

THE TRUSTWORTHY MULE AND THE DEAD HORSE: REVIEW OF LANCASTER, LUCAS. *SANTO ATANÁSIO E A CRISE ARIANA*. RIO DE JANEIRO: EDITORA CDB, 2022.

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Abstract

This review offers a critical analysis of *Santo Atanásio e a Crise Ariana* (2022), by Lucas Lancaster, published by the Centro Dom Bosco, situating the work within the recent rise of the Catholic far right in Brazil. It demonstrates how the book, despite its ambition and length, systematically fails to meet fundamental requirements of historiographical practice—from basic factual inaccuracies, conceptual anachronisms, and improper use of sources to a hagiographic narrative style that replaces historical inquiry with apologetic devotion. By comparing Lancaster's approach with earlier Catholic scholarly traditions such as that of Tillemont and with contemporary debates on historical methodology, the review argues that the work not only distorts Late Antiquity and the Arian controversy but also exemplifies the dangers posed by the marginalization of ancient and medieval history in Brazilian education, which opens space for pseudo-historical, ideologically driven productions. The review concludes by defending the disciplinary responsibility of historians and the need for stronger institutional and academic support for these fields, lest they be overtaken by reactionary discourses that confuse tradition with traditionalism.

Keywords

Athanasius; Late Antiquity; Arianism; Far-Right; BNCC; Hayden White.

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Resumo

Esta resenha analisa criticamente *Santo Atanásio e a Crise Ariana* (2022), de Lucas Lancaster, publicado pelo Centro Dom Bosco, situando a obra no contexto do crescimento recente da extrema-direita católica no Brasil. O texto evidencia como o livro, apesar de sua ambição e extensão, falha de modo sistemático em critérios fundamentais do ofício historiográfico – desde erros factuais elementares, anacronismos conceituais e uso inadequado das fontes até um registro narrativo hagiográfico que substitui a análise histórica por devoção apologética. A partir de comparações com tradições eruditas católicas como a de Tillemont e com debates contemporâneos sobre metodologia histórica, argumenta-se que a obra de Lancaster não apenas deturpa a Antiguidade Tardia e a controvérsia ariana, como também exemplifica os riscos do abandono da história antiga e medieval no ambiente educacional brasileiro, criando espaço para produções pseudo-históricas de viés ideológico. A resenha conclui defendendo a responsabilidade disciplinar e a necessidade de reforço institucional e acadêmico desses campos de estudo, sob pena de sua captura por discursos reacionários que confundem tradição com tradicionalismo.

Palavras-chave

Atanásio; Arianismo; Antiguidade Tardia; Extrema-direita; BNCC; Hayden White.

Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε, οὐκ ἔσεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ· ὅτι φιλοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς γωνίαις τῶν πλατειῶν ἐστῶτες προσεύχεσθαι, ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσι τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.²

What the reader has in front of her is an article that begins with a review.

In 1776 (a fundamental year for the human spirit, I've read somewhere), Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In this work ("the first modern history *tout court*", in the informed judgment of Moses Finley – Finley, 1991: 24), Gibbon achieved the separation of the history of the Christian era's first centuries from the providentialism of that religion. Writing as the British establishment's gentlemen that he was, it would not be surprising, and it was not shocking, to find anti-Catholic arguments in the work; Rome was, to pious Anglicans of the XVIIIth century, Babylon, and for more skeptical politicians a source of tensions in semi- (or perhaps not so semi) colonized Ireland.

What surprised and shocked the book's audience were its *antichristian* arguments. In the work's famous chapters 15 and 16, the previously mentioned separation occurs: the reasons presented for Christianity's success are exclusively human. Thanks in large part to these chapters, Gibbon would forever be marked with the label of "unbeliever" (Pocock, perhaps hastily, puts him in the same "skeptical party" of the frankly atheist Hume – Pocock, 1999: 68-69).

The mature Gibbon (in whom Momigliano perceived a vague Deism – Momigliano, 1954: 457) would probably answer this label (as indeed he did) with an ironical smile, which would perhaps widen when he reflected that his younger self had committed a radical act of youthful rebellion when he entered Oxford: a conversion to Catholicism. The episode was so shocking that it forced Gibbon *père* to send his son to exile in Lausanne, Switzerland, an act that had the momentous consequence of connecting his progeny to the waves of enlightened thought that vividly pulsated in the Continent (and in Scotland) in a manner quite unlike that of England.

Gibbon, then, turned into a – turned into *the* – Enlightenment historian, and the episode of his youthful conversion was forgotten, which makes it hard to say anything about it. What can be *surely* said is that any bibliography that Gibbon might have read that led to his conversion was quickly abandoned. The Enlightenment's Gibbon would read, of his contemporaries, the *histoires philosophiques* of Voltaire and Montesquieu, and would focus on classical pagan literature (with a distinct preference of

² Mat. 6.5. The passage is translated below.

Latin over Greek). To the ancient Christian authors, he would give little attention henceforth.

A problem is presented to the reader that is unaware of the *Decline and Fall*: how did Gibbon write about Christianity, since he had abandoned the patristic authors? The answer lies in the profitable meeting of Gibbon with the Catholic scholars of the end of the XVIIth century and beginning of the XVIIIth: Mabillon, Montfaucon, Muratori and one of his greatest influences, “the indefatigable Tillemont”.

Sebastien Le Nain Tillemont (1637-1698) was, in the affectionate definition of Gibbon, “The patient and sure-foot mule of the Alps [that] may be trusted in the most slippery paths” (Gibbon, 1909, vol. 2: 50). As Owen Chadwick notes, Tillemont’s *Mémoires Ecclésiastiques* (and other religious historians) allowed Gibbon to digest in a quick, concise way a vast volume of ecclesiastical sources in order to obtain the “philosophical” historiographical synthesis that he sought. The skeptical English Deist was profoundly shaped by the immense labors of the French ecclesiastical priest-historian. A religious abyss separated them, but the mule’s intelligence – which guided Gibbon through those Alps of scholarship, Greco-Roman patristics – united them. Tillemont was sometimes the target of Gibbon’s humor, but never of his contempt; and as Chadwick puts it,

The effect, in total, is one of dependence and respect [of Gibbon vis-a-vis Tillemont], occasionally more than respect, nearer to reverence, for this unpretentious, quiet, self-effacing, trustworthy guide. (Chadwick, 1976: 122).

It is a commonplace that Brazil went through – is still going through – a political crisis since at least 2013. That one of the aspects of that crisis is the appearance of a far-right movement as a political player seems obvious to me. As an ancient historian, I have, as a professional obligation, just to listen to political scientists, sociologists and (yes) historians of modern Brazil about this crisis, since they have better and richer heuristic and hermeneutical tools to interpret this vast phenomenon in its broader lines than I myself do.

But what an ancient historian can understand, and understand well, is the growth of a Catholic far-right movement. For this movement, the national crisis is invariably merged into an international one, that is the papacy of Francis. The Argentine who occupied the Chair of Peter was and still is a source of bewilderment to them.

Perhaps it is the junction of these factors – that is, a papacy that is *in some sense* progressive and the Brazilian political crisis – that explains the boom of a Catholic far-right (in its various forms and denominations:

traditionalists, sedevacantists, integralists, restorationists... we do not have the space here to catalogue these sects).

Pride of place needs to be given to Centro Dom Bosco. It is a lay Catholic association (that flirt, despite their protests, with Lefebvrist sedevacantism), based in Rio de Janeiro, with an aggressive political profile and some political reach. It was the CDB that welcomed actress Cássia Kiss on her march to reactionary Catholic fundamentalism; it was the CDB that attempted to prevent the movement *Católicas pelo Direito de Abortar* from using the term "Catholic" in its name³; it was the CDB that repeatedly tried to stop the comedy group *Porta dos Fundos* from producing sketches about Jesus Christ. It was the CDB that interrupted a Catholic Mass with Afro-Brazilian elements in 2019, in a flagrant act of religious intolerance.

Beyond these activities, the Centro stands out for its numerous publications, with more than two hundred books published since 2016. The books are, in its vast majority, conspiratorial in tone: one of them discusses "Masonic infiltrations in the Church". Outdated works also appear prominently, like the Salazarist "European History" of Pedro Ameal. Some patristic works are piously translated (if only the publisher would stick to that). And, in 2022, they published a massive book, of 1007 pages, about "Saint Athanasius and the Arian Crisis", written by Lucas Lancaster. It is this work that will be reviewed henceforth.

The book begins poorly. We find a beautiful icon of Athanasius in page 37 (in black and white, alas). Its provenance is uncredited: the (already) skeptical reader will not be surprised to find out the image is from Wikipedia. The reader is then shown "The Roman Empire of the Fourth Century". I do not know Where this map comes from but it contains *egregious* errors.

The first is to ignore Diocletian's evacuation of Dacia; the second is to ignore the Mesopotamian conquests of Diocletian and Galerius in the East; the third is to generously bestow the Kingdom of Bosphorus to the Roman Empire. But the Bosphoran Kingdom (which is erroneously enlarged in the book's map) was part of the Roman Empire only between AD 63 and 68, under Nero. Considering that Dacia was Roman only after Trajan's conquests, it is necessary to conclude that the author used a considerable creative effort to blend borders from different centuries in the same map... into the wrong century.

³ One has to note they succeeded, at first, with the TJSP accepting, lamentably, the arguments of the CDB. The decision was voided in the STJ, which correctly noted there was no lawful and material link between the lawsuit's parties.

Such creative effort is only matched by his attempt to bypass the administrative divisions of the Empire. If we set aside the bursts of geopolitical creativity, the map is a *passable* version of the Roman Empire's administrative division... in the beginning of the third century.⁴ For the fourth century, it is completely anachronistic; Diocletian's profound administrative reform completely changed the situation, dividing the provinces mistakenly shown by the author into smaller units.⁵

It is possible, perhaps, to forgive the use of a Wikipedia image of unknown provenance with no references to illustrate the person who is the main character of the book (though sloth if, after all, a deadly sin: Lancaster missed the opportunity to use Rubens' beautiful painting of *Saint Athanasius*). But the author already fails spectacularly in the simple presentation of a map.

Let us continue. The author offers a brief profession of faith, an activity foreign to the historian's craft (pp. 41–42), to then present a distorted history of Christianity during the first three centuries AD, in which only Christian martyrdom and persecution are presented (portrayed, against reality – at least until Diocletian –, as systemic and constant rather than sporadic and uneven: 43).

One might waste a great deal of ink on this distorted and historically illiterate distortion of Christianity in its first centuries, but it is more profitable to see Lancaster's mistakes when he presents us with Alexandria, hometown of his hero Athanasius ("hero" is an understatement: Lancaster's praise to this historical character is so overwhelming that one must conclude he was the fourth person of the Trinity).

The mistakes are countless. "Alexandria was built [by Alexander] to be the capital of a universal empire and a beacon from which Greek civilization would spread its rays of light (p. 44)." An ugly Eurocentrism is plainly on display here, with Greek civilization and its rays of light, and will be even more blatant later. But it is curious that Lancaster does not cite any source that attests this assertion, and that – whatever source he may have used – Alexander, upon completing his conquests, established himself in Babylon. How else could he govern an empire that stretched from India to Egypt?

⁴ I say "passable" thanks to two minor mistakes: Britain is presented as an unified whole, and Syria-Palestine is divided between Syria and Judaea.

⁵ The reader (and, more urgently, Mr. Lancaster) can consult the *Atlas of Classical History*: 176-177.

The error would be astounding, but Lancaster soon surpasses himself, since “his main legacy [Alexander’s] – the Hellenic culture sown by him wherever his troops set foot upon – defeated the *ancient barbarism of the conquered peoples* and prevailed” (my emphasis: 44). Where to begin? What kind of historian, what kind of human being, would now call Persians, not to mention Egyptians, “barbarians”? Hellenic culture? It may have been attractive to some, but it was repulsive to so many others. I present to Mr. Lancaster a passage from First Maccabees, considered sacred by the Catholic Church:

In those days came there forth out of Israel transgressors of the law, and persuaded many, saying, let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles that are round about us; for since we were parted from them many evils have befallen us. And the saying was good in their eyes. And certain of the people were forward herein and went to the king, and he gave them licence to do after the ordinances of the Gentiles. And they built a place of exercise in Jerusalem according to the laws of the Gentiles; and they made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the Gentiles, and sold themselves to do evil. (1 Mc. 1.11-15).

And what is this “evil” of the “Gentiles”? Hellenic culture, with its characteristic gymnasium.

The book presents itself as historical, but it is clearly hagiographical. I cannot resist quoting Tillemont: “Only Saints deserve to write the praise of saints” (Tillemont, 1735: 02). Lancaster, as far as I know, is not a saint; but worse, he pretends to be a historian, while acting as a hagiographer. Let us accept that Lancaster might write a hagiography; even so, the praise is still excessive.

The Catholics of every place ran to see this invincible fighter for the Church’s sake, to praise his passage, to ask for his blessing and to hear his words. With his presence dripping sanctity and with exhortations that sounded like a celestial oracle’s, Athanasius instigated clergy and laity to stay loyal to the Nicene Creed, and to reject communion with the Arians (Lancaster, 2022: 405).

The writer of these lines must forgive me for my blasphemous thought, but one must ask if one who receives such high praise bore the stain of original sin. Lancaster not only *heroicizes* Athanasius (which would be enough, in itself, to turn a work of history in something flavorless and outdated; Great Men history is, after all, a simplistic one), he *idolizes* him. One must ask why the Logos found it necessary to incarnate in the flesh and suffer in the Cross if a man might achieve the complete excellence that one sees in the Lancasterian Athanasius; it seems to be a lot of effort spent on someone who seems to never erred, much less (under a Catholic lens) to have needed confession. To the atheist reader, uninterested in theology, I mean

to say that, if Lancaster's History is bad (and it is), as a work of Catholic theology it is even worse. I dare say Augustine would feel a faint, or perhaps not so faint, trace of Pelagianism in the work.

Let us go through other quotes which speak of Athanasius, the fourth person of the Trinity, born without mortal sin:

the risen flag of the dogma, the marble column which nothing could take down, the steel gate which was impossible to be destroyed by any battering ram, a impenetrable [sic] wall which protected the Catholic Church for fifty years amidst unimaginable anguish and suffering (Lancaster, 2022: 28).

In favor of Alexandria's archbishop were the saintly and the virtuous, the defenders of the truth, the confessor, the men devoted to the Church and the bishops of irreproachable conduct, ready to defend him from the absurd allegations of the conspirators (Lancaster, 2022: 267).

... on that 2 [sic] of May of 373 one of the greatest, if not the greatest defender that the Catholic Church ever had, flew into heaven (Lancaster, 2022: 867).

The insipid heroicization of Athanasius deserves a *passim* to be described, which by itself turns the book unreadable. But there is another mistake which is irritatingly frequent in Lancaster's work. He is a fanatical acolyte of the "Professor X" school of historical psychology⁶. We find, everywhere, sentences like "Seeing the Eternal City again (...) *must have* pleased Athanasius' heart" (Lancaster, 2022: 404 – or perhaps not, maybe Athanasius found Rome a tedious city); "it was certainly a truly touching scene that of the long and warm farewell embrace between these two saints [Athanasius and Pope Julius], who went their separate ways as dear friends and brothers" (Lancaster, 2022: 404 again – or perhaps not, maybe the two did not like each other but tolerated the other for political reasons); "(...) the presence of the two messengers [of Pope Julius to the Council of Serdica] strengthened the spirits of the prelates with the certainty of being 'under the rule of Saint Peter' (Lancaster, 2022: 375; or maybe it disappointed them, because they would feel stronger with the presence of Julius himself). When the sources do not allow the building of a narrative that fits into the preconceived notions of the author, he assumes, unashamedly, the role of an author of historical novels.

No hostility against hagiographers or against authors of historical novels should be assumed here; what is the target of the present criticisms is that the *historian* is not allowed the narrative freedoms that Lancaster takes, repeatedly, putting the sources beds of Procrustes, or even in true racks, so

⁶ To the (un)fortunate who are unaware of that pop culture colossos, the X-Men, Professor X is a character that has the power to read minds.

that they might, like the bleeding pig of the joke, confess to their leporine nature.

Source elements which would go against the narrative of a perfect Athanasius which Lancaster wants to build are discarded. We see this in the episode of Athanasius baptizing his fellow childhood playmates, an episode narrated by Sozomen (Sozomen, *HE* III.17.-7-8). The patriarch Alexander warily observed a bunch of kids imitating a baptism ceremony, with the young Athanasius playing the part of a bishop. Alexander called the younglings to reprimand them. Thus Lancaster:

The group arrived, scared and crestfallen, and stayed silent when Alexander asked what were they playing. Pressured more by Alexander's kindness than by his severity, they all turned in the direction of one of them and said "It's him. Athanasius is our chief" (Lancaster, 2022:62, my emphasis).

A saintly story, whose only defect is to be lamentably absent from the source. Alexander really was shocked, according to Sozomen. But, facing the initial silence of the children, Alexander threatened them with... *torture*. That is one of the meanings of *τῇ βασάνῳ*, the word which Sozomen uses, perhaps even its main sense. Even if we give the word a lighter tone (*τῇ βασάνῳ* might mean a rigid "inquiry"), one needs to lie to see kindness in Saint Alexander in this specific moment. The lie becomes easier when one does not read the source one is working with.

The use of translations by Mr. Lancaster is very clear, since he evidently does not control Ancient Greek (though he feels he has the authority to praise Athanasius' command of the language).

Proof can be found in page 284. Here, Lancaster "translates" a passage of Sozomen (Sozomen, *HE* II.28), wherein the historian narrates the famous episode where Athanasius, with extreme chutzpah, interrupted a procession of Constantine to petition the emperor.

Bishop Athanasius stopped me so unexpectedly in the Middle of the street with some others who accompanied him that I was taken aback. God who sees all my witness that I *did not recognize him at first*, and that it was needed that some of my entourage told me who he was and of what he had come to complain about (Lancaster, 2022: 284, my emphasis).

"I did not recognize him at first" is an acceptable translation for "*je ne l'ai pas reconnu d'abord*", the translation proposed by Monsieur Cousin in the distant year of 1686 (Cousin, 1686: 131). Lancaster's carelessness with the source here is multiplied: he affirms this passage is to be found in *HE* II.23 – a plain mistake. But he did not even bother to check the original, which is *παρὰ τὴν πρώτην ὄψιν*. The *obvious* translation to this expression is "at first

sight” – used, indeed, by the most recent translation of Sozomen in French, which uses *à première vue* (Sozomen, 1983: 359). Mr. Lancaster, who avoids the translation of Ancient Greek – since he does not know it (which is perfectly excusable, unless one is to write a book about Ancient Greek speakers) – feels he has authority to assert that the “profane” [sic] studies of Athanasius were not useless, “especially when one considers the use he made of his beautiful and well put Greek in defense of the dogma during the Arian controversy” (Lancaster, 2022: 66). “Beautiful and well put”: Lancaster’s intimacy with his mother tongue is also fragile.

But Lancaster goes beyond: he also *makes things up*. Let us go back to page 62, which contains the following fictitious passage:

Alexander looked at the boy and Athanasius looked back. His wide open eyes, with their audacious and candid frankness, noble and angelical physiognomy, displayed the triple reflex of the beautiful souls: peace, intelligence and purity (Lancaster, 2022: 62).

Athanasius looking back, his open eyes, his frankness and visage: all made up. “The triple reflex of the beautiful souls” is a poetical passage of Lancaster, which might be true or not. I imagine that Lancaster thinks Saint Augustine had a beautiful soul, but one needs an incorrigible optimism (or a terminal incapacity of comprehending a text) to read the *Confessions* and the *City of God* and come to the conclusion that Augustine lived with a deep interior peace (fortunately for Latin and universal theology, the exact opposite was the case).

Even more enthused than Lancaster was Jerome, the great translator of the Bible to Latin. The *Life* of the monk Anthony, written in Greek by Athanasius, was an absolute bestseller: the enterprising mind of Jerome led him to invent a monk who supposedly preceded Anthony, “Paul of Thebes”, and to write his *Life*, in which (strangely) many episodes which Anthony went through are retreated, and in which “Paul” always gets the best of his successor. Many contemporaries of Jerome accused him of making up this saint, which did not stop the *Life of Paul* to become itself a bestseller. But modern criticism has shown that “Paul” is a fiction. Lancaster piously believes this fiction (Lancaster, 2022: 69).

The sin of anachronism is one that is also committed by Lancaster. At page 320, he asserts that

The union of Constantius and of the Eusebian bishops would create a common army of State Totalitarianism, typical of the old pagan system, and of Heresy, against the divine constitution of the Church (Lancaster, 2022: 69).

The quoted passage not only shows the mistake in using the concept of “totalitarianism” (speaking of which, is there a totalitarianism which is not from the State?) in dealing with a pre-industrial State, but it also shows the plain ignorance in Mr. Lancaster’s part in understanding the old pagan “systems” (sic), whom he singularizes for unknown reasons.

Let us go through a passage about Saint Anthony. “Tillemont asserts that after the death of Anthony three years passed without rainfall in Egypt”, with this dry period being either the sadness of Nature’s elements over the death of the saint, or divine vengeance over the sins of Arianism (Lancaster, 2022: 529-530). It was not Tillemont that asserted that the death of Anthony was followed by three years without rainfall in Egypt, for the simple reason that Tillemont wrote from a distance of almost 1350 years from the events. The authority that Tillemont uses, and that Lancaster did not bother to quote or indeed search, is none other than St. Jerome, in his *Life of Hilary*⁷.

Let us move from this deliberate suppression. The narrative idolatry which is given to Athanasius has the unforeseen result of a notable diminution of the role that other Christian priests had in the forging of a Nicene orthodoxy. I do not speak here of the sociological dimensions of the dispute, which are given a careful treatment by Galvão-Sobrinho (Galvão-Sobrinho, 2013), and which are, evidently, beyond the meager historiographical capacities of Lancaster. Let us accept, *ad argumentum tantum*, a simplified (perhaps dumbed down) narrative, which puts the Arian question as a dispute between individual bishops, divided in two opposing groups (and, in Lancaster’s eyes, one composed by pure saints, led by an Athanasius free from original sin, and the other composed by hellspawn). The exaggerated role given to Athanasius hides the action of these other individuals.

Hilary of Poitiers has the good fortune of having accompanied Athanasius in some of his trials, and thus is given some proeminence; but the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nissa) and their activities and tribulations are reduced to a mere continuation of Athanasius’ labors (Lancaster, 2022: 849-854, 870-871). The skillful political operative that was Basil is only given a historical role when he speaks with Athanasius. Basil, however, died but five years later after Athanasius, and the amazing ecclesiastical web of contacts that the former

⁷ The pious reader might be disappointed when discovering that this drought in Egypt is only mentioned by Jerome himself; amongst his many qualities was the gift of always seductively improving a story. More soberly, Athanasius does not mention any drought throughout this period.

built, at much personal cost (especially but not only in Anatolia) was *decisive* to the triumph of the *homousios* in the Council of Constantinople.

In page 861, as he is about to narrate the death of Athanasius, Lancaster writes “Is it allowed that, at least here, the historian might give place to the believer”? It is astonishing that the author does not see the irony of his words. The believer devoured the historian, chewed on him and spit his mangled body in the previous 860 pages. When one reads this sentence one feels like seeing Jack, the Ripper, pleading forgiveness for picking a pocket.

One might spend more pages to enumerate Lancaster’s mistakes. But let us come back to Tillemont, who, in an incisive passage of his *Reflections*, meditates on the historian’s craft (a Catholic historian, by the way):

It cannot be doubted that the rules given by Saint Bernard [of Clairvaux] about how a saint is built might be also applied to the way how history is written. It is necessary that one who undergoes such a task to be worthy of such a grandiose and holy thing. He must have as much understanding as zeal about what he is doing. The authority of his person, the gravity of his style and, above all else, a saintly life in proportion to the sanctity of his subject are that which sustain what he says, and that honor the truth of what he claims (Tillemont, 1735: 114).

Lucas Lancaster’s zeal is not to be put into doubt under a scientific lens. Under a Christian lens, one might wonder if endless and endlessly public proclamation of his faith does not violate Matthew 6.5:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

As for understanding, as shown in an exhaustive manner, it simply does not exist: in this requirement the book has a thousand and seven pages and a thousand and seven mistakes. The literary style is bad: sentences which seem to have been written by a foreigner with an intermediary level of Portuguese (“...Anatolia, that peninsula... subdivided by the Roman Empire in provinces by the name Bithynia, Asia... Lancaster, 2022: 849) are followed by others written by a pedant obsessed with the second person plural (e.g., “Thou wouldst be in which side had thou lived in that time?” Lancaster, 2022: 926). One cannot say anything about the sanctity of Lucas Lancaster’s personal life, but the authority of his person, in the terms given by Tillemont, is null.

About the fury which Lancaster sets upon the Catholic “moderates” of our present day (e.g., Lancaster, 2022: 530-531), the historian can only note that God has hardened his heart, like Pharaoh’s. But a hardened heart might,

theoretically, write something of value, something that was useful, or at least interesting to read.

This is not the case. Reading this book is not profitable to the historian, to the layman, to the fervorous believer (in marked contrast with the work – would one dare say “the holy work”? – of Le Nain de Tillemont). And this is not because of his hardened heart, but because of his slippery hands, which are unable to grasp or comprehend any complex topic. The crisis of the Catholic Church is bigger than the traditionalists believe it is, if this is the intellectual value they profess to the tradition.

The contrast with the Catholic scholars from more or less 1690 to 1740 is instructive. Facing the onslaught of scholarship directed against the *Annals* of Baronio by authors so unlike each other in time, space and religious opinions as Pierre Bayle, Joseph Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon (which left the work in complete discredit, except for Lancaster), Catholic authors like Mabillon, Muratori, Montfaucon and Tillemont changed the rules of the game, showing they controlled the critical apparatus of scholarship as competently (or perhaps even more so) than their Protestant or skeptical adversaries. Facing Tillemont’s footnotes, Voltaire took the radical step of *abolishing* his own footnotes in his historiographical works, becoming less of an author thanks to such an attitude (Gibbon would manage to merge the skills of Catholic – and non-Catholic – antiquarian scholars with the conceptions of the French *philosophe* historians – Momigliano, 2004: 112-114). Following a Catholic belief, indeed a Catholic dogma, did not stop Tillemont from using and quoting works from his religious adversaries. In a way, this following incentivized him to do so.

And that is the worst aspect of Lancaster’s book. Seen by a secular historical lens, the book is bad: careless, imprudent, full of mistakes. But if we accept that we are dealing with a sacred matter, whether because we share Lancaster’s Catholic beliefs, whether because we are from another Christian denomination, whether we have the simple empathetical respect that a serious historian must have for his subject, then Lancaster’s status only worsens. For reasons of the historian’s craft, but also and *mainly* for theological reasons by those that share a Christian belief, the question of the Arian crisis, of Athanasius’ life – of *any and all patristic themes* – must be treated with due respect.

“Due respect”, in the case of Athanasius, implies a scholastic effort to read in more languages than English and French; implies a moral decency that prevents the historian from simply adapting passages from older works; implies a respect for the sources which requires a technical control over them, a control which demands the use of academic editions of these

source; implies a interfaith dialogue with scholars of other Christian denominations, even if this dialogue might be hostile.

About this last point, one might elaborate. Tillemont referenced the Protestant works by Scalliger and the Magdeburg Centuriates, to use the former and insult the latter; Lancaster simply does not use the book of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, about Arius – “Arius, *Heresy and Tradition*” (Williams, 2002)⁸ –, a book which would prevent him from making many theological mistakes, but he does use a work by Roberto de Mattei about *the Second Vatican Council* (Lancaster: 1007).

Father, forgive those who do not follow these precepts: they know not what they are writing. To Lancaster, one must give the following piece of advice: to study the topic again (or, whenever is the case, for the first time), with the required amount of sobriety and respect. To the Centro Dom Bosco’s press, one suggests, in a charitable and respectful manner, that they dedicated themselves, instead of publishing *bad* history, to produce *good* translations of patristic works. A good translation of a work by Athanasius, or Augustine, or Ambrosius, would be much more useful (in a spiritual manner besides) than a historical work filled to the brim with mistakes. It is better to present old Christian apologetics than a new *bad* Christian apologetic which starts from an *even worse* history.

In an admittedly less charitable spirit, this traditionalist work reminds me of the definition of “tradition” made by Jaroslav Pelikan, the author of a monumental five-volume *History of the Christian Doctrine* (Pelikan, 1971-1989)⁹:

The history of Christian doctrine is the most effective means available of expensing the *artificial theories of continuity* that have often assumed normative status in the churches, and at the same time it is an avenue iinto the authentic continuity of Christian believing, teaching, and confessing. *Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living* (Pelikan, 1971: 09, my emphasis).

About Ancient History, patristics and related matters

Why write this review? It was composed, I admit, with great trepidation. There is the always present risk of me appearing to legitimize a

⁸ It is interesting to note that the Anglican Church also professes that Arianism was heretical; the *first* of its Thirty Nine Articles of Religion rejects it by postulating the same substance for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As a sectarian, Lancaster refuses to use Williams.

⁹ The reader will not be surprised to discover that Lancaster does not use this work.

“traditionalist” (frankly Integralist) Catholic position, through having a dialogue (or seeming to have a dialogue) between equals with what is a book that is conscientiously reactionary and bigoted from my authority as a professional historian, facing traditionalist “lumpenintellectuality”. These scruples, as meaningful as they are, were passed over: I believe I have made it crystal clear that Lancaster fails almost comically (certainly obscenely) in both a historical and a theological way.

There is no possible dialogue, because Lancaster has not learned to speak or (worse and more important) to listen; the book’s 1007 pages are bulky, but they would only be given passing grades in an undergraduate History school through the referees’ incompetence. Lancaster’s diploma might let him use the title of historian, but his historiographical practice ends up nullifying any authority that it might have given him. If Tillemont was a sure-footed mule, Lancaster, historically and historiographically speaking, is a dead horse, violently but not undeservedly kicked in the previous pages.

However, *sociologically* speaking Lancaster’s book is interesting. It is simply true that when I started to study Late Antiquity, some twenty years ago, there simply was not a volume of 1007 pages speaking about a Patriarch of Alexandria from the fourth century, published by a printing press composed by laymen.

What is proffered next is key to the development to a Brazilian ancient and medieval historiography. And it is proffered in a situation where not only the BNCC, in its infamous first version, struck a tough blow against the teaching of such topics in elementary and high school, but in which these topics are dismissed by professional historians from an university setting.

If one abandons, discards, considers the European ancient and middle ages to be of little importance, a flank will be opened – in a sense, it has *already been opened* – which is being filled, and potentially will be filled to an ever greater degree, by the worst kind of historiographical work. I am not asking here for a biography of some eight hundred pages about Athanasius for the Brazilian public, but it would indeed be interesting if at least some introductory academic articles about this figure existed¹⁰. They do not exist (yet), and one must state that the curious reader who wishes to buy something about Athanasius in Portuguese might be tempted to peruse a

¹⁰ I gladly note that the situation is better, perhaps even *considerably* better, when it comes to podcast: I note Robson Murilo Grando Della Torre’s beautiful exposition on Arianism to the USP’s Medieval History Podcast (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/4Z2pWRI5CiYnyJj95mUboS>, accessible in 17/07/2025).

confessional, badly written work, based in a shallow reading of outdated authors. We can – no, we *must* – do better.

And here I stop kicking our friend, the Lancasterian dead horse, and being a discussion with my fellow historians. And I do so with the polemical Hayden White.

I not only deny the authority of “professional historians” to “police” anything, I also deny that historians, in their current “professional” capacity, possess the resources necessary for rendering “ethically responsible” judgment on whatever we mean by “history” (White, 2005: 335).

One needs not to go into the vast chasm that is Hayden White’s work. I only present another quote from Lancaster:

It is really astound to note the short interval of time between the peace of Constantine, in 313, and the first manifestation of Arianism, in 318 or 319. In human terms there is no, between one thing and the other, cause and effect. However, if we visualize the facts from the spiritual forces that fight in the invisible world, one must really wonder whether Satan, being unable to annihilate the Church with the bloodthirsty persecutions that he unleashed for three hundred years, changed his methods, trying to destroy it from the inside as soon as it was in peace with the Empire. It is reasonable. (Lancaster: 176-77).

There is no real problem if Lancaster *believes* in that. But how do we deal with this text, while it is presented as a historical labor? Should we accept that the Demon yet again appears as a historical character? Is it reasonable (to use Lancaster’s words) that we keep quiet? It does not seem to me that we should act here as those that “illuminate the blind spots that maintain the current social systems intact and proclaim their alternatives as ‘unreal’” (Avila, 2021: 72, manifesting the thought of Joan Scott). Especially because Lancaster uses a practical impulse and past – but not a feminist or post-colonial practice, but a Catholic integralist one, which condemns us, *post mortem*, to the eternal flames of Hell¹¹ – and, more prosaically and meaningfully, to historical mistakes, falsifications and belittlements.

Let us accept, necessarily, the judicious evaluation of my friend, Arthur Lima de Avila, about the present crisis of History, in which the discipline finds itself in an endless labyrinth: “*dismantling of the institutional conditions which gave it support*”, “*enormous enlargement of informative inflation*”, “*tyranny of the immediate in social networks and of a society forced to forget the long term*”, “*dissolution of its centuries-long epistemological and political fundamentals*”, “*collapse of the notions of the commons and of sharing stimulated by neoliberal hyperindividualism*”, “*disciplinary decay*,

¹¹ It is curious that Lancaster repeatedly uses Tillemont, given that author’s heretical Jansenism.

not always grasped, which closes the discipline in itself” (Avila, 2021: 56, emphases in the original).

But if we accept the conditions of this crisis, should we naturalize it? And here the work of Lancaster is useful. The noise around the work of Hayden White frequently led to moral questions: how to speak of the Holocaust (Saul Friedlander), White as the heir of Gentile (Ginzburg in his worst moment, categorically, as White’s critic). The solidity of the events of the Second World War – to Momigliano, to Ginzburg, - as well as the enormity of Nazi crimes, made the rising of tensions and bad feelings in this discussion basically unavoidable (and White might not be guiltless, as he did leave his flank open to such criticisms).

Lancaster’s book (printed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the year of Our Lord 2022) allows us to see the limits of White’s work in a less passionate way. Lancaster sees in the Arian crisis the greatest crisis of the Church, and deals with it with a passion whose size is only matched by his multiform incompetence. What to do when faced with his historiographical work?

I believe I gave a constructive answer to this question with my review. Its tone is conscientiously ironical, but to focus in this aspect is to be superficial. It is not a linguistic question that Lancaster composed a horrendously *wrong* map. It is not a narrative choice that makes him quote works about Athanasius written in the XIXth century as if they were primary sources. The use of a concept of “totalitarianism” to describe the Roman Empire of Constantius II is an anachronism, and if there is a disciplinary decay (a dangerous word!) in modern historiography it is to be found (or *also* to be found) in an excessively libertarian conception of historical activity, and by a defeatism vis-à-vis the utility of History by its own practitioners. The historiographical paths are not a monopoly of the Historians’ Guild; but some parallel pathways (like Brasil Paralelo’s) lead to a *forgery* of History.

Is it possible to deny Satan as the cause of the Arian crisis? *Good* historiographical work is not, *pace* White, a merely textual artefact. It would be much easier for graduate students in both the Masters and PhD levels if they had only to entertain, if (in the mistaken expression of a great historian) history was a “textual construct *par excellence*” (Bentivoglio, 2018: 53). Alas, they have to go through the rite of passage that is the referees’ evaluation. And their use (or abuse) of the sources is one of the main evaluating topics.

One of the (many) defects of Lancaster’s work is its poverty as a literary artefact, as has been shown. Let us imagine that Guimarães Rosa, risen

from the grave, (for his sins) had to rewrite Lancaster's book to turn it into a narrative colossus. The text might become wonderful to read; *and yet* Lancaster's map would still be wrong, the deified Athanasius would be imaginary, the Roman Empire of any century would still not be totalitarian, the Arian crisis (however one might understand it) will still have perfectly human causes.

And here one comes to the work of Nancy Struever, an author little used in Brazilian historiographical literature, even though she was one of Hayden White's critics in *History And Theory's* special 1980 volume. The issue posed by errors in historiographical operations is not the (re)hashed distinction between fact and fiction. It is the *argumentative* nature of historiographical labor. And this argumentative nature is also found in... Quintilian's rhetorical work!¹²

No, Satan did not cause the Arian crisis; Lancaster's astonishment with the small distance between the Edict of Milan and the beginning of the Arian crisis has no reason to be, given the interesting tendency of Christian dogmatics to delve into vicious theologico-philosophical conflicts, a tendency that has no parallel in any other religion (not even other monotheist religions of the Book); the beginnings of the Arian crisis can be found as the result of the imposition of an orthodoxy by groupings of bishops, as Galvão-Sobrinho teaches us.

An ethically responsible history *has to answer, necessarily, in these terms*, admitting (evidently) the revision, and even the refusal, of the arguments presented by Galvão-Sobrinho. And this occurs through a process of argumentative *disputatio*, through a rhetoric – similar to judicial rhetoric – that we find described by Quintilian. After all, History, as it has been practiced at least since Gibbon's days (and the name of Gibbon is rarely mentioned by White) is a science, or at least a discipline; and historians do have the authority to police their own field of study.

Otherwise, what should we do? Do we accept the "it is reasonable" of Lancaster? Why spend so much effort studying, writing, arguing? Would it not be better to close all History departments, and start to plant potatoes?

An alternative to the disciplinary discourse of scientific history exists nowadays. And we must be conscious that it exists. It is a miserable jalopy, a Ford Pinto ready to explode. It is painted in a way that leads the unaware passenger (who has never heard that the Ford Pinto was a vehicle that had the unfortunate tendency to burn its driver down) astray; the beautiful,

¹² Symptomatically, Ginzburg quickly discards Struever's work in his considerations about History and Rhetoric (Ginzburg, 2002).

perky vehicle called “Curso de História da Igreja” of Lancaster (a mere 59,90 monthly installments over a year) presents itself as an alternative to the driver. This alternative leads to a fiery death or, in the best scenario, to a cliff – or, to abandon the images, to pseudoacademical books and Youtube courses of contemptible quality, false whenever they are not incompetent.

Behind this cliff lies the notion of “the West”. This conception, of a glorious past composed by Roman law, Greek philosophy and the Catholic Church is present, in one way or the other, in practically all the para-academical reactionary goo expunged by the far-right, from Lancaster to Brasil Paralelo, passing through Olavo de Carvalho¹³.

What I mean to point out here is that this conception of the West *is also present in the critique of other historians to the Brazilian study of ancient and medieval history*. We might call this the “Bacurau view of the West”: Westerners do not see us as part of the West, therefore Brazil is not Western¹⁴. The conclusion of this train of thought is “therefore, it is not necessary to study ancient or medieval history in Brazil”, in any shape or form.

The approval by two historians that in the first BNCC

It was simply a matter of trying to confront the harmful effects of treating the subject of History in the classroom as a kind of overcrowded bus where, at every moment, new passengers insist on getting on. The first challenge faced, therefore, was choosing some content at the expense of others, in an effort to reduce the enormous load of topics that teachers and students must (or should) cover – a thankless and generally unsuccessful task. (Cerri; Costa, 2021: 05).

is honest, at least.

Let us discard the easy defense of the actual presence of Greco-Roman antiquity in Brazilian society and of the usefulness of a critical study of this period for a student’s education (after all, the word that best defines Brazil is “oligarchy”, a word that was not created during the Second World War or during the coffee cycle in Brazil). Let us continue, indeed, with the evocative image of the overcrowded bus present by Cerri and Costa. What do those two poor passengers, ancient and medieval history, (un)justly expelled from the bus, have to do? Some twenty, twenty five years ago

¹³ I hurry to note that not *all* Western pillars are defended by this mob: Lancaster has violently attacked Roman Law in a Youtube short. Traditionalists are, above all, weird.

¹⁴ What a curious non-Western country, wherein European colonizers speaking a Latinate language brutalized indigineous peoples and dedicated themselves to that Western enterprise *par excellence*, the Transatlantic enslaved trade.

(and perhaps even more recently), their enemies' answer would be *nothing* (which would be bad, and stupid, enough). But their adversaries, today, would deliver Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the far-right. I struggle to think in anything more imprudent that one might do than let Catholic integralism jump the turnstile.

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