

Heidi Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies and Ritual Authority: Platonists, Priests, and Gnostics in the Third Century C.E.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. PP 200. ISBN: 9780812247893. 55.00 USD.

Heidi Marx-Wolf's monograph *Spiritual Taxonomies and Ritual Authority: Platonists, Priests, and Gnostics in the Third Century C.E.* seeks to rehabilitate the scholarly image of the third century and to reframe models of religious competition in this period. Both of these goals are achieved admirably. Marx-Wolf shows that interaction between philosophers, ritual experts, and Christian elite in this period was far more complex than is often assumed. More importantly, she shows that key figures—the philosopher, the hierophant, and the Christian expert—were more intimately connected, mutually influential, and directly competitive than previously assumed. Finally, she shows that the third century was a critical period in which various religious experts were attempting to carve out not simply a social identity but a viable professional niche in a context of constant contact and mutual competition. The particular combinations of practices, ritual and textual skills, and claims to authority made by figures like Origen, Porphyry, and Iamblichus in the third century would become standard for later experts, establishing a particular notion of what a “priest” or “philosopher” was and what they did. These models influenced the development of philosophy and Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy in Late Antiquity and beyond.

The book is well written, and the main arguments are clearly presented. This is no easy task as the subject is a body of complex, esoteric, and often contradictory texts about souls, demons, and heavenly realms. The book will certainly be useful to scholars interested in how ancient Mediterraneans conceived of and interacted with a broad array of imagined superhuman agents (demons, gods, heroes, spirits, souls, etc.). It will be particularly useful for scholars thinking about the development of Christianity, as Marx-Wolf shows that the role of Christian ‘priest’ was neither appropriated whole-cloth nor sui generis, but rather the result of a competitive process that was still very much in process in the third century.

The central issue of the book is the creation of “spiritual taxonomies”—attempts to systematize, categorize, and rank the populous and messy world of imagined superhuman agents. Ideas about and practices oriented toward such beings were everywhere in the ancient world (as in the modern world), but these ideas were normally non-discursive, unsystematic, and locally varied. The central argument of the book is that certain literate, educated elites attempted to impose order on this mass of ideas and practices and that this was done for competitive reasons. The book focuses most directly on the works of Origen, Porphyry, and Iamblichus and illustrates how their spiritual taxonomies attempt to “emplot spirits in a larger cosmic framework.” Often this involved projecting moral taxonomies into the superhuman realm by classifying various divine beings as good, bad, or indifferent. The goal was to systematize a disparate mass of popular ideas and practices into a theological system that was consistent and sensitive to particular conceptions of justice, the

nature of the divine, and theodicy—historically, points of critique of ‘popular’ religion by philosophers.

The most important point of Marx-Wolf’s work is the argument that such spiritual taxonomies were competitive, not acts of philosophical speculation. Men like Origen, Porphyry, and Iamblichus claimed to know truth about the divine which superseded the knowledge of local priests, healers, and holy men. In so doing, they attempted to carve out a new social role for themselves, claiming authority over more traditional religious personnel as self-described “priests of the highest god.”

A second key argument of the book is that the people playing this game were in far closer contact that has often been assumed. Specialists often read the same texts, studied in the same schools, and shared ideas together in formal and informal settings. Marx-Wolf is particularly interested in breaking down the traditional divide between Greco-Roman philosophers and Christian theologians, for which her main example is the interaction between Porphyry and Origen. She clearly illustrates that Christians and non-Christians shared “conceptual categories” deriving from similar education and skills.

Marx-Wolf pushes this further in the third chapter where she argues that, for people like Origen and Porphyry, the impetus to create spiritual taxonomies came from Christian thinkers often labeled ‘gnostic,’ a category she rightly nuances. This reverses the traditional scholarly model of inter-Christian influence. Her main example here is the Secret Book of John, which provides a spiritual taxonomy that directly challenges that of people like Origen. She argues that gnostic spiritual taxonomies provide a “missing link” that impelled people like Origen to create their own. This is the weakest part of the book, but only because it is extremely difficult to prove influence and precedence of influence. The metaphor of a ‘missing-link’ may not be ideal since it moves away from mutual contact and competition (which was so important in preceding chapters) towards a more linear model. Those ideologically committed to the primacy of ‘proto-orthodox’ Christianity will not be swayed. Those who are not so committed will clearly see the shared conceptual categories and mutual competition operating between different types of Christians as illustrated between philosophers and Christians in previous chapters, even if examples of direct influence and response are elusive.

The final sections of the book consider how spiritual taxonomies were used competitively in social situations. Here Marx-Wolf addresses the ways spiritual taxonomies were used to claim superior knowledge of the divine realm as well as the correct practice and interpretation of rituals. Figures like Porphyry and Origen, in creating systematized cosmic hierarchies, claimed to know the truth about the highest gods as opposed to other religious functionaries whom they disparaged as servants of lesser— or even *evil*—divine agents. This argument is developed in relationship to the body of texts often labeled ‘magical.’ Marx-Wolf argues that these texts do not represent a fringe element of ancient religion or a class of itinerant ‘magicians.’

Rather, she associates the texts with hereditary Egyptian priests disenfranchised in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The spiritual taxonomies of people like Iamblichus, who himself affected an Egyptianizing identity, thus attempt to supersede the traditional priests, not only in the realm of rhetoric but also in the realm of ritual practice. This part of the argument may very well be correct, but requires more development. It is unclear how the social dynamics Marx-Wolf outlines in this section would map onto other areas of the ancient Mediterranean where the history of hereditary priesthoods and colonization are radically different and where there is little evidence of texts similar to those found in Egypt.

I raise these issues as areas of further investigation, not critiques of Marx-Wolf's main points. The book is successful in correcting common scholarly assumptions and illuminating a world of religious competition insufficiently analyzed thus far. The arguments have significant consequences for our understanding of competition between religious experts in the third century and beyond, and, most importantly, the development of the Christian notion of 'priest.' The particular, and rather peculiar, job description developed by the figures Marx-Wolf analyzes becomes *the job description* for Christian priests and bishops in Late Antiquity, and it largely remains so today. This work helps elucidate a key part of that development.

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