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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

Marco Zambon, *“Nessun dio è mai sceso quaggiù”. La polemica anticristiana dei filosofi antichi*, Carocci, 2019 (Frecce), 552 pp.

If Marco Zambon’s new and very substantial (in contents and size) book did ‘only’ what its title promises, it would be a tremendously helpful step forward in our understanding of the complex relationship between late antique pagan philosophers and early Christian thinkers during a period that spans a few centuries, between the Emperors Tiberius and Justinian. But the book does much more than that, and notably also includes a comprehensive discussion of a set of related issues, such as: the legal status of being a Christian in the Roman Empire; the development of a policy of persecution against the Christians; and the social, political and cultural changes in the Empire that led to Christianity to become the dominant religion of the time, and of the times to come, globally. This is a book that I recommend with no hesitation as an essential read for all those working in late antiquity at the intersection of philosophy, history and theology. Its erudition and depth are no barrier to its readability, thanks to Zambon’s intellectual clarity, and his efficacious and direct way of expression. While this is a book that will push forward the boundaries within which we have thus far understood certain aspects of the pagan/Christian intellectual interactions in late antiquity, it is also a read that will be enjoyable and informative to the non-specialist.

No reviewer can ever pay full justice to what s/he reviews; I am afraid I am no exception to this predicament. I will here discuss only a selection of themes from the book, and from a philosophical perspective; but Zambon’s readership will no doubt have wider interests. The aim here is simply to wet their appetite. For the purpose of this review (and therefore inevitably simplifying matters somewhat), I consider the book as having two main themes: the argumentative engagement between pagans and Christians; and the socio-political ‘practical’ consequences that this engagement had in shaping the Roman Empire’s reaction to Christianity. (The author divides the book into four sections; what I identify as the first theme is covered in the first three sections, and as second in the fourth).

Zambon explicitly states (e.g. p. 15) that the book’s chief goal is to examine why the so-called professional philosophers of the time engaged in a polemical discussion of Christianity; but the question more broadly is: why did they engage with Christianity at all? It is not obvious why they did it: in a way, precisely by engaging with it as if it were a philosophical adversary, they were giving this status to Christianity. The Christians themselves did not claim to be professional philosophers; so why were they treated as such by their opponents? Zambon reconstructs the reasons with much ingenuity and on very solid historical and textual foundations. His point, literarily translated, is that the Christians were perceived by the philosophers of the time as ‘invading the field’ (p. 167): as playing the same game and claiming they were superior at it (see also p. 13); implicitly, there must have been a sense of intellectual threat – delegitimization – that the pagans philosophers must have felt from Christianity. Zambon develops his thesis along two main lines, which I here briefly reconstruct. First, the philosophical ‘schools’ of the Hellenistic period presented themselves (and competed against each other) as offering a philosophical education that would serve as ‘therapy’ – as a means to achieve a happy life. Christianity too had the same goal, broadly speaking, promising its followers a happy life/afterlife (pp. 141-2). Second, even without calling themselves philosophers, the Christians were truth-seekers; the overlap with the goal of philosophy is evident. Thus, Zambon ultimately presents the pagan philosophers’ position as complex: they did not want to recognise the Christians as philosophers (see p. 424), and yet felt as if they were professionally threatened by them.

If these considerations do explain why pagan professional philosophers were driven to engage with the Christians, why was their engagement so polemical – and was it justifiably so? Zambon

has an impressive array of thoughts to offer in answer to this question. He expresses them in a nutshell by identifying in novelty and irrationality the two features of Christian that were ‘smoke in the eye’ of the philosophers of the time (pp. 17, 22, 42, 46, 60 and elsewhere). Christians were self-declaredly searching for the ultimate truth (and indeed boasted they possessed it). They claimed success in reaching the truth on account of divine intervention, the revelation received from their God. To start with, this would certainly fly in the face of those who thought human intellectual capacities and effort, via education and training, were valuable tools in the search for truth. Christians were for the most part uneducated (p. 161ff). Yet they claimed they could access truth directly without the support of all that centuries of philosophical reflection could offer (e.g. p. 20). Further, their ‘ascent’ to the truth was based on faith, which is irrational, and opinion, which is a low cognitive state, especially for the Platonists (pp. 26, 43, 164, 169ff). Further, the Christians claimed that they had exclusive access to truth, whilst consensus had become a significant factor at the time as a marker of successful truth-tracking. No tradition had full and privileged access to truth, but each had some success, worthy of intellectual respect, which the Christians were not willing to acknowledge (pp. 148ff; 233ff). Zambon notes with acuity that in holding this position, the Christians would have been perceived as claiming that mankind is victim of a systematic error: why everyone else except the Christians would have been misguided in their effort to reach the truth, and wrong in what they thought were intellectual achievements toward the truth? (And why would the God of the Christians have let this happened if he did love humanity? p. 147). Returning now to their relationship with the preceding intellectual/religious/philosophical traditions, in so far as they leaned on them, the Christians were perceived as messing with cultural identities: e.g. appropriating the Jewish scriptures, as if anticipatory of the revelation, but not their cults and practices (pp. 42, 48); and taking ideas from the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, but out of context and ‘subjugating’ them to their doctrine. Lastly, non-Christian thinkers would have found plausible that like knows the like and via likewise means (e.g. p. 173); namely, the ultimate truth would be known to the knowledgeable – not to the ignorant! and if God wanted to reveal it, he would have done so to intellectually worthy recipients, and with appropriately sophisticated writings – not via the Christian scriptures which the pagans found of poor literary quality, self-contradictory, full of false information and even ridiculous stories (p. 181ff), and thus not even apt to be read allegorically (p. 211ff). Zambon thus builds an overarching and cogent argument that addresses in full the original opening question: the pagan professional philosophers of the time had plenty of reasons for engaging polemically with the Christians.

The reader might want to press the further question: could things, hypothetically, have gone differently? Could the engagement be other than polemical? Was it a fair exchange of arguments? Zambon gives evidence of (to my counting) four characteristics typical of the engagement between Christian and pagan philosophers during the period he considers: we saw already that it was conflictual, and worse polemical; further it was more often that not concentrated on details rather than the bigger picture; and ultimately it was a conversation among deaf people, that is with no mutual understanding and no common ground (p. 424). (Zambon cautiously notes that at least this is how things appear to us, when centuries later we read what survived of that engagement; but he rightly notes that all we have is the winner’s testimony; see p. 423ff.).

In addition to the broadly speaking philosophical issues discussed so far that fuelled the pagan/Christian diatribe, Zambon points out that there were also a number of ‘aggravating circumstances’, as we might call them. While the socio-political ones have been discussed in the literature already and will be more familiar to the reader, I will limit myself here to mention two issues that Zambon treats with great scholarly sophistication. First, the Christians promoted a

human life against human nature, meaning that they seemed to ‘depreciate’ the value of human life (e.g. by willingly accepting martyrdom), and in particular its physical needs and desires, and its social dimensions (i.e. good political citizenship); to the point of appearing misanthropic (pp. 25 and 36) – yet, somewhat absurdly, they believed in the resurrection of the body (p. 324). Second, the Christians believed in a divine life against divine nature: their God is weak, slow and ineffectual in saving humanity (see e.g. pp. 229, 302); jealous (p. 260); did not want to enable man to distinguish between good and bad (p. 261); preferred sinners and neglected the just (p. 267). In claiming that Jesus is God incarnate, the Christians made a human condemned to death an object of cult (134; 282ff). It’s genuinely impossible to be exhaustive in covering the ground Zambon covers, but as anticipated from the start, this is not even the goal here. By highlighting some of the lines of arguments and conclusions that Zambon develops in his wonderful book, this review aims to spark interest in a book that will enrich its readers very much indeed.

AM

D. Nikolaus Hasse, A. Bertolacci (eds.), *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna’s Physics and Cosmology*, De Gruyter, Boston – Berlin 2018 (*Scientia Graeco-Arabica*, 23), 549 pp.

The numerous articles collected in the volume, amounting to thirteen, are the result and development of the papers formerly discussed in June 2013, during an international conference held at Villa Vigoni (Menaggio, Italy). As the title explicitly displays, the volume deals with the reception of Avicennian topics and issues in the field of natural philosophy in three distinct yet connected milieus. This publication shares also its format with a previous one: in 2008, in fact, an analogous conference devoted to the reception of Avicenna’s metaphysical claims took place in Menaggio and a few years later, in 2012, the volume *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna’s Metaphysics* was published (De Gruyter, Boston – Berlin 2012). Moreover, several scholars contributed to each of these conferences as well as to the corresponding volumes, which together share the project of delving critically within the posterity of Avicenna by combining philological inquiry and philosophical analysis.

The main Avicennian sources for the topics at stake are found in quite a few writings, among which stand out the sections of the *Kitāb al-Šifā’* on natural philosophy, devoted to general physics, meteorology, psychology, action and passion and much more, and the late *al-Isārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, which had a stark and remarking fortune in the Arabic East. Other works such as the *Kitāb al-Nağāt* and the *Dānešnāme-ye ‘Alāī* were also known and exploited by several authors or commentators, although not to the same extent as the first two already mentioned. Even if critical of the pristine Avicennian thought, then, al-Ġazālī’s *Maqāsid al-falāsifa* also constitutes another relevant source, preceding the latter and systematic commentaries of the twelfth and thirteenth century, such as Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī’s for the eastern Arabic tradition, and Averroes’ for the western one.

The volume is structured according to the triadic division mentioned in the title, displaying at first six papers devoted to the Arabic context of reception. To the Hebrew Andalusian milieu two works are then reserved, followed at last by five more writings concerned with the production of Latin authors. A total of five papers is also followed by one or more appendices, which either summarise the main arguments formerly discussed (P. Adamson, C. Trifogli) or provide explicit textual material from the Latin authors (A. Lammer, A. Bertolacci, J.-M. Mandosio).

In the first section a further distinction may also be done, given the different fruition that the eastern and western exponents of the Arabic medieval world had of the Avicennian corpus. As a