
This fascinating and thought-provoking book offers a refreshingly innovative approach to the old and much-debated question of the changing status of the bishop in the increasingly Christian world of Late Antiquity. Rapp draws upon a wide array of patristic, hagiographical, legal, and epigraphic sources to challenge a number of traditional assumptions regarding the rising prominence of the bishop in the Late Roman Empire. In their place, she presents a new model through which to interpret the shifting role of the bishop and the relationship between bishops, holy men, and secular elites in the ‘age of transition’ between AD 300 and 600.

This new model is laid down in Part I of her book. Rapp rejects Weber’s polarised contrast of institutional and charismatic authority, which cannot do justice to the religious complexity of the Late Antique world, and she proposes instead a tripartite definition of episcopal leadership, which better expresses the interaction of what she describes as the bishop’s pragmatic, spiritual, and ascetic authority (Chapter 1). Her historical outline of the emergence of the episcopate is rather schematic (Chapter 2), but Rapp proceeds to offer a useful account both of early Christian attitudes towards 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the only New Testament passage that lays down the qualities appropriate to a priest or bishop, and of the writings of various patristic authors who discuss the nature of ecclesiastical leadership. She then summarises how the early Church regarded those who possessed spiritual authority (Chapter 3), and places particular emphasis upon ascetic authority (Chapter 4), which in her model represents ‘the focal point at the interconnection between spiritual and pragmatic authority’ (18). Asceticism both prepared an individual to receive the Spirit and revealed those who possessed spiritual authority, for bishops no less than for holy men,
while personal ascetic authority in turn legitimised the bishop’s possession of the pragmatic authority of his episcopal office.

The great strength of this new model, as Rapp herself states in her opening chapter, is that ‘the combination of these three kinds of authority—spiritual, ascetic, and pragmatic—provides the analytical tools that allow the study of bishops and holy men within the same cultural, religious, social, and political context’ (18). In opposition to those like Weber who seek to contrast the bishop and the holy man, Rapp emphasises the similarities in their respective roles and in their presentation in contemporary Christian writings. As she demonstrates through her discussion of the Late Antique conception of the desert both as a physical location and as a symbolic and Biblical image in Chapter 4, asceticism was not necessarily regarded as incompatible with ecclesiastical office and worldly engagement. Indeed, ascetic experience was often viewed as a valuable qualification for clerical service, and a number of monks became priests and bishops, despite their reluctance which would become a topos of hagiography. Rapp’s model also offers a further insight into the nature of the tensions that did indeed arise between episcopal authority and the authority of the holy man, particularly concerning the right to teach, to offer intercession, and to impose penance. These tensions, which are visible in the controversy between Cyprian and the confessors of Carthage and in the Novatian and Donatist Schisms, did not originate from conflicts over the importance of ascetic values and moral virtue to the bishop, which moderates and rigorists alike upheld. Rather, the debates revolved around ‘the definition of the nature of episcopal leadership and the relative importance of spiritual, ascetic, and pragmatic authority in this context’ (97), and the issue of whether Christian authority rested in the individual or was inherent within the clerical office would continue to divide the Church for centuries.

Part II of Rapp’s book extends this comparison of bishops and holy men to also include civic elites, for ‘the bishop’s role in practical matters was analogous to that of the patronus or public benefactor, whether he was a holy man or a prominent citizen’ (156). Within
the framework of her tripartite model of episcopal authority, Rapp here returns to a number of crucial questions regarding the social status and activities of bishops in Late Antiquity. After an interesting comparison between two very different bishops, the wealthy Neoplatonist Synesius of Cyrene and the ascetic Theodore of Sykeon (Chapter 5), she undertakes a more detailed study of the origins and education of bishops in the early Church (Chapter 6). While a few bishops did come from humble backgrounds, the majority of fourth century bishops were of curial origins, with senatorial bishops emerging in the late fourth and particularly in the fifth century. This conclusion is hardly new, but Rapp then develops in detail the comparison between the public activities of bishops, including the construction of buildings, the distribution of food, and the care of prisoners, and the traditional behaviour of the Greco-Roman civic elite (Chapter 7). As she observes, the difference between the bishops and the elite from which they were often drawn lies less in their specific actions and more in their expressed motivation, while the bishop was also separated from the holy man by the access to greater wealth offered by the former's institutional position.

Rapp therefore emphasises that bishops remained distinct from the wider civic elites, despite their similarities in social background and public activities. She dismisses the now widely rejected claim of several older scholars that the powers given to bishops in the legislation of Constantine turned the bishops into functionaries of the state (Chapter 8), and she also challenges the similarly dated explanation of the rising importance of the bishop by reference to a so-called 'decline of the curiales'. Rapp prefers to set that rise against the background of the increasing Christianisation of the Late Roman world and the concentration of civic power in fewer and fewer hands (Chapter 9). The development of the role of the bishop was a gradual process throughout the period from Constantine to Justinian, a process that in her Epilogue Rapp traces through the shifting hagiographical presentation of holy bishops 'from model Christians to model citizens' (290).
Certain aspects of Rapp's model of episcopal authority do need to be handled with some caution. This is in part an inevitable consequence of her decision to omit from her book any detailed discussion of the development of the episcopal office as an institution or of the roles that bishops played in liturgy or in doctrinal debates (22). The institutional nature of the episcopate is to an extent recognised in her model, and Rapp has rightly sought to avoid the polarised conflict of institutional and charismatic authority proposed by Weber. Yet although Rapp acknowledges that 'spiritual authority conferred through ordination is what ultimately sets bishops apart from martyrs and holy men' (98), the significance of the 'official' status of the bishop is not a theme that she ever analyses in depth. Rapp prefers to emphasise the similarities rather than the differences between bishops and holy men, and it is by no means self-evident that ordination was as she asserts 'primarily a confirmation of pre-existing qualifications, whether spiritual or social, and only in the second place the bestowal of a license to a greater scope of activities and/or the conferral of additional spiritual powers' (166). The role of the bishop in doctrinal controversies was also central to episcopal authority and self-presentation, as the career of Athanasius of Alexandria (139) or the inscription of Makedonius of Lydian Apollonis (291-2) demonstrate, and this highlights a further difference between bishops and holy men whose importance Rapp again perhaps underestimates. And although in her Introduction she declares the need for 'a study that deemphasizes the reign of Constantine' (13), when she takes up this theme in Chapter 8 her argument is in fact restricted solely to the impact of Constantine's episcopal legislation. Despite her conclusion that Constantine was 'more a cautious emperor than a shrewd administrator or a devout revolutionary' (259), her entire book can equally be read as an eloquent testimony to the vast influence that the conversion of Constantine did of course exert upon the development of the Christian Church.

Most importantly, however, despite the impressive breadth of sources which Rapp cites, her conception of asceticism as the nexus uniting the bishop's pragmatic and spiritual authority derives
almost exclusively from an ideal concept of the episcopate presented within a limited corpus of patristic and hagiographical texts. The authors upon whom she depends, particularly the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Jerome, were all men who shared a strong interest in ascetic values, and indeed all followed the tripartite career path of education, contemplation, and ministry that according to Rapp was symbolised above all by the life of Moses (Chapter 4). This in turn raises the question of to what extent the model of the episcopate that she has drawn from the writings of these exceptional individuals can be taken as representative of the wider church, a danger that Rapp acknowledges in her Epilogue. The model that she presents is unquestionably of great value, but, as Rapp herself would agree, more work is still required to achieve her stated aim ‘to reinsert into their contemporary conceptual framework the thousands of bishops who were discharging their duties, for better or for worse, throughout late antiquity’ (22).

David M. Gwynn
Christ Church
Oxford