

REVIEW

Isabella Sandwell

Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews, and Christians in Antioch
in the series, *Greek Culture in the Roman World*

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), cloth, xii+310 pp.

Reviewed by Demetrios Tonias, Boston College

Isabella Sandwell's *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* is an examination of the variegated religious life of fourth century Antioch using the writings of the Christian preacher John Chrysostom and the pagan orator Libanius as a lens. Sandwell's book, part of a series that examines the impact of Greek culture in the Roman world, is a revised version of the author's doctoral thesis at University College London in 2001. Sandwell demonstrates in her book that the labels of Greek, Jew, and Christian were far from being the well-defined categories many have imagined them to be over the years. In contrast to the stark divisions presented in Christian texts, the author describes a fourth-century Antiochene religious life that was both fluid and unformed – in large part due to the prevailing social structures present in the Roman imperial world of the fourth century.

Sandwell's use of Chrysostom and Libanius serves her well, as the former was an advocate of the distinct categories of Greek, Jew, and Christian while the latter presented a society where religious affiliation shifted depending on habit, feel, and perceived personal and political gain. The study is also valuable in light of the fact that Chrysostom was Libanius' student in rhetoric – although this relationship is not the focus of the text. While Chrysostom and Libanius had profoundly different views concerning religious identity, they both spoke to and about the same fourth-century Antiochene society. Sandwell herself contends that it was Libanius who more accurately described the realities of religious identity in fourth-century Antioch. For Libanius, religious practice was seen as an individual affair in which the goal was to obtain personal access to the divine. Chrysostom's use of defined categories of religious identity was, in part, an effort to mitigate this social reality. Libanius, however, did not view the religious milieu in terms of competing monolithic groups, but rather as a collection of personal religious practices. Sandwell argues that we can glean Libanius' pluralistic approach from his letters, which indicate that he favored a network model as the basis for religious connection as opposed to a system based on social groupings. While Libanius would have most certainly desired a return to the earlier Roman civic religion, Sandwell demonstrates that he was pragmatic and recognized that "religious identities were not idealized and monolithic but strategic and practical" (p. 163).

As the title of the book indicates, Sandwell also recognizes the presence of a strong Jewish community in Antioch, and thus as a corollary, its associated importance as part of the Antiochene religious fabric. She acknowledges, however, that the absence of Jewish textual material makes any analysis of the Jewish role in Antiochene religious life largely dependent on the writings of Chrysostom and Libanius. Chrysostom's reference to the local Jewish community in his eight homilies against Judaizing Christians is of course well known. Sandwell, however, builds on the work of Robert Wilken and others by placing Chrysostom's work within the context of Antiochene civic life in general and religious identity in particular.

Sandwell contends that Libanius accepted the loss of the former civic religious identity, whereas Chrysostom attempted to reconstruct it in a fashion where "to be a citizen of Antioch was to be

Christian and vice versa” (p. 138). Sandwell uses Chrysostom’s sermons to show that the Christian preacher consistently attempted to link all other Antiochene groups into a single religious category — the non-Christians. Thus, Jews were accused of being idolatrous Greeks and Christian heretics accused of being Jews in another form. For Sandwell, therefore, Chrysostom’s homiletic references to wealth and poverty were intended to create a Christian civic life and help shape Antioch as a Christian city.

Sandwell notes, however, that Chrysostom was not alone in trying to form a unified civic religious identity in Antioch. Throughout the book, Sandwell is quick to point out that during the brief reign of Julian from 361-363 CE – a little more than two decades before Chrysostom was offering his sermons to his flock in Antioch – the Roman Emperor also attempted to promote a common civic religious identity along Greco-Roman pagan lines. Julian even pursued an alliance of sorts between Jews and Greeks based on their common use of animal sacrifice. Furthermore, while he did not go as far as Julian in promoting this type of religious alliance, Libanius also demonstrated sympathy for the Jews of Antioch, at times extolling their virtuous life. Where Libanius was concerned with “creating and constructing religious networks rather than describing religious groups” (p. 239), Sandwell notes that, “through a constant reference to Greeks, unbelievers, Christians and Jews, Chrysostom was trying to create these as categories” that described discrete religious identities (p. 64).

Religious Identity in Late Antiquity serves well as an examination of religious life in the century that would mark the ascendancy of Christianity. Unfortunately, many have often mistakenly transposed later religious distinctions to the fourth century – a mistake of which Sandwell is well aware and which she addresses by describing the fluid political and social environment at that time. The reality of the day was that both Chrysostom and Libanius were making idealistic statements about religious identity in an age where the whims of the emperor or of the general populace often held sway over the actual practice on the ground. Sandwell is right to note that when a Christian homilist like Chrysostom described a set of well-defined religious categories to his flock it does not necessarily follow that the community at large (or even the Christian community itself) respected those distinctions. Conversely, Libanius’ call for a unified religious ethos based on a loose model of social organization would never be realized once Theodosius officially made the empire a Christian one in 381.

Sandwell does an admirable job of providing sufficient historical context in the book without allowing it to overpower the core substance of the text. While primary source references from Chrysostom and Libanius constitute the heart of the work, Sandwell also draws upon some of the most well known scholars in the field to help support her conclusions. A limitation to a study such as this is in the paucity of physical archeological evidence to help supplement the textual sources cited in the book — a deficiency that Sandwell herself laments. Additionally, there is the aforementioned dearth of Jewish texts, which makes a thorough understanding of the role of the Jewish community problematic as we seek to understand religious identity in fourth-century Antioch.

Isabella Sandwell’s thorough treatment of the topic of religious identity should be of value to a wide, academic audience. Although studies such as this are inherently limited by a lack of physical and textual evidence, Sandwell still helps add to our understanding of this period by juxtaposing these two major figures of fourth century Antioch and asking relevant and enlightening questions about them. The net result is a book that produces a new understanding of the material and opens doors for future conversations on the subject. By giving focus to the issue of religious identity, Sandwell offers scholars not only a solid reference tool but also a frame of reference from which future research can be conducted.