

**Mirrors for bureaucrats: expectations of Christian officials in the Theodosian Empire\***

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ABSTRACT

*This article tackles a relatively understudied aspect of the Christianisation of the Roman aristocracy. It considers the influence of Christian norms on a key stage in the elite male life course: service to the state. Drawing on the letters of Isidore of Pelusium, Augustine of Hippo, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus to imperial officials, this article argues that a Christian rhetoric of officeholding had developed across the Mediterranean by the first half of the fifth century. It traces these authors' varying expectations of how the religious identities of elite Christian men would shape their political agency. Their letters demonstrate the diffusion of Christian political ideas within the imperial state—and the terms on which Christian affiliations and traditional public careers were understood to be compatible—in the era of the Theodosian dynasty.*

At some point in the first decades of the fifth century, Isidore, a monk in the vicinity of Pelusium at the eastern fringes of the Nile delta, sent a letter to a *corrector* named Peter.<sup>1</sup> Peter most likely governed the province of Augustamnica, whose capital was

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\* I would like to thank the Editor, the anonymous reviewers for the Journal, Gillian Clark, and Christopher Jones for excellent feedback on various versions of this article. Audiences in Exeter, Sheffield, and Oxford also gave helpful suggestions and critiques at different stages in its development. Remaining errors and infelicities are of course my own. My thanks also go to the Hulme Fund, Brasenose College, Oxford, and The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, for supporting the research from which this article stems.

<sup>1</sup> Evieux 1995: 108–9; *PLRE* II: 865 (Petrus 5). Evieux 1995 is the sole modern monograph on Isidore; see too Treu 1998; Leemans 2013; Boivin 2014; C. Jones 2015; Larsen 2017.

Pelusium; he is only attested in the monk's letter collection. Isidore admonished Peter that he, like other rulers, should be subject to the laws, take good counsel, and avoid corruption. To support his argument, Isidore drew on a salutary political story from 'ancient histories' (ἀρχαίαις ἱστορίαις): a king telling his subjects to disobey him if one of his orders broke the law.<sup>2</sup> From this *exemplum*, the monk drew out a way of understanding a fundamental truism of Christian political thought from late antiquity.

But if he gave heed to justice in this way, even though he is king and not required to subject himself to public scrutiny (εὐθύνας παρὰ ἀνθρώπων μὴ μέλλον ἀπαιτεῖσθαι)—for such a man is liable to divine judgement alone, wherefore also the psalmist says, *against you alone I have sinned* (Ps. 51:4)—how right it is that you who are subject to kings and greater powers should maintain justice, and not transgress it even once, knowing that if you avoid judgement here, you will not avoid divine judgement.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that an emperor answered to God alone was central to countless accounts of the Christian emperor from late antiquity, starting with Eusebius' vision of Constantine.<sup>4</sup> Like many late ancient authors, Isidore both repeated this political bromide and destabilised it, through an example of a ruler who subjected himself to his subjects anyway. Part of the reason the monk did so was that the recipient of this concise mirror for princes was very much 'subject to public scrutiny'. As an imperial

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<sup>2</sup> See Ps.-Plut. *Mor. (Reg. et imp. Apophthegmata)* 183F (on Antiochus III).

<sup>3</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1,746 = 5.383. Isidore's letters lack a full modern edition. Evieux 1997–2017 includes letters 1,214–2,000 (using the numbering from the manuscript collections). When citing these letters from Evieux's edition, I use both these numbers and the earlier numbering from PG 78 (volume plus number). Citations from PG simply contain the latter. A useful key is available at

[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/isidore\\_of\\_pelusium\\_letter\\_index.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/isidore_of_pelusium_letter_index.htm)

<sup>4</sup> The classic account is Dvornik 1966: 659–723, esp. 679–80, 687–91, 693–6, 709, 712–13, 718–23; for excellent recent treatments of various late ancient engagements with this paradigm, see McGuckin 2003 (responding to Dvornik); Van Dam 2007: 329–53. On its centrality in Byzantine political thought see esp. Dagron 2003: at 17–20; though cf. Kaldellis 2015: 165–98.

governor, Peter was subordinate to the emperor (presumably Arcadius (r. 395–408 C.E.) or, more likely, Theodosius II (r. 408–450 C.E.)), the praetorian prefect of the East, and the *praefectus Augustalis* in Alexandria, who would oversee his conduct in office, and could potentially hear charges made against him by residents of Augustamnica.<sup>5</sup> Still, Isidore made it clear that Peter should not just fear future judgement from these men. The monk reminded the governor of Augustamnica that he would also face a reckoning for his actions at the Last Judgement. In his role as a ruler, Peter, like his superior in Constantinople, acted within a political realm ultimately governed by divine providence. Isidore adapted central themes in late ancient Christian thought about emperors to set out an ethic of officeholding for one of the emperor's subordinates.

Isidore's letter highlights a relatively understudied aspect of the Christianisation of the Roman aristocracy. Many excellent treatments have explored how the 'service aristocracy' of the post-Constantinian Empire became Christian.<sup>6</sup> Less attention has been paid to what happened next: once they had become Christian, what this actually meant for those elites when engaged in imperial service. This is partly a function of the historiography of religious change in this period. Recent work has sought to respond to conventional narratives of late antiquity in general, and the fourth century in particular, as an era of conflict between pagans and Christians and episodic pagan 'reactions' and 'revivals'.<sup>7</sup> These traditional accounts (and more recent correctives) predominantly draw upon the religious self-expression of this service aristocracy and discussions of their religious affiliations by contemporary Christian writers. Even as they undermine older narratives which charted the progress of Christianity in the teeth of pagan resistance, such studies often retain the same coordinates: a process which had outlived its historical significance by the turn of the fifth century. When the late Alan Cameron's monumental account of the *Last Pagans*

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<sup>5</sup> Sloomjes 2006: 41–3; Palme 2007: 245. Cf. Isid. *Ep.* 1.178, petitioning the praetorian prefect of the East Rufinus to take disciplinary action against a governor of Augustamnica.

<sup>6</sup> See (among many others): Brown 1961; 1995; 2012; Salzman 2002; Kahlos 2007; Alan Cameron 2011; Watts 2015. Service aristocracy: esp. A.H.M. Jones 1964: II 529; more recently: Heather 1994; Weisweiler 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Astute summary by Maxwell 2012.

*of Rome* considers early fifth-century officeholders, it is to round up (and problematise) stray pagans and putative episodes of revived cultic practice.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the culture of this now largely Christian elite has gone unstudied (and indeed, Cameron's book provides many fascinating insights into fifth-century elite formation at Rome). Numerous historians have documented the creative appropriation, by fourth- and fifth-century Christian impresarios, of the language and culture of late Roman aristocrats: first to get them to become Christians and then to encourage them towards progressively stronger forms of Christian commitment.<sup>9</sup> They have considered the implications of those commitments for the basic concerns of elite households: property, reproduction and patronage.<sup>10</sup> It is just that they have rarely considered what being Christian meant for the same aristocrats while engaged in political service.

Where important recent books on the Christianisation of the later Roman Empire touch on the culture of the state (and its agents) in the fifth century, it is to stress its continuing detachment from the priorities of the bishops and monks whose interactions with it left textual traces. In *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Peter Brown more than once invokes an imperial state which was 'robustly secular' in its operations across the fifth-century West: 'a cliff face of secular power largely untouched by the appeals of churchmen'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in *The Final Pagan Generation*, Ed Watts has emphasised the cultural distance (and generational shift) between the 'establishment' figures of the fourth-century empire who 'embod[ied] conventional success in the imperial system' and the Christian 'dropouts' of the later fourth century. Watts' account ends by emphasising the continuing cultural force of the opposition between the 'world of rhetoric and imperial power' and the 'ascetic and episcopal counterculture' through to the sixth century in the Greek East.<sup>12</sup> And yet, Isidore's letter to Peter suggests that claims to the state's essential secularity, or to a

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Cameron 2011: 187–205. See too Watts 2015.

<sup>9</sup> For the Roman aristocracy: esp. Brown 1961; Curran 2000: 260–320; Salzman 2001; 2002: 200–219. For the Greek East, see esp. Elm 2012: at 11; and the judicious summary of Papadogiannakis 2012: 13–28.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper 1992; 2007; Bowes 2008; Brown 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Brown 2012: 377, 380–4, 451–2, 529; quotations at 383, 452.

<sup>12</sup> Watts 2015: 149–220; quotations at 220.

stark contrast between traditional and Christian ways of life, do not capture the interplay of age-old political ideals and Christian patterns of thought in the first decades of the fifth century. By bridging the cultural assumptions of the ‘world of rhetoric and imperial power’ and the ‘ascetic and episcopal counterculture’, Isidore and others could express decidedly Christian visions of what it meant to serve within the imperial state—and specifically in correspondence with current officeholders.

This article considers how the Christian identity of imperial officials manifested itself in the era when the Theodosian dynasty ruled the Roman Empire in both East and West. The first section (I) outlines the fundamental problems of such an inquiry: the dearth of surviving texts where current officials discussed their religious affiliation, and the marginalisation of such figures within ascetic Christian writings whose overwhelming preoccupation was the renunciation of activities and affective ties considered ‘worldly’. One solution to both of these problems are letters sent by bishops and monks to imperial officials, because they encouraged (and indeed often required) the authors to find a way to reconcile distinctly Christian and more traditional ideals of virtuous agency. For the first decades of the fifth century, the extensive letter collections of Isidore, Augustine of Hippo, and Theodoret of Cyrillus provide just such a perspective on this problem.

The rest of the article explores these three letter collections. The best known is that of Augustine.<sup>13</sup> In letters written from the mid-400s to his death in 430, the bishop of Hippo addressed figures active in the civil and military administration of the province of Africa and at the court in Ravenna, as well as those on special missions pertaining to the resolution of the Donatist schism. These are much-studied letters, famous for their detailed treatments of the ethics of coercion and punishment (sometimes, we might suspect, rather more detailed than their recipients would have expected or welcomed).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps less well known is Isidore of Pelusium, the monk

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<sup>13</sup> Calling Augustine’s surviving letters a ‘collection’ is somewhat misleading, given the multiple aggregations in which they were preserved: see Ebbeler 2017: esp. 243–4.

<sup>14</sup> A comprehensive account of the nuances of Augustine’s political thought—or even of the fine-grained argumentation of each of these letters—is beyond the scope of this article. Markus 1970 is the classic account; Dodaro 2009; 2012 are important recent discussions. See too Van Oort 1991: 93–163; Weithman 2001; Kaufman 2003;

with whom this article began. His letters date from the last decade of the fourth century through until his death, probably c. 435–440.<sup>15</sup> These letters were most likely collected soon afterwards by his monastic community; they were circulating across the Eastern provinces by the start of the sixth century. The extant collection of 2000 letters almost certainly derives from a compilation made by the ‘sleepless’ monks of Constantinople in the early sixth century.<sup>16</sup> First as a priest of the church of Pelusium, and then from his monastery, Isidore sought, in part through letter writing, to take an active role in his city and the province, Augustamnica, of which it was the capital. 413 of the surviving letters were sent to individuals characterised by their modern editor, Pierre Evieux, as part of the ‘administration’ (as opposed to those of the ‘vie municipale’ and ‘église’, ‘moines’ and others).<sup>17</sup> Isidore’s letters include exegesis of scriptural passages, explanations of ecclesiastical topics, and interventions on behalf of church, city and province: most notably, campaigns against two governors and a number of clergy whom he saw as corrupt. But Isidore’s characteristic missives to imperial officials are brief and rather brusque letters on ethical political conduct. If, Symmachus’ letters have often been compared to visiting cards,<sup>18</sup> Isidore’s look rather more like the passive-aggressive notes of a next-door neighbour.<sup>19</sup> The final epistolographer is Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus in the province of Euphratensis from 423 to his death in the later 450s or 460s.<sup>20</sup> Of perhaps 5000 letters extant in the

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Griffiths 2012. On Augustine as letter writer: Rebillard 1998; Ebbeler 2011. On the letters to imperial officials: McLynn 1999; Shaw 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Evieux 1995: 3–8, 347–51; Larsen 2017: 295–7.

<sup>17</sup> Evieux 1995: 20–1.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Cameron 2016: 68.

<sup>19</sup> This is assuming that these texts were not edited down from longer original letters for collection (which is a possibility). On some occasions, sections from longer letters appear as if they may have been divided into multiple ‘letters’ in the collection although this may simply reflect an ongoing exchange on a particular topic. Given the state of the edition, it is hard to say much more, except that there is no reason why they could not have been sent as is. See Evieux 1995: 359; Treu 1998: 991.

<sup>20</sup> On Theodoret: Urbainczyk 2002; Allen 2008; Puech 2011; Schor 2011; Papadogiannakis 2012.

fourteenth century, 232 survive, preserved in collections of documents related to ecclesiastical councils and two single-author late medieval collections from Patmos (the *Patmensis*) and Naples (the *Sirmondiana*). The surviving letters are mostly dated 431–437 and 444–451; a significant minority was sent to imperial officials.<sup>21</sup>

Theodoret's characteristic letters to officeholders are various forms of patronage letter: petitions for his city, letters of recommendation, invitations to church festivals and, above all, requests for interventions in ecclesiastical politics in defence of the apostolic faith (that is, on behalf of his episcopal faction).

The second section (II) of this article highlights decisively Christian features of officeholding invoked in all three letter collections. These writers' descriptions of how the courtiers and provincial officials to whom they wrote might legitimately exercise power show obvious parallels to contemporary discussions of emperors. These men had received their office and their virtuous qualities as a gift of God; they were to use it in an appropriately pious fashion, bearing in mind the heavenly judgement to which they would one day be liable. Like emperors, these were individuals whose authority was part of (the Christian) God's ordering of the world. In this sense, all three authors presented imperial office as (potentially) the job of a distinctly Christian authority figure; at the very least, they showed how the religious affiliation of individual officials could impinge on their performance of their duties.

Section II takes a wide-angled approach, teasing out shared assumptions from letters in all three collections about Christians in political service and parallel applications to officeholders of Christian ideas more often presented in the context of emperors. It focuses on how authors thought about Christian governance in general. Sections III and IV refine this picture by showing what each author actually expected from men serving imperial regimes, and how those officeholders themselves might think about what, if anything, their membership of the church meant for their service to the state. It is in their articulation of these expectations that Isidore, Theodoret and Augustine diverge. Isidore and Theodoret (III) only intermittently articulated

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<sup>21</sup> Collections: Allen 2008: 6–7; Schor 2017. Letters are cited from Azéma 1955–1998. The four volumes present three collections, with Roman numerals for the *Collectio Patmensis* (vol. 1), Arabic numerals for the *Collectio Sirmondiana* (vols 2–3) and Arabic numerals preceded by IV for those preserved in various collections of doctrinal and conciliar documents in Greek and Latin (vol. 4).

distinctly Christian moral demands in their missives to officeholders. Isidore sent numerous letters of admonition on the conduct of government with no specifically Christian markers, absences which are particularly striking given the instruction he gave on scriptural problems and church customs in other letters to elite men in Pelusium. Theodoret, by contrast, consistently presented traditional virtues in the context of a supreme god's ordering of world, but often did so in a way open to a more traditional philosophical interpretation. Both Isidore and Theodoret may have expected the Christian identity of these officials to be central to their conduct of government, but for the most part, that religious affiliation did not change the nature of ethical administration.

Augustine took a different approach to this combination of Christian identity and political service (IV). His letters take for granted (sometimes perhaps disingenuously) that his addressees will be amenable to discussions of their agency permeated by scriptural allusion and expectations of Christian behaviour. Yet these letters also essentially problematise the idea that an individual could be both an ideal official and an ideal Christian, by characterising these two as separate roles with expectations which were hard to reconcile. All in all, these three letter collections suggest that agents of the Roman state in the fifth century were neither expected to be unproblematically Christian nor blandly secular in their assumptions about their own agency. Isidore, Augustine and Theodoret each saw service in the late Roman state as a *locus* for the complex interaction of traditional and more Christian models of virtuous behaviour. Their carefully situational compositions imply that their official correspondents thought something similar.

## I ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS

For representatives of perhaps the most vocally self-promoting institution in the Roman world, Christian imperial officials are strangely quiet. Hundreds of Christians can be identified among the names which fill the pages of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*; few of these individuals can be overheard talking about what that religious identity meant for their political service. Partly, of course, this is a problem of survival. The documentation produced by aristocrats in imperial service was, for any number of reasons, much less likely to be preserved in the long term than the archives of bishops and ascetics. But this simply isolates a higher order problem.



Within late ancient Christian literature, there are a great many texts written by and about individuals who at one time served in the late Roman state. Yet these texts tend to portray that career path with disapprobation, as befitted individuals who had turned away from the world for a lifestyle more fitting for a committed Christian. Such ‘conversions’ were a staple of late ancient Christian biography. Any number of late fourth- and fifth-century saints’ lives portray individuals who quit promising careers for forms of retreat from the world or episcopal office.<sup>22</sup> Frequent recourse is made to stereotypical dichotomies between worldly service and superior forms of *militia*, whether forms of ascetic or monastic profession, the episcopate, or even martyrdom.<sup>23</sup> These texts signal a recurrent unease among some contemporaries that ideal officials could not be ideal Christians—and vice versa—as a result of the distinct, and not entirely congruent demands which these two roles and institutional contexts made on an individual.

Imperial officials emerge from many late ancient texts as a decidedly liminal sort of Christian. Such marginalisation sits strangely with the actual makeup of the Roman state from the first decades of the fifth century (if not earlier). The rate of change is hotly contested, but there is a general consensus that, by the reigns of Theodosius I (r. 379–395) and his successors, Christian affiliation had become influential in appointments, and non-Christian political actors had seen their room for manoeuvre decisively closed down.<sup>24</sup> Christians did not have a monopoly on imperial offices in the fifth century and opportunities remained for those who maintained connections to traditional cults.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it seems a reasonable expectation that the majority of the emperor’s subordinates in that period were at least nominally Christian. Certainly, dozens, if not hundreds of adherents can be identified in service

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<sup>22</sup> Well-known examples include August. *Conf.*, Paulinus, *V. Ambr.*, Sulpicius Severus, *V. Mart.*; *V. Aux.*; *V. Dalm.*.

<sup>23</sup> Leclercq 1992 (with useful references).

<sup>24</sup> Debate has centred on when Christian affiliation became an influential consideration for imperial appointments. The classic account is Von Haehling 1978; compare Barnes 1995 and Salzman 2002; and see the judicious summary of Alan Cameron 2011: 177–98. All assume a predominantly (if perhaps little more than nominally) Christian service aristocracy in the first half of the fifth century.

<sup>25</sup> Esp. McLynn 2009: 583–6.

of the late Roman state across the following decades.<sup>26</sup> The character of this Christian affiliation will have varied, both in terms of formal status (as a baptised member of the faithful, a catechumen, or simply an interested attendee) and the less tangible degree to which these differing levels of group membership shaped the self-identity of an individual. A number of studies of late ancient religious identities have distinguished various positions on a spectrum of commitment to Christian lifestyles and forms of belonging.<sup>27</sup> The degree of formal initiation which specific officials had received, and their placement on such spectra, is of obvious significance. It will have affected how those individuals saw and presented themselves, the leverage which ecclesiastical authority figures had over them, and the extent to which they and others might have seen Christian moral requirements shaping their agency.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this placement is rarely clear excepting particular occasions where the outstanding piety or dishonourable backsliding of an individual was deemed worthy of discussion.<sup>29</sup> As a result, when this article refers to Christian identity or affiliation, it will (of necessity) take in the full range of possibilities.

The mere fact of this (perhaps simply default) religious affiliation does not tell us much about the likely significance of Christian group membership for imperial officials. Perhaps more relevant are changes in the self-representation and activities of imperial regimes and the culture of elites in the era of the Theodosian dynasty. Recent accounts have identified a shift in the ideology of government in the reigns of Arcadius and Theodosius II in the East, and Honorius (r. 395–423) and Valentinian III (r. 425–455) in the West. Under these emperors, the imperial courts at Constantinople, Ravenna and Rome saw an intensification of Christian ceremonial activity and of interactions with ecclesiastical institutions, matched by a more frequent use of distinctly Christian frames of reference to legitimate the exercise of

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<sup>26</sup> See (with caution) Von Haehling 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Kahlos 2007: 26–34; Alan Cameron 2011: 176–7; C. Kelly 2015: 148–51.

<sup>28</sup> On these ‘levels of allegiance’: esp. Sandwell 2007: 190–204 (quotation at 200); Rebillard 2012a: 64–70; Pignot 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Von Haehling 1978: 21–2. For contrasting accounts of piety and backsliding: e.g. Augustine on the *comes Africae*, Boniface: below, Section I; also Section II on his complaints about the *uicarius* and catechumen Caecilian.

power.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this reshaping of the imperial image, the roles of the emperor's subordinates, too, were becoming more and more susceptible to Christian interpretation. Dealings with ecclesiastical actors and the business of the church were an increasingly routine part of the job description. Key officials and members of the senate at Constantinople took prominent roles in imperial relic translations to the city.<sup>31</sup> The pattern of these men's lives outside of office was also changing: the possibilities for a Christian understanding of political service are suggested by the broader recoding of various aspects of traditional aristocratic culture in Christian terms and the development of Christian forms of prestigious display.<sup>32</sup> Among those aristocrats who participated in these new forms of display were imperial officials. For example, prominent courtiers were amongst the most significant patrons of new church buildings and monasteries in Constantinople.<sup>33</sup> In fact, a number of the officials discussed later in this article can be spotted using their wealth to engage in appropriately prestigious acts of piety.<sup>34</sup> Such activities suggest that many aristocrats were confident that they could combine Christian devotion and political agency. For all of these reasons, it seems likely that many who served regimes in East and West in the first decades of the fifth century connected their political agency and their religious identities.

The paucity of texts written by imperial officials in post reflecting on the implications of religious affiliation for their officeholding does not obscure their views entirely. Like other members of the 'laity', the cultural assumptions of Christian officials can be glimpsed through texts written to and about them by clerics

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<sup>30</sup> See in general: McEvoy 2013 and the essays in Kelly 2013b. Ceremonial: Diefenbach 1996: 43–60; Meier 2007: 142–58; Croke 2010: 255–7; Van Nuffelen 2012; Kelly 2013a; Gardiner 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Increasingly routine contacts: esp. Millar 2006 (on the East); Mathisen 1989 (on Gaul); Hermanowicz 2008; Lenski 2016: esp. 180–96 (on North Africa). Relic translations: e.g. *Chronicon Paschale* a. 406, a. 415; see too, Diefenbach 1996: 52; Croke 2010: 255–7; Van Nuffelen 2012: 191, 197; Kelly 2013a: at 221, 223–4.

<sup>32</sup> See references in nn. 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> Bowes 2008: at 106–16, 120–3 for Constantinople.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. *PLRE* II: 84–6 (Anatolius 10), 990–1 (Fl. Senator 4), and Aug. *Ep.* 220.4 on Boniface.

and monks.<sup>35</sup> Recent work on religious identity in late antiquity has used clerics' adaptation of their messages for specific audiences as a way of reading in alternative perspectives and rationales.<sup>36</sup> More than that, it has revealed a multitude of ways of thinking about what it meant to be Christian beyond the (supposedly) normative statements of clerics. In this regard, letter exchanges have been particularly revealing, because they required writers to frame what they had to say in a manner which would appeal to the recipient (or at least, in more robust terms, one which was not downright offensive to them).<sup>37</sup> Close reading of ascetic conduct letters for aristocrats in retirement has teased out the likelihood of a continued concern for traditional aristocratic values like status, lineage and the public image of the household, belying claims to dramatic acts of renunciation.<sup>38</sup> The same approach can be taken for letters to and about imperial officials which likewise had, in some way, to chart a course between ascetic and aristocratic (or indeed bureaucratic) assumptions about what made for a virtuous actor—whatever their own views on the subject.

The rest of this article pursues such an approach. It explores three letter collections from the first half of the fifth century which contain multiple letters to Christian officeholders. Bringing Isidore, Theodoret and Augustine together may not seem like the most obvious choice. Work on the fifth-century Mediterranean in general, and Christian thought in particular, tends to present East and West as contrasting (and increasingly divergent) political environments and cultural milieus.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, there were key differences in both classical and Christian political thought between Greek East and Latin West; other factors like the character of ecclesiastical politics led to differential forms and intensity of interaction with the structures of the late Roman state. Still, these contrasts can be overdrawn, especially for the early fifth century, given the use of a common set of Christian cultural resources, basic shared

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<sup>35</sup> For an acute recent study: Bailey 2015.

<sup>36</sup> For all of the following: Maxwell 2006; Sandwell 2007; Sizgorich 2009; Rebillard 2012a; 2012b.

<sup>37</sup> For this point: Rebillard 1998: 128–9.

<sup>38</sup> Esp. Cooper 2007; see too Kurdoch 2007; Kate Wilkinson 2015.

<sup>39</sup> An emphasis traceable to (in broad terms) debates over the fall of Rome and (in Christian political thought) contrasts of 'Caesaropapism' and 'Augustinianism': for the latter, see best, Dagron 2003.

ideas about officeholding and aristocratic honour, and parallel developments in the late Roman state and the relations of bishops and monks to it.<sup>40</sup> The letters considered here are emblematic. Isidore, Augustine, and Theodoret had very different epistolary styles, concerns and emphases; some of those differences will be explored in the following discussion. Nevertheless, all three participated in what were reasonably similar epistolographic situations: various sorts of petition or advice letter which might encourage a Christian authority figure to lay out what Christianity should mean for their correspondents. As a monk in self-imposed exile from his city, Isidore's social location is somewhat different, but his ongoing concern for the internal politics of the church at Pelusium and self-presentation as a pastoral figure reduces this contrast.<sup>41</sup> That all three authors offered similar sorts of responses to the requirements of those rhetorical compositions—and in spite of the many differences in their own situations—is suggestive of underlying contemporary assumptions in Christian political thought about imperial officials, in both East and West.

An essential need to give up a political career does not seem to have been one of these assumptions. Some of the letters which Augustine, Isidore and Theodoret wrote perpetuated aspects of the stark dichotomies between the ascetic and the world described above, but such contrasts were only rarely present. On occasion, all three encouraged aristocratic correspondents to change their behaviour and give up various forms of worldly activities and attachments—notably (extramarital) sex, property and career ambitions—so as to pursue a superior Christian lifestyle.<sup>42</sup> But there is an

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<sup>40</sup> Common basic assumptions in Christian political thought: Gaddis 2005; Inglebert 1996 (with discussion of various fourth- and fifth-century Latin 'Eusebians'). Ideas of officeholding and honour: Lendon 1997; Kelly 2004. Parallel and mutually influential political developments: e.g. McEvoy 2010: 169, 175–85, 190 ('an overarching and common developing imperial culture', at 176); Lenski 2016: 180 n. 35. For broader consideration of relevant comparisons and contrasts between fifth-century East and West, see the papers in Grig and G. Kelly 2012 and Maas 2014, esp. Elm 2014; Greatrex 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Evieux 1995: 151–240, esp. 206–40; Larsen 2017: 289–91.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Aug. *Epp.* 189, 200, 220; Isid. *Epp.* 1.126, 1.162, 1.186–7, 1.229, 1.317, 1.466, 2.156, 1,946 = 4.227, 1,261 = 5.36, 1,413 = 5.142, 1,465 = 5.181, 1,513 = 5.224, 1,676 = 5.339; Theod. *Ep.* iii.

obvious concern for timeliness in their sending of such letters. They portrayed appropriate religious conduct and political careerism as two incommensurables at transitional moments when their addressees seemed receptive to that stark counsel. Such is the case when, for example, Isidore chastised a *politeuomenos* named Phileas for his disappointment at missing out on an office. Phileas was reminded that although many received both worldly and divine glory, no one could get both kinds of glory if they sought both.<sup>43</sup> Augustine set out an explicit rationale for this selectivity in a letter he wrote to Boniface, *comes Africae*, in 417, written explicitly as a ‘mirror’.<sup>44</sup> Boniface was told that even men in military service could earn salvation. ‘They have a greater place before God, those who have left behind all worldly activities and also serve him with the perfect continence of chastity. *But each*, as the apostle says, *has his own gift from God, one person this, another that* (1 Cor 7:7).’<sup>45</sup> Of course, Christian letter writers could be pragmatic in other ways when deciding who should be encouraged to realise their receipt of greater (and more onerous) divine largesse. Some time after sending this *speculum* to Boniface, Augustine and his friend and episcopal colleague Alypius travelled to Tubunae and convinced the *comes* not to quit military service for a monastic life after the death of his wife.<sup>46</sup> Boniface’s clout within the state was too useful for Augustine’s faction of African ‘Catholic’ bishops. As Augustine recalled in a later letter, ‘you thought about what we pointed out: how much what you were doing benefited the churches of Christ.’<sup>47</sup>

This disclosure could be seen as revealing of an underlying feature of the majority of the letters sent by bishops and monks to imperial officials in this period. The sending of a petition presupposed that the recipient could be of use in his official capacity. Persuading that man to give up his position would mean losing a valuable ally when seeking to access and harness the power of the late Roman state. Less cynically, the careful timing of exhortations to greater commitment makes sense in terms of their authors’ redoubled concerns for what was appropriate for an individual. Both the writing of letters and the offering of Christian moral advice required a

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<sup>43</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1,426 = 5.152.

<sup>44</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 189.8; *PLRE* II: 237–40 (Bonifatius 3).

<sup>45</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 189.5.

<sup>46</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 220.3; see Brown 2000: 426–7; Lancel 2002: 470.

<sup>47</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 220.3.

sensitive consideration of the specific recipient. When Isidore and Augustine wrote about or discussed clerics and monks, they deployed a similar pragmatism in differentiating potential Christian lifestyles.<sup>48</sup> Imperial officials, like any other kind of Christian, were supposed to strive to do what they could given their individual capacities and their current circumstances. As a result of all of these considerations, Isidore, Augustine and Theodoret start from the assumption that their correspondents would continue in their current imperial roles. This is not to say that they saw the imperial state as an ideal field of activity for a Christian. Augustine famously recounted the dilemmas of the judge in *City of God*; the emperor's subordinates in Africa received similar reflections on the difficulties of office for a moral, Christian subject. Isidore and Theodoret were less often explicit on this, but it remains obvious both from individual letters and other works that they expected less from Christians who took such roles than from the bishops and monks they praised elsewhere in letters and (in Theodoret's case) in history and hagiography.<sup>49</sup> Still, rather than dwelling on any scruples they might have had about the potentially harmful implications of political office, they offered commentary on how Christians should best exercise it. Whether it was an obsequious petition, polite moral guidance, or an uncomfortable admonition, all three writers took as their subject the appropriate use of the recipient's agency in his imperial role. These letters inevitably tell us more about what they thought about late Roman officials than what those officials thought about themselves, but that presentation remains important. Petitions and conduct letters to Christian officeholders can be used to explore how contemporaries understood what their religious identity meant for those wielding power in the state across the fifth-century Mediterranean.

## II THE RHETORIC OF CHRISTIAN OFFICEHOLDING

In their letters, Augustine, Isidore, and Theodoret depicted the virtuous agency of imperial officials in Christian terms. Of course, it is important to stress from the beginning that this did not involve a wholesale reimagining of how the elites of the

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<sup>48</sup> Isidore's pragmatism when writing to monks: Larsen 2017: 291–2; and see e.g. Isid. *Ep.* 1.258. Augustine's pragmatism: esp. Markus 1990: 45–83.

<sup>49</sup> See below, n. 107.

Roman Empire should engage in government. Augustine, Isidore, and Theodoret oriented their letters around long-held beliefs about how elite Greek and Roman males could behave virtuously in service of the common good, and the fundamental cultural assumptions of elite education, as well as the more rarefied strictures of neo-Platonic philosophy.<sup>50</sup> To differing degrees, each author recast time-honoured verities about moderation, justice, generosity, and incorruptibility in Christian terms. As a result, these visions of imperial service were far from being exclusively Christian. Yet in the context of late ancient Christianity in general, and Christian political thinking in particular, it is far from clear that such exclusivity ever really existed. As recent work on Christianity, classical culture, and Hellenism in late antiquity has shown, to separate aspects of contemporary discourse into exclusive categories of the ‘Christian’ and the ‘classical’ is both reductive and counter-productive.<sup>51</sup> Late ancient Christian writers used these same ‘classical’ ideals of virtuous elite behaviour to define and legitimate various forms of ‘Christian’ lifestyle. It has long been recognised that late ancient Christian depictions of Christian emperors appropriated neo-Platonic ideas of divinised political agency.<sup>52</sup> In similar terms, Richard Flower has recently demonstrated how Christian writers constructed their images of emperors using the standard toolkit of epideictic rhetoric, adding the increasingly potent cultural resources of Scripture and ecclesiastical history to their repertoire.<sup>53</sup> The manner in which Augustine, Isidore, and Theodoret praised, advised and admonished their official correspondents runs in parallel with these discussions. All three writers inflected pre-existing political ideas with Christian norms to make political service compatible with pious commitment. The comparable ways in which they did so suggest common ideas about Christian officeholding in both East and West in this period.

Isidore, Augustine and Theodoret took for granted that Christian officials were superior to non-Christians. They told specific officials that they would be better

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<sup>50</sup> On education and elite formation, esp. Kaster 1988; Brown 1992: esp. 41–7; Watts 2006; Cribiore 2007. Neo-Platonic political thinking: O’Meara 2003: 73–139.

<sup>51</sup> See esp. Averil Cameron 1991; Elm 2012 (on Gregory Nazianzus and Julian); Storin 2012 (also on Gregory).

<sup>52</sup> Again, Dvornik 1966: 611–723 is classic (and yet to be replaced).

<sup>53</sup> Flower 2013: 61–126, esp. 68–77.



administrators if they became Christian or committed themselves further to a Christian lifestyle, whether by baptism or ascetic practice.<sup>54</sup> Such exhortations often worked by a schema which placed Christian piety above other virtues. One neat example is a letter which Theodoret wrote to a recently reappointed governor of Euphratensis, Sallustius, most likely in the spring of 445. Theodoret passed on the joy of the province's inhabitants at Sallustius' reappointment given the benefits they had previously received. 'But I pray that they will experience greater goods, and your illustriousness will have a share of greater glory: to add to your other goods also the head of those good things, piety...'<sup>55</sup> Theodoret did not feel the need to spell out why the addition of this virtue, presumably through some form of increased Christian commitment (conversion from paganism? baptism? changes in behaviour?), would make Sallustius better for his subjects.<sup>56</sup> When writing to the imperial official and Christian catechumen Caecilian in 414, Augustine was rather more forthcoming.<sup>57</sup> This is a notably testy letter: Augustine ostentatiously avoided accusing Caecilian of the political murder of two of the bishop's allies, the brothers Apringius and Marcellinus (proconsul of Africa and *tribunus et notarius* respectively). In that context, the bishop complained about what he portrayed as his imperial addressee's excuse for putting off baptism.

But there is one thing, if you wish to hear the truth, which I find most troubling in you, that although you are the age you are now and have this sort of life and probity, still you wish to be a catechumen, as if the faithful cannot administer the commonwealth more faithfully and better, insofar as they are more faithful and better.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> E.g. Theod. *Epp.* xvii, 22, 37, 73, 76; cf. 45 where Christian subjects benefit more from good government; Aug. *Epp.* 133–4, 138, 151, 155; Isid. *Epp.* 1.27, 1.36, 2.14, 2.115; cf. 1.66, 1.99, 1.282, 3.264 (invocations of more general Christian superiority or exhortations to ascetic lifestyle addressed to imperial officials).

<sup>55</sup> Theod. *Ep.* 37; cf. *Ep.* xvii, similarly allusive.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Azéma 1964: 101 n. 3, suggesting Sallustius was a pagan.

<sup>57</sup> On the problems of identifying Caecilian's specific office: Shaw 2015: 44–7.

<sup>58</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 151.14; Rebillard 1998: 139–40; McLynn 1999: 42–3; Shaw 2015: 44–7; Pignot 2016: 462–3.

Contrariwise, Isidore expressed his surprise, in letters to two eunuchs at the imperial court in Constantinople, Pharismanius and Antiochus, that their avid reading of Scripture had not made them more virtuous.<sup>59</sup> Isidore claimed that close engagement with relevant biblical stories like Daniel in the lion's den—a metaphor he used elsewhere for the court<sup>60</sup>—should have made Antiochus less prideful and more concerned for justice.

These references to piety, faithfulness and scriptural ethics were part of a broader framework. The Christian identity of their official correspondents led Augustine, Isidore and Theodoret to conceive of imperial service within an economy of divine providence. All three reminded correspondents that God had had a hand in their appointment.<sup>61</sup> They expressed their joy that specific Christian officials had received this power, which was surely meant as a divine gift: for the church, for Christians, or for a broader group of citizens or subjects.<sup>62</sup> They signed off with polite prayers that God would maintain their addressees in their positions, or even furnish them with greater worldly power.<sup>63</sup> On numerous occasions, these three writers made of their official correspondents people who should be, or already were, cognisant that their authority, just as much as that of the emperor, was derived from God. Whether praising them for acting in accordance with this, or encouraging them to do so in future, they applied to the emperor's subordinates this same understanding of the late Roman state as an institution which was (in one sense or another) divinely sanctioned and legitimised.

The language of Isidore's advice to governors is particularly redolent of central themes in these Christian adaptations of imperial ideology and neo-Platonic virtue. The *praeses* Conon was told that good earthly governors were imitators of the

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<sup>59</sup> Isid. *Epp.* 1.27, 1.36; Evieux 1995: 95–7; Antiochus is most likely the well-known *cubicularius* (fl. 404–421) and tutor of Theodosius II, on whom: Greatrex and Bardill 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Isid. *Ep.* 1.462.

<sup>61</sup> Theod. *Epp.* 44, 92, 94, 98; Isid. *Ep.* 1.133; Aug. *Epp.* 86, 97, 206.

<sup>62</sup> Theod. *Epp.* 79, 92, 94, 98; Isid. *Ep.* 1.226, cf. 1.116; Aug. *Epp.* 97.1, 100.1.

<sup>63</sup> Theod. *Epp.* 45 (cf. 57), 119; Isid. *Ep.* 1.133; Aug. *Epp.* 229–31.

heavenly order,<sup>64</sup> while the *corrector* Peter was informed that he should make sure he was a ‘friend of God’.<sup>65</sup> In a letter to another *corrector*, Simplicius, Isidore highlighted discernment as the key benefit of this divine friendship.<sup>66</sup> As judge, Simplicius would have God ‘as helper and ally, both indicating to you the bad ones, and showing to you the good ones’.<sup>67</sup> Isidore did not simply expect the new governor to understand his rule in providential terms. He also encouraged Pelusium’s town councillors to think in the same way.

To the town council.

God still takes care of Pelusium. Here the seed of piety still persists. The guardian martyrs of old still watch over it. The marvellous Simplicius has come to take up the reins of office. I bring good news to you of another life. Receive the man gladly; recount all your difficulties to him in a tragic tone. He has a discerning wisdom, and a pious will, and will turn your troubles around. For he is strengthened by God, from whom the capacity to do good is granted to many.<sup>68</sup>

Such a description of Simplicius’ power may have been intended to influence the character of the traditional welcome which the *corrector* would receive from the civic élite of Pelusium.<sup>69</sup> At the very least, it presented the capital of Augustamnica as a political environment in which Christian governance might be expected.

In this context, official conduct could be portrayed as a form of service with both earthly and heavenly recipients and benefits. On a number of occasions, Theodoret made the fulfillment of a specific request a way of honouring or worshipping God and storing up heavenly rewards.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, this

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<sup>64</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.148.

<sup>65</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.290. On the emperor as ‘friend of God’: Kevin Wilkinson 2009: 44–5; Drake 2015: 291, 301.

<sup>66</sup> On discernment as divine gift and key judicial virtue: Uhalde 2007: 44–76.

<sup>67</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.225; Evieux 1995: 108.

<sup>68</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.226.

<sup>69</sup> On which: Slootjes 2006: 107–19.

<sup>70</sup> Theod. *Epp.* xxxiii, xxxvii, 92, 98, 111, 120, 140–1, IV 25.

theme appears most often in a series of letters he sent from 448 to 450 in an attempt to overturn his proscription. Theodoret petitioned various members of the imperial court to complain that Theodosius II had confined him to his see without a conciliar or judicial verdict. This imperial ban resulted from the bishop of Cyrrhus' controversial participation in conflicts within the eastern Church regarding the correct formula to define Christ's nature(s); its enactment profoundly impaired his capacity to advocate for his own faction in those debates.<sup>71</sup> As a result, Theodoret tied in the (anticipated) aid of his imperial correspondents with support for orthodoxy, and thus an act of official piety for which God would compensate them. This rhetoric of divine service and celestial reward also features in less obvious contexts. A few years earlier, in 445–446, Theodoret had sought the mediation of various figures at court to ensure that imperial assessments of Cyrrhus' tax liability were not revised upwards.<sup>72</sup> In writing to a *patricius* (the appropriately named Senator) to maintain a tax break for the city of Cyrrhus, he used very similar rhetoric. Theodoret even used heavy-handed agricultural imagery to characterise the consequences of this protection of Cyrrhus' (apparently minimal) yield. 'For it is fitting for your magnitude, both to reap the harvest of this just action with the others, and to gather in prayers from the recipients of those good works, and to serve the God of all.'<sup>73</sup>

Isidore shared many of Theodoret's emphases in individual letters. In a letter to an unotherwise unattested *dux* named Strategius (more excellent nominal determinism), he portrayed the military commander as a virtuous individual rightly appointed to high office, and stressed that political power should be used to serve God; 'spotless' administration might even lead to a promotion from that heavenly ruler.<sup>74</sup> Like Theodoret, Isidore could also suggest that certain qualities and actions would unproblematically bring with them both current and future rewards.<sup>75</sup> Augustine tended to be more cautious, problematising the connection between earthly

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<sup>71</sup> On all this, see best: Schor 2011: 124–8.

<sup>72</sup> On this campaign, see best Tompkins 1995 (noting the apologetic nature of this portrayal of Cyrrhus' hinterland at 182 n. 27); also Schor 2011: 158.

<sup>73</sup> Theod. *Ep.* 44 (cf. *Epp.* 23, 81 for the same motif).

<sup>74</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.133; Evieux 1995: 110; *PLRE* II: 1033 (Strategius 4).

<sup>75</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.31.

and divine service and rewards.<sup>76</sup> The manner in which he invoked it nonetheless suggests that he was engaging with a frequent, perhaps even customary pairing in contemporary ideas of Christian (imperial) service.

This framework of divine providence and dual forms of service also supplied all these letter writers with a form of leverage: it facilitated reference to the Last Judgement.<sup>77</sup> Recollection of that fearsome tribunal could seem an especially fitting theme when it came to requests for mercy and clemency, as Apringius, the proconsul of Africa, would discover on receiving a petition from Augustine in 411/412.<sup>78</sup> In seeking to persuade Apringius not to execute certain Donatists and Circumcellions who had confessed to violent crimes, Augustine made the proconsul's liability before that higher tribunal his opening theme: 'I do not doubt that in this power, which God gave to you as a human being over other human beings, you think on the divine judgement, where even judges will stand to render an account concerning their own judgements.'<sup>79</sup> Considering his own future judgement was supposed to make Apringius more predisposed to show mercy to the convicted Donatists. Along similar lines, Isidore used it to try to persuade the prefect Isidorus to forgive a *naucularius* named Bonus who had lost an *annona* shipment at sea. 'If we depend on God and demand forgiveness from him, we should forgive debts to those liable, that by this we might succeed in owing nothing.'<sup>80</sup> The Last Judgement was not simply a useful topic in requests for judicial clemency; it could pertain to the morality of various aspects of an official's conduct. Isidore told the praetorian prefect, Rufinus that if he did not act against a governor of Augustamnica who was abusing the citizens of Pelusium, he would be judged alongside him.<sup>81</sup> Theodoret, meanwhile, retailed its implications for

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<sup>76</sup> E.g. Dodaro 2009: 239.

<sup>77</sup> Aug. *Epp.* 134.1, 153.8, 220.5; Isid. *Epp.* 1.36, 1.178, 1.299, 3.370, 1,746 = 5.383; Theod. *Epp.* iii, xviii, IV 25.

<sup>78</sup> On this exchange: Rebillard 1998: 148–9; McLynn 1999: 40; Shaw 2015: 36–9.

<sup>79</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 134.1. Judicial accountability: Harries 1999a; 1999b: 167–71.

<sup>80</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.299; cf. *Ep.* 1.300: a similar petition to the prefect's *domesticus*; *PLRE* II: 632 (Isidorus 9) has this as the praetorian prefect, Flavius Anthemius Isidorus, followed by C. Jones 2015: 1,290; Evieux 1995: 101–4 suggests Isidorus was (more straightforwardly) a prefect of the *annona*.

<sup>81</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.178.

the *magister militum* Anatolius after the Council of Ephesus (431), in a letter preserved in a sixth-century Latin translation. Anatolius was provided pressing reasons to ignore those who put forward accusations against Theodoret's party: 'because, best of men, you have this faith, and desire to remain within the definitions and laws of divinely inspired scripture, and you await the great, terrible and longed for presence of our saviour, at which time each will receive recompense according to their own life and behaviour (*uitam suam conuersionemque*).'<sup>82</sup> The universality of this (anxiety-inducing) future experience made it a rhetorical gift for these Christian petitioners.<sup>83</sup>

Such statements once again ran in parallel to the customary framing of emperors as divinely supported. A number of fourth- and early fifth-century bishops similarly stressed that emperors would have to account for their actions, especially in the context of interventions in ecclesiastical politics of which they disapproved.<sup>84</sup> These comparable depictions of imperial subordinates isolate something important. Studies of late ancient panegyric have emphasised the shared set of tropes, rhetorical strategies and reference points which those addressing their rulers could deploy, not just as part of formal orations, but also effective petitions.<sup>85</sup> On the basis of these three letter collections, the same could be said for the deployment of specifically Christian rhetorical strategies in addresses to those lower down the imperial hierarchy. In this sense, the perspectives of Augustine, Isidore and Theodoret converge. They agreed that Christian officials could be virtuous political actors and display a shared sense of how those officials could contribute towards good government and order. More than that, each writer found strikingly similar ways to inject distinctly Christian cultural reference points and norms into traditional political discourse. This broad similarity of approach is all the more significant given the differing specific circumstances of these authors (Latin/Greek, East/West,

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<sup>82</sup> Theod. *Ep.* IV 25, with Schor 2011: 105 and n. 177.

<sup>83</sup> On the interplay of the Last Judgement and Christian judicial and administrative discourse: Shaw 2003; C. Kelly 2004: 232–45; Uhalde 2007: at 135–6. For the rhetorical uses of the Last Judgement more broadly in late antiquity and the early middle ages: Palmer 2014.

<sup>84</sup> E.g. McGuckin 2003; Drake 2015: 306–7.

<sup>85</sup> Useful syntheses: Rees 2012; Flower 2013: 33–49.

bishop/monk etc) and the divergent dynamics of the individual letter exchanges (courtiers/provincial governors/military officers, petitions/greetings/admonitions and so on). The letters of Augustine, Isidore and Theodoret suggest a common set of ideas about how Christian officials should act, in operation across the late ancient Mediterranean.

### III ADAPTABLE VIRTUES: THEODORET AND ISIDORE

The letters of Augustine, Isidore, and Theodoret draw on a shared rhetoric of Christian political service. The previous section directed attention to common concerns to offer a composite image of how the participation of elites in governance could be presented and understood in decisively Christian terms. All three writers seized on similar opportunities to depict the duties of courtiers, governors, and military commanders as the activities of pious Christians. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the passages which I have brought together were part of compositions generally written for other purposes. As a result—and as might be expected—these skilled epistolographers did not present in every letter a standardised picture of imperial officials serving God, storing up heavenly rewards, and awaiting the Last Judgement with trepidation. In practice, this recasting of moral governance came through in different ways, and to different degrees, in specific exchanges. As a result, what was required of them might have looked rather different from the recipients' perspectives. This section and the final part of this article will turn to those expectations, as they come out of the differences between these three authors, and between individual exchanges in each of their letter collections. Such an approach provides a more nuanced sense of how a Christian understanding of government gradually permeated the imperial state in the first decades of the fifth century.

Here, Isidore, Theodoret, and Augustine diverge: both in their presentation of the moral demands on officials, and in the degree to which they made it explicit that conventional political virtue was subject to new, Christian terms of use. Isidore's correspondents received variations on traditional virtues.<sup>86</sup> The monk sent dozens of letters which explained—rather abruptly, if the preserved state of the corpus is a

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<sup>86</sup> See e.g. the stereotypical gubernatorial virtues of Men. Rhet. 2.3, 10 (95–115, 165–71), with Slootjes 2006: 110–19.

guide—how officials should do their jobs properly. Governors were supposed to preserve justice, be fearsome or merciful depending on the situation, ignore bribes and favours, practise moderation in all things and place virtue above all else. Some letters cast this advice in Christian terms, through scriptural references or allusions to God's will; the majority present a religiously neutral administrative morality.<sup>87</sup> Taking those missives in isolation—as their addressees would have done, lacking access to later letter collections and modern editions—they simply reproduced aristocratic political values. Theodoret's administrators, by contrast, were almost always told that their praiseworthy actions were part of an overarching Christian framework: a way of serving or honouring the 'master of the universe' and gaining heavenly rewards. Nevertheless, the virtues for which Theodoret praised his addressees were rarely other than standard tropes of good government. He used these officials' (supposed) embodiment of virtues like justice, equity and generosity—which had gained them a glorious reputation among their peers and subjects—to frame specific requests whose fulfilment (he stated) would be their natural consequence. These rhetorical devices would have been calculated to appeal to more traditionally minded officials in the imperial hierarchy (however they would have defined their religious affiliation); so too his carefully couched references to the master of the universe and divine service.

Theodoret's articulation of the impact of such distinctly Christian moral standards on official behaviour seems to have been related to a confidence that his recipients would find such a correlation acceptable. The most developed presentation of a specifically Christian ethic comes in cases where he demonstrably had prior knowledge of his addressees through previous letters or personal contact. A string of

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<sup>87</sup> Various letters on official morality without Christian frame of reference: Isid. *Epp.* 1.208, 2.237, 3.175, 3.365, 3.373, 3.375, 3.384, 1,269 = 5.42, 1,279 = 4.84, 1,396 = 5.129, 1,646 = 5.313 (advice regarding justice); 2.12, 2.286, 1,707 = 5.361, 1,795 = 5.414, 1,986 = 5.563 (pursuit of virtue); 2.25, 2.78 (philanthropy); 2.219, 3.145, 3.328 (lack of favouritism or personal grudges); 3.50, 3.194 (dangers of hubris and tyranny); 1,267 = 5.40 (choice of subordinates); 1,449 = 5.168 (situational treatment of subjects); 1,802 = 5.421 (parrhesia useful for correcting mistakes); 1,851 = 5.455, 1,859 = 5.462 (qualities of good governor); 1,995 = 5.568 (qualities of good advocate).



letters to the imperial grandee Anatolius, *magister militum per Orientem* from 433 to 446 and *patricius* from 447 onwards, provide striking examples.<sup>88</sup> These letters consistently use the rhetorical devices outlined in section II, while also including some revealing emphases. In a letter quoted above, Theodoret presented Anatolius as a humble Christian trembling at the thought of the Last Judgement.<sup>89</sup> In another from a decade later, the *magister militum* was praised for his command after leaving Antioch for Constantinople: the god-fearing missed him and ‘all the others, even the ones who do not have perfect knowledge of divine things, suffer similarly from despondency, counting up your benefits (*euergesias*)’.<sup>90</sup> Theodoret apparently saw the *magister militum* as amenable to the idea that his pious Christian subjects would particularly appreciate his exercise of command. As Adam Schor has noted, Anatolius was a key contact for the bishop of Cyrrhus, particularly during his period in imperial disfavour. He was also a correspondent with whom Theodoret felt able to show considerable familiarity: in the latter missive, the bishop gently ribbed him through pretended outrage at his ‘abandonment’ of his Syrian subjects.<sup>91</sup> To take such a liberty implies that Theodoret was in a position to know how Anatolius would (or would not) want to be described by a petitioner.

That familiarity puts Theodoret’s other missives in perspective. As Schor has persuasively argued, the majority of these letters are deliberately ambiguous in their religious language. ‘He cited “philosophy” instead of asceticism. He spoke of exchanging “impiety” for “the wealth of faith.” Anything more specific would highlight differences rather than commonalities.’<sup>92</sup> Theodoret’s need to maintain patronage networks often prevented him articulating clear positions on what exactly he defined as correct Christian doctrine or recommended as pious behaviour. The same demands seem to have led him to a pragmatic marginalisation of distinctly Christian moral requirements. Still, the religious ambiguity of Theodoret’s petitions

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<sup>88</sup> Theod. *Epp.* 45, 79, 92, 111, 139; see too IV 25, plausibly reattributed by Schor 2011: 105 with n. 177; *PLRE* II: 84–6 (Fl. Anatolius 10).

<sup>89</sup> Above, n. 82.

<sup>90</sup> Theod. *Ep.* 45.

<sup>91</sup> Schor 2011: 146–8, 165; Puech 2011: 288.

<sup>92</sup> Schor 2011: 160.

should not be overstated.<sup>93</sup> Handbook virtues and Platonic cosmology were very often paired with much less open-ended forms of appeal: to the prayers (and potential disapproval) of the holy people in his diocese,<sup>94</sup> to the apostolic faith,<sup>95</sup> to Christ,<sup>96</sup> and to the needs of the church.<sup>97</sup> Even when these remained undefined (in the manner which Schor has so neatly characterised), such appeals nevertheless assumed a Christian recipient. All in all, Theodoret seems to have expected that officials would keep doing what they had previously done, but that they would now do it, ideally more self-consciously, as Christians.

Isidore's letters show a similar combination of targeted language and marked pragmatism, but without the same relationship to the particular character of addressees. Certainly, particular officials do receive multiple letters which bring values connected to their membership of the Christian community to bear on their conduct of government and of their personal lives. The *corrector* Ausonius Dionysius—the recipient of perhaps twenty-one extant letters—is a case in point.<sup>98</sup> Isidore sent this governor (again, presumably) of Augustamnica a rebarbative missive on how to understand an infamous passage from Paul's *Letter to the Romans* often debated in late ancient political thought, 'there is no authority except from God' (Romans 13:1).<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere, the monk recommended Abraham to Ausonius as a model of humility in government, citing the patriarch's self-deprecating statement, *I am earth and ashes* (Genesis 18:27),<sup>100</sup> and congratulated the governor for his receipt of a gilded statue from the emperor, while reminding him that earthly rewards paled

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<sup>93</sup> Useful material in Puech 2011: 284, 288–90.

<sup>94</sup> Esp. Theod. *Epp.* 42, 44, 81.

<sup>95</sup> Theod. *Epp.* xviii, 94, 121, 139.

<sup>96</sup> E.g. Theod. *Epp.* v, 94, 97, 139–40.

<sup>97</sup> Theod. *Epp.* 79–81, 92–7, 119–20, 139–40.

<sup>98</sup> Combining letters to Ausonius, Dionysius, and Ausonius Dionysius: see Evieux 1995: 105–8, with n. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 2.216, quoting John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Rom.* 23.1; cf. also *Hom. in Rom.* 16 on Pharaoh. Influence of Chrysostom on Isidore: Leemans 2013: 37–8 (with useful bibliography).

<sup>100</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 3.264.

into comparison with the heavenly ones which Christ could provide.<sup>101</sup> The monk's admonitions may have followed Ausonius Dionysius into retirement. One letter sent to a Dionysius (addressed without a title) sought to discourage him from pursuing political office; another, addressed to an Ausonius (again, without specified position) set out how to act to make sure 'the heavenly ranks will receive you from the seats of good government'.<sup>102</sup> These letters are striking for their confrontational recasting of the pursuit of a political career to meet scriptural moral standards. And yet, they are massively outnumbered by the rest of the letters which Ausonius received. In the other eighteen letters, Isidore presented far more generic reflections on justice and the treatment of subjects.

A similar disjuncture appears elsewhere in the collection. A number of *comites*, *correctores* and *tribuni* seemingly sought Isidore's advice on specific biblical passages, doctrinal problems and ecclesiastical practices.<sup>103</sup> In his replies, the monk often set out an interpretation of these passages which stressed their moral implications for Christians. One of these men, the *comes* Herminus, was the addressee of perhaps forty-one letters in total; Pierre Evieux has plausibly suggested the letters he received were intended as a form of catechesis, since they include biblical exegesis, explanations of baptism and almsgiving, and arguments against heretics and pagans.<sup>104</sup> Herminus also received letters on the virtuous performance of office. But again, Isidore only once presented that political conduct in the same terms, despite the count's apparent amenability to his Christian moral formation.<sup>105</sup> In Isidore's letters, there is a disconnect between Christians as individuals and Christians in their roles as

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<sup>101</sup> Isid. *Ep.* 1.395.

<sup>102</sup> Isid. *Epp.* 1,411 = 5.141, 1.165.

<sup>103</sup> Exegetical or ecclesiastical letters with explicit antecedent request: e.g. Isid. *Epp.* 1.18, 1.20, 1.55, 1.136, 1.259, 1.267, 1,551 = 5.249, 1,587 = 5.273. Other letters present similar advice to individuals with official titles.

<sup>104</sup> Evieux 1995: 117–8; cf. C. Jones 2015: 1,292. Some of these should likely be combined: esp. Isid. *Epp.* 1.229–30, 1.242–5, 1.287–8, 1,372–3 = 5.106–7, 1,628–9 = 5.299–300.

<sup>105</sup> Govern with Last Judgement in mind: Isid. *Ep.* 3.370. Generic virtues: Isid. *Epp.* 2.219, 2.237, 1,596 = 5.277. Cf. Isid. *Ep.* 1,372–3 = 5.106–7 (*philosophia* over other things).

imperial officials. Isidore seems to have been content to perpetuate traditional virtues without suggesting they required new terms of use.

Isidore and Theodoret adopted sharply contrasting personas in their letters. The monk more often than not presented himself as a fearless *parrhesiast*;<sup>106</sup> the bishop, a suave facilitator. But both sought, above all, to act as mediators; their different rhetorical approaches to this role led to very similar depictions of official agency. Each lightly recast the traditional virtues of ancient political actors and ethical elite men. Many of Isidore's admonitions and Theodoret's praises would have been happily read by elites in Egypt, Syria, and Constantinople, whatever their religious affiliation. Certainly, they do not seem to have required major adjustments in practice or mindset from what these individuals would have learnt in the schoolroom. This framing can be explained, in part, by the integrative approach to classical culture which Isidore and Theodoret took elsewhere in their works, but such an explanation only works to a certain extent. Their other presentations of Christians as ideal Greco-Roman men were generally meant to demonstrate not only the continuing force of those values, but also that they had found a (specifically Christian) embodiment: one which should encourage Isidore and Theodoret's audiences to virtuous imitation of monks and martyrs.<sup>107</sup> For both Isidore and Theodoret, political service appears as a peculiar form of virtuous Christian life. Nevertheless, it is clear that they did understand officeholding as a field in which Christians could act piously. More than that, they often assumed that their correspondents would think the same. Theodoret consistently used the religious identity of his correspondents as a frame of reference, if often in fairly general terms. Isidore was less consistent, but the great majority of his official addressees received at least one letter portraying appropriate official conduct in distinctly Christian terms—and sometimes in ways which saw it profoundly altered. Christian moral demands might not have structured their approach to governance, but that political service was to be understood, in part, in terms of officials' identity as Christians.

#### IV PILGRIM OFFICIALS: AUGUSTINE

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<sup>106</sup> Brown 1992: 139–40.

<sup>107</sup> Isidore: Evieux 1995: 241–92; Leemans 2013: 39–43; C. Jones 2014: 83–4. Theodoret: Urbainczyk 2002; Papadogiannakis 2012.

In contrast to the two Greek epistolographers, Augustine was consistent in coding his addressees' virtuous performance of office as subject to specifically Christian moral requirements. In his letters to imperial officials, the bishop of Hippo frequently elaborated key aspects of the schema of earthly and heavenly citizenship which would later pattern *City of God* (and the programmatic book nineteen in particular).<sup>108</sup> Augustine explained to these officials that earthly goods should be used for heavenly ends and that good Christian officeholders comported themselves in their duties so always to have the heavenly city in mind. This meant adopting an appropriate interior disposition,<sup>109</sup> and pursuing true Christian virtues over traditional ideas of ethical magistracy: or, perhaps better, distinctly Christian versions of those ideals.<sup>110</sup> At his most curt, Augustine was liable to remind correspondents to avoid empty pride, since everything they did should be attributed to God, an emphasis which stemmed from his debates with Pelagius and others on the possibilities of perfection and free will.<sup>111</sup> Various officials were praised or admonished for succeeding or failing to live up to this model of a pilgrim bureaucrat.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Augustine's letters is the degree to which he portrayed Christian affiliation and political office as separate roles with different sets of expectations and institutional contexts, even as he sought to combine them to characterise the correct agency of an official in a specific case. In this way, the bishop of Hippo also suggested his own expectations of these Christian functionaries. His correspondents would take into account their membership both of the Christian community and the imperial state, but were more likely to act according to the demands of the latter unless they were pushed to remember the overarching implications of the former. Just as in Augustine's sermons to congregations at Hippo Regius and Carthage, Christian affiliation was positioned as one of 'many identities'

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<sup>108</sup> On these letters and Augustine's political thought: above, n. 14.

<sup>109</sup> Esp. Aug. *Epp.* 138.11–14, 153.19, 220.8.

<sup>110</sup> See esp. Dodaro 2009; 2012: 390–1.

<sup>111</sup> Attribution to God: Aug. *Epp.* 112, 189.8. Anti-Pelagian emphasis: e.g. Markus 1990: 55.

which these imperial officials held, and one to which they should pay more attention.<sup>112</sup>

This rhetorical strategy began with the address line. In his salutations, Augustine interweaved, in various combinations, the recipients' nobility, official authority and Christian group membership (which placed them under his pastoral care).<sup>113</sup> The inclusion of the latter also helped to level the (often stark) social inequalities between the bishop of Hippo and his addressees, while foregrounding his most obvious call upon their sympathies. The imperial *tribunus et notarius* Marcellinus was addressed as 'noble and worthily famous lord and dearest son' (*domino eximio et merito insigni atque carissimo filio*); the governor Caecilian was called 'noble lord and son truly honourable and worthy to be received in the love of Christ' (*domino eximio et in Christi caritate uere meritoque honorabili ac suscipiendo filio*).<sup>114</sup> These collocations sometimes receive explicit commentary. Writing to Olympius in 408, Augustine acknowledged the prominent courtier's recent promotion to the post of *magister officiorum* at Ravenna, but immediately called him 'our dearest and most sincere fellow servant and Christian'. Augustine was sure that the *magister* saw his status as a *conseruus* as 'more glorious than all glory and more lofty than all loftiness'.<sup>115</sup> The bishop expressed his confidence that Olympius would remain humble in his new role and use his greater power within the earthly commonwealth to the benefit of the heavenly city. Such pious agency would provide rewards both in 'the land of the living' and 'in the true peace of secure joys without end'. Augustine paired Olympius' receipt of just deserts both now and in the next life, but carefully delineated the manner in which they could be achieved: by remaining humble even as he performed his duties at court—like the petition which Augustine was about to put before him.

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<sup>112</sup> See Rebillard 2012a: esp. 84–5; Shaw 2015: 49–50.

<sup>113</sup> For accounts of Augustine's salutations: O'Brien 1930: at 83–4 for *filius*; Ebbeler 2011: 70–2, 163–8, 200, 218–9; M.S. Williams 2011.

<sup>114</sup> Aug. *Epp.* 133, 86. Cf. McLynn 1999: 37; Shaw 2015: 44–5 on the problems of the latter's precise office and date.

<sup>115</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 96.1; *PLRE* II: 801–2 (Olympius 2). Rebillard 1998: 137, 145–6; McLynn 1999: 39; Shaw 2015: 40–2.

This interweaving did not stop with the salutation, but continued throughout. Augustine portrayed the range of potentially correct official decisions and the possibilities of virtuous Christian behaviour as separate spectra, which overlapped only at certain points.<sup>116</sup> This is a notable contrast to Theodoret and Isidore, who were much more willing to portray imperial service as a *locus* for the activities of a virtuous Christian. Any possible tension in their ecclesiology remained latent; their addressees' virtuous agency as an official and as a Christian was portrayed as one and the same. Augustine, meanwhile, made clear that officials were individuals constrained in their adoption of a Christian lifestyle. The specific requirements of the job description held them back in a way other Christians were not.

If Augustine could imagine a more comprehensive translation of Christian behaviour into official conduct, it was no more than a thought experiment. In 411 or 412, the bishop of Hippo participated in an epistolary exchange with the distinguished senator and former proconsul of Africa, Volusianus, mediated through their mutual friend, the *tribunus et notarius* Marcellinus.<sup>117</sup> Augustine had initiated this correspondence in an attempt to persuade Volusianus towards some form of Christian commitment.<sup>118</sup> In response, Volusianus sent a series of queries about Scripture (somewhat mischievously attributed to a conversation partner).<sup>119</sup> Augustine also received a letter from Marcellinus appending further objections which he had heard Volusianus make orally, but which the latter had omitted for reasons of brevity. The most detailed (and thus perhaps the most pressing) was the question of how a committed Christian could be an effective imperial official.

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<sup>116</sup> See esp. Aug. *Epp.* 100, 133–4, 139 to Apringius and Marcellinus, with Hermanowicz 2008: 153–5 and Hillner 2015: 91–2; also Aug. *Ep.* 116.

<sup>117</sup> Aug. *Epp.* 132, 135–8.

<sup>118</sup> Volusianus is traditionally portrayed as a 'pagan' aristocrat; Alan Cameron 2011: 196–7 and Rebillard 2012a: 81–2 have questioned this application of the lump term; compare also Kahlos 2007: 39. Augustine and Marcellinus portray this exchange as about inculcating Christian commitment without clear definition—or polemical characterisation—of Volusianus' current religious state.

<sup>119</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 135.

His [God's] preaching and teaching is in no part appropriate to the customs of the commonwealth, since, just as many say, it is well known that it is his precept that we ought to repay no-one with evil for evil, and offer the other cheek to one striking us, and give our cloak to one trying to take our tunic, and go twice the distance with one who wants to commandeer us, all of which things he asserts are contrary to the customs of the commonwealth. For who should suffer something to be taken from them by an enemy or not want to repay evils to the despoiler of a Roman province by right of war?<sup>120</sup>

For Volusianus, a scriptural ethics was quite simply incompatible with the activities required of a representative of the Roman state. From his point of view, a good Christian would not make a good imperial official.

In his response to Marcellinus, Augustine rehearsed arguments which he would develop at greater length in *City of God*.<sup>121</sup> To begin with, he adopted an apologetic tone, conflating the Christian mercy exemplified by Volusianus' pacific New Testament citations with classical clemency (9). He then took a step away from this comparison through pointed discussion of the necessary use of force. This coercion was squared with Volusianus' scriptural texts by referring their implications to the interior disposition of the Christian agent rather than his actions (11–14). The possibility of a Christian official is salvaged; nevertheless, by the end of his discussion, Augustine had fully walked back from the possibility that individuals could be both ideal Christians and ideal officials. In another startling counter-factual, Augustine suggested that it would require a wholly different society—an implausibly Christianised *res publica*—for a Christian official fully to implement the scriptural ethics of a heavenly citizen in this age.

Thence, those who say that the teaching of Christ is contrary to the commonwealth, let them give such an army as the teaching of Christ ordered soldiers to be; let them give such provincials, such husbands, such wives, such parents, such masters, such slaves, such kings, such judges, and finally, such taxpayers and tax collectors (*debitorum ipsius fisci redditores et exactores*), as

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<sup>120</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 136.2.

<sup>121</sup> Aug. *Ep.* 138; paragraph references in text.



Christian teaching ordered, and let them dare to say that it is contrary to the commonwealth, indeed, let them hesitate to confess that it would be of benefit to the commonwealth if this were complied with. (15)

This fully Christian *res publica* serves to highlight the pragmatic limitations of the conditions in which he perceived Christian officials operating. This is not to suggest that officials could not be virtuous Christians to Augustine's mind. Yet there were limits on both the manner and the extent in which good imperial officials could be good Christians.

Augustine was much more consistent in making explicit a contrast implicit in the letters of all three authors. He frequently separated his correspondents' agency into two overlapping roles, as official and Christian. The splitting of these two 'identity sets' both stemmed from and encouraged a sense that being a good Christian and being a good official might involve different forms of behaviour which were not always entirely compatible. In this way, unlike Isidore and Theodoret, he gestured towards other views: those of Christian hardliners who saw political service as something which had to be renounced for service to one's true master, and of inveterate traditionalists (both Christian and pagan) who saw the distinct ethical demands posed by Christian affiliation as incompatible with imperial government. It may be that Augustine's location within certain networks of elite and ecclesiastical discourse made him keener to pinpoint these differences. As he wrote these letters, the bishop of Hippo was involved in fierce debates over the possibilities of Christian perfection (which led him to a defence of 'mediocrity');<sup>122</sup> at the same time, he was also engaged in concerted efforts to meet and rebut criticisms and anxieties (like those of Volusianus and Marcellinus) regarding the state of the empire in Christian times.<sup>123</sup> Both had a direct impact on the complex and carefully positioned conception of Christian imperial service which emerges from these letters. So too his willingness to bend epistolary norms in sending back replies which were much longer and more wide-ranging than the letters he had originally received.<sup>124</sup> What is most important

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<sup>122</sup> Markus 1990: 45–62.

<sup>123</sup> De Bruyn 1993; Brown 2000: 297–311.

<sup>124</sup> Augustine's engagement with (and occasional flouting of) epistolary norms: Rebillard 1998; Miles 2008; Ebbeler 2011.

here, though, are the expectations which these accounts implied. In that sense, Augustine is both more and less optimistic than Isidore and Theodoret. His letters envisage the possibility that his correspondents could adopt a distinctly Christian official praxis, while also militating against the idea that they would be able fully to do so. Imperial officials should act like Christians insofar as they could; how far that might be was contingent on the state of human society as a whole.

## V CHRISTIANITY AND THE STATE IN THE FIFTH CENTURY

When writing about the Christianisation of the later Roman Empire, historians are at the mercy of Christian authors' rhetorical strategies.<sup>125</sup> This is part of the reason for ongoing (and perhaps unresolvable) debates about the pace, extent and significance of religious change in late antiquity. Throughout the period, Christian observers celebrated the spread of Christianity into all areas of contemporary life, while—almost in the same breath—bemoaning deep-rooted manifestations of non-Christian thought and practice as well as the work which still had to be done to form a truly Christian society. The same essential problem impinges upon letters sent to Christian imperial officials in the fifth century, which owed much to the dynamics of specific letter exchanges and the self-presentation of the bishops and monks who wrote to them. In that sense, the question of how much purchase these letters and their ideas of Christian officeholding had on the views of specific officials can only receive particular—and provisional—answers.

This article has not tried to escape the matrix of rhetorical strategies deployed by bishops and monks when speaking to the powerful; instead, like many recent studies, it has tried to work with them. In work on religious violence and intolerance in late antiquity, it has become customary to present the late Roman elite in general, and officials in particular, as conservative obstacles to the agenda of more committed Christians, whether those agents of reform were bishops, emperors in their anti-heretical and anti-pagan legislation, or mobs baying for the destruction of statues and

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<sup>125</sup> On all this: Brown 1995; also McLynn 2009: 586; Alan Cameron 2011: 184.

temples.<sup>126</sup> That was certainly the case, at least for some of the late Roman elite, some of the time. But it is worth noting that this depiction suited the agendas of bishops and emperors seeking to dissemble their own inability to impose uniformity on the religious heterogeneity present within their episcopal and imperial jurisdictions. More than that, it does not capture the full picture of elite culture and behaviour in the early fifth century: elites whose commitment to a particular affiliation was only occasionally defined by their reaction to episodes of religious intolerance. Like the rest of Roman society, the state was changing as Christian ideas were diffused and reiterated across Mediterranean. Fifth-century regimes in East and West became ever more insistent on the decisively Christian representation of their own legitimate governance. Officials were part of these wider changes, as might already be expected from their involvement in church councils, relic processions, and routine interactions with church leaders. From all of those activities, it would seem strange if officials did not start to see their work as related to their involvement with a Christian God.

By assembling the range of positions which Isidore, Augustine, and Theodoret took up, this article has sought to reconstruct what they saw as the horizons of the possible when writing to Christian imperial officials in the first half of the fifth century, so as to capture some sense of those officials themselves. In this context, it is striking that Isidore, Augustine, and Theodoret drew on a common rhetoric of Christian political service. Each writer felt able to use distinctly Christianised rhetorical strategies, like the use of biblical exempla and typology, allusions to the Last Judgement, and plays upon the humility and tolerance of their official correspondents. They made legitimate official service subject to divine providence and suggested that good administration was a form of service to God. To be sure, they carefully chose when to do so: even then, these letters were undergirded by classical ideals of self-control, uncorruptibility, moderation, and equity. But this does not make these individuals ‘secular’; nor does it place their political agency outside the religious and cultural changes remaking other aspects of the Roman world in this period. Many recent accounts have emphasised that such carefully judged adaptations of received wisdom were central to the Christianisation of the later Roman Empire, a process now often

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<sup>126</sup> From any number of excellent accounts, see esp. Brown 1995: 38–54; Shaw 2011: 195–206, 499–508; Magalhães de Oliveira 2012: esp. 273–4.

framed in terms of Christian ideas permeating previous patterns of thought and behaviour, in creative dialogue with classical culture.<sup>127</sup> The contribution of this complex interplay between the ‘Christian’ and the ‘classical’ to the remaking of elite culture and life courses in this period should make us rethink the religious identities of those who continued to perform public office (itself, of course, a key stage in the life course of elite men). From these letters, traditional public careers and Christian piety appear much more compatible than has previously been thought.

The letters discussed in this article represent the start of a story. This new beginning could be seen in narrow terms, given the influence of Augustine’s separation of ‘Christian’ and ‘secular’ agency on fifth- and sixth-century discussions of governance in the Latin West, and the appropriation of Isidore’s letters by the Constantinopolitan deacon Agapetus in his *Ekthesis* for Justinian, a mirror for princes which would have a long afterlife in the Byzantine world.<sup>128</sup> More broadly, the following centuries saw the development of Christian ideas of officeholding across the late ancient Mediterranean, in parallel to the evolving images of emperors, bishops, and ascetics traced in such exquisite detail by modern historians. At the same time, the essential limits identified here also continued throughout late antiquity. The expectation remained that only very exceptional lay officials would, or could, act like bishops or monks: that the culture of the state could only become so Christian, even if its representatives had become Christians. Nonetheless, the ways in which Augustine, Isidore, and Theodoret made the actions of officials, like those of the emperors they served, part of a Christian God’s ordering of the world, should force a rethinking of the culture of that state in the era of the Theodosian dynasty. These three letter collections attest to the carving out of a Christian political morality, and the process by which the sphere of political activity and the culture of the Roman state were gradually reshaped by a Christian political imagination.

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<sup>127</sup> See nn. 9, 51.

<sup>128</sup> Meier 2014: 149–73 is an important recent account of this Augustinian reception. On Isidore and Agapetus: Frohne 1985: 199–208, 231–53; Bell 2009: 9, 32; Agapetus’ reception: Ševčenko 1978.

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