologetics texts offer a great deal of useful information to all who work with this theme and on these texts and authors.

About the Author:

Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Dr., Professor for Systematic Theology at the Department of Theology, Aarhus University, Denmark (alj@cas.au.dk)