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In Honor of Peter R. L. Brown

Editors

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“Salutary Vertigo”: Peter R.L. Brown’s Impact on the Historiography of Christianity

David A. Michelson

Introduction

In the preface to the tenth-anniversary edition of his *Rise of Western Christendom* (2013), Peter Brown makes a statement which may seem startling for a work focused on the history of Christianity in Europe: “What we now call distinctively ‘European’ Christianity was unthinkable in the year 500 A.D.”¹ This bold recasting of

1 The author would like to thank a number of colleagues for making this article possible. Petre Guran has been a source of Christian friendship (intellectual and spiritual) both in Princeton and now around the globe. Thank you. Without such collegiality the life of the mind would be of no meaning. For their part, Peter and Betsy Brown have modelled this sort of *amicitia* with a generosity that cannot be overstated. So too the hospitality of the conference hosts at New Europe College, București and the Mihai Eminescu Central University Library of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași made the “Faith and Community around the Mediterranean” conference a wonderfully successful international scholarly collaboration and a stimulating exploration of the scholarship of Peter Brown. In addition, a number of colleagues at the conference offered insightful comments for which I am grateful. Lastly, this article was greatly improved by the help of two research assistants. Stephanie Downing Fulbright assisted me in 2016 in tracking Peter Brown’s voluminous bibliography. In 2019, William L. Potter assisted me with final revisions and suggested several useful improvements. Finally both Paul Michelson and Daniel Schwartz kindly read the whole manuscript and offered several useful corrections and improvements. This article is copyright David A. Michelson, 2019 and licensed for reuse under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Reuse is encouraged.

the history of Christianity in Late Antiquity is not an offhanded claim. This thesis is a natural outworking of Brown's general approach to the history of the later Roman world. Brown is well known for his ground-breaking periodization in distinguishing the era of Late Antiquity from both the Greco-Roman classical era and the Middle Ages. His conceptualization of Late Antiquity successfully flipped scholarly perceptions of periphery and horizon revealing that what was assumed to be a dwindling periphery of the classical age was actually a vibrant cultural synthesis: "Late Antiquity", a period whose horizons stretched further than ever before, both chronologically and geographically, into Africa, Central Asia, and Northern Europe.

One of the key innovations of Brown's historical narrative was his insight that the religious dynamics of this epoch, which scholars since the time of Edward Gibbon had assumed to be backwaters of decline, were actually wellsprings for creative flourishing and the *loci* of profound social re-organization. Looking back now at Brown's half-century of publications, scholars from a number of fields—including classical studies, ancient and medieval history, and ancient philosophy—have noted how his reconsiderations of late antique Christianity have profoundly changed the larger historiography on the Later Roman world.² This article examines the same scholarly nexus in Brown's work but from a different vantage point. Instead of Brown's impact on the study of Late Antiquity, our focus is Brown's contribution to the historiography of Christianity. In both cases, however,

Materials quoted in this article are used under the terms of academic fair use in the United States and remain under copyright of their respective publications. P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, tenth-anniversary revised edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. xvi.

- 2 The scope of Brown's scholarly impact can be seen in the extraordinary number of symposia proceedings and *Festschriften* which have reflected on his work. The present special issue of *Études byzantines et post-byzantines* joins the following already in print: J. KREINER and H. REIMITZ, eds., *Motions of Late Antiquity: Religion, Politics, and Society from Constantine to Charlemagne* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016); P. ROUSSEAU and M. PAPOUTSAKIS, eds., *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2009); A. SMITH, ed., *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Brown* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005); P.A. HAYWARD and J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, eds., *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); a special issue of *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (vol. 6, no. 3, 1998) on "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997"; and a special issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* (vol. 72, no. 1, 1997) on "The World of Late Antiquity Revisited". For a review which critiques Brown's historical method see R. MACMULLEN, "The Place of the Holy Man in the Later Roman Empire," *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 1 (January 2019), p. 1–32. Although the piece is highly polemical, it is still *prima facie* evidence for the long impact of Brown on the study of Late Antiquity. See for example, MACMULLEN, "The Place of the Holy Man," 3 n. 5-6. MacMullen's argument largely falls apart because he ignores how Brown's method as an historian has evolved between 1971 and 2019. For example, he is not aware of Brown's 2003 Haskins Lecture where Brown explains how he grew dissatisfied and came to abandon the functionalism and "largely British tradition of social anthropology" which defined his earliest work. See P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning: Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 2003*, ACLS Occasional Paper 55 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2003).

it is Brown’s re-framing of late antique Christianization which has changed subsequent scholarly approaches.

Five recurring motifs or theoretical approaches to Christianization epitomize Brown’s interpretive method as an historian of Christianity:

1. Christianization as Social Change
2. Christianization as Continuity
3. Christianization as Revolution
4. Christianization as Simultaneously Diverse and Universal
5. Christianization as Unfamiliar

Individually, each theme illustrates Brown’s fruitful efforts to challenge the various monolithic interpretations of “Christianization” in Late Antiquity. Taken as a whole, these themes reflect Brown’s emphasis on conflicting and paradoxical aspects of Christianity in Late Antiquity. As Brown himself has put it, his goal in constantly overturning scholarly assumptions about Christianization was to achieve “a sense of the salutary vertigo” in which the historian encounters ancient Christianity with “the same combination of wonder and respect that makes for fruitful travel in a foreign land.”³ To summarize these five themes, this article proposes the Brownian phrase “salutary vertigo” as a short hand for the historical method which Brown pioneered in the study of Christianity. Given Brown’s impact on scholarship, this path of “salutary vertigo” has now become a standard approach in the toolbox of many historians of religion—not just scholars of Late Antiquity but historians working on all periods of the history of Christianity.

Because the focus of this article is Brown’s engagement with Christianization, most of the evidence is drawn from those publications in which Brown sought to revise the received “grand narrative” of Christianization or in which he offered new paradigms for understanding the development of Christianity in Late Antiquity.⁴ These sources can be clustered into four groups:

1. *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (1971).⁵ This work stands alone as a seminal and intentionally synthetic narrative, casting a vision for the

3 P. BROWN, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. xxiv–xxv.

4 This article will focus on the moments in which Brown discusses the general contours of the history of Christianity rather than those in which he focused on specific topics such as the “cult of the saints” or Augustine of Hippo. For example: P. BROWN, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), p. 80–101; P. BROWN, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, First Edition, The Haskell Lectures on the History of Religions, n.s. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); P. BROWN, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Peter Brown’s scholarly corpus is immense and a full review of his *opera omnia* would require an entire monograph. It is the hope of the author that this article demonstrates the potential for a longer study of Brown as an historian of Christianity.

5 P. BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971). This work

reconceptualization of the later Roman Empire which Brown has followed, *mutatis mutandis*, throughout much of his career.

2. Publications on Christianization including:
 - *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (1995).⁶ This work is the revision and culmination of multiple previous works.
 - “Christianization and Religious Conflict” (1997).⁷
 - “Conversion and Christianization in Late Antiquity: The Case of Augustine” (2004).⁸
3. *The Rise of Western Christendom*.⁹ This work was published in three editions: a first edition in 1996, a substantially revised edition in 2003, and a tenth-anniversary reissue of the revised edition with a new preface in 2013.
4. Brown’s direct methodological reflections in a series of lectures, interviews, and retrospective prefaces including:
 - *A Life of Learning: Charles Homer Haskins Lecture* (2003).¹⁰ An extended

was Brown’s first effort to cast a synthetic vision of Late Antiquity and has been re-issued numerous times but without substantial revision.

- 6 P. BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). This book is the revision of multiple published lectures including the Raleigh Lecture given in 1992 and the Tanner Lectures given in 1993. It also includes a revision of Brown’s contribution on “Holy Men” to the *Cambridge Ancient History* (published in 2000 but written earlier, see the footnote below). See P. BROWN, “The Problem of Christianization,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1993), p. 89–106; P. BROWN, *Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Tanner Lecture Library (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1993); P. BROWN, “Holy Men,” in *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, ed. A. CAMERON, B. WARD-PERKINS, and M. WHITBY, vol. 14, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 781–810. We should also note that Christianization has long been a focus of Brown’s work including one of his earliest publications: P. BROWN, “Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 51 (1961), p. 1–11.
- 7 P. BROWN, “Christianization and Religious Conflict,” in *The Late Empire, AD 337–425*, ed. A. CAMERON and P. GARNSEY, vol. 13, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 632–64. In the preface to *Authority and the Sacred*, Brown indicates that he had already completed “Christianization and Religious Conflict” and “Holy Men” (see previous note on this) while he was drafting the final version of *Authority and the Sacred*. See P. BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred*, p. x.
- 8 P. BROWN, “Conversion and Christianization in Late Antiquity: The Case of Augustine,” in *The Past before Us: The Challenge of Historiographies of Late Antiquity*, ed. C. STRAW and R. LIM, Bibliothèque de l’antiquité tardive 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), p. 103–17.
- 9 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, first edition (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Tenth-Anniversary Edition)*.
- 10 P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning: Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 2003*, ACLS Occasional Paper 55 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2003).

personal reflection on how Brown considers his method and approach to have changed over time.

- “An Interview with Peter Brown: On Scholarship, Faith and Augustine” (1999).¹¹
- “In Search of the *Génie du christianisme*: An Interview with Peter Brown about Teaching and Research” (2006/2019).¹²
- Acceptance speech for the 2008 Kluge Prize of the Library of Congress.¹³
- New introductions to anniversary editions of *The Body and Society* and *The Rise of Western Christendom*.¹⁴

As relevant, this article will also draw on some of Brown’s monographs, especially his trilogy on wealth and poverty: *Through the Eye of a Needle* (2013), *The Ransom of the Soul* (2015), and *Treasure in Heaven* (2016).¹⁵

Christianization as Social Change

Although the scope of Brown’s work is immense, it is possible to illustrate much of his method from just one of his works, *The World of Late Antiquity*, a slim volume first published in 1971 that has, perhaps surprisingly, turned out to be Brown’s most enduring *oeuvre*.¹⁶ Christianity looms large as a theme in this groundbreaking work. On the opening page, Brown evokes Christianization as a driving question for the study of Late Antiquity: “we are increasingly aware of the astounding new beginnings associated with this period: we go to it to discover why Europe became Christian and why the Near East became

11 A. HWANG, “An Interview with Peter Brown: On Scholarship, Faith and Augustine,” *Princeton Theological Review* 6, no. 1 (1999), p. 20–27.

12 This item is an interview with Peter Brown and Petre Guran, conducted in 2006, and published in the same volume as this present essay, see *infra*, p. 291–308.

13 A video recording of the speech is hosted by the Library of Congress and a personal copy of the text was provided to the author by Peter Brown. See “Kluge Prize Ceremony,” (Library of Congress, December 10, 2008), video, 1 hour, 9 minutes, <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-4485/>.

14 See P. BROWN, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. xxi–lxvii; BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Tenth-Anniversary Edition)*, p. xi–lxviii; P. BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, Second Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 441–520. Regrettably, space does not permit me to engage with the new epilogue in *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* in any detail. It should be noted that the second edition was reissued again in 2013 as a “Forty-Fifth Anniversary Edition” but the contents appear to be the same as the 2000 “new edition”.

15 P. BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); P. BROWN, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); P. BROWN, *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

16 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*.

Muslim....”¹⁷ The outline of the book makes it clear that “Religion” (the title of a large section) will be a major theme of the work.¹⁸ And yet, the first citation of a “Christian” primary text in the book reveals that Brown is using his sources in new and unexpected ways. The passage is Christ’s maxim about going the extra mile from Matthew 5:41.¹⁹ In a rhetorical move that typifies his approach, Brown does not quote St. Matthew to make any point about the history of Christianity or even religion in Late Antiquity, rather the gospel *pericope* is used as social evidence for the brutal and ubiquitous military transportation mechanisms of the late Roman Empire.

This use is representative of Brown’s method. He does not relegate revered “religious” sources to exclusive roles as informants on ancient religion or culture: these sources are as equally available for broad social analysis as they are for understanding late antique religion and culture. In fact, Brown’s interpretations of the various “Christianities” of Late Antiquity is always focused on a social context, thus evidence for the development of Christianity has much to tell about the history of Late Antiquity *and vice-versa*.²⁰

Breaking down divisions between religious and non-religious sources and themes cuts both ways for Brown, who also employs sources traditionally not used to analyze religion to tell a narrative about religious transformation as social transformation. Indeed, one may perhaps summarize the main thesis of *The World of Late Antiquity* as the argument that the religious transition of Late Antiquity was a social transformation, or as Brown puts it: the collapse of traditional Mediterranean religious culture is “*the spiritual revolution that makes Late Antiquity such a distinct and fertile period in the history of the Ancient Mediterranean.*”²¹ This point is made repeatedly throughout the book and has echoes in Brown’s later work.

Accordingly, the first motif is one that may seem exceedingly obvious now. But we do well to recall that it was far from self-evident in 1971, a fact that itself reveals Brown’s impact on the field. Simply put, Brown argued that the rise of Christianity was not just a religious event but a fertile social change in the late Roman World. In an interview published online in 2005, Brown framed his approach this way: “I have always tried to write the history of this period in a way that takes religious change seriously, but does not limit itself to merely

17 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

18 “Part One” of the book is 89 pages long and is itself divided into two parts. The second part, titled “Religion”, is 47 pages long, or about one fourth of the whole book.

19 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 13.

20 As we shall see below, Brown has called for greater attention to the diversity of “Christianities” or “micro-Christendoms” in a way that allows the historian to grasp their particularity, see the discussion in P. BROWN, “Gloriosus Obitus: The End of the Ancient Other World,” in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus*, ed. W. KLINGSHIRN and M. VESSEY (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 290 and a related commentary in R. MARKUS, “Between Marrou and Brown: Transformations of Late Antique Christianity,” p. 13.

21 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 51. Emphasis mine.

religious change."²² Brown also hit this same note in his 2003 Haskins lecture:

Up to this day, the study of religious experience divorced from a precise social context has always struck me as a singularly weightless exercise. A history of the rise of Christianity that is not rooted in a precise and up-to-date history of the social, economic and cultural circumstances of the later Empire and the early Middle Ages is, quite simply, not a history.²³

In short, for Brown the study of the rise of Christianity in Late Antiquity and the study of the great social and cultural changes that defined the era were integral to each other. Religious changes were part of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the era and not some separate domain. Accordingly, social historians ought not to ignore Christianization nor should historians of religion study Christianization in a vacuum apart from its social context.

Christianization as Continuity

For Brown, a series of observations necessarily follow closely on his conclusion that the intertwined histories of Christianity and late antique society were inseparable. Brown emphasizes that Christianization cannot be seen exclusively as a cultural disjuncture or the advent of something *ex nihilo* in the ancient world. For Brown, the rise of Christianity was like the revolution of Late Antiquity itself, a change built out of existing materials (*ex materia*): "...the changes that came about in Late Antiquity can best be seen as a redistribution and a reorchestration of components that had already been existing for centuries in the Mediterranean world."²⁴

To help historians see how the various late ancient Christianities were recombinations of existing cultural raw materials, Brown models subtlety and nuance in telling the story of the rise of Christianity. He uses skillful analogy to show how the Christianization of the Mediterranean world was a creative reconstitution of the social and cultural order that can be understood as coming from *within*, i.e. this was the "transformation of the classical heritage" not its abolition.²⁵ For example, Brown writes in *The World of Late Antiquity*:

22 The quote continues, "A history of the rise of Christianity that does not address the social, economic, and cultural circumstances in which Christianity took root is not really a history" (P. BROWN, "Interview [with the Princeton University History Department]", Princeton University History Department Website, circa 2005. A copy was archived by archive.org on April 16, 2005 and is available at https://web.archive.org/web/20050416065514/http://his.princeton.edu/people/e56/peter_brown_intervie.html).

23 P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 7.

24 P. BROWN, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Carl Newell Jackson Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 9.

25 This phrase is taken from the University of California Press monograph series edited by Brown. See "Transformation of the Classical Heritage (ACLS Humanities E-Book Special Series)," accessed March 1, 2016, <https://www.humanitiesebook.org/the-collection/special-series/transformation-classical-heritage/>.

It is not surprising, therefore, that pagans and Christians fought so virulently throughout the fourth century as to whether literature or Christianity was the true *paideia*, the true Education: for both sides expected to be saved by education. The man who had chiseled and polished himself like a statue through devotion to the ancient classics was the highest ideal. He is shown on his sarcophagus, gazing quietly at an open book—a ‘man of the Muses’, a saint of classical culture. Soon he will become a saint: the Christian bishop with his open Bible, the inspired Evangelist crouched over his page, are direct descendants of the Late Antique portrait of the man of letters.²⁶

In this comparison, Brown views Christianity as an abstraction made intelligible through its cultural genealogy. In this case late antique Christianity is a *paideia*, a type of classical education. Although it was in competition with classical literature, Christianity was not foreign to the ancient world; it was a competing instantiation of the classical idea of education.

Brown uses such comparisons to contextualize Christianity throughout *World of Late Antiquity*. Thus, the cult of saints is explained as “a projection upwards” of the basic Roman realities of patronage.²⁷ The key here is that Brown frames Christianity as a part of, rather than apart from, the classical heritage in which it formed. Brown notes: “pagan and Christian alike...came to chisel out a position for themselves at the expense of the time-honored consensus of traditional public worship.”²⁸

For Brown, much of the vitality of late antique Christianities came from their ability to encompass Roman culture and turn it into mass religious cultures far beyond the lettered elites. Indeed, for Brown Christianization was a threat to the *Helenes* of the fourth century because of its close intellectual kinship with them rather than because it was culturally alien; Christianity was a rival precisely because it had become intelligible in Greco-Roman terms as an alternative to a revival of classical culture. For Brown, it is only modern historians who think Christianity was perceived as foreign to Roman culture—a modern misreading resulting from giving too much credence to anti-Christian polemic. Brown explains:

[Julian] saw, with a clarity bred of hatred, one blatant feature of his age—Christianity rising like a damp-stain up the wall of his beloved Hellenic culture. What he did not see was that the

26 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 32.

27 In this sentence I am intentionally imitating and paraphrasing Brown’s prose found in *ibid.*, p. 36–37. More dramatically, Brown describes Christianization as part of a “new mood” in which “the sense of an imminent ‘breakthrough’ of divine energy in the inner world of the individual had revolutionary effects.” Christianity is part of new social and cultural dynamics, but it is not the sole cause, beneficiary, or participant. Brown instead explains Christianity’s spread and appeal in terms of its ability to contextualize itself to these dynamics: “But if demons were the ‘stars’ of the religious drama of Late Antiquity, they needed an impresario. They found this in the Christian Church.... To men increasingly pre-occupied with the problem of evil, the Christian attitude to the demons offered an answer designed to relieve nameless anxiety” (*ibid.*, p. 54–55).

28 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 57.

same Christianity was able to pass the classical culture of an élite to the average citizen of the Roman World. The Christian bishops were the missionaries of the culture with which they had identified themselves. For Christianity was essentially a “Cockney” religion. It had clung to the contours of urban life throughout the Empire.²⁹

This final turn of phrase reveals the nature of Christianization in Brown’s early scholarship, namely that Christianization was a type of Romanization. In sum, a second recurrent motif in Brown’s approach to the history of Christianity has been to frame the rise of Christianity as being from within the late ancient world, not foreign to it.

Christianization as Revolution

His emphasis on continuity notwithstanding, Brown has also been quick to emphasize that the result of Christianization was something unprecedented:

The rise of Christianity cannot be isolated from the social changes we have been describing. The expansion of Christianity was not a gradual, ineluctable process beginning with St. Paul and ending with the conversion of Constantine in 312. Its expansion in the third century was impressive, because it had been totally unexpected. Very suddenly, the Christian Church became a force to be reckoned with in the Mediterranean towns. The very seriousness of the measures taken against the Church as a body...in the persecutions of 257 and after 303, shows that something was lacking in the life of a Roman town, which Christianity was threatening to fulfill.³⁰

Brown’s interpretive model enthusiastically embraces the paradoxical nature of Christianization and of the periodization of Late Antiquity. Here Brown does not shy away from seemingly contradictory aspects of the development of Christianity. In reflection on this aspect of his method, Brown points to the influence of Arnaldo Momigliano, whom he credits for teaching him the following:

The writing of history is largely about the act of “worrying about” problems that will not go away. For that reason, it remains a strenuous and somewhat messy activity. Historiography is as much a story of the “worries” experienced by historians in the face of intractable problems as it is a narrative of triumphant methodological breakthroughs.³¹

In this regard, we might understand the somewhat paradoxical nature of the five motives which mark Brown’s method as also being a trail of the intractable issues which have constantly held Brown’s historical attention.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 65. Here Brown is arguing that Christianity was not unique, but *avant-garde*: “It is part of the appeal of a religious group that it can be a little ahead of social developments.... At a time when so many local barriers were being painfully and obscurely eroded [in Roman society], the Christians had already taken the step of calling themselves a ‘non-nation’” (*ibid.*, p. 65–66).

31 P. BROWN, “Conversion and Christianization in Late Antiquity,” p. 103.

This focus thus leads Brown to emphasize both continuity *and* change: Christianity was simultaneously a product of a shared social context *and* a source of radical transformation. Christianity was firmly part of the ancient world but also a *locus* for far-reaching changes. Brown assigns the success of Christianization to this paradoxical dynamic:

the leaders of the Christian Church, especially in the Greek world, found that they could identify themselves with the culture, outlook and needs of the average well-to-do civilian. From being a sect ranged against or to one side of Roman Civilization, Christianity had become a Church prepared to absorb a whole society... For the conversion of a Roman Emperor to Christianity, of Constantine in 312, might not have happened...if it had not been preceded, for two generations, by the conversion of Christianity to the culture and ideals of the Roman world.³²

In Brown's telling, Christianity became Roman, i.e. it was intelligible in terms of existing Mediterranean social structures, *but* also proved to have the cultural dynamism to restructure or "restore" the entire late Roman world according to its own varied images. He notes: "In this restored world, the Christians had the advantage of being the most flexible and open group."³³

Thus, for Brown, it is not enough to say that Christianization was Romanization, it is also the case that Christianization was a transformation or even series of transformations. Indeed, in his retrospective preface to *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Brown emphasizes that continuous transformation was a characterizing feature of (and not merely a "moment in") late antique Christianity:

In the first place, we have learned that Christianity did not simply rise and triumph in this period. It changed perpetually... A salutary sense of the fluidity of Christian identity makes it easier to write the *Rise of Western Christendom* as the history of a religion that changed throughout the centuries.³⁴

For Brown, the history of Christianity in Late Antiquity must take into account both that the Christianities of this period were constantly undergoing change and that their later medieval trajectories were unknown. An overly narrow focus on the medieval outcomes (or especially a myopic focus on Roman Catholic Europe) risks missing the diversity and uncertainty of the myriad transformations of Christianity in Late Antiquity.

32 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 82. Brown describes this "conversion of Christianity" in this way: "By 300... Christianity had put down firm roots in all the great cities of the Mediterranean: in Antioch and Alexandria the Church had become probably the biggest, certainly the best-organized single religious group in the town. The Christian gains had been made in just that part of the Roman world that had emerged comparatively unscathed from the troubles of the late third century... The most decisive change of that time, however, cannot be reduced to a matter of the size of the Christian communities" (*ibid.*).

33 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 88.

34 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Tenth-Anniversary Edition)*, p. xxxi, xlii.

Christianization as Simultaneously Diverse and Universal

While much of Brown's research has focused on Christianization of the Roman Empire, that event is by no means where Brown wants to end the story of Late Antiquity or his narrative of the rise of Christianity. Indeed, as Brown loved to remark, "Late Antiquity is always later than we think."³⁵ This Brownian *gnomē* offers a couple of revealing insights into Brown's approach to the history of Christianity. The first observation is that Brown's own career as an interpreter of Late Antiquity has been driven by pushing himself to expand his horizons, by looking both "later" and further afield for source materials beyond fourth-century Rome to early-medieval Ireland and Mesopotamia. As Brown noted in his 2008 Kluge Prize acceptance speech, the norms of Classical Studies must be expanded:

Altogether, in modern conditions of scholarship, the conventional tools of a classical scholar—Latin and Greek—though they remain indispensable, are no longer enough. There are other languages to learn. Alas, today, my old Housemaster [at the Shrewsbury School in Shropshire] would have had to puff his pipe with even greater emphasis than he did in 1948. He would now have to say "Brown.... Do Greek. But do not forget also to do...Coptic, Syriac, classical Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic."³⁶

Brown's constant calls for reflexive self-evaluation are not merely rhetorical. His work reveals that he heeds his own advice and that his own vision of Late Antiquity is always moving its focus later and wider, a shift that can be seen over his career, especially in his changing emphases on the universality and diversity of Christianity in Late Antiquity.

In Brown's early work, the *Nachleben* of Christianization is seen as something hard and constraining. In *The World of Late Antiquity*, he writes:

The hardening of boundaries reflects an inner rigidity. After Justinian, the Mediterranean world came to consider itself no longer as a society in which Christianity was merely the dominant religion, but as a totally Christian society.... The medieval idea of the "Christian Society", flanked uneasily by the ghetto, began in this period.³⁷

35 A dictum heard by the author directly from Brown on numerous occasions. It can be found in print with the following context: "...the changes that came about in Late Antiquity can best be seen as a redistribution and a reorchestration of components that had already existed for centuries in the Mediterranean world. From the point of view of religious language, Late Antiquity is always later than we think" (BROWN, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 9).

36 "Kluge Prize Ceremony," n.p.

37 Brown continues, "The change was the symptom of rapid simplification of culture.... In the late sixth century, the boundary [between aristocratic and popular culture] was all but obliterated: the culture of the Christian man in the street became, for the first time, identical with that of the elite bishops and rulers" (BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 174).

Brown paints a picture of how the late sixth-century culture became “medieval”, with traditions piling up: holy books, holy fathers, liturgy, icons all filling up the cultural space of Justinianic society.³⁸ Or, as Brown put it in his *Authority and the Sacred*:

By playing a role in the slow emergence of an imaginative model of the world that had a place for such wide-arching prayers, the Christian saints of Late Antiquity helped to make Christianity at last, and for a short moment, before the rise of Islam, the one truly universal religion of much of Europe and the Middle East.³⁹

The paradigm implied here, even in works which Brown wrote in the 1990s, is that Christianization can be studied as a movement reaching an apex (a “moment”) in which a common Christian vision (“truly universal religion”) was shared across the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world.

Across Brown’s later scholarship, however, one finds a greater emphasis on the fact that this universal Christian *romanitas* was neither static nor monolithic. The difference here is one of emphasis rather than contradiction. Even in the pronouncement above one hears a hint of this in the qualifier “for a *short* moment”. Brown’s argument is that the development of Christianity was always reproduction *with* variation. Even in an early work such as *The World of Late Antiquity*, Brown presented Islam as one such variation:

Whatever he may have thought about the Christian Church, the Muslim guided his conduct by exactly the same considerations as did any Christian or Jew throughout the fertile Crescent. He, too, was a “God-fearer.”⁴⁰

Brown’s point is to show the variegated and paradoxical nature of the religious revolutions of Late Antiquity. The newly formed religious and cultural communities were both highly particular to their local contexts in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Balkans, etc. and yet also shared certain universal characteristics because they were all products of related dynamics of social and cultural change.

Increased focus on this paradox represents a major shift in Brown’s scholarship over time. Awareness of the regionally and culturally variable quality of Christian *romanitas* became a dominant theme in Brown’s later work, leading to his notable phrase, “micro-

38 Thus, Brown notes, “In a sense, we have come full circle to the days of untroubled pagan conservatism in the age of the Antonines. Heaven and earth have settled down to a well-regulated harmony. Christianity is now the ancestral religion” (*ibid.*, p. 183). Brown’s later work certainly moves back from this rigidity, but here it is on full display where Brown describes Coptic and Syriac Christian identity as having hardened to the degree that they remain the same to the present day (*ibid.*, p. 186), a sentiment he no longer holds having since become personally familiar with many of the present day intellectual leaders of these modern day Christian traditions.

39 P. BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred*, p. 78. This passage is also published as BROWN, “Holy Men,” p. 810.

40 P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 191.

Christendoms" in *The Rise of Western Christendom*.⁴¹ In his Haskins lecture Brown explained:

It is for this reason that I have been drawn, over the years, to the problem of Christianization in Europe and the Middle East in the late antique and early medieval periods. A study of the spread of Christianity in Western Europe, in the period between 200 and 1000 A.D., especially in the recent Second Edition of *The Rise of Western Christendom*, has involved me in the comparison of societies as far apart as Ireland, Iceland, Armenia and Central Asia. For each of these regions produced, at this time, its own "representation" of the process of Christianization. A comparative study of these representations tells us much about the cultural resources of local forms of Christianity. It also challenges us always to look elsewhere if possible, to archaeological data, but, also, to the great, untidy "excavation site" of the texts themselves. We still must sift these texts, again and again, for hitherto unconsidered scraps of evidence, for hints of unresolved anomalies and of alternative voices lurking on the very margins of the evidence.⁴²

In short, we again find Brown offering a highly useful, yet strikingly paradoxical interpretation of Christianization. Christianity had become universal, indeed so universal as to produce dialects, regionalisms, local variation, and to find itself in direct competition with its close cousins (e.g. Rabbinic Judaism, Manicheism, Islam).

Looking back on his own work, Brown has described part of his work in *The Rise of Western Christendom* as "a search on my part for a formula with which to express this intriguing phenomenon."⁴³ Indeed, Brown makes it clear that his interest is not merely in the diversity *per se* but in exploring the dynamic through which late ancient Christianity was self-consciously both universal and local without a sense of contradiction. He noted in the introduction to the second edition of his *Rise of Western Christendom*:

Christianity was a remarkably universal religion, endowed with common codes which could spring up in many different environments. But, at this particular time, it was not necessarily a unitary, still less a uniform religion. Here, I think, it is something of an advantage to be a late antique historian, and to have spent much time, in the past years, studying the Christianities of the eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East. Such study develops, in the scholar, a healthy taste for diversity. What has to be explained in the history of the Greek, the Coptic, the Syrian, and the Armenian Churches of the East (to name only a few) is the remarkable manner in which their Christianity remained both universal and, at the same time, highly local. As long as we think of the "localization" of Christianity as a failure to achieve some ideal of unity, we seriously misunderstand this phenomenon. Distressing though the fact may be to theologians (today as in the days of Justinian), what strikes the historian about the competing regional Churches of the east was the robust confidence of each of them that

41 P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom (1st Edition)*, 218; BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Second Edition)*, p. 358–59.

42 P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 18–19.

43 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Second Edition)*, p. 15.

they possessed a sufficiently full measure of universal truth to allow each one to stand on its own.⁴⁴

In particular, Brown faults earlier historians (such as Henri Pirenne and Christopher Dawson) for mistakenly assuming that late antique Christianity required a “center” to hold it together.⁴⁵

Instead, Brown proposes that late ancient Christians came to transform or even abandon the previous poles of “center” and “periphery”, redefining a social orientation which had been so important before the decline of strong imperial authority. Brown observes:

My point is that we should not think of Ireland or Britain simply as distant “peripheries” being drawn, ineluctably, into uniformity with a “center” placed in Rome. Many Irishmen and Saxons carried with them “a Rome in the Mind.” These “Romans” (as they called themselves) often strove to bring that distant Rome to their own region.... Their efforts were perceived as having brought to their own region a “microcosm” which reflected, with satisfactory completeness, the “macrocosm” of a worldwide Christianity. They did not aim to subject the “periphery” of the local Christianities of the British Isles to a “center” situated in Rome.... Rather they strove to cancel out the hiatus between “center” and “periphery” by making “little Romes” available on their home ground.⁴⁶

Brown explains that the end result of this process was the erasure of “center” and “periphery” and their replacement by “a loosely spread constellation of centers”, not only North into Europe but also stretching South across Africa and East into Central Asia.⁴⁷

Because his narrative of Christianization takes into account this shifting attitude toward center and periphery, Brown is able to formulate a historical interpretation which explains the “universalizing” process of Christianization through close attention to the regional specificities of the various micro-Christendoms. In an interview, Brown explained that:

The Rise of Western Christendom is a plea for the regional complexity of a process. How did societies in central and northern Europe—Ireland, Scandinavia, Northern Gaul—take on a religion whose basic structures and mindset had been formed in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean? We tend to think of Western Europe as homogeneous, but in fact the Europe that we might recognize had not yet finally emerged, even on the last page of the book. The true rise of the papacy as the final authority of Western Christianity hasn’t quite happened, even by the last page. Instead one finds an intermediate Christianity with very strong regional cultures and loyalties. Here again, I think one should never separate religious history from cultural or economic history. Anyone who studies the circulation of pottery is going to discover the same distinctive regions that I found studying the spread of Christianity.⁴⁸

44 *Ibid.*, p. 14–15.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 12–15. Brown argues that “From A.D. 400 onwards, diversity, not unity was the hallmark of an age without Empire” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

46 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Second Edition)*, p. 15.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

48 P. BROWN, “Interview [with the Princeton University History Department].”

In this comment, one can see how Brown’s refusal to treat the history of Christianity solely as an intellectual phenomenon and apart from its economic, social, or political contexts led him to reinterpret the role of regional variation in the formation of late antique Christianities.

In the preface to his *Through the Eye of a Needle* (2012), Brown describes his method in this way:

the more I have studied the theme of wealth in the churches the more I am convinced that the Roman Empire was made up of distinctive regions. The Christian churches in each region (despite their frequent interchanges and despite the theoretical claim to forming part of a universal institution—the Church with a capital “c”) were as much the product of local conditions as was any other feature of the Roman World. A true history of Latin Christianity requires an unremitting sense of place. Each Christian region had a landscape of its own.... Rather than advancing triumphantly toward a clear goal along a single high road, the regional churches of the West proceeded each at its own pace. They were frequently ignorant of the affairs of their neighbors, and all were equally ignorant of the future that lay in store for them. To view them separately, generation by generation, struck me as the best way to convey the diversity of the Christian churches of the late Roman West....⁴⁹

To summarize, Brown’s paradigm of “micro-Christendoms” allows him to offer a new narrative of Christianization that traces a “universal” development through all of its “irreducible particularity.”⁵⁰

Christianization as Unfamiliar

Brown’s sustained interest in the “riot of divergent Christianities” is key to his narrative of Christianization.⁵¹ This emphasis reveals another recurrent theme in his approach to Christianity in Late Antiquity. Brown’s attention to context and historical particularity reflects his deep commitment to respecting and relaying the “disturbing strangeness” of Early Christianity.⁵²

A hallmark of Brown’s scholarship is that he never misses an opportunity to remind modern historians to avoid hindsight. For Brown, the Christianities of the ancient and early medieval worlds need to be seen through fresh eyes so that their unfamiliar particularities can come into focus. As Brown has noted, this task is perhaps most difficult for American and Western European scholars where post-Reformation theological assumptions have combined with the secularization of the academy to create a twofold intellectual blind

49 P. BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. xxii.

50 “Despite the continued fascination, for the Western reader, of the Roman Empire and the origins of Christianity, we must respect their irreducible particularity...” (BROWN, *The Body and Society [Twentieth Anniversary Edition]*, p. xvii).

51 See the section “Divergent Christianities” in *ibid.*, p. xxxvii–xxxviii.

52 *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

spot. The modern scholar who presumes to already know the well-worn account of Latin Christianity declining into dark ages has been misled by now dated Protestant and Enlightenment narratives. Instead, Brown suggests that scholars must approach the religious experience and practices of Christians in Late Antiquity as if entering distant and unknown lands.

This motif of ancient Christianity as “strange”, “unfamiliar”, or “alien” to “modern” scholarly sensibilities can be found in nearly all of Brown’s works.⁵³ It should be noted that peeling back modern assumptions to retrieve ancient mentalities is one of Brown’s preferred interpretive modes in general, a method of anthropological “translation” which he applies to all source materials, Christian or not.⁵⁴ In one of his reflections on his method, Brown notes: “If I had learned anything from Edward Evans-Prichard and Mary Douglas, it was that societies other than our own were opaque to us, unless we took the careful task of parsing the alien language with which they spoke about themselves.”⁵⁵

Brown puts this method on elegant display in his later work on wealth where he points out how our distance from the past is a barrier to understanding:

Altogether, we are dealing with a notion [“treasure in heaven”] that causes acute embarrassment to modern persons. Such embarrassment is calculated to make the historian of religion sit up and take notice. Why is it that a way of speaking of the relation between heaven and earth that late antique and medieval Christians took for granted seems so very alien to us? Perhaps it is we who are strange. Why is it that we have such inhibitions in approaching the subject of the joining of God and gold?

Faced by the need to explain modern inhibitions, the religious historian is well advised to turn to modern anthropologists. Their work reminds us that we, as modern persons, are out of step with past ages....⁵⁶

53 See these examples: “What we often lack is a sense of what it was like to live in that world” (BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 7); “This book is an attempt to enter into their surprise” (P. BROWN, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 1); “It is to make this distant Christianity more present to us that this book has been written” (P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom [Second Edition]*, p. 34); and “To begin with, we must defamiliarize the sayings of Jesus. As modern persons, we tend to think that we know what he meant.... In early Christianity, a considerably wider conglomerate of notions gathered around the words of Jesus” (P. BROWN, *Treasure in Heaven*, p. 5). We shall also see a similar example from *The Ransom of the Soul* below: cf. P. BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 84; P. BROWN, *The Ransom of the Soul*, p. 29–30.

54 For the application of this method to non-Christian classical material, see Brown’s moving evocation of the weight of the *mundus* “that we must first instill back into our minds” in BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred*, p. 8–9. Brown even applies the motif of “great strangeness” to the history of his own career. See P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 3, 8, 9, and 10, where Brown credits the Oxford tutorial system for fostering a mindset in which the tutor was required to interject “strangeness” into the obvious.

55 P. BROWN, *The Body and Society (Twentieth-Anniversary Edition)*, p. xxvii. Elsewhere Brown explains his “anthropological” motivation as wishing “to give back even to the most flamboyant figures, to those most repugnant to a modern observer, a little of their workaday human face” (BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 12).

56 P. BROWN, *The Ransom of the Soul*, p. 29.

In short, for Brown the first step in historical understanding is to banish one’s assumptions of familiarity, and even more to assume that perhaps the present is no more normative than the past. In a 2006 interview, Brown offered insight into how the historian must help the reader realize their own modern strangeness:

Part of one’s duty as a teacher is to make people realize that we would seem very odd to people in the past, just as the other way round. In terms of a *paideia* of the students, what the historian can do, is to give young people the feeling that they themselves can look very different seen from other viewing points, a real de-centering of a person.⁵⁷

Brown consistently employs this “de-centering” as a method for helping historians realize that they are writing about Late Antiquity from across a cultural and chronological chasm of historical perspective. Although the historian might be tempted to treat the transition from ancient to medieval as an inevitable given, she must recall that the denizens of Late Antiquity could not have even imagined the Christian Middle Ages let alone taken its arrival for granted.⁵⁸

Brown uses this “disturbing strangeness” to shape our historical understanding of late antique Christianity in two ways. First, he attempts to sweep away the false teleological familiarity with which modern Western scholars tended to treat Christianization. Brown insists that a narrow focus on what Christianity becomes in the European Middle Ages risks ignoring the diversity of trajectories and horizons of historical possibility that are perhaps the defining features of late ancient Christianity: “I have gone out of my way to argue that the history of the rise of Christianity should not be reduced to a history of the Church – as if it was a single, monolithic structure, proceeding at a brisk pace along the main highway of history to its eventual triumph in the West.”⁵⁹

In his Haskins Lecture of 2003, Brown proposes instead that the best approach to the study of Late Antiquity is to capture the mentality of the era without imposing a teleology: “to treat with intelligence and respect persons, little as well as great, caught, in this way, on the edge of an unknown future, remains the *ars artium* of any historian of Late

57 P. BROWN and P. GURAN, “In Search of the *Génie du christianisme*: An Interview with Peter Brown about Teaching and Research” in this volume, *infra*, p. 291-309.

58 In the same interview, “In Search of the *Génie du christianisme*,” Brown makes clear some of the influence on him from C.S. Lewis, whose lectures Brown attended as an undergraduate at Oxford in 1954. Brown’s method here is very similar to Lewis’s famous call for studying “dinosaurs” from a first-person perspective in his Cambridge inaugural lecture of 1955 (C. S. LEWIS, “*De Descriptione Temporum*”: *An Inaugural Lecture by the Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature in the University of Cambridge* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955]). In this lecture Lewis reflects on various historical moments of disjuncture, including “the dark ages.” Most notably, Lewis, like Brown later, emphasizes that the gap between modern and pre-modern mentalities threatens our ability to understand the past: “It is my settled conviction that in order to read Old Western literature aright you must suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern literature (p. 21).”

59 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Tenth-Anniversary Edition)*, p. xlii.

Antiquity.”⁶⁰ For Brown, the goal, then, of the historian of Christianization is to capture as fine-grained and open-ended a description of the process of transformation as possible. Thus, Brown frames his entire study in *Through the Eye of a Needle* in those terms:

As we shall see, chapter by chapter, these clear meanings did not emerge all at once and only from the minds of the leaders of the churches. Like pebbles slowly polished into smoother and more regular shapes in the swirling waters of a great river, the constructions placed on Christian giving emerged as the result of the constant (and frequently abrasive) interaction of differing constituencies within the Christian churches.... Behind the apparently unambiguous shape of a Christian ideal of giving that was passed on to the Catholic Middle Ages, *there lies nothing less than an entire social history of Latin Christianity* in the stormy years between 350 and 550 AD.⁶¹

For Brown, the flaw in any teleologically oriented history (which in this case would be a fixation on the “unambiguous” and “final” Western medieval form of Latin Christianity) is that it misses the particularity and contingency which produced the very “medieval” result in question.

As part of challenging teleological narratives of Christian development into the Middle Ages, Brown’s emphasis on the “disturbing strangeness” of ancient Christianity led him to resist the familiar contempt too often assumed by modern interpreters of the Christian past. In his 2003 Haskins lecture, Brown identified *The Body and Society* as a turning point for his scholarship in this regard:

The Body and Society was, in many ways, a new venture for me.... Above all, it was a book in which my previous zest for explanation was held in suspense. I no longer wished to render the persons whom the reader would encounter in this book totally transparent to understanding.... I wanted to make sure that the ancient authors spoke to us quietly, and with their own voices. I wanted to recover, for the modern reader, something of the weight of the life-choices which they had made.... For a historian of the Christian churches, the thrill is precisely that it is well-known landscapes...that have been rendered disturbingly unfamiliar.⁶²

In a 2005 interview, Brown elaborated further: “In the book I don’t try to explain why this change happened; by this point I didn’t really believe anymore in giving explanations. Rather, I try to spell out the stages in which the change came about.”⁶³

60 P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 20.

61 P. BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 89. Emphasis mine.

62 P. BROWN, *A Life of Learning*, p. 14.

63 Brown continues, “I want the reader to understand the passions and fears pushing issues of sex to the top of the agenda in certain cases, and also to hear the voices of opposition—for there was opposition. I try to get a feel for the texture of the debate. Very often when you study a historical development it all seems so obvious. But what makes it obvious?... The historian has to ask what forms of opposition gave way, what the alternatives were. In *The Body and Society* I was tracking the somewhat contingent rise to prominence of a set of values which, by the end of the story, were irreversibly dominant. That is, how do dominant values become dominant values?” P. BROWN, “Interview [with the Princeton University History Department].”

In his retrospective introduction to *The Body and Society*, Brown explains that his turn away from explanation and his emphasis on the unfamiliarity of Christianity in Late Antiquity was in part a response to a false familiarity which permitted modern scholars (especially theologians, but also secular historians) to conclude that they could readily comprehend and critique early Christian sexual ethics without any need for deep historical context:

I wrote also so as to meet a need that was experienced, in the 1970s, as much in the churches of Europe and America as in academe.... The repeated emphasis, throughout the book, on the distance between ourselves and the Early Christian past was a strategy with which I hoped to resolve, in a more productive manner, an intellectual dilemma that a vocal and well-intentioned movement of criticism of the Christian tradition (expressed both within and outside the churches) had appeared to me to have brought upon itself.

Put very briefly, this was a time when leading figures in the scholarly and ecclesiastical worlds had come to look back in anger on the Christian past. In moments of raw intensity, they would treat the Church Fathers as if these people were directly responsible for the ills they were suffering in the present.⁶⁴

For Brown this anachronistic “attempt to make the past accountable to the present” risked losing the very sense of particularity of the past which has been the productive hallmark of his approach to Late Antiquity.

Brown wrote *The Body and Society* as an alternative, an effort to jar the reader into recovering a sense of the distance and contingency of late antique Christianities. As he explained in his retrospective:

I wrote this book so as to instill in its readers (from whatever religious tradition, if any, they might have come) “a sense of the salutary vertigo” about the Christian past. I wished to make them aware of the existence of a gulf between themselves and their own past that was wider than they, perhaps, expected it to be. It was a gulf that could be bridged only by showing, to that distant, Christian past, the same combination of wonder and respect that makes for fruitful travel in a foreign land....

It struck me that a more fruitful way of dealing with the Christian past was not to make it answerable in so frontal a manner to the present....

Perhaps the time had come to look behind the hard surfaces of these texts and to ask ourselves, in the first place, why their authors had expressed themselves as they did and when they did, and what were the wider implications of these statements to those who heard or read them for the first time, in the unimaginably distant world of a very ancient Christianity. Altogether, my aim throughout *The Body and Society* was to defamiliarize Christian texts. I insisted that the reader should treat them as if they were, indeed, the voices of inhabitants of a distant country.⁶⁵

64 P. BROWN, *The Body and Society* (Twentyieth-Anniversary Edition), p. xxiv.

65 *Ibid.*, p. xxiv–xxv, cf. pages xvii and 447 in the first edition.

While Brown's method of challenging historians to read the Christian texts of Late Antiquity with new eyes (or new ears) arose in response to a particular moment, its applicability was not limited simply to the study of early Christian views on sexuality. In many ways, this method of "salutary vertigo" informs the whole of Brown's work, beginning with the newness of the overlooked world he evoked in *The World of Late Antiquity*.

This respectful defamiliarization of "the unimaginably distant world of a very ancient Christianity" also provides a theoretical framework for Brown's later work on *The Rise of Western Christendom*. In the introduction to the 2003 revision, Brown challenges a number of "powerful stereotypes" about early medieval Christianity including in particular the theological teleology of some historians:

I never cease to wonder at the confidence with which scholars, Christian and non-Christian alike, declare that they somehow know for certain that such and such a feature of the Christian Church is a not a manifestation of "true" Christianity—that it marked a decline from some more "pure" state of belief.⁶⁶

As should by now be expected, Brown's view of the history of Christianity has little patience for either a late antique Christianity which declined or a high medieval Christianity which triumphed. Instead, Brown casts a vision to recover that time "in the first millennium of our era when this older [pre-medieval] Christianity has covered western Europe with a more diverse and fragile net, and in doing so had dotted the landscape with little 'portions of paradise' [the micro-Christendoms or centers]."⁶⁷ With this vision in mind, he concluded his introduction to *The Rise of Western Christendom*, "It is to make this distant Christianity more present to us that this book has been written."⁶⁸ There can be little doubt that Brown has repeatedly succeeded in making these distant late antique voices both familiar and unfamiliar—one need only think about his invocation of Bardaisan in second-century Edessa as the opening scene for *The Rise of Western Christendom* or any of Brown's beloved evocations of the early medieval fashion trends in trousers.⁶⁹ The result of this de-familiarization of late

66 P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Second Edition)*, p. 18.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

68 *Ibid.*

69 For Bardaisan see *ibid.*, p. 40 ff. The rage for trousers can be found at many points in Brown's work and is summarized well in his 2005 interview: "I also felt that historians had neglected important questions raised by the Christianization of the Roman Empire. How do you deal with the plainly exotic elements entering Roman culture? How do you reconcile the classical and the non-classical? What does it mean to take on a new past that conflicts with the inherited, traditional past? People were beginning to observe new religious holidays and were becoming acquainted with the Old Testament. King David does not resemble the Emperor Augustus, no matter how hard you try. But by exotic I'm not only referring to religion. Take trousers, for instance. In the 4th century everyone abandoned togas for trousers, and trousers belonged entirely to the Germanic cultures north of the Danube and the Rhine. Trousers flowed in as 'fashion statements' all over the Roman world as the frontiers of Rome became more open. I mean to raise an important point here. I have always tried to write the history of this period in a way that takes religious change seriously, but does not limit itself to merely religious change. A history of the rise of Christianity

antique Christianities induces a vertigo for the reader, but a salutary one in that it shows us vast but overlooked landscapes in the history of Christianity. Brown’s interpretation reveals Christianities and Christendoms whose stories, trajectories, and dénouements are multiple and varied. He challenges historians in the modern West to admit that the Christianities we know today were neither inevitable nor the only historical possibility.

Historiographical Impact

Brown’s scholarship stretches across more than half a century and is still ongoing. Many aspects of Brown’s approach to the historiography of Christianity have gained wide acceptance not only among scholars of Late Antiquity but among historians of Christianity in the Middle Ages and the modern era. As early as 1986, John Van Engen noted in a historiographical review (without mentioning Brown) that:

historical study has become particularized and localized.... The thousand-year stretch of history produced a variety of Christian ideals and societies or, if one prefers, of ‘Christendoms.’ In sum, few medieval historians speak with any confidence of some common ideal animating all of medieval Christianity irrespective of particular places, times, schools, orders, and authors.⁷⁰

Writing more specifically about the historiography of late antique Christianity, David Brakke made a similar point in 2002:

Social context is [being] more determinedly pursued, albeit in a textualized mode, and the conflicted, hybrid character of Christian cultures eclipses the more holistic, integrative functions of religious symbols and practices.... The study of ancient Christianity is in a period of highly productive change, with a build-up of new and persuasive micro-stories and larger thematic stories.⁷¹

Because Brown is a wide and voracious reader and a prodigious writer it can be difficult to distinguish between his influence on historiography and where he is simply able to adopt new methods and insights immediately (*e.g.* inspired or challenged by Pierre Bordieu, Caroline Walker Bynum, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, or Pierre Hadot).⁷²

that does not address the social, economic, and cultural circumstances in which Christianity took root is not really a history” (P. BROWN, “Interview [with the Princeton University History Department]”). See also P. BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 21, 28; BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom (Tenth-Anniversary Edition)*, p. xxvii.

70 J. VAN ENGEN, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (1986), p. 533.

71 D. BRAKKE, “The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory, and the History of Christianity,” *Church History* 71, no. 3 (2002), p. 490.

72 See for example BROWN, *The Body and Society [Twentieth-Anniversary Edition]*, p. xviii, xxx.

Nevertheless, through whatever combination of innovation, intuition, and intellectual debt, Brown's methods of approaching Christianity as both universal *and* diverse seems to have anticipated and suggested the direction now taken by most historians of Christianity.

Thus in 2007, Anne Thayer's answer to the question "What's new in the history of Christianity?" suggests that what is "new" for the field in general is in fact the interpretive method which Brown has long been perfecting:

What's new in the history of Christianity? Two overarching themes guide current research. First, the geographical range of Christianity has expanded. New churches around the globe and old churches in places new to Western scholarly attention are being studied and telling their own histories. Historiography will itself expand and change as these stories are incorporated into the overall history of Christianity. Second, new interests are complexifying standard narratives. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the diversities that exist and have existed among those who identify themselves as Christians. Minority traditions and the history of groups not previously included are receiving focused attention.⁷³

In short, the scholarly trajectory that Brown began with *The World of Late Antiquity* nearly fifty years ago has in fact had an impact on how the historiography of Christianity is written today. Brown's technique of employing "salutary vertigo" can be found as a methodological influence in fields as disparate as the history of Mormonism and the history of Soviet technology.⁷⁴ Moreover, although he is now professor *emeritus*, Brown continues to publish, and more than one generation of his students continue to revise and develop methods which he first crafted.

It is fitting to conclude this historiographic study of Brown's impact, with one of his own insights on scholarly influence. In 2004, Brown looked back on his own work and noted: "...historiography is essentially an exercise in gratitude. It makes each one of us realize how little we can know for ourselves and how much we depend upon the work of others. We cannot 'go it alone.'"⁷⁵ Brown's insight here rings true both in the abstract and also in his particular case. There is much to be grateful for in Brown's own contribution to the historiography of Christianity.

73 A. THAYER, "What's New in the History of Christianity?," *Religion Compass* 1, no. 2 (March 1, 2007), p. 279.

74 See S.M. BROWN, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 6; B. PETERS, *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet* (Boston: MIT Press, 2016), p. xiii.

75 P. BROWN, "Conversion and Christianization in Late Antiquity," p. 103.

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