CHAPTER ONE
CRISIS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Rationale

Appropriate responses to environmental and social crises—by individuals, communities, governments, religious and charitable organizations—are increasingly under focus in the twenty-first century. The focus of our research is episcopal crisis management in Late Antiquity, based principally on bishops’ letters in Greek and Latin from the fifth and sixth centuries (410–590 CE). The time-frame has been chosen to exclude at one end the letters of John Chrysostom and at the other end the register of Gregory the Great, both of whose letters have received recent scholarly attention.¹ All of John’s surviving letters date from his period of exile in Armenia (404–407), a curious phenomenon which skews the evidence of his epistolographical activity. Due to the rationale behind the collection of John’s letters we have no information whatsoever in his epistolary corpus about his time as a priest in Antioch, and no systematic data about his period as archbishop of Constantinople. In general, then, we are thrown back on the evidence from his homilies for crises other than that induced by his own exile from his church in Constantinople. For this reason we have excluded John’s letters from the corpus under discussion here.²

¹ Poverty in the letters of John Chrysostom has been sufficiently analysed in the “Poverty, Welfare in Late Antiquity” project of the Centre for Early Christian Studies at Australian Catholic University. These letters are not fruitful for evidence of other kinds of crisis since they derive from John’s period of exile, not from his time in episcopal office. See Allen, Neil, Mayer, Preaching Poverty, pp. 69–117. For Gregory I, see J.C.R. Martyn (intro., trans., notes), The Letters of Gregory the Great, Medieval Sources in Translation 40 (Toronto, 2004); B. Neil, M. dal Santo, eds., A Companion to Gregory the Great (Leiden, Boston, forthcoming).

So far there has been no study of the processes or ideology of episcopal crisis management or crisis management in general in Late Antiquity. This episcopal role became increasingly important as bishops assumed or were given roles previously assigned to imperial officials. Late-antique episcopal policies of religious inclusion/exclusion in response to crisis find contemporary resonance in the hardening of definitions of identity and political boundaries between Christian, Jewish and Islamic societies post-September 2001. The outcomes of such policies in the religious communities of Constantinople have been studied primarily in relation to hagiography, i.e. the Lives of saints, but not in relation to episcopal letters, which provide harder evidence. Maier points the way to the use of letters and homilies in his sociological analysis of the politics of orthodoxy in fifth-century Rome. A similar approach will offer a broader analysis of the politics of crisis management in the eastern and western parts of the Roman empire over two critical centuries in Mediterranean history.

Due to the disproportionate influence of Brown’s work, Poverty and Leadership, scholars have examined the role of the late-antique bishop as “lover of the poor”, “champion of the weak” and “civic leader” in the field of evergetism or public giving, without looking at the broader influence of the bishop in managing social and religious crises. Brown defended his characterization of the fourth- and fifth-century bishop mostly from sixth-century sources. A shift certainly seems to have occurred in the fifth century in the way the bishop was seen, or expected, to act towards the poor and other victims of crisis, but Brown provides no convincing or systematic evidence for when or why that change occurred. This volume offers a more sustained treatment of letters on the theme of crisis than has been available up to the present, and carries the timeframe forward into the crucial sixth century.

While crisis in the later Roman empire was frequently cast in religious terms as a way of making sense of a cascade of events that were beyond human control and individual experience, such meaning-making did not appear in episcopal letters, but was confined to homilies, chronicles, histories and literary prefaces. Letters were more concerned with practical aims,

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6 See Abbreviations.