Introduction

*I*n Constantinople sometime in the 440s, the empress Pulcheria stood at the edge of an excavation trench. She was there under orders from none other than Saint Thyrsus, who had appeared to her in a dream and instructed her to find the relics of forty Christian soldiers who had perished on the ice of an Armenian lake.[1] Aided by clergy and palace officials she began a massive excavation, complete with its own public relations director, local church historian Sozomen, who recorded the event for posterity. The excavation eventually uncovered a casket which, when opened, emitted the sweet odor of myrrh: the martyrs had been found. The day was proclaimed a public festival, the martyrs' relics were processed through the city streets, and, with the empress and bishop standing by, the Forty were laid to rest alongside the relics of Thyrsus himself. Thus were the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste enrolled among the capital's saintly citizens.[2]

Christian ruler, aided by church officials, hunts for saints' relics amid public fanfare: as abridged in many ancient and modern histories, Sozomen's tale is reduced to a familiar headline, one which seems to embody the age itself.[3] Indeed, the history of Christianity after the Peace of the Church often reads like a broadsheet report of that day in Constantinople: it is a history peopled by bishops and clergy, ruled by newly Christian emperors and empresses, and set against the backdrop of a new Christian *polis* with its churches and public liturgies. It is a history preoccupied with the development of Christian institutions, with the shifting forms of civic authority and with the new material language of Christian power. In other words, the history of late antique Christianity has traditionally been the history of a new and energetic public.

What is missing from these histories is what Sozomen actually witnessed that day and grudgingly, even disparagingly, recorded in his chronicle. For it

1

was not an empress or a bishop who originally introduced the Forty Martyrs to Constantinople. Rather it was an aristocrat named Eusebia, whose obvious wealth and piety Sozomen obscures with insinuations of doctrinal deviancy. Eusebia did not place her treasure in one of the city's public churches, but in a private chapel on her suburban estate. Both she and her best friend, the wife of the consul Caesarius, were eventually buried beside the saintly remains, while a cadre of monks, specially ensconced on the estate for this purpose, prayed over their souls. Even Saint Thyrsus, he who had appeared to the empress Pulcheria, came to the city in another private venture, this one instigated by the self-same Caesarius who likewise constructed an estate-martyr shrine.[4] In other words, what has been written out of the history of late antique Christianity is precisely what so troubled Sozomen: a vast and powerful world of private religiosity.

This book seeks to reexcavate this private. It investigates the phenomena of private churches and private worship from the fourth through the first half of the fifth centuries A.D. From the powerful private churches and monasteries of Constantinople to the great estate churches of the rural western empire, from the reserved eucharist consumed in the home to healing rituals involving personal relics, the following chapters describe the physical shape and ritual content of those practices that took place outside the bounds of the nascent public church. Using both texts and material evidence to construct its narrative, the book describes the extraordinary range of private ritual activities undertaken by late antique people. Far from being an adjunct to episcopally supervised cult, private worship constituted a major force in late antique Christendom, dominating the ritual lives of the great imperial capitals and nurturing the first rural Christian communities. Outside the sparkling new basilicas and splendid public liturgies lay a thriving, heretofore unexplored world of private Christian practice.

Yet, like Sozomen's narrative, it was a world shot through with potential discord. The family and the household, this book will argue, lay uneasily alongside the nascent church, as ancient habits of doing religion organized around family and patronage failed, at least in theory, to mesh with episcopal authority and clerical hierarchies. Occasionally, this largely notional dissonance would explode into real-world clashes; private churches and private rituals attracted accusations of heretical practice, accusations that resounded with increasing hysteria in imperial law courts and church councils. At the same time, in growing numbers of ascetic handbooks and saintly biographies, the impresarios of private churches were lauded as examples of exemplary piety. Private cult was not simply a potent presence in late antique Christendom, but a matter of strenuous debate.

For within Sozomen's disapproving subtext lie the seeds of a problem that has never left us. What are "the public" and "the private," particularly as they pertain to religion? Do they even exist? If so, how are they related? Who

determines their boundaries – scholars, theologians, politicians, or common consensus? From Cicero to the framers of the American constitution, politicians have proposed legal boundaries to separate public from private religious activities; and from Sozomen to the prelates at Vatican II, scholars of religion have ranked them, disparaging one at the expense of the other.[5] Debate over public and private religion has for centuries, in large and small ways, saturated social discourse.

While the public/private debate may be both ubiquitous and unending, the arguments themselves have a history, one whose ebbs and flows reflected and stimulated broader social changes. Sozomen's dismissal of Eusebia's private relic cult, this book will suggest, reflects more than the rank prejudice of an imperial flunky; it is a buried echo of a public/private revolution. This revolution, which altered not only the terms of the public/private argument but also its intensity, was ushered in by the advent of a new public entity: the public Christian church. From sexuality and gender to inheritance and marriage, the slow development of public Christian institutions threw into question the relationship between individuals and a new Christian collective. The development of a newly public religious institution carried with it new ideas of public justice, increasingly centralized control over ritual and doctrine, and new expectations of personal virtue as a criterion for public office.[6] At the same time, the rise of asceticism found some individuals isolating themselves from the Christian collective, creating elitist hierarchies centered on virginity and renunciation of worldly matters.[7] Wives and husbands wrestled with a hodge-podge of new expectations of the marriage bed, while children were accorded an increasingly central place in religious thought and private law.[8]

Perhaps in no place, however, was this debate more furious or the boundary between public and private more hotly contested than around the issue of private ritual and private churches. Family, friends, and dependents had formed the core of Roman religious life and continued to do so in the first centuries after the Peace the Church. Yet in domestic churches like Eusebia's, at private masses, even in private prayer, families and individuals collided with the new religious public and its impresarios, Christian bishops. How were such private spaces and acts to be defined? Who should own and control them, heads of family or the episcopate? Private devotion raised thorny questions about the respective places for individual piety and collective identity in a Christian world, questions in which the very shape of a Christian society was at stake. What would form the nexus of Christian communities – the ancient prerogatives of aristocratic families or the newer claims of Christian bishops? What was the proper relationship between families and/or individuals and the religious community? As the problem grew weightier, public/private distinctions became increasingly important. No longer were "public" and "private" simply categories of religious life; now they were moral yardsticks, measures of heresy and sanctity, virtue and vice. In other words, through

responses to projects like Eusebia's, we catch a glimpse of a watershed in the public/private dialectic, a moment in which public and private became ever more important categories of moral scrutiny and the individual's relationship with the religious collective was fundamentally altered.

HISTORIES OF LATE ANTIQUITY CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

If the history of Christianity from the fourth through the mid fifth century is typically told through the lens of its nascent public persona, the central character of these histories is most often the bishop. The lives of the episcopate's most famous exempla, such as Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, or Basil of Caesarea, and their impact on doctrine, social issues, and community formation, form the punctuation marks of a complex institutional history.[9] Bishops were, in one sense, the new *dramatis personae* on a new public stage. Under bishops' aegis, cities acquired a mantle of churches and martyr shrines.[10] Bishops managed great public assistance programs to benefit the poor, old, and infirm.[11] They orchestrated new public spectacles and processions centered on the cult of martyrs whose venerated bodies lay outside the city walls.[12] Eventually, bishops would even claim the mantle of magistrate, handing down judgments from newly minted episcopal courts.[13]

Until recently, scholars have tended to take the power of this new public collective for granted, assuming that bishops and the institutional church were every bit as successful in creating a new "Christian society" as they themselves advertised. A more recent body of scholarship, however, has suggested that these moments of episcopal power were rather fewer and farther between than previously thought.[14] The average late antique bishop was a rather anemic creature with an uncertain job description and more authority than actual power. Even the likes of an Augustine or an Ambrose was confronted with limited financial resources, uncooperative elites and imperial bureaucrats, and a systemic inability to translate theological dictates into real-world practice. Other figures, particularly holy men and women and powerful laypersons, often rivaled or trumped bishops' still-nascent authority.[15] And while in some instances, holy man, aristocrat, and bishop merged into a single person, in the first century of public Christendom those well-publicized cases were probably more exceptional than typical.[16]

This history of Christianity's public face is well-known; more nebulous, but of increasing interest to scholars of all disciplines, are the histories beneath this developing public façade, specifically, the fabric of everyday lives and the changing character of the family. It is now apparent, for instance, that the physical and social makeup of the house underwent something of a metamorphosis in late antiquity. At the same time that a decline in mandatory public

euergetism caused the gentle decay of public building, the space of both the urban and rural private was slowly expanding. Earlier *fora* were subdivided into shops, and theaters and public basilicas were transformed into multi-family housing.[17] At the same time, the great urban *domus* were growing, taking up ever greater portions of their cityscapes.[18] Their vast dining rooms, reception halls, and peristyles were cities-in-miniature, and like the forum, they were stuffed with honorary inscriptions and played host to political meetings and church councils.[19] And yet, these "public" spaces were often kept at the house's fringes, while other spaces, bedrooms, and more intimate dining and meeting rooms, were nestled in a protective cocoon of separating halls and courtyards.[20] Likewise, in the countryside, huge sums were poured into the creation of great country houses; dining rooms, reception halls, and baths, all encrusted with mosaic floors, spelled out a new language of seigniorial status.[21] Great monuments of personal and familial power, these villas served as anchoring points for a vast rural *familia* of tenants, slaves, and workers; at the same time, they provided an ever more intimate refuge for aristocratic *otium*. The late antique house was, perhaps even more than its high empire predecessor, an intensely public AND very private space, its two faces ever more emphatically defined.

Aristocratic families themselves were transforming, expanding their boundaries in certain senses while narrowing them in others. The expansion of the senatorial order throughout the fourth century meant that there were simply more elite families who claimed *clarissimus* status.[22] As the order expanded so, too, did the diversity of the class, now embracing a huge range of wealth and backgrounds, from the landed aristocracy of old to military brats and merchants' sons.[23] The increasing numbers of *novi homines* among elite ranks meant that the *familia* in its narrow definition of only agnatic kin seems to have been less and less useful as a status determinant, since fewer families had long and prestigious blood lines to brag about.[24] Instead, a broader familial unit of agnate and uterine kin, dependents, and even friends, all grouped under the heading "domus," became a more rhetorically useful social category.[25] Inheritance strategy similarly embraced a broader notion of family: although tradition and a certain body of law insisted that property was to be passed down through agnatic lines, in practice families were far more flexible in their testamentary strategies. Wealthy families targeted their wills at the desired descendents without much thought for tradition or long-term financial planning, while the law loosened to permit inheritance by groups outside the agnatic line, particularly between mothers and children.[26] Yet in other ways, the nuclear family probably continued to form the nexus of everyday life, and in some matters, such as in death and in marriage, it may have grown ever more central. Late antique gravestones in the West increasingly mention only parents and/or siblings as dedicatees, suggesting that the care of the dead became a tighter family affair.[27] In the East it has been claimed that close-kin

marriages and elaborate betrothal ceremonies were likewise the result of closer nuclear bonds.[28] However, these studies have come under recent fire not least because they assume a socially homogenous third through seventh centuries, and it may be that the "collapse inward toward the nuclear family," took place well after our period of interest.[29]

The ideology of the family was likewise in flux.[30] On the one hand, some Christian thinkers had long propounded a seemingly "anti-family" ideology, most starkly expressed in Luke 14:26: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."[31] The Pauline and post-Pauline epistles employed a more positive rhetoric, insisting on filial obedience, the value of the marriage bond, and care of one's relatives, while claiming the church as an alternative to blood-kinship: all Christians were *adelphoi*, sisters and brothers, and the church itself was a "household of the faith."[32] The rise of the ascetic movement, particularly in its cenobitic forms, actually offered a new kind of physical *domus* – the monastery – free of the blood family, while to some contemporaries, the loud praises of virginity seemed to threaten marriage and family life altogether.[33] Family members gradually ceased to appear on funerary epitaphs, while the great familial funerary monuments of the high empire gave way to more anonymous collective graveyards in churches.[34]

And yet, rumors of the family's death, even as an ideological category, have been greatly exaggerated. Ascetic proponents like Augustine and Ambrose offered alternative readings of New Testament "anti-family" dictates, insisting on the value of the marriage bond and seeking ways to integrate familial and ascetic lives.[35] Legal changes that threatened family bonds or reconfigured them in a Christian guise, like Constantine's repeal of Augustan laws punishing celibates, were seemingly not motivated by Christian thinking at all but rather by a long-standing moral status quo gradually given legal expression.[36] Even the commemoration of the dead continued to be a family affair, as families continued to be the impresarios of funeral feasts while great familial mausolea, now attached to churches, continued to convert those familial bonds into permanent memories.[37] While there is no doubt that the family as social group and ideological entity was shifting, families remained a potent social and rhetorical force throughout Christendom's first four centuries.

The relationship between aristocratic families and the new Christian public was thus a complex one, filled with opportunities for both tension and overlap. For instance, the power that aristocrats commanded over their dependents could be enormous, as being a patron also meant being a *dominus*, or lord.[38] At the same time, the new Christian hierarchy claimed spiritual lordship over these *domini* and their dependents in an at-times awkward inversion of traditional status roles.[39] Even more dramatically, the poor had emerged out of the corners of social oblivion to claim a place in a new spiritual economy; from previously invisible social refuse, they became a vessel into which the aristocracy might

pour their excess, sin-producing wealth, or an image of apostolic poverty to be emulated by a new ascetic elite.[40] Of course, aristocrats might become bishops, thereby neatly folding civic into spiritual authority and acting as über-euergete to the teaming masses.[41] Yet aristocrats seem to have taken this step only infrequently, and broadly speaking, beginning only in the later fifth century. With the exception of certain regions like southern Gaul, bishops tended to be recruited from more middling classes and local senatorial elites continued to outstrip them in power and wealth.[42]

Similarly, the cacophonous din of traditional aristocratic status proclamation now jostled with a new self-effacing Christian aesthetic. Great circus and gladiatorial games continued to be given, largess was publicly distributed and silk-clad *clarissimae* paraded the streets accompanied by their entourages.[43] Equally extravagant displays of status were also conveyed through Christian asceticism; sackcloth and a pale face took the place of silks and jewels for some aristocrats as "holy arrogance" became a new language of spiritual elitism.[44] Between the traditional and the radical lay the large and small gestures of Christian public giving, from the construction of public basilicas by pious elites to the penning of Christian poetry for consumption in elite salons.[45]

Private worship, private churches, and the piety of the individual stood in the tectonic boundary where these worlds met, between the new Christian public and traditional family life, and between old modes of status distinction and new kinds of collective euergetism. As an aspect of "private life" which influenced the nascent public church, private worship pulled together the needs of personal religiosity, the social structure of family, and the dictates of Christian liturgy, and gathered them in the space of the home or estate. That gathering, however, was not without risk. As we shall see, for the pagan aristocrat of the high empire the estate temple was simply the cultic manifestation of seigniorial power, and its worshipping community of both family and dependents echoed the social hierarchy of the *domus*. To construct a Christian estate church, on the other hand, and to select its clergy from among the estate's peasants, was not to bridge the two worlds of the public Church and the private Christian, but to probe the tension-filled space between these worlds. Which of the available social hierarchies would govern that church? How would ties of blood and dependency interact with ties of clerical duty? Into which mighty economic engine, the rural estate or the church coffer, would such a church feed the donations of the faithful? The history of private worship thus forms part of the late antique struggle to determine what it meant to be Christian and what it meant to be a member of a *familia*.

Private worship also calls into question many of the scholarly assumptions about these public and private histories. The briefest trawl through the evidence for private worship forces a radical reconsideration of scholarly categories for Christian identity – clerical, lay, and monastic – by focusing on a practice shared by all types of Christians. It likewise challenges the bishop's

pride of place as creator and leader of Christian communities, emphasizing instead the lay aristocrats who not only converted family, friends, and dependents, but constructed the edifice for an entire Christian life within homes, themselves entities of complex familial, economic, and religious composition. Most importantly, the history of private worship further challenges the presumed symbiotic relationship between aristocracy and clergy, exposing the chasms of social and economic difference that separated them. These chasms were deep enough not only to set layman against clergy, but also to set an individual against himself, as clergymen struggled to reconcile the dictates of their office with the simultaneous and age-old demands of friendship, kinship, and the other baggage of being a "private" person. Thus, this relatively narrow history of private worship might thus be used to probe the broader historical edifice of late Roman social history, exposing and challenging some of its basic tenets.

HISTORIES OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

Galvanized by Annales school historians such as Philippe Aries and George Duby, the historical study of "private life" has flourished, in perhaps no period more than late antiquity, where the discipline's muse, Peter Brown, has inspired a thriving "private life" industry embracing subjects as diverse as the family, sexuality, housing, dreams, and travel. In other periods, private devotion and personal piety are regularly classed among such "private life" social history.[46] However, there exists no comprehensive examination of private worship in late antiquity and only a handful of allied studies, most of either dubious methodological foundation or with a primary focus on later periods.

A series of early articles, spurred by the work of Ulrich Stutz, described the private churches of the early Middle Ages as products of a particularly Germanic religious mentalité.[47] These "nation-origin" theories were quickly dismissed and replaced by more sober studies, principally on the later manifestations of the problem in the Byzantine east and medieval west.[48] While excellent in their own right, these studies have as their aim the explication of the phenomenon in the high Middle Ages or the middle Byzantine period, times when private cult and private churches enjoyed better documentation than during late antiquity. Thus the late antique material is treated summarily, a phase of "becoming" on the way to the real object of inquiry. The last two decades have produced a series of more late antique-specific studies; these tend to be regionally based catalogues, typically focused on either the textual or archaeological evidence, and thus side-step the broader historical questions raised by the phenomenon.[49] In no case has the phenomenon of Christian private worship been laid against pagan precedents, or integrated into broader

8

socio-religious history. The present study thus represents the first history of the practice in its many facets.

Why private worship in late antiquity should have excited so little interest, given its centrality to developments like the evolution of monasticism and the creation of a Christian aristocracy, is in itself illuminating. The most obvious reason is that private devotion is hard to see. Our knowledge of ancient private life is paltry compared to that of political structures, rhetoric, and public cult. This disparity reflects the simple fact that the ancients poured their writing and building talents into the creation and maintenance of status, and status was principally defined through the public sphere. In late antiquity, the textual and archaeological corpus is dominated by the writings of churchmen anxiously trying to create a new public institution and by the splendid remains of new Christian basilicas. Excavating the private from amongst the overwhelming detritus of the public requires no small amount of effort and the results are often meager – a brief mention of a domestic ritual, the foundation walls of a private church.

And yet, the lacunose study of private worship cannot all be laid at the door of evidentiary troubles. Private worship challenges many basic assumptions about the history of Christianity and like an embarrassing relative, it has proven easier to ignore than to invite to the table. One such assumption is born of the strongly periodized perception of ancient Christianity.[50] The miraculous conversion of Constantine in 312 seems to provide a precipitous, episodic boundary separating the illegal "cult" of the first three centuries A.D., when it is frequently grouped with other so-called mystery cults, with the religion of empire of the fourth century.[51] This pre/post Nicene periodization rests heavily on antonymic notions of private versus public. Lacking legal status and set in private homes, pre-Nicene Christian practice is persistently located in an ill-defined "private," along with the so-called pagan mystery religions. The "triumph" of the Church, ushered in by Constantine's conversion, is marked by a departure from the private house, a victorious procession to newly minted basilicas, and the rightful assumption of Christian worship and Christian ritual in the public sphere.[52] In large part, this public/private divide is rooted in a Protestant teleology that read the history of Christianity as the tragic, head-long rush away from an *ur*-Christian "private." While its assumptions have been largely demolished over the last thirty years, a public/private binary still runs through most modern histories.[53] This tacit approval of a public/private divorce, brokered by Constantine and witnessed by the replacement of the private house church with the public basilica, has not only diminished the profile of private worship after the Peace of the Church, but forced most considerations of these practices into the teleologically marginalized position of "vestiges," or "residues" of a fast-disappearing pre-Nicene past.[54] Even the study of late paganism has been tarred by the same brush; as Christianity "triumphed" in the public sphere, paganism is said to have retreated to the private

9

where its manifestations, like those of pre-Nicene Christianity before it, are understood as a last-ditch "resistance."[55] Within this historiographic context, post–Nicene private worship of any flavor is hard to examine on its own terms and within its appropriate historical framework.

Just as problematic is the historiographic paradigm that has done the most to foster the study of private worship – the concept of "Christianization."[56] "Christianization," broadly defined as the conversion of various groups, the development of new Christian institutions, or the creation of new Christian material culture, continues to form one of scholarship's most important lenses on late antique history.[57] Christianization is typically, although almost always tacitly, understood as the process by which something – be it people, actions, or things – "became" Christian. Christianization narratives generally tend to formulate these social changes as a swap sale; they describe how the senator exchanged his consular toga for bishop's miter; how the civic bureaucracy was charged with building churches and hostels instead of amphitheaters and baths; and in this particular case, how Roman homes and families were enfolded into the "family of Christ." This unalloyed confidence that one practice, thing, or social role was exchanged for another assumes a tacit teleology. The Christian end of the equation is already known and tends to be the object of inquiry, that is, the Christian basilica, the episcopate, or the Christian family. The job of the historian is to discover what practice or thing preceded it, that is, the dining room, the civic aristocracy, or the pagan domestic shrine, and to elaborate the functional similarities that bound antecedent and successor. At their worst, then, Christianization histories are framed less around a historiographic model than a pre-packaged plot-line, grinding inexorably towards the same, inevitable finale, namely an *a priori* conception of Christian society, or in this particular case, the Christian house and family.

Christianization models also tend to assume that consensus-building is the principal, if not only means by which social change happens. In other words, the swaps from aristocrat to bishop, from *familia nobilis* to *familia Christi* are assumed to have been successful; by filling the same functional/societal need, they usher in gradual social change, but through processes of integration and consensus that render change relatively seamless and untroubled. These swaps also succeed because "religion" and "society" are assumed to be umbilically tied, the two changing in lock-step.[58] Thus, religious change, that is, a person or family's conversion to Christianity, is presumably accompanied by concomitant social change, that is, an alteration in the social structure of the family or estate to incorporate episcopal authority.

The problem in these histories lies not so much in the stories they tell as in what falls outside their tacitly unidirectional trajectories, namely non-conformity with the developing consensual Christian community, or community non-success.[59] Typically, "dissenting" elements in these stories were placed