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0521595576 - Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World

Peter Brown

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The Christianisation of the Roman world lies at the root of modern Europe, yet at the time it was a tentative and piecemeal process. Peter Brown's study examines the factors which proved decisive and the compromises which made the emergence of the Christian 'thought world' possible. He shows how contemporary narratives wavered between declarations of definitive victory and a sombre sense of the strength of the pre-Christian past, reflecting the hopes and fears of different generations faced with different social and political situations. He examines the social factors which muted the sharp intolerance which pervades the contemporary literary evidence, and he shows how Christian holy men were less representatives of a triumphant and intransigent faith than negotiators, at ground level, of a working compromise between the new faith and traditional ways of dealing with the supernatural world. His illuminating analysis of religious change as the art of the possible has a wide relevance for other periods and regions.

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*Aspects of the Christianisation
of the Roman world*



PETER BROWN
Princeton University



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Preface

These three chapters are a version of lectures delivered at Cambridge on 22, 23 and 24 November 1993. The occasion was organised at Clare Hall by Dr Janet Huskinson with unfailing thoughtfulness. It was rendered gracious by the hospitality and by the participation throughout of the President, Sir Anthony Low. The panel of discussants chaired by Keith Hopkins – Peter Garnsey, Robin Lane Fox, Christopher Kelly and Rosamond McKitterick – have not only left me with food for thought for many years to come: they provided us all with a model, for our times, of commentary and disagreement that were as lively as they were courteous. The presence in the audience of so many friends and colleagues – Henry Chadwick, Ian Wood, Robert Markus, William Frend, Andrew Palmer, to mention only a few – guaranteed that the discussion ranged vigorously throughout the entire late Roman and early medieval period. Altogether, I present these chapters with a touch of sadness: they are, simply, the lees of the wine – what survives in print of an unusually vivid and humane occasion.

A shorter version of the first chapter had been delivered, in the previous year, as a Raleigh lecture of the British Academy (Peter Brown, 'The Problem of Christianisation', *Proceedings of the*

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British Academy: 1992 Lectures and Memoirs 82 (1993), pp. 89–106). The themes of that chapter, and of the two subsequent chapters, emerged in large part as a result of my work for sections of volumes XIII and XIV of the *Cambridge Ancient History*. I owe much to my *ergodiôktés* in this venture, Averil Cameron, who, along with her editorial colleagues, has done nothing less than place, at long last, three whole centuries of the later Roman period in their rightful place, at the culmination of the history of the ancient world. I was saddened that illness prevented her from acting as a discussant of work in which she has been a continuous, inspiring presence.

I trust that these chapters speak for themselves without extensive introduction. The reader, however, should be careful to bear in mind that this book is, indeed, a study of *aspects*, only, of the Christianisation of the Roman world. The chapters are narrow flakes, struck from the immense block of an event that lies at the root of much of the religion and culture of modern Europe. I have concentrated on ‘aspects’, in this manner, not simply out of academic caution. It is because I have long suspected that accounts of the Christianisation of the Roman world are at their most misleading when they speak of that process as if it were a single block, capable of a single comprehensive description, that, in turn, implies the possibility of a single, all-embracing explanation.

A modern historian of the rise of Christianity in the Roman world does not have to repeat the facilitating simplifications of those who were contemporary to that process. Faced by the rapid changes that followed the conversion of Constantine, in 312, Christians and pagans alike needed to generate explanatory narratives that made sense of success, on the one side, and eventual failure, on the other. My first chapter is devoted to a dominant narrative of Christianisation, that circulated widely in Christian circles in the fourth and fifth centuries. It examines the

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social circumstances and the slow changes of mentality by which this dominant narrative came to be flanked, in the Latin world, by a considerably less euphoric attitude – by a view of Christianisation that was prepared to linger less on the supernatural triumph of Christ and more on the weight of the pagan past within the Christian present.

In chapter two, I touch on a narrative generated by Christians and pagans alike, that has achieved unquestionable status as if it were a commonsensical statement of the obvious. It is universally assumed, first, that the laws of Christian emperors played a decisive role in ensuring the victory of the Church over all its rivals, and, second, that this was only to be expected: that the late Roman period, as a whole, was overshadowed by the rise of religious intolerance, and that the end of the fourth century, in particular, was characterised by widespread and decisive outbreaks of violence, on the part of Christians, against Jews and pagans. In this chapter, I have no wish to deny this clearly documented streak in late Roman history. I do, however, wish to set the vivid certainties of many Christian texts against a wider background. For these certainties, loudly though they came to echo in later centuries of the Christian middle ages, were dwarfed and muffled, at the time, by the long habits of an upper-class society, whose members maintained a sure sense of politics as the art of the possible, a reluctance to see their social world in terms of mutually exclusive, confessional categories, and that retained a certain merciful *pudeur* when it came to outright acts of religious victimisation and religious violence.

No-one is more aware than I am myself that this chapter is only a beginning. It points the way to a subject which was not exhausted by the discussion subsequent to the lectures. For once we weaken the persuasive power of one, obvious narrative of Christianisation in the Roman empire – the unholy alliance

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between authoritarian legislation and a triumphant groundswell of Christian intolerance – we have only displaced the problem, not resolved it. Instead, a gentle violence should be seen to have been brought to bear in more subtle, less melodramatic ways, more widely diffused throughout society. We still have to ask what were the vectors of the change, that caused a whole society from Europe to the Middle East to identify the stability of its social order with the spread of a novel and exclusive religion. Whatever the answer to that question may prove to be, I suspect that it will come only if we are prepared to look beyond the stridently self-confident Roman empire of the fourth and early fifth centuries, the empire that produced the *Theodosian Code*. We must venture deep into the less certain centuries of the early middle ages. The differing vicissitudes of state-power, and its relationship to religious authority, along a whole spectrum of societies, from the emergent states of the West, through Byzantium, to the Christian kingdoms of Armenia, Georgia and Ethiopia, must be studied, in order to provide an explanation of the eventual identification of Christianity with authority, that is the hallmark of the medieval world.

Hence, my third chapter attempts to look beyond the vivid image of a well-known figure of Christian late antiquity – the Christian holy man. Having lingered, for many decades now, with delight and constant profit, on the *Lives* of the great saints of Byzantium and the Latin West, I decided that the time had come for me to learn how to use these texts to recover the story that they were written, in large part, to eclipse. I attempt, in this chapter, to glimpse, out of the corner of the eye, as it were, of these *Lives*, the vast, muted landscape of pre-Christian belief and practice against which the activities of holy men took place. I wish to use the bright technicolour of their narratives to find my way to a grey time between the gods, when pagan practice had been prohibited

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and when Christianity itself, though officially triumphant, was by no means, as yet, the religion of the 'cognitive majority' among the populations of Europe and the Middle East.

If the reader of these three chapters comes away with a greater sense of how much more still needs to be done on the problem of Christianisation in the entire first millennium AD, then these lectures will have been of some use. May they help to encourage further debates as vigorous, and, I trust, as generous, as those which took place, to my delight, in Cambridge in November 1993.