

Wilhelm Kursawa, Healing not Punishment. Historical and Pastoral Networking of the Penitentials Between the Sixth and the Eighth Centuries, Turnhout (Brepols) 2017, XIV–358 p. (Studia Traditionis Theologiae. Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology, 25), ISBN 978-2-503-57589-6, EUR 75,00.

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Kursawa's innovative study of the penitentials found in Ireland, Britain and Gaul between the sixth and eighth centuries will be a useful addition to the increasing interest in these texts. Kursawa usefully interprets »penitential« quite broadly and includes letters and synodal decrees which dealt with the issue of penance (within his time period).

Kursawa's main focus is on ten texts. The first five – Patrick's letter to the knights of Coroticus, the Synod of Brefi, Gildas on penance, the Synod of the Grove of Victory and excerpts from the book of David – are dealt with in chapter two. The remaining five – the penitentials of Finnian, Columbanus and Cummean, the »Paenitentiale Ambrosianum« and Theodore of Tarsus' writings on penance – all receive a chapter each. The opening chapter – the early development of penance – is not the easiest to read, and the book only really gets going with chapter two. Kursawa uses quite a detailed enumeration for organizing his chapters: some readers will feel that sub-sub-sub-sub-chapter numbers are a step too far (e. g. p. 48: »1.2.3.5.1. Résumé«), especially since only the overall chapter numbers are given in the contents so the sub-chapters cannot be used to navigate the book.

One of Kursawa's central themes, both explicit and implicit throughout, is the role of penance as medicine »not punishment« (to quote the title). Kursawa traces the transfer of the idea of the spiritual *medicus* from the Oriental Church to the West. Being medicine might not necessarily make the cure easier to bear – sometimes doctors have to cut or burn out infection – but to Kursawa the penitentials have to be read thus. Such an understanding allows Kursawa to interpret the development of »private« and repeatable penance as a pastoral tool to aid the soul.

Kursawa does not only concentrate on the content of these penitentials – a theme running through the book is the interrelation between the texts he is studying; the »networking« of the title is, of course, a difficult thing to prove. Nonetheless, Kursawa's arguments will, at least, stimulate debate. As one would expect, the more detailed the penitentials became, the more one is able to suggest influence. The arguments for connexions between the earlier texts are perhaps more tenuous. Does Patrick's stipulation that penance should be performed *effusis lacrimis* really suggest the influence of Basil of Caesarea (for whom it was the first of his four steps of repentance) (p. 56)? Perhaps, but this is not definitive.

The interrelation between the Synod of Brefi (*Sinodus Aquilonalis*) and the Synod of the Grove of Victory (*Sinodus Luci Victoriae*) is the next possible connexion. The two synods are believed to have occurred in close succession and in close proximity. The first – Brefi – dealt with penances



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within the monastic community; the second – the Grove of Victory – dealt with penance in the lay community too. Was there, therefore, an intentional development from an »inner-monastic sphere into Christian communities outside the monastic enclosure«? Does »the Synod *Luci Victoriae* assume the knowledge of penances in the *Sinodus Aquilonalis*«? (p. 71, 312). If so, then one would expect the decisions of these two synods to have been transmitted together; and indeed they were. *Brefi* and the Grove of Victory (and Gildas and the book of David) were copied together in two 9th/10th century continental manuscripts¹. The fact that copyists saw fit to transmit these texts together might well indicate that they were – to a degree – dependent, at least in how they were received.

Finally, Kursawa advances the view that the »Paenitentiale Ambrosianum« was compiled in Columbanus' circle in Gaul in the early 7th century (rather than being a British/Irish source, compiled c. 550–c. 650 and drawn on by Columbanus and his followers) (p. 172–177, 312). Kursawa demonstrates that, following the compilation of the »Penitential« of Columbanus, Columbanus and his followers on the Continent became acquainted with the works of John Cassian. He then theorizes that it was Columbanus' circle which compiled the »Paenitentiale Ambrosianum« because that penitential used Cassian's »Eight Vices« as a structure for the work. Then (as is already accepted) the »Paenitentiale Ambrosianum« influenced Cummean, who also adopted Cassian's Eight Vices as a way to organize his penitential. This theory is based on an impressive close study of the texts, and it will be interesting to see how it is received.

The lines of descent which Kursawa identifies also allow for an examination of when and how the compilers altered previous rulings. Penitentials tended to be derivative and so differences between dependent texts draw attention: such alterations might indicate the requirements of the time and place of production. Penitentials produced in Gaul, such as the »Ambrosianum« (in Kursawa's reading), were worried about heresy; penitentials produced in Ireland, such as Finnian, were more concerned about magic.

There are, regrettably, some stylistic problems. The author is not, as he notes in the introduction, writing in his *Muttersprache* (p. XIII) and the syntax is frequently difficult. The word order means that some sentences require multiple readings, and the sense in which Kursawa uses the word »respectively« is unclear to me (e. g. p. 67, 74, 75, 78). It is noticeable that this is a doctoral thesis which has quickly been put into print; a new paragraph beginning halfway through a sentence (p. 29) indicates that more time could have been spent proofreading. Sadly these problems do detract from the work, since they make it harder to follow the author's argument. Nonetheless, this book is a stimulating contribution to its field, for which Kursawa is to be thanked.



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¹ Wilhelm Kursawa, p. 57–58; Rob Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600–1200*, Cambridge 2014, p. 40.