

and poverty. Recognizing the weakness of the thematic approach for beginners, K. closes with a concise (and surprisingly complete) chronological history of the early Christian period.

This book succeeds at many levels. It will serve as a useful and enjoyable review for the specialist, but it will perhaps be most effective as an introductory text for the classroom. The chapter detailing the various tools that scholars use to reconstruct the past is particularly valuable. Few introductory texts explain things such as manuscript transmission, text criticism, and the role of computers in scholarly research. K. does. His discussions of canon formation and the emergence of theology exemplify both economy and clarity. Likewise, the treatment of slavery, war, women, and wealth deftly considers how early Christians both challenged their culture and were products of it. Like any introductory text, this book tends to flatten and simplify the contoured complexity of the early Christian world. Even so, K. takes care to remind us that many questions about the early Christian period remain open. K.'s years of teaching undergraduates have clearly paid off in this text, which will serve as a useful resource for anyone venturing, perhaps for the first time, into the early Christian world.

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AUGUSTINE'S CRITIQUE OF SKEPTICISM: A STUDY OF THE *CONTRA ACADEMICOS*. By Augustine J. Curley. *Studies in the Humanities*. New York: Lang, 1996. Pp. xx + 167. \$44.95; \$32.95.

Curley's purpose is to examine anew Augustine's intention in writing the *Contra Academicos*. Objecting to the "received interpretation" that emphasizes Augustine's epistemological refutation of skepticism, C. contends instead that his primary concern focused on the ethical ramifications of skepticism. In order to substantiate this thesis, C. undertakes a detailed examination of the argument and narrative structure of the dialogue, virtually paragraph by paragraph, in

the hope that the text will speak for itself.

The reader in search of understanding the finer points of Augustine's argumentation will certainly appreciate C.'s meticulous analysis of the text's content, which offers important insights into its meaning. C. is at his best in his discussion of three topics: the significance of Romanianus's role in the dialogue, Augustine's use of the dialogue format to convey ideas, and the relation between Augustine's dialogue and the tradition of esoteric writing in pagan and Christian circles.

However, while the text cannot but speak in favor of C.'s thesis, it is precisely his preoccupation with detail that eventually permits other issues to surface and to demand his attention as well. Thus, it remains unclear why Augustine finds it necessary to engage in an epistemological refutation of skepticism when his primary purpose consists in demonstrating the harmful moral effects of skepticism. Nor is it clear how this distinction correlates, if at all, with the other distinctions Augustine has in mind, namely, those between reason and authority, Platonism and Christianity, the few and the many, and unincarnate and incarnate truth. The emergence of these issues in addition to C.'s ambivalent statements regarding the text's purpose (18, 43, 77-78, 127, 135) leaves the reader somewhat baffled in the end with respect to the text's meaning.

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THE CHURCH OF THE ANCIENT COUNCILS: THE DISCIPLINARY WORK OF THE FIRST FOUR ECUMENICAL COUNCILS. By Peter L'Huillier. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1996. Pp. xii + 340.

Archbishop L'Huillier brings together, in this reworked doctoral thesis, an immense amount of research and learning. He presents a comprehensive analysis of the extant disciplinary canons of the first four ecumenical councils: Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. Each

chapter starts with a general presentation of the historical background to a particular council and includes some detail on the events of the council. Subsequently L.'s English translation of each canon is given with a commentary elucidating significant disputes, variant readings or translations, and his judgment of the likely intention of the council.

L. does not present new insights into the interpretation of the disciplinary work of these councils. However, his English translation and commentary are very readable; and his work reflects a degree of historical sensitivity not always the norm within Orthodox circles. E.g., L. rejects the perspective of those who see canonical texts "as the perfect and therefore untouchable expression of Orthodox canon law, such an attitude [being] a manifest exaggeration which we often meet in a strict, integrist environment" (5). On a number of occasions, he states that during this period the term "ecumenical council" was not a technical term. He demonstrates that the commonly held Orthodox view, that Nicaea forbade the celebration of Easter at the same time as the Jewish Pascha, is erroneous. Finally, he points out that the canons of the councils were blatantly ignored by local hierarchs in a number of instances (the problem of simony being the most long lasting). These points and others demonstrate L.'s commitment to a high degree of scholarly interpretation and judgment.

The work, however, does have shortcomings. The sections that introduce the canons do not represent the degree of critical scholarship present in the textual sections. L. in no way nuances his judgment of who was right and who was wrong, resulting in gross oversimplifications; e.g., he states that Arius's teaching "so flagrantly contradicted Holy Tradition that it was not difficult to get everyone to condemn him" (101)—an assertion recent scholarship clearly contests. Similarly, although he recognizes variances in application and interpretation of the canons, he does

not directly address the issue of whether in fact there was a common understanding of the authoritative character of the conciliar decrees. Nonetheless, this work is a valuable and significant contribution, especially for English-language nonspecialists who wish better to understand canonical work of the fourth- and fifth-century Church.

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THE GRIEF OF GOD: IMAGES OF THE SUFFERING JESUS IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND. By Ellen M. Ross. New York: Oxford University, 1997. Pp. xiii + 200. \$49.95.

In this illuminating study Ross draws upon the evidence of church wallpainting, manuscript illumination, sermons, literature of spiritual edification, mystery dramas, and Books of Hours to underscore the centrality of the Passion in late medieval English religious culture and devotional practices. In this evidence, which R. admits is selective, depictions of Christ on the cross were graphically brutal, revealing gaping wounds, rivulets of blood, and his emaciated body racked with pain. Although there was much here to disturb even the most callous believer, she argues convincingly that this icon of suffering had a positive, transformative impact which inspired people not with abject fear, as is often supposed, but with compassion, love, and the impulse to convert. Through the death of his Son, God revealed his love and mercy toward sinful humanity, inviting them into his salvific friendship through the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist.

The divine invitation provoked a startling array of devotional responses. What interests R., however, is the response of women. In examining literature written about women (e.g. the Middle English lives of saints Katherine of Alexandria, Margaret of Antioch, and Elizabeth of Spalbeek) and by women (notably Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe), R. demonstrates the compelling, affective