

*Gregory the Great and his world.* By R. A. Markus. Pp. xxiii + 241 incl. 3 maps.  
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To be a bishop of Rome in the late sixth century was no laughing matter. Italy was torn asunder by political strife. The Lombards threatened to overrun the entire country after having occupied large chunks of it after AD 568. Atrocious crimes were committed in these military conflicts. In addition, the plague

repeatedly depopulated entire regions. There was flooding of the Tiber, famine and inflation. It is the intention of Robert Markus' new book about Gregory the Great to describe the shaping of the mind of his hero in relation to this turbulent environment. But at the same time Markus notes that we live 'in several worlds: not only the world we see and hear and act in and upon; but also the world of our imagination, perceptions, representations and ideas'. Hence the need to place Gregory 'in both his worlds: the social reality and the intellectual and imaginative construct' (p. xi). In addition, there is a 'third world', i.e. our construct of Gregory's worlds. Yet Markus is not interested in the sometimes artificial complexities of post-modern historiography. His book is not an exercise in methodology, but rather a traditional 'account' of the empirical and mental realities which Gregory had to grapple with.

The order in which Markus depicts Gregory's 'worlds' is significant: he sees him as a 'contemplative in a troubled world' (the title of ch. i). After a short introduction containing elementary information on the sources, on the country in which Gregory lived, on his life before his pontificate and his writings (ch. i), Markus sets out to describe the conflict between the contemplative and the active life which dominated Gregory's life and his ministry (ch. ii). Gregory managed to resolve this conflict by discovering the spiritual value of 'humility, a ready submission to God's calling, like Jeremiah's surrender (Jer. i.6) ... Pastoral involvement could be integrated into his spiritual goals' (p. 20). Hence the writing of the *Regula pastoralis* a few months after his accession in AD 590: 'Contemplation had to be considered in the context of the pastor's function in the Christian community, and, conversely, the pastoral ministry itself had a radically contemplative direction' (p. 26).

Yet as a pope Gregory was also conscious of his authority. Although he described the Church as a community of love, it was primarily a hierarchical institution he had in mind in which there were rulers (*rectores*), celibate clergy (*continentes*) and lay people (*coniugati*). The terminology is significant, for Gregory is a monk and the ideal of asceticism is an integral part of his intellectual makeup. His is an aristocratic view of the Church which is readily explained by his origins: born into a family of wealthy landowners, Gregory had followed an almost classic administrative career until he was appointed *praefectus urbi* in AD 573. After his conversion he tried to escape from worldly affairs and yet remained too useful to be allowed to retire into a monastery. Instead he was made the pope's legate (*apocrisiarius*) to Constantinople where he kept close contact with the imperial family. After another short spell in his monastery on the Coelian Hill he was the obvious choice as successor to Pelagius II who had died of the plague in 590.

These are the external presuppositions for Gregory's work as a bishop of Rome. Markus then turns to retracing Gregory's inner world which he sees as dominated by interpretation of the Bible (ch. iii) and a strong sense of apocalypticism (ch. iv). He strongly emphasises Gregory's sense of the nearness of the end of the world, calling it somewhat overpointedly 'unequalled since the fading of the early Christians' eschatological expectations' (p. 51 – what about the Montanists?). The present world order is coming to an end, little time remains for the faithful to bring their lives to order and for those outside the Church to come into the fold. This explains Gregory's strong emphasis on moral teaching and on mission. Ch. iv also contains a paragraph of wonderfully argued prose

on holiness in which Markus shows the way in which Gregory remodelled the old martyr-story so as to become a narrative celebrating modes of sanctity applicable to his own time and society (pp. 59–63). Markus writes (p. 62):

The real significance of his *Dialogues* lies in Gregory's clear intention to provide an alternative collection of *exempla* of sainthood. Although he thought that you only needed to look round to see that the world was still full of martyrs, Gregory discarded the mould of the martyr-story, and thereby liberated the Italian saint of his day, and saints of succeeding generations, from its tyranny. Hagiography could celebrate models of sanctity conceived and described as autonomous in their own terms.

Markus goes on to characterise Gregory's views of his non-Christian 'neighbours' (ch. v). The Jews were to be converted by preaching only. However, the pagans were, like heretics, considered enemies of the Christian faith who had to be converted by force, if need be: 'The unquestioned model behind Gregory's missionary enterprise was the long-established pattern of the coercive regime of the Christian Roman Empire. Force was acceptable, even a normal means, for the propagation of the faith' (p. 82). In the light of the English experience, however, the pope changed tack. When coercion brought little tangible results, he ordered his missionaries *en route* for England no longer to destroy the shrines of idols, but to turn them into churches. 'Thus, when the people see that their shrines have not been destroyed they will banish error from their hearts and recognising and adoring the true God, they will be more inclined to come to the places they are accustomed to' (*ep.* xi.56, quoted at p. 183). Markus sees in this a 'powerful testimony to Gregory's pastoral flexibility' and speaks of 'a dramatic change of direction in papal missionary strategy' (p. 184) – statements which appear to me slightly exaggerated.

From ch. vi onwards Markus turns to Gregory's political activities, detailing, for example, the conflict with the patriarch of Constantinople over the title 'ecumenical'. The dangerous political situation forced even the pope to get involved in affairs of state and to negotiate with the Lombards (ch. vii). In Markus' account Gregory comes across as a shrewd politician who, by numerous diplomatic *démarches*, was able to save his see from devastation.

To be a pope was also to be steward of an enormous piece of land (the 'patrimony' of St Peter) which had to be properly administered (ch. viii). In Markus' view Gregory was an able administrator. Early in his pontificate, he reorganised the management of these estates by centralising it and replacing lay people by clerics. Chs ix–xii are dedicated to the schism of the Three Chapters, to Gregory's frequently tense relations with the bishop of Ravenna, and to his dealings with the Churches in the most western parts of Europe – Visigothic Spain, the Frankish Church and kingdoms and, of course, England – and, finally, with African Christianity.

Markus concludes his book by defining the novel character of Gregory's pontificate: 'what was unprecedented about Gregory's pontificate was the deeply pondered conception of the pastoral ministry which infused it. The *Pastoral care* is the key, as Gregory intended and knew it to be, to all his work. It represents that fusion of thought and action which gives Gregory his moral seriousness' (p. 204). Given the paucity of evidence available I am not wholly convinced that Gregory's concern for his flock was unprecedented. However, a great pastor he undoubtedly was. He was fearless and, at times, ruthless in defending orthodoxy

and the freedom – both spiritual and physical – of his Church. He was humble in that he dedicated himself entirely to the duties which his office demanded from him without any personal gain.

*Gregory the Great and his world* is a slim book, written in an untechnical language with sparse footnotes. It is, therefore, easily accessible to the non-specialist. It is also a carefully argued piece of scholarship. At times it even appeared to me as if scholarly caution had kept Markus back from giving a more vivid and daring account. Markus' characterisation of Gregory's religion as 'in every way a religion of detachment' (p. 50) could equally be applied to his own way of writing history. Thus to me Markus' Gregory remains a friendly, albeit slightly aloof person, painted in pastel rather than in oil. Yet this is a small criticism in what will no doubt be the standard monograph on this famous pope for a long time to come.

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