JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S AUDIENCES AND HIS ACCUSATIONS OF RELIGIOUS LAXITY

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the question of religious apathy in the 4th c. by looking at the writings of John Chrysostom and Libanius. It will first explore the accusations of religious laxity that Chrysostom makes against his audience and the picture that Chrysostom’s writings give of the attitudes of his audience towards religion. It will then turn to look in broader terms at the place given to religion in the 4th c. by exploring the writings of Libanius on this matter. By taking into account this broader perspective, this article will suggest that Chrysostom is unfair to accuse his audiences of religious laxity and that instead what we see is that they disagreed with him over the extent to which religion should permeate their lives.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the place of religion in 4th c. society is a very pertinent one. Christian texts from the period can give the impression that religion in general was of central importance. At the same time, recent trends in the study of Late Antiquity have emphasised the centrality of religion and the impact of new Christian ideals and models for living. Other trends in the study of Late Antiquity have, in contrast, questioned the centrality of religion and have particularly questioned

1 The references to Libanius’ letters are marked out as coming from either Norman’s Loeb translations or Bradbury’s translations for Liverpool’s Translated Texts for Historians series by the prefix B. or N. Translations of John Chrysostom are from the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers series, often with my own adaptations.

2 This view is most obviously promulgated by Peter Brown in a number of works. See Brown (1971), (1972), (1982), (1992), (1995) and (1998).
whether the large numbers of Christian texts that remain are representative of the period as a whole. The issue of how far religion mattered to people in the 4th c. is thus still very much an open one that needs some thought devoted to it.

One of the problems with the way that debate about this question has been set up in the past is that when people talk about the importance of religion in Late Antiquity what they usually mean is the importance of Christianity. Graeco-Roman religions are only really talked about in terms of how far they survive the growth of Christianity and the processes of Christianisation that are seen to take place in the period. The problem with this prioritisation of Christianity is that when we come to reassess the place of religion in the 4th c. we tend to assume that we only need to assess the importance and centrality of this one particular religion. This is rather different from assessing the importance of religion and religious attitudes as a whole and as a result has rather restricted the way these issues have been debated in the past.

In this short essay we shall explore some of these issues by looking at the works of two writers based in Antioch in Syria—John Chrysostom and Libanius. John Chrysostom was priest and preacher in Antioch between A.D. 386–97, before being called to become Bishop of Constantinople. As with other Christian leaders who have left their sermons to us he is an interesting figure for understanding the importance of religion (Christianity) to his audiences. On the one hand his works can be counted among those that give an impression of the centrality of Christianity. All of his sermons are focused directly on religious matters and in them we see him trying to educate his audience about Christian ideals for living. On the other hand, however, he can also give some evidence that Christianity was not as important to people as he would have liked, as we see him dealing with the typical 4th c. problem of audiences who were apparently resistant to his teachings and who constantly need to be rebuked. Chrysostom’s sermons can thus help us to begin to answer the question of how important Christianity was in the 4th c. To go beyond this, however, and to seek to understand how important religion was more generally we also need to take into account a non-Christian view. We shall thus also spend a little time considering the writings of the ‘pagan’ teacher and orator Libanius who was born in Antioch and who lived, worked and wrote

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