

Cornelius Motschmann: *Die Religionspolitik Marc Aurels*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2002 (Hermes Einzelschriften 88). 296 pp. Euro 74,- ISBN 3-515-08166-6.

The winner of the crown for best Roman emperor in Julian the Apostate's fictitious competition, blamed by posterity only for letting his „monstrous“ son Commodus succeed him and accordingly put an end to Gibbon's period „during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous“, earned his regard above all from his so-called *Meditations*, the modern name for a wide-ranging collection of philosophic reflections showing him to be a man of high moral standards.<sup>1</sup> Motschmann's study of the „religious politics“ of Marcus Aurelius, a revised version of his doctoral thesis (Freie Universität Berlin, 2000), has a threefold starting point. Firstly, he expresses the hope that an investigation of the emperor's Religionspolitik will complement the picture of his character as gained from the famous collection of wise phrases, the moralistic element of which Ancient authors are said to have regarded „als einen wesentlichen Bestandteil der Religiosität des Kaisers“ (11). Secondly, he aims to contribute to the debate on the influence of Marcus' philosophic convictions on his political decisions. Thirdly, he intends to answer the question of whether the emperor's ‚religious politics‘ hastened or delayed the religious crisis within the empire. The four chapters of the book accordingly focus on what are seen to be the main elements of Marcus Aurelius' ‚religious politics“ and on how these relate to those of his predecessors.

In chapter two („Römische Religiosität, philosophische Gottesverehrung – ein Widerspruch?“) Motschmann sets out to unite what he describes as the emperor's „monotheistic beliefs“<sup>2</sup> with his inevitable position in the very centre of the „Römische Religionspraxis“ (34). It remains of course to be seen how literally Marcus' „monotheism“ ought to be taken, as Asklepios and a fertility goddess appear in his *Meditations* as well (5, 8; 6, 43). In any case, as has been

- 1 Jul. Apost., Symp., esp. 333-335. E. Gibbon: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), vol. I. ch. 3. For a new approach to Commodus, see now the fundamental work by O. Hekster: *Commodus. An Emperor at the Crossroads*, Amsterdam 2002, and on the emperor's intent to be succeeded by his son as a matter of course, esp. id., „All in the family: the appointment of emperors designate in the second century AD“ in L. de Blois (ed.): *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies in the Roman Empire. Impact of Empire I*. Amsterdam 2001, 35–49.
- 2 Cf. 68: „Marc Aurels Glaube war monotheistisch“ (with reference to Med. 7, 9), and 58 n. 152: „Wie alle Stoiker denkt Marc Aurel monotheistisch.“

remarked by others before,<sup>3</sup> Marcus' religiosity does not stand out in an unequivocal manner from his personal writings. As for his cultic activities, Mutschmann first assesses the influences from his mother (Domitia Lucilla, who is alleged to have protested against the attempts of her twelve-years old son to sleep on the ground in imitation of philosophers, *Hist. Aug. Marc. Aur.* 2,6), his tutor Fronto, and his predecessor Antoninus, and then discusses the various priesthoods to which the young Marcus belonged.

In chapter three („Religionspolitik und Herrschaftslegitimation“) Mutschmann asks a question which he finds often overlooked in the study of the „religious politics“ of Marcus Aurelius, since the latter's elevation of Lucius Verus to co-Augustus and promotion of Commodus are often seen as unfit for his image of philosopher on the imperial throne: in what manner did Marcus apply religious elements to the legitimation of his own position and that of his family? Since 12 BC each emperor occupied the position of chief priest of Rome, and thus unified sacerdotal and executive authority, „was ihm die Möglichkeit bot, die Religion in den Dienst seiner Politik zu stellen“ (70). In a long section Mutschmann discusses the simple fact that Marcus may have made Verus co-Augustus, but kept the title of Pontifex Maximus to himself,<sup>4</sup> without introducing a double chief pontificate in the same way as happened in 238 with Pupienus and Balbinus after the death of the first two Gordians.<sup>5</sup> The section is certainly interesting, but also a bit too much ado about nothing: in AD 161 it was, apparently, still fully natural that only the more senior Marcus became *pontifex maximus*.<sup>6</sup> The discussion that follows on the „imperial cult“ under Marcus – „seine philosophische Position stand zu der Vergöttlichung eines Menschen grundsätzlich nicht im Widerspruch“ (81)– would have gained from

3 E. g. A. R. Birley: *Marcus Aurelius. A Biography*. London/New York, sec. ed. 1987, 222: „It is difficult to define Marcus' religious position. To some he appears deeply imbued with traditional piety. But at times in his writings he seems more like an agnostic, although believing that it was right to carry out formal acts of religious cult.“

4 Verus was given the title occasionally in inscriptions from some of the provinces (cf. 72 n. 183), but this said doubtless more about the response to central developments by the periphery than about the central developments themselves.

5 Mutschmann refers to Marcus' decision to keep the pontificate for himself as „keineswegs selbstverständlich“ (16), but see his own words on the pontificate later on: „Wenn dies im Jahre 238 von Pupienus und Balbinus kollegial besetzt wurde, so ergibt sich dies aus deren durchaus andersgeartetem Herrschaftsantritt und beweist nicht, dass man das auch schon bei Marc Aurel erwarten durfte“ (77).

6 See also Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 117: „the highest priesthood being indivisible“.

taking into consideration Lendon's important thesis that such cultic acts ought to be interpreted above all in terms of „honour“.<sup>7</sup>

In the longest chapter four („Religion als Instrument der Krisenbewältigung“) Mutschmann reviews in detail a long series of ceremonial measures taken by the emperor to brave situations of crisis caused by wars, epidemics or other disasters, such as the rites of atonement at the outset of the Roman offensive in the Marcomannic Wars, the purge of the cult of Serapis, the interpretation of the famous Rain Miracle that made Marcus' army beat the Quadi, the donations made to the sanctuary at Eleusis after its partial destruction by enemy tribes and Marcus' subsequent initiation in the local Mysteries, and the traditional declaration of war in his capacity as *fetialis* at the outset of the second Marcomannic war. Looking for the intentions with which Marcus undertook those ritual actions, Mutschmann makes, not surprisingly with such a starting point, the rather general and noncommittal statement „dass sich Marc Aurel bei seinen religionspolitischen Entscheidungen in einem Spannungsfeld zwischen religiöser, der Staatsräson untergeordneter Pflichterfüllung und individuellen Glaubenswahrheiten bewegte, der er miteinander zu verbinden suchte“ (168).

In chapter five („Marc Aurel und die monotheistischen Religionen“) Mutschmann assembles the relevant material relating to the emperor's attitude to Jews and Christians. He discusses both the well-known passage in Ammianus (22, 5, 5) where Marcus, travelling through Palestine, exclaims at the petitioning<sup>8</sup> Jews that they are even more excitable than the Marcomanni and Quadi, and the Talmudic legend which presents the emperor as a lifelong friend of Rabbi Juda, concluding that neither tradition has the final say. In the second, much longer part of this chapter, Mutschmann aims to investigate why it was precisely under Marcus that the contrast between pagans and Christians reached such dramatic heights. The martyrdoms of Polycarpus and Justinus and the cases against Christians in Lyon pass the review, leading to the author's judgement

7 J. E. Lendon: *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World*, Oxford 1997, 160–172, at p. 161: „acts of divine cult for the emperors were honours, holding a place at the top of a continuum of honours which an individual, city, or provincial council might bestow.“ See now also the equally important work by I. Gradel: *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford 2002, esp. p. 29: „divine worship was an honour which differed from ‚secular‘ honours . . . only in degree, not in kind.“

8 Mutschmann convincingly follows a text conjecture that reads (*se*) *petentium* rather than the insulting *fetentium*. Contra Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 193, who commented that „on more than one occasion he apparently found their riotous behaviour and lack of concern with hygiene something of a trial, Ammianus records“.

that although the emperor should not be held responsible for the infamous persecutions under his regime, „doch wirkte seine bewusste Förderung traditioneller Religionsbräuche als Katalysator, um den Gegensatz zwischen Heiden und Christen zu verstärken“ (272–273).<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that a lot of knowledge and learning has found its way into Mutschmann's book, and the analysis of sources will be a great help for students working on the reign of Marcus Aurelius. However, its eventual value remains questionable. As Mutschmann himself admits, „mit der vorliegenden Monographie über die Religionspolitik Marc Aurels wird zwar kein wissenschaftliches Neuland betreten, aber doch zum ersten Mal diesem Thema eine eigene Studie gewidmet“ (17). One problem with the book, of course a characteristic feature of biographies, is that its main character is given too central a role. It is implicitly implied that Marcus' personal religious convictions had a far-reaching effect on the „religious history“ of the empire as a whole during his reign, although there is no evidence that Marcus ever forced his personal opinions about the divine on his subjects. It is a pity that Mutschmann decides (15) to make only limited use of numismatic and archaeological material, as a detailed look at the use of religious symbolism, above all on coins, would have contributed to a more complete understanding of any „message“ that Marcus wanted the inhabitants of his empire to receive. It is not unimportant that the latter never read (and were indeed never meant to read) his so-called *Meditations*. Without something such as a centrally issued coinage reflecting religious preference, how relevant *are* individual cult activities in the provinces? Last but not least, my main criticism of Mutschmann's book is the christianising distinction between „religion“ and „politics“, not only in the context of his discussion of the imperial cult – „wenngleich dieser vorwiegend politischen Zwecken diene und nach modernem Verständnis nicht unbedingt der religiösen Sphäre zuzuordnen ist“ (14)<sup>10</sup> –, but inherent in the whole approach. Comparing Marcus' cult practice on the one hand with his „personal conviction“ (as learned from his philoso-

9 Cf. 263, where he states that Marcus' „religious politics“ had contributed „dass der vorhandene Antagonismus zwischen Heiden und Christen sich unter spezifischen lokalen Gegebenheiten in gewalttätigen Aktionen entlud, die wiederum zur Einleitung der Verfahren führten.“ Cf. 269, where he argues that an analysis of the martyracts shows „dass sich die gesetzliche Grundlage der Christenprozesse unter Marc Aurel nicht verändert hat.“

10 The statement is especially surprising because Mutschmann has put S. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1984) on his bibliography.

phical reflections) on the other is, naturally, very tempting, but the precise relationship will always remain in the dark.<sup>11</sup>

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11 It is therefore not surprising that Mutschmann's conclusion is slightly vague: „Die Erörterung von Marc Aurels Religiosität führte zu dem Schluss, dass römische Religionspraxis und philosophischer Gottesglaube für ihn keinen Widerspruch darstellten, sondern sich gegenseitig ergänzten und so zu einer eigentümlichen Synthese gelangten“ (272).

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