



Response to Visigothic Symposium I, Panel 1: Theology

Rethinking Theology in Visigothic Society: From Sources to Concepts

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The first Visigothic Symposium gathers a remarkable selection of studies that explore the Visigothic society of the sixth and seventh centuries from different perspectives and disciplines. Organized around two key themes, Law and Theology, the present contributions investigate with renewed vigor old questions which have long been at the center of medieval – and especially Visigothic – historiography. Indeed, Law and Theology are fields of research with a long tradition and that have provided scholars with a large number of categories, hypotheses and methodological approaches which are deeply rooted in Visigothic studies. Therefore, the essays in this inaugural volume offer interesting perspectives that trigger new ways of thinking about Visigothic Hispania.

In general terms, the contributions to the Theology section underscore the importance of the theological dimension – the study of which frequently has been relegated to the exclusive field of Theology – in the analysis of social practices, power strategies and languages of authority. From this perspective, the different articles reveal a common ground concerning precisely the study of what is usually understood as religion – and therefore goes beyond the specific area of Visigothic research. Far from conceiving religion

as an autonomous sphere, neatly defined and separated from social practices, the studies emphasize the need to think about the constant interaction of what in modern times we understand as politics and religion.

Eleonora Dell'Elicine addresses the problem of paganism in the Iberian Peninsula through a case-study analysis of Canon XI of Toledo XII (681). From the outset, the article invites reflection on both the term 'paganism' and the Visigothic sources available for its analysis. Rethinking and deconstructing concepts strongly established in this field of study is, therefore, the first methodological requirement. However, abandoning the definition which conceived pagan practices as the survival of ancient cults, also leads to the problem of sources, in particular, the scope and limits of the conciliar acts.

According to the author, canon law – Canon XI of Toledo XII – can hardly be conceived as a reflection or a faithful description of the pagan practices actually current in the peninsula in the second half of the seventh century. Instead, it represents a strategy of centralization of monarchic power, which found in the anti-idolatrous program a means of underpinning the image of the new king – now associated with the eradication of infidelity – and of consolidating the verticality of social relations, thus placing the monarch at the top of a chain of mediations instituted by God.

As Dell'Elicine rightly points out, the canon, based on biblical foundations (Deut 4: 1-20), made King Erwig responsible for renewing the covenant between God and his chosen people. In the light of Scripture, the monarch, who had summoned the council shortly after

ascending the throne under unclear circumstances, was seen as a new Moses, committed to the elimination of idolatrous practices scattered throughout the peninsular territory. Moreover, Canon XI intervened directly in the power base and negotiating scope of the *domini*. In fact, they were awarded, under pain of excommunication, a specific function within the anti-idolatrous program designed by the king: to avoid the relapse of those who had been found guilty of carrying out idolatrous practices and had been brought before the lord by bishops and judges. In this way, the scope of action and mediation of the lords was reduced, limited by the actions of other agents – the judges and the bishops – and by the royal initiative itself, which, based on its direct relationship with the divinity, capitalized on all that strength to bolster its position. Finally, as a result of this approach to the sources, the author dismantles old assumptions on paganism – which were strongly anchored in Visigothic historiography – and challenges the traditional means of addressing this complex phenomenon.

The article of Isabel Velázquez studies the conciliar documentation as well. The author insists on the methodological importance of considering the interaction between political and religious power. In this case, the analysis focuses on the *leges in confirmationem concilii*, suggesting a novel approach: the conciliar activity of the Church is not conceived as an autonomous and independent sphere, but examined in direct connection with legislative initiatives of monarchical origin. In this sense, the article addresses an additional problem deeply rooted in Visigothic historiography – and key to the understanding of the society of seventh-century Hispania: the role of the council and of the social forces involved in it (king, bishops and nobles). According to Velázquez's analysis, the council –

as demonstrated by the careful study of those specific assemblies in which the presence of a *lex* or *edictum* (*in confirmationem concilii*) is registered – shows a political and legislative character, beyond the exclusively religious or ecclesiastical function.

On the other hand, the essay of Gusmão presents an in-depth study of the episcopal figure in Visigothic Hispania, focusing more specifically on the role played by the bishop in the relationship between Church and Monarchy. The responsibilities and attributions of the episcopal dignity were not necessarily limited to doctrinal and pastoral questions, nor did council assemblies only regulate matters of ecclesiastical discipline. This central position of the bishop is examined via the legal code known as *Liber Iudiciorum* (654). The author identifies a set of laws in which the episcopal authority is bolstered, for example, by underscoring the active role of bishops as judges and protectors of their diocese, and as leaders of their community. The bishop appears in the *LI* as judge and arbitrator, a legal figure involved in the civil and administrative affairs of the kingdom. Collectively, these studies of Dell'Elicine, Velázquez and Gusmão reveal, in complementary ways, the strategies of power inscribed in certain contexts, and contribute, thus, to the comprehension of Visigothic society in terms of power and not of institution.

Jacques Elfassi displays in his study a new list of sources for the *Sententiae* of Isidore of Seville by analyzing its chapter I.10. Dedicated to the angels, this chapter, previously studied from philological and theological perspectives by Pierre Cazier and Atilio Carpin, respectively, reveals, in fact, the major importance of furthering studies on sources. In this particular case, it contributes, in the first place, to elucidating Isidore's theological thought

and angelology. The author invites us to rethink the sources previously identified by Cazier and Carpin and suggests new guidelines for the analysis. More specifically, the identification of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob* as the ultimate source of several of the passages examined in *Sent* I.10 – instead of, for example, his *Homiliae* – encourages future studies on the reception of this major Gregorian work in Hispania, as well as on the chronology of the Isidorian works.

Elfassi's study has revealed that questions about the Patristic base of Isidore's works, and about his own method of work, need to be further examined. Indeed, studying the sources of the *Sententiae* is a highly valuable approach because, as the author suggests, it may shed new light both on the ways in which other voices of authority were used by the Bishop of Seville and on the production and circulation of manuscripts in the peninsula.

It is clear that these studies do not remain on the surface. Instead, important methodological questions are raised that allow us to think, first of all, on the interaction of powers in the Visigothic society of the sixth and seventh centuries – and in this sense to reconsider the concepts used for its analysis, and to recognize their limits and potentialities. Secondly, these articles contribute to the review of the ways of approaching and working on the sources of the period.

A final comment. To cover these studies in detail was far beyond the scope of this “response paper”. I only tried to capture some of their most powerful ideas. Therefore, I would now like to address a question that has been in my mind while reading the different

contributions: What about the sources? How should they be explored? What do they tell us or what can they tell us about that specific society?

In recent decades, notably since the second half of the 20th century, discursive approaches have been the object of a profound renewal in different disciplinary fields, mainly in linguistics, semiology and philosophy of language. As a result of the increasing contributions to those fields, discourses are being studied in their performative dimension rather than in a merely descriptive one. This approach – focused on the performative dimension – has opened the way for observing the creative faculty not only of written texts, but also of every form of recording actions and behaviors, that is, the capacity to create presence and meaning. From descriptive to performative acts, historiography has come a long way. Between textual operations and social interactions, the written text results in a new creation, it is used and experienced, received and appropriated.

In this sense, discourses have ceased to be considered as closed statements, reflections or specular expressions of reality to become, instead, discursive utterances and operations, that is, actions that are aimed at interpreting and producing realities. Since Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, among others, categories such as *text* or *intertextuality* have experienced severe changes.

When studying a work such as *Sententiae* or *De ortu et obitu Patrum* (to name the Isidorian works studied in my essay) it is possible to observe the constant (and multiple) appropriation of biblical and patristic texts, which results in a complex intertwining of

voices. These voices can sometimes appear explicitly – for example, to confer authority or inscribe the text within a certain line of thought – or implicitly, interspersed throughout the work without any reference or indication. This distinctive feature, typical of a great number of medieval ecclesiastical works, has occasionally led scholars to describe them as mere reproductions or simple collections of biblical and patristic sources.

However, as we have seen, it is more a question of observing the interaction and the work that underlies the use, selection, combination and adaptation of these sources. In other words, the recognition of a systematic use of patristic texts does not automatically imply a mere repetition, but rather the simultaneous appropriation of those utterances. These utterances are removed from their context of production – intention, generic framework, addresses – to give meaning to new realities, that is, new contexts on which they shed new light. In addition, the inclusion of biblical and patristic authorities – a widespread practice at the time – was not a reflection of the incompetence or lack of originality of those who elaborated these writings but a necessary operation, which at the same time transmitted vital content, created an alternative text and engendered authority.

Looking back at the essays of this inaugural Visigothic Symposium, I wish to stress the importance of a multidisciplinary perspective towards the achievement of a general understanding of Visigothic society. In addition, the crucial role of Law and Theology in the definition of practices, subjectivities and authorities, boundaries and strategies should also be emphasized. All the contributions gathered in this volume represent original and stimulating approaches that will hopefully inspire future insights into Visigothic Hispania.