

**THE POWER, THE BODY, THE HOLY:
A JOURNEY THROUGH LATE ANTIQUITY
WITH PETER BROWN**

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In the middle of an exciting history course, it takes a high degree of moral courage to resist one's own conscience; to take time off; to let the imagination run; to give serious attention to reading books that widen our sympathies, that train us to imagine with greater precision what it is like to be human in situations very different from our own.

It is essential to take that risk. For a history course to be content to turn out well-trained minds when it could also encourage widened hearts and deeper sympathies would be a mutilation of the intellectual inheritance of our own discipline. It would lead to the inhibition, in our own culture, of an element of imaginative curiosity about others whose removal may be more deleterious than we would like to think to the subtle and ever-precarious ecology on which a liberal western tradition of respect for others is based.

—Peter Brown, "Learning and Imagination,"
Inaugural Lecture of 1977, Royal Holloway College¹

Rarely has a historian of late antiquity attracted so much attention through his writings and lecture appearances as has Peter Brown. In the past three decades, few other scholars can claim to have challenged mainstream assumptions so consistently while replacing them with unique, plausible, and controversial alternatives. That he continues to do so today is a testament to both Peter Brown's renown and scholarship. Brown's remarks in his inaugural lecture at Royal Holloway College in 1977 express what could be considered his credo: a fervent belief in letting the imagination roam free to take its owner into new and unexpected realms of thought. In letting himself do so for the greater part of his professional career, Brown has managed not only to show himself how it must have been to live in situations very different from his own; he also has consistently managed to share those experiences with his students and audiences, with the care and determination of a dedicated teacher and informative tour guide. Whether those taking the tour have believed all they have seen and heard, however, is another matter.

¹ Peter Brown, "Learning and Imagination," in *Society and the Holy* (Berkeley, 1982), 4.

In many respects an enigmatic historian, Peter Brown and his work defy traditional classification. Indeed, few have endeavored to place him in a particular “school” of thought or interpretation, and those who have tried, have met with limited success. One of them, however, has made the poignant observation that what Richard Southern did for the High Middle Ages, Peter Brown has done for late antiquity.² By emphasizing the role of the individual and interpersonal relations as a basis for understanding late-antique society, particularly in the case of the relationship of between the “holy” and their peers, Brown has shed new light on the world of A.D. 200–700, and in doing so has influenced an entire generation of historians. Now, with the appearance of *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Peter Brown adds this textbook to an already-impressive list of publications and continues the tradition of expanding his horizons.³ But what brings a historian of late antiquity to end his book in Iceland in the year 1000? What follows here, then, is less a review of this most recent and very different endeavor, than it is a look at the historiographical journey that has led him to this point, in the hope that such a study may help account for the great influence Brown’s work has wielded upon our current understanding of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Peter Robert Lamont Brown received his grammar school education at the Aravon School in Ireland, after which he attended the Shrewsbury School in England. He spent the next several years at Oxford, where he took his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1956. Brown remained in England as a University Reader, Lecturer, and Professor of Modern History until his 1977 move to the University of California at Berkeley, where he taught until relocating to Princeton University in 1983. He remains there presently as a full professor. He has published widely in the fields of late Roman Imperial and late antique history; his most renowned works include *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967); *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (1971); *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971); *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978); *The Cult of the Saints* (1982); *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (1982); *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988); *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (1992); *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation*

² Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991), 361. See also Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT, 1952).

³ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (Oxford, 1996). In a recent electronic review, James J. O’Donnell refers the reader in turn to a very enticing symposium in *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997): 1–90, largely dedicated to the impact of Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (New York, 1971), which is in a sense the precursor to the 1996 book. In addition to essays by Averil Cameron, Glen Bowersock, Albrecht Dihle, Elizabeth Clark, Aline Rousselle, and others, the forum features Brown’s responses, as well as his own comments on *The Rise of Western Christendom*.

of the Roman World (1995); as well as myriad journal articles and book chapters.

While several scholars have influenced Brown throughout his career, one could not discuss the work of any late-antique historian without referring to A.H.M. Jones, whose pioneering book, *The Later Roman Empire*, did much to establish the field of late antiquity in its own right, thereby providing his successors with a clearly-defined era in which to carry out their research.⁴ More specifically, Brown owes perhaps his greatest debt to mentor and friend Arnaldo Dante Momigliano, with whom he studied at Oxford, and whose influence Brown has acknowledged in several dedications. A comment he made in his teacher's obituary speaks for itself in this regard:

He lingered with evident excitement on those works which erased the borderline between prehistory and history, breaking down the historiographical barriers which usually separated the study of ancient civilizations from the shadowy barbarian world on whose fringe they lay.⁵

Such an earnestness to break down existing historiographical and methodological walls has proven to be the great legacy Momigliano bequeathed to his pupil.

A more detailed examination of Brown's work reveals an additional legacy. Like his teacher, Brown has exhibited an affinity for the journal article or essay; in relative terms, new book-length studies appear only rarely among his works. The obvious exception is, of course, his biography of Augustine, acknowledged almost universally as a classic, and considered by some as the central point of reference for Brown's work.⁶ Most of his books, however, are either compilations of previously published articles and essays or revisions of lectures. This pattern of publishing would make the task of tracing the progression of Brown's thought relatively simple, were it not for the fact that his subject matter varies so greatly; the realms of ideas weave in and out of one another in such a diffuse way as to make systematic classification nearly impossible. Yet in spite of the complexity of his thought and his varied career as a wandering scholar (both geographically and methodologically), Brown has dealt consistently with much the same material throughout his career. A medievalist by training, he has chosen to study the Mediterranean world

⁴ Ably pointed out by Simon Esmonde Cleary, review of *The Body and Society*, by Peter Brown, in *History Today* 39 (Nov., 1989): 58.

⁵ Brown, "Arnaldo Dante Momigliano," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 74 (1988): 421.

⁶ See Alexander Murray, "Peter Brown in the Shadow of Constantine," *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983): 191–203. Although Murray built his essay around the "Constantinian questions," those questions do, in one way or another, relate to Augustine as well.

of late antiquity, focusing his efforts upon the recurring themes of the “holy,” the “body,” and “power.” While at first glance these topics can appear unrelated, Brown has enjoyed substantial success in studying them in their own rights as well as in fusing them into coherent, if controversial, images of the late Roman and early medieval eras. Using these terms as a rudimentary guide to his conceptual framework, one can chart at least a wandering course through the evolution of Peter Brown’s thought during the past three decades.

Synthesis in the Making

Brown applies the term “holy” to loci exhibiting recognizable spirituality or righteousness. Four works allow us to trace the distinct evolution of this strain of thought, particularly as such a locus has most often been identified with the “holy man.” The “holy” made its first appearance in Brown’s 1968 article, “Christianity and Local Culture in Late Roman Africa,” in which, drawing from Latin oratory, he called attention for the first time to the role of a “mediator”—the proto-holy man—in making the culture of the elite available to a wider audience.⁷ Though slightly different than the concept he would eventually develop, it is significant that the idea made its first appearance so early in Brown’s career. The full expression of the role of the “holy” came three years later with “The Rise of the Holy Man,” an essay later included in *Society and the Holy*.⁸ Already expounding one of his major themes, that “much of the contrasting developments of western Europe and Byzantium in the Middle Ages can be summed up as a prolonged debate on the precise locus of spiritual power,” Brown outlined the role of the holy man, particularly in the East, as an arbiter between villagers and urban folk.⁹ In contrast to this early concept of the holy man, one can recognize a marked transformation in Brown’s thought by the time *Authority and the Sacred* appeared in 1995. Brown obviously had decided to give his holy man more latitude in action. Rather than holding power based purely on his role as the total stranger, and thus as the “perfect judge,” the holy man was now endowed with greater social status and power, as a patron of the community—a “facilitator for the creation of new social orders.”¹⁰ Though Brown is

⁷ Brown, “Christianity and Local Culture in Late Roman Africa,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 85–95.

⁸ Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *Society and the Holy*, 103–152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰ Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge and New York, 1995), 60. This book, like so many of Brown’s others, finds its genesis in an essay; see Brown, “The Problem of Christianisation,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1993): 89–106.

conspicuously silent in *Authority and the Sacred* regarding the evolution of his holy man, the change first manifested itself in his 1983 article “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity.”¹¹ Influenced by contemporary anthropologists, Brown had endeavored to remove the holy man from what he considered the “too clinical” role of pure arbiter, giving him instead the title of “accessible exemplar.”¹²

A similar evolutionary process has affected Brown’s concept of the “body.” Fundamental to his study of the human body has been his belief that late-antique people thought of their bodies in relation to society as a whole. Again, beginning in the 1960s, it is evident that Brown was thinking about the meaning of the body even before his first major success with *Augustine*; indeed, it would seem that his ruminations on the body’s significance eventually led him to write that acclaimed biography. In a short essay in 1965 on Augustine’s political thought, Brown contended that for Augustine, the notion of “transcendence”—the permanent banishment of all sexual desire from the human body—was an utter impossibility.¹³ Relying primarily on Augustine’s idea of *concupiscentia carnis* (*City of God*, Book 19), Brown showed that Augustine—and therefore the entire Latin West after him—adopted a more pragmatic approach in dealing with the human sex drive than had his Eastern counterparts.¹⁴ The issue of the individual’s relationship with his or her sexual self was not yet, however, a settled one for Brown; it resurfaced at the 1983 colloquy of the University of California’s Center for Hermeneutical Studies. There, Brown, replying to a colleague in the discussion following his presentation on Augustine, took the ideas on the table a step further than he had before: “What Augustine is saying is that you should integrate [sexuality] into the hierarchy and, much more insistently, that this hierarchy should extend into the most intimate reaches of the human body.”¹⁵ This was an important step in the direction that would eventually lead him to publish *The Body and Society*; not merely asserting Augustine’s despair at man’s inability to transcend sexual desire,

¹¹ Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 1, no. 2 (Spring, 1983): 1–25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Brown, “Saint Augustine,” in *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Beryl Smalley (Oxford, 1965), 12.

¹⁴ Brown also calls attention to Augustine’s sadness upon his realization of humanity’s permanent fall from grace. It is a typically sympathetic portrayal of his hero. See Brown, “The Lost Future,” chap. in *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967): 146–157.

¹⁵ Brown, responding to Mary Douglas in “Augustine and Sexuality,” in *Protocol of the Forty-Sixth Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture. Held 22 May 1983*, ed. Mary Ann Donovan (Berkeley, 1983), 30.

Brown now argued that, for Augustine, the body had become inextricably bound to the mind and soul via sexuality.¹⁶

Brown's concept of "power," like the other two central tenets of his thought on late-antique people and society, also has evolved over a period of twenty years. He first expressed his ideas on the exercise of political power in late antiquity in the collection of essays that appeared as *The Making of Late Antiquity* in 1978, exploring here more freely than before the institution of patronage as a basis for establishing a position of authority in the late Roman Empire, particularly if the patron were endowed with a spiritual nature—a key concept that has recurrently surfaced in Brown's work:

In a society that knew all about the main social effects of friendship and patronage, the emergence of men and women who claimed intimate relations with invisible patrons meant far more than the rise of a tender religiosity of personal experience, and more than the groping of lonely men for invisible companionship. It meant that yet another form of "power" was available for the inhabitants of a Mediterranean city.¹⁷

That year's particularly fruitful meeting of the University of California's Center for Hermeneutical Studies planted the seeds of several of Brown's future works. Most relevant to the issue of power was, not surprisingly, *Power and Persuasion*. The main ideas expressed in this 1992 book had first appeared in the discourse at Berkeley in the winter of 1978, and included the role of the philosopher as negotiator among late-antique power elites; the role of a shared classical culture (*paideia*¹⁸) in uniting a "truly Empire-wide aristocracy" in an era of increasing political instability; and the potential independence (*devotio*) of local elites from distant imperial authorities.¹⁹ Important, too, was Massey Shepherd, Jr.'s suggestion of studying

the mean between the pagan philosopher and Christian monk in relation to society. I refer to the Christian bishop, and especially to those among the bishops who shared the philosophical, rhetorical, and literary culture of the classical tradition and used it, albeit in subjection to the higher

¹⁶ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988).

¹⁷ Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1978), 64.

¹⁸ Brown borrowed this concept from Henri-Irénée Marrou's *A History of Education in the Ancient World*, trans. G. Lamb (New York, 1956), 96. Note its presence in "The Saint as Exemplar"; in Brown, et al., "The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity," in *Protocol of the Thirty-Fourth Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture. Held 3 December 1978* (Berkeley, 1980); and in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992).

¹⁹ Brown, et al., discussion of "The Philosopher and Society," 5.

“wisdom” of the Scriptures, and who in either their own person or in their advocacy embraced the ascetic ideal.²⁰

Shepherd’s proposal to include the role of the urban bishop in future considerations did not fall on deaf ears. Although it took him over a decade to complete, Peter Brown produced in *Power and Persuasion* an account of power relations among local aristocratic elites, philosophers, and the emperor, as well as urban bishops. One might counter here that Brown had previously dealt with bishops in *The Cult of the Saints*, but in contrast to the elaborate system of influence and coercion he depicted in *Power and Persuasion*, Brown had limited his coverage of political entanglements in *The Cult of the Saints* to the episcopal struggles with regional nobles over control of local shrines.²¹

The Body and Society arguably contains the most comprehensive expression of Peter Brown’s thought.²² Although it is technically not a compilation of articles, one could in many ways characterize it as such, since several of his essays from the 1980’s appear in it almost verbatim.²³ Weaving together significant aspects of all three of Brown’s major themes, *The Body and Society* includes a passage on a power-hungry Ambrose determined to validate virginity so as to ensure a stable source of income for the Church from eligible young women; a portrayal of John Chrysostom’s struggle with the people of Antioch over the object of their bodily loyalties, whether to the state or to God; and, perhaps most substantially, a general recognition of the increased devotion to shrines in the fifth and sixth centuries. Referring to key points of *The Cult of the Saints* within *The Body and Society*, Brown indeed seems to have tried to create an ideological synthesis of his own:

²⁰ Ibid., 29. Brown also added the figure of the Christian ascetic to the discussion at Berkeley, and, with his classic flair for imagery, contrasted philosopher with ascetic in terms of the “conscientious ship’s mechanic” versus the “breakdown mechanic” of late-antique society.

²¹ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1982).

²² Joyce Salisbury, review of *The Body and Society*, by Peter Brown, in *The Journal of Social History* 23 (Summer, 1990): 817. Although Salisbury calls it “comprehensive,” she does not explain her use of that term. Indeed, in reviews of Brown’s other works, both Norman Cantor and John McCulloh very appropriately use the term “syncretic” to describe his method.

²³ These include, although not exclusively, “Sexuality and Society in the Fifth Century A.D.: Augustine and Julian of Exlanum,” in *Tria Corda: Scritti in onore de Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. E. Gabba (Como, 1983): 50–70; and “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and L. Leclercq (New York, 1985): 427–443. Also worth noting is that an excerpt from *Body and Society* subsequently appeared as “Bodies and Minds: Sexuality and Renunciation in Early Christianity,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990): 479–494.

For the martyrs' shrines contained the bones of men and women on whom the Holy Spirit had come to rest. The presence of the Spirit removed from the remains of these dead human beings the grim associations of normal death. The bodies of the Virgin and of virgin men and women carried a similar [holy] charge.²⁴

Brown's ability to create such a synthesis out of seemingly discordant themes—a trait so observable in *Body and Society*—surely accounts for much of his reputation as a creative scholar.

New Paths to Late Antiquity

Several of Brown's contemporaries have characterized him as a trailblazer. One essayist even credited him with having "destroyed the frontier, passing this way and that until the marks have gone. By doing so he has said new things himself, and opened paths and vistas for everyone else."²⁵ The best way to decipher Brown's new "trail map" is to examine his methodology. His unabashed use of other disciplines, particularly anthropology, to support several of his theories has, more than anything else, distinguished Brown from many of his fellow historians. Brown has repeatedly justified and defended his ecumenism. Referring to the anthropological works that benefited him in his re-evaluation of the role of the holy man, Brown argues:

I do not think that to apply their methods does violence to the nature of our pursuit. Rather, like a traveler returning home after a spree of residence abroad, I have found that their work has helped me to see, with the clarity that can come from an instant of unfamiliarity, some of the central problems of a very familiar topic—the Christianization of the Mediterranean world.²⁶

The clarity in the work of the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has had a particularly strong influence on Brown's writings. Geertz's idea of "symbolic forms," which maintains that at the center of any political body a governing elite reiterates its authority via outward symbols, has had a special appeal for Brown.²⁷ Geertz's influence is particularly evident in Brown's recent contention that fourth-century Roman elites still used pagan symbols in asserting their dominance—a fact

²⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, 445.

²⁵ Murray, 191.

²⁶ Brown, "Saint as Exemplar," 8. Brown also has felt free to use psychoanalysis and sociology; see in particular Brown, "Religion and Society," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1972), 18.

²⁷ Brown, *Authority and Sacred*, 11.

he sees further borne out in the nobles' continued toleration of paganism well into the fifth century.²⁸

Other social sciences have also influenced Brown's re-evaluation of the holy man's role in society. He sought the advice of friends in three separate disciplines—history, anthropology, and psychoanalysis—and they in turn encouraged him to refine his earlier depiction. Reactions to this development in Brown's methodology, one common in recent cultural history, have on the whole been quite positive. One reviewer, for instance, praised *The Making of Late Antiquity* for its pioneering use of anthropology, calling it “the latest and probably the most coherent product of his anti-methodological method,” and encouraged others to follow suit.²⁹ Other fellow late-antique historians have also added their support, including Raymond Van Dam, who agreed, “The study of miracle stories in particular, and of late antiquity in general, will only benefit from marriages with other disciplines and other methodologies.”³⁰

In addition to his open-minded use of other disciplines and methodologies, Peter Brown has developed a penchant for debunking what he considers widely-accepted “historical myths.” He has claimed, for example, that the most notable of these, the “two-tiered” model of religious history in late antiquity, has afflicted the evaluation of religious events of the late Empire and early Middle Ages since the appearance of David Hume's *Natural History of Religion*—an influence he has characterized as “dominant” within the works of Edward Gibbon, A.H.M. Jones, and Michael Rostovtzeff.³¹ At the heart of the “two-tiered” issue is the tendency of religious historians to assume, for example, that the rise of the cult of saints was in fact the “seeping in” of vulgar, pagan religious

²⁸ Ibid., quoting Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 124.

²⁹ Mary Douglas, review of *The Making of Late Antiquity*, by Peter Brown, in *Religious Studies Review* 6 (Apr., 1980): 96. Her positive review is hardly surprising, however, in that, as Brown later revealed, Douglas had played a determining role in convincing him to incorporate anthropology into his subsequent re-evaluation of the holy man. Brown had actually experimented with an anthropological approach several years earlier in “Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,” in *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (London, 1970): 17–45. He tried to portray the creation of the concept of “evil sorcery” in the Christian West of the fourth and fifth centuries as a strategic attempt by Christian leaders to give lay Christians a more stimulating—and frightening—explanation of superhuman events to keep them in the Church. Brown later chastised himself for what he saw as a “botched” first attempt at an anthropological study of human belief systems. See Brown, “Saint as Exemplar.”

³⁰ Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1983), 7.

³¹ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 13, 28. One can see what Brown is getting at by examining an introductory passage in Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1957), xvi: “As time passed, this high civilization was gradually absorbed by the growing middle class and adapted to their standards and requirements. In becoming so widely diffused, the delicate creation of the first century was bound to become more and more simplified, more and more elementary, more and more materialistic.”

beliefs into Christian society. Though the issue came to the forefront of his attention in *The Cult of the Saints*, there are several indications that Brown was already planning a strategy, long before 1982, to combat what he saw as an anachronistic historiographical approach. Already in 1971, in his first writings on the holy man, Brown had confronted popularly held beliefs that the holy man was only a symbol of a “lower” type of religion and therefore insignificant. Brown challenged that assumption, albeit not yet using the term “two-tiered,” maintaining that the holy man was in fact “one of those surprising devices by which men in a vigorous and sophisticated society...set about the delicate business of living.”³² Again, before he identified the issue as his chief interest in *The Cult of the Saints*, Brown drew attention, in *The Making of Late Antiquity*, to what he saw as an anachronistic, Romantic treatment of late antique religion that inappropriately accentuated subjective religious experiences, assigning them labels that “fit ill on the massive realism of the ancient, Mediterranean view of religion.”³³ And, more recently, he has continued his crusade for proper contextualization by arguing in *The Body and Society* that, far from being orgy-connoisseurs, Roman elites were actually quite reserved in their sexual appetites.³⁴

Forums of Debate

With a few notable exceptions, Brown’s works all have enjoyed overwhelmingly positive reviews, particularly for his novel perspectives and stylistic talent.³⁵ On the first count, praise has come principally from those who have welcomed the downfall of the “hopelessly simplistic two-tier model,” particularly in regard to Brown’s re-evaluation of the rise of

³² Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 82.

³³ Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 9.

³⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, 31. In making this judgment, Brown has drawn on, as he often does, the work of Paul Veyne; see especially Veyne, “The Roman Empire,” in *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. 1 of *A History of Private Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1987):202–205, for his refutation of the Romans’ supposed “Eden of the unrepressed.”

³⁵ While James Alexander’s characterization of Brown’s 1996 *Rise of Western Christendom* as “a brilliant work of synthesis, well worth attention,” continues this tradition, Warren Treadgold’s rather more harsh comments comprise a challenge to it, as he argues that it is exactly those “years of scarcely any criticism [that] have taken a toll on the author of the rigorous and well-documented *Augustine of Hippo* (1967).” One has to wonder, however, whether Treadgold was working with a defective copy of the book, since much of his dissatisfaction stems from the alleged absence of any notes citing Brown’s late antique sources—an unfounded critique, at least for the paperback edition. See James Alexander, review of *The Rise of Western Christendom* by Peter Brown, in *Theology* 100 (May/June, 1997): 222; and Warren Treadgold, review of *The Rise of Western Christendom* by Peter Brown, in *American Historical Review* 102 (Dec., 1997):1463.

the cult of the saints³⁶ as well as his views on late Roman sexuality.³⁷ Regarding Brown's literary talents, one British reviewer described a reading of Brown's *Cult of the Saints* with vivid enthusiasm:

It is like having your hair washed by one of those august barbers who used to work at Harrod's; it was fun, but you had to keep a straight face under the foam.... While this reviewer cannot take his wondrous prose quite seriously, he certainly cannot help enjoying it.³⁸

The statement is really quite telling. While scarcely a review of Brown's work goes by without the almost perfunctory praise for his superior style, many of those same reviews express a subtler concern, as seen above, over the fundamental validity of Brown's assumptions. Indeed, in a recent review of *Power and Persuasion*, the difference between Brown's style and content came back to haunt him. While acknowledging Brown's ability to write well as "a touchstone for ancient historians eager to point out an exception to the deplorable norm," J.E. Lendon also warily drew attention to potential problems inherent in Brown's approach:

The thick, flowerful atmosphere Brown evokes, so characteristic of and delightful in his writing, can here and there conceal the sharp outlines of his logic. After a long and pleasant snuffle...the reader occasionally wonders if the truffle is slightly too well hidden.³⁹

He was not alone in his observation; several other reviewers over the years have also alluded to this potential pitfall. Most interesting is one author's comment in a critical essay on *Religion and Society*, early in Brown's career, that "Mr. Brown can tell us what it felt to have ideas. But on the ideas themselves, as a primary factor in the determination of men's consciousness, he is silent."⁴⁰

³⁶ Of all Brown's books and articles, *The Cult of the Saints* has received by far the greatest amount of critical attention, perhaps as a result of its bold, outright challenge to the "two-tier" model.

³⁷ Henry Chadwick, review of *The Body and Society*, by Peter Brown, in *The Times Literary Supplement* 4473 (Dec. 23-29, 1988): 1411. Rather unexpected was another reviewer's culling of a moral lesson from *The Cult of the Saints* for modern men and women: "Peter Brown spells out a message for our generation who have yet to find a world where justice, mercy and brotherhood of all mankind are norms not exceptions. We should look with greater sympathy and hence with greater care at those late-antique Christians who were so deeply committed to providing the world with places where men could stand in the searching and merciful presence of a fellow human being." Joan Hazelden Walker, review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Religious Studies* 20 (June, 1984): 325.

³⁸ Eric Christiansen, "Exorcist Three," review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Spectator* 246 (May 16, 1981): 20.

³⁹ J. E. Lendon, review of *Power and Persuasion*, by Peter Brown, in *Speculum* 69 (1994): 1131.

⁴⁰ "Late Roman Realities," review of *Religion and Society*, by Peter Brown, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (May 26, 1972): 608. Another reviewer expressed a similar sentiment nearly

Apart from the purely literary aspect of Brown's work, criticism has focused on several of Brown's major arguments. One of the principles with which fellow scholars have found fault is Brown's assertion in *The Cult of the Saints* that veneration of the "holy" in the West was strictly limited to dead martyrs. Countering that claim, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill pointed out the noticeable absence from Brown's account of Pope Gregory the Great, who, he maintains, gave "equal attention to miracles worked by living men. The tradition of the holy man clearly flourished in the atmosphere of sixth-century Gaul." Similarly, J.N. Hillgarth has argued that "from the fifth century onward the cult of the ascetic confessor, monk, or bishop begins to rival the popularity of that of the martyr," and that "without the presence of the living saint, the greater part of western Europe would have remained permanently alien to the new religion."⁴¹

Despite these spates of criticism, Brown's work has remained extremely popular. One can attribute some of his continued success to his scrutinizing and utilizing of the works of fellow well-known historians of late antiquity that have stimulated his pursuit of new ideas. While the works of Derwas Chitty long have fulfilled Brown's need for background information on his recurring themes of asceticism and holy men,⁴² the give-and-take relationships Brown has developed with Robert Markus and Ramsay MacMullen appear to have served as even greater sources of inspiration throughout his career. For instance, Markus appears to have had a crucial influence upon the development of *The Cult of the Saints*. In noting Markus's earlier observation that "the parting of the ways between East and West springs from the way in which Christianity adapted itself to its Roman environment," Brown, in a 1976 article, uses Markus's thoughts to lay the foundation of his own theory, soon expressed in *The Cult of the*

twenty years later for *The Cult of the Saints*; see Jonathan Sumption, "Veneration made Vulgar," review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (May 1, 1981): 479.

⁴¹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983), 40; see also J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1986), xiv, 20. Hillgarth goes so far as to assert, "In this the Christian West does not appear to me to differ significantly from Syria or Asia Minor." For yet another call to consider Gregory the Great, see John M. McCulloh, review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Speculum* 58 (1983): 153. Kathleen Mitchell seems to bridge the gap between Brown and these critics by recognizing the dual role of a living bishop. See Mitchell, "Saints and Public Christianity in the 'Historiae' of Gregory of Tours," in *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Richard E. Sullivan*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and John J. Contreni (Kalamazoo, MI, 1987), 81.

⁴² Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, NY, 1966), is cited by Brown as a "humane and reliable" source. He also refers to A. Vööbus's *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* as "a spectacular portrait of Syrian eccentricity." See Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 211.

Saints, of Western Christianity's preference for worshipping martyrs.⁴³ Although Brown and Markus often have disagreed about various aspects of Augustine's life and theology, they also have converged on several significant issues. Worth noting is Brown's praise of Markus's "masterly exposition of the thought of Augustine" in the latter's 1970 book *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, insofar as he portrayed what Brown agreed to be Augustine's coming to grips with uncertainty about human nature.⁴⁴ Agreement has also come from Markus's side, best observed in his recent acceptance of Brown's interpretation of *concupiscentia carnis* in *The Body and Society*, as well as in their mutual belief that the real appeal of ascetic sexual renunciation lay in the rejection of the world as a whole, not simply of the human body.⁴⁵ Most recently, Brown has stated that Markus's *The End of Ancient Christianity*, a "recent masterpiece of lucid and deeply pondered historical judgment," inspired him to write about the evolving perceptions of the process of Christianization in the Roman Empire in *Authority and the Sacred*.

Apparently far less cordial has been the scholarly interaction between Brown and Ramsay MacMullen, although one certainly would not get that impression by examining Brown's use of MacMullen's works. Throughout his career, and in nearly every book and article he has written, Brown has depended on MacMullen as a major source of information on the world of late antiquity. In 1971 Brown drew principally upon MacMullen's "Social Mobility and the Theodosian Code" to help him build his first work around the holy man. Other notable examples have included his use of *Enemies of the Roman Order* to support the idea, in *The Cult of the Saints*, of a "democratization from on top" as the motive behind elites' manipulation of the lower classes; and, more recently, his use of MacMullen's *Roman Social Relations* to illustrate the argument in *Body and Society* that Christian widows' gifts to the Church were of crucial

⁴³ Brown, "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways," in *Society and the Holy*, 174. Robert A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York, 1974). Brown also acknowledges his use of similar ideas that W.H.C. Frend advanced in *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York, 1967). Interestingly, however, Markus later expressed a slightly different view of the rise of saints and icons in the West; far from Brown's characterization of power-hungry bishops manipulating relics to suit their own political ends, Markus's version implies that the bishops were rather reluctant to take decisive action in using the power of relics to dominate the laity or local aristocracy. See Markus, "The Cult of Icons in Sixth-Century Gaul," *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1978), 155.

⁴⁴ Brown, "In Gibbon's Shade," in *Society and the Holy*, 52. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970).

⁴⁵ Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), 61, 81. See also E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965). The fact that Markus's book was dedicated to Peter Brown certainly gives the impression of a friendly discourse between the two men.

importance to its rise.⁴⁶ But is this a reciprocal relationship? MacMullen's remarks on *The Cult of the Saints* speak for themselves:

What emerges from [Brown's] many pages of analysis (unless it be the view that the elite exploited "superstition" for the purpose of advancing their influence within their communities—and that must entail a class-wide, concerted deceit) is not at all clear, at least to myself; nor does his treatment really address the cause of changes so characteristic of the thought of the time: veneration of saints, veneration of ascetics, working of miracles. He seems rather to "explain a thing till all men doubt it, And write about it, Goddess, and about it." Which is not to deny that these phenomena seem very puzzling at first sight.⁴⁷

At the heart of their differences lies MacMullen's express wish to maintain the "two-tiered" model in historicizing the social and political relationships of late antiquity.⁴⁸ Particularly of interest to him has been the impact of the "*nouveaux arrivés*," the barbarian mercenaries within the Empire, who, with their "positive hostility toward the life of the mind" of classical Rome, exacerbated the differences between the elites and the lower elements of society, serving to lower the standards of Christianity, eventually leading to the adoption of the cult of the saints to placate the masses.⁴⁹ A fascinating point of contention between the two is the subtle, yet highly significant, difference in their interpretations of a statement made by Arnaldo Momigliano in his article "Popular Religious Beliefs and the Roman Historians."⁵⁰ Because, Momigliano told his academic audience, Christianity had tended to blur class distinctions in late antiquity, it was therefore inaccurate for modern historians to write about ancient Roman historians of "popular" religion, since there had been no such thing for them to write about in the first place. Brown took that to mean that because there was no strictly "popular" religion, as such, the imposition of the veneration of saints must have come from a quarter

⁴⁶ Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 94; Ramsay MacMullen, "Social Mobility and the Theodosian Code," *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964): 49–53; Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 48; MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 170–179; Brown, *Body and Society*, 345; and MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven, CT, 1974), 101.

⁴⁷ MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton, 1990), 127. An especially cute touch in MacMullen's retort is his use here of the same "poet's apostrophe to Dullness" that Brown cited when calling for the abandonment of the "two-tiered" model: "Oh, let us never, never doubt, What nobody is sure about." (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 18). MacMullen tactfully adds, "not that dullness is by any means Professor Brown's style."

⁴⁸ Warren Treadgold has made a similar observation, contrasting Peter Brown's "post-structuralism" with "the more traditional approaches" of Alan Cameron, Timothy Barnes, J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, Ramsay MacMullen, and John Matthews. See Treadgold, 1462.

⁴⁹ MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire*, 117, 129.

⁵⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Popular Religious Beliefs and the Roman Historians," *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972): 1–18.

other than the lower classes. The origin of the idea lay, he believed, with the bishops, used as a ruse to establish their supremacy over the local elite by attracting the devotion of the masses by means of the power of the saints at their disposal. MacMullen accused Brown of going too far, and proceeded to make a compelling case against him by establishing the origins of Momigliano's thoughts themselves. He argued that Momigliano had based his exhortation upon ideas originally expressed by Gilbert Murray and A.J. Festugière:

The Christian abolition of the internal frontiers between the learned and the vulgar had clear implications. For cultured persons it meant the reception and acceptance of many uncritical, unsophisticated beliefs in miracles, relics, and apparitions.⁵¹

The appeal of such an obviously "two-tiered" approach for MacMullen is clear, as are the implications for Brown's argument. If the one source upon which he based his new interpretation was itself of hostile origin, the validity of his new model would be in jeopardy. Since Brown himself has never formally replied to this particular criticism, his defense of such an ostensibly weak position remains unknown. The only sure conclusion to emerge from the debate thus far is that those who continue to champion the "two-tiered" model have found a hero in Ramsay MacMullen.

Peter Brown has come to exert wide influence on the field of late antique history since he began publishing articles in the early 1960's. He gained early recognition with the success of his biography of Augustine in 1967. Still hailed today as a classic, it remains a standard, if not *the* standard, work on the bishop of Hippo. Most, if not all, works on Augustine published since 1967 cite Brown's book as a major reference. Even John O'Meara's work on the young Augustine, considered by some critics as superior to Brown's, although originally published thirteen years earlier, has in an updated edition included Brown in its own select bibliography.⁵²

Outside the realm of patristic biography, Brown enjoys further respect among fellow historians, especially for his work on the history of saints and sainthood. A sample of those who have acknowledged his skill and ability includes J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, who, after examining Merovingian

⁵¹ MacMullen, *Changes*, 126, quoting A.J. Festugière in *Les Moines d'Orient*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1961), 1:21.

⁵² John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 2nd ed., rev. (London, 1980). Norman Cantor, for one, still considers O'Meara's the best work on the African bishop. Other recent biographies, such as George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford, 1987) and Warren Thomas Smith, *Augustine: His Life and Thought* (Atlanta, 1980), depend heavily, if not fundamentally, on Brown's account. That Brown was chosen to write the introduction to the most recent version of Augustine's *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Boston, 1993), further illustrates his enduring influence on the subject.

calendars, hymns, inscriptions, and breviaries in his *Frankish Church*, arrived at very much the same conclusions regarding the cult of saints as Brown did, writing, “They [the cults of the saints] were only ‘popular’ in the sense that they were aimed at the common people, not in the sense that they derived from them.”⁵³ Raymond Van Dam, also working on saint-phenomena, has called Brown the “leading impresario” in that field, and much of his own work holds closely to the model laid out in *The Cult of the Saints*.⁵⁴ Similarly, Ian Wood has acknowledged a general debt of gratitude to Brown, particularly noting his appreciation for the insight Brown’s “Relics and Social Status” lent to his own considerations of the power of Merovingian bishops; and Susan Ashbrook Harvey has wholeheartedly adopted Brown’s ideas in her framing of the sixth-century world of John of Ephesus, drawing especially upon Brown’s characterization of the holy man as arbiter, “bridge,” or the “point at which the human and the holy met”—terms drawn almost verbatim from Brown’s “Rise and Function,” “The Saint as Exemplar,” and *The Body and Society*.⁵⁵

With deft use of the imagination, one might be able to see the late antique model of power and patronage at work today in academia, particularly in the decision-making processes of major university publishing houses. The fact that Peter Brown was appointed General Editor of an important historical series, “The Transformation of the Classical Heritage,” for the University of California Press testifies to his stature in the American academic establishment and to the institutionalization of his contributions to scholarship. Serving in this regard since the series’ inception in 1981, Brown has overseen the publication of works by several colleagues and friends, as well as one or two former students. Sabine MacCormack, for instance, whose *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* appeared in 1981, has, perhaps more than other contributors, benefited from a lively exchange of ideas with Brown over the years; each has borrowed from the other on several occasions, and in fact it would be fair to say that Brown probably has profited more. Acknowledging her thanks to Brown for her training in classical languages while researching at Oxford in the 1970’s, MacCormack has cited *The*

⁵³ Wallace-Hadrill, 78, 424. One can only speculate as to his specific thoughts on Peter Brown, since he maintains that he did not have the “luxury” of specifically noting all his sources in this reflective book. The fact that he did see fit, however, to make special reference to Brown’s “innovative” article “Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours” leads one to believe in his deference to Brown in certain matters, including, perhaps, the conclusions made in *The Cult of the Saints*.

⁵⁴ Van Dam, 5.

⁵⁵ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1994), xi, 73; and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the “Lives of the Easter Saints”*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 18 (Berkeley, 1990), 14. A broader work deserving note is Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe* (New York, 1991), 70–74, which draws upon Brown’s syntheses of ideas originally gleaned from Chitty and Vööbus.

Making of Late Antiquity and *Religion and Society* as particularly helpful in her re-creation of “The World of the Panegyrists.”⁵⁶ For his own part, Brown has eagerly drawn upon *Art and Ceremony* on several occasions to support various theses, including his illustration in *Authority and the Sacred* of lingering pagan forms among fourth-century power elites, as well as his use in “Relics and Social Status” of her work on the *adventus* and *consensus* ceremonies to clarify the significance of the arrival of relics to an early medieval community.⁵⁷ Brown has also enjoyed a valuable scholarly interplay over the past three decades with Philip Rousseau. Like MacCormack, Rousseau fancies himself as having been shaped by Brown, and one can indeed see a similarity in approach and interpretation between his *Basil of Caesarea* and Brown’s *Body and Society*. Scrutinizing the same texts by Basil, both scholars have arrived at similar conclusions about his subtle recommendations for a more defined ascetic life—the possible beginnings of an increasingly-organized monasticism.⁵⁸ Carole Straw, author of the series’ *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, has the distinction of being the only “traditional” student of Brown’s of the lot. While most of them studied with him only at one time or another, it appears that, in spite of his peripatetic career, Straw managed to keep him as an advisor throughout her graduate study. His influence—and her devotion—are most clearly evident in her treatment of Gregory’s concern for the “hunger of Christians for communion with the holy,” that is, the masses’ desire for outward examples of God’s power. Straw employs aspects of Brown’s work to explain Gregory’s use of living holy men’s miracles in the context of Gregory’s own Greek heritage. Although potentially challenging to the assertion in Brown’s “Eastern and Western Christendom” that the “holy” of the West resided largely in the dead, Brown’s model, at least in Straw’s hands, remains safe.⁵⁹

Another author in the “Transformation” series, Averil Cameron, is set apart from the rest in that she was most certainly never a student of Brown’s, but rather a fellow student with him. Two considerations of her work are of interest to this historiography. The first is the curious fact that her biography and re-evaluation of Procopius lacks any utilization of Brown’s works at all. While on the surface this may not seem all that

⁵⁶ Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 1 (Berkeley, 1981), xv. One can readily observe the legacy of Brown’s language instruction; well over three-quarters of her substantial references are to classical authors, with the relevant passages provided in the original language.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, 12; *Society and the Holy*, 248.

⁵⁸ Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 20 (Berkeley, 1984), 197; Brown, *Body and Society*, 274. Brown, characteristically, found Rousseau’s references to “informal orders of virgins” most rewarding.

⁵⁹ Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 14 (Berkeley, 1988), 69.

strange, it quickly becomes so when one realizes that it was her express desire to “read” Procopius in a more appropriate way, that is, to contextualize him within the sixth century, rather than to fall into what she has observed as the trap of viewing this figure in “classical” terms.⁶⁰ Why she did not make use of Brown’s *Making of Late Antiquity* as at least a general reference, since Brown even discusses the historiography of Procopius in his introduction, is open to speculation. The second, more meaningful, implication of Cameron’s work comes from her relationship with Arnaldo Momigliano. There is an obvious connection between her and Peter Brown via their common mentor. Using this as a jumping-off point has the potential of shedding some light on the connection among the authors of the “Transformation of the Classical Heritage” series as a whole. The influence Arnaldo Momigliano had in the field of late antique history is mammoth; nearly every work mentioned in this historiography, particularly those in the “Transformation” series, has relied heavily on Momigliano’s insights. This is especially the case in the “Transformation” series. Of course, referring to a scholar of Momigliano’s stature can simply signify deference to a great predecessor. Yet, nearly without exception, all the works of the series refer to, accept, and repeatedly employ the conclusions of Momigliano’s “Popular Religious Beliefs and the Late Roman Historians” and *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*.⁶¹ It is thus plausible to contend that, perhaps more than Peter Brown, the real binding force of the series has been the pervasive influence of Momigliano. Not only were Brown and Cameron his own students at Cambridge, but MacCormack also maintains that she benefited from his tutelage. A further connection likely stems from his involvement, in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, with the University of Chicago as a distinguished lecturer in late antique and Roman history.⁶² There he would have had the opportunity to interact with Kenneth Holum, Patricia Cox, and their advisors, serving perhaps as a bridge between them and his own former students.⁶³ Much of this is, of course, speculation, but given the

⁶⁰ Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 10 (Berkeley, 1985), ix.

⁶¹ Momigliano, “Popular Religious Beliefs,” and *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963).

⁶² Brown, “Arnaldo Momigliano,” 405. It is also worth mentioning that Brown has enjoyed a close relationship with the University of Chicago over the years as well, having presented *The Cult of the Saints* in its original form as the Haskell Lectures there in 1978.

⁶³ Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 3 (Berkeley, 1982); Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series, 5 (Berkeley, 1983). Another curiosity emerges from Cox’s work, in that she refers very seldom, if at all, to Brown’s works on the holy. Of course, in 1983 she would have had no chance to respond to *The Cult of the Saints* already or, certainly, to “The Saint as Exemplar.” Yet Brown’s “Rise and Function of the Holy Man” had been in existence since 1971.

circumstantial evidence and Momigliano's influence on the field in general, it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility to conjecture such a significant role for him.

One ought not forget, too, that Brown has come to exercise great influence outside the United States and Great Britain. While most non-English criticism has appeared in French, several Italian and German scholars have also paid attention to Brown, although to a noticeably lesser extent. The vast majority of debate and commentary has focused on Brown's *Cult of the Saints*, translations of which appeared in Europe in the mid-1980's and early 1990's, quickly followed by several review essays.⁶⁴ Although Brown's work has attracted predominantly favorable comments, his theories have inspired at least one French sociologist, Jacques Fontaine, to challenge Brown's "one-sided elitist argument."⁶⁵

Peter Brown in Perspective

To date there have been two semi-historiographical treatments of Peter Brown, although neither has attempted to deal with his entire "canon." In his 1991 book *The Inventing of the Middle Ages*, American medievalist Norman Cantor, in an attempt to place Brown within a wider historiographical school of thought, characterized him as a principal heir of the tradition established by Richard Southern. Arguing that Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages* had had a formative influence on Peter Brown, Colin Morris, Robin Lane Fox, and Caroline Walker Bynum, Cantor finds in their works visible traits of the "Southernist style," which, he says, emphasizes personal feelings and individual perceptions in the writing of medieval history, as opposed to a stricter, more "formalist" approach. Brown's works, particularly those dealing with the "holy," seem to fit this description well—so well, in fact, that Cantor has called Brown a

Ostensibly the strict methodological nature of her work—a focus on biography—accounts for this silence.

⁶⁴ Major translations include: *Le Culte des saints. Son Essor et sa fonction dans la chrétienté latine* (Paris, 1984); *Il culto dei santi. L'origine e la diffusione di una nova religiosità* (Turin, 1983); and *Die Heiligenverehrung. Ihre Entstehung und Funktion in der lateinischen Christenheit* (Leipzig, 1991). The late date of translation into German perhaps accounts for the lack of substantial commentary in that language. It is, of course, safe to assume that most European scholars were already aware of this and Brown's other works long before they appeared in translation. For a sampling of European reviews, see Michel Carrias, review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 71 (1985): 383–384; Antoine Lion, review of *Le Culte des saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 58 (1984): 238–240; P. Maraval, review of *Le Culte des saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 65 (1985): 321–322; and Hans-Martin Schaller, review of *The Cult of the Saints*, by Peter Brown, in *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 41 (1985): 287.

⁶⁵ Jacques Fontaine, "Le Culte des saints et ses implications sociologiques. Reflexions sur un récent essai de Peter Brown," *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982): 17–41. Raymond Van Dam draws particular attention to Fontaine's anti-elitist argument; see Van Dam, 4.

“direct imitator of Southern.”⁶⁶ Cantor also points out a number of interesting, if coincidental, links between the two. Both enjoyed distinguished tenures at the “Oxbridge” establishment, benefiting from its “peculiar private unprogrammed study” reserved for the highest echelon of students. He also notes at least one common friend, Beryl Smalley; a lifelong devotee of Southern’s, Smalley also was instrumental in getting Brown’s first work on Augustine published.⁶⁷ Cantor further suggests that, within this larger context, Brown’s chief adversary has been played by Robin Lane Fox, whose 1986 *Pagans and Christians* posed a direct challenge to Brown’s notion of “syncretism”:

According to Lane Fox, the conversion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century represented the political triumph of a counterculture, not the Brownist syncretic blending of multifaceted Mediterranean culture. Lane Fox is quite explicit that he is challenging Brown’s thesis.⁶⁸

How valid is Cantor’s argument? While the argument concerning Southern’s influence is convincing, Cantor’s statements regarding Brown’s relationship with Lane Fox do not hold up so well. The two men agree, in fact, on several key issues. Lane Fox attests to the non-pagan origins of the cult of saints, a key element of Brown’s *Cult of the Saints*; and, for his part, Brown has drawn upon Lane Fox’s work on several occasions, most recently in *The Body and Society*, to back up his point about the divergent views of continence held by various Christian communities in late antiquity.⁶⁹ There has been one minor bone of contention, reflecting their differing opinions on the role of the holy man. Downplaying the influential mediatory role advanced by Brown, Lane Fox characterizes desert ascetics as “solitary Christian overachievers” to whom Near Eastern Christians sometimes happened to appeal.⁷⁰ Though this touches upon an important issue for Brown, there is little else to support Cantor’s claims of an inherently antagonistic relationship between the two; he has apparently based his assumption more on personal inference—perhaps a reflection of his own experience with Southern?—than on any hard evidence that might better illustrate this posited adversarial intellectual exchange.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Cantor, 361.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 344. See Brown, “Saint Augustine.”

⁶⁸ Cantor, 363.

⁶⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), 22; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 64, 142.

⁷⁰ Lane Fox, 679.

⁷¹ Not that Cantor’s personal inferences don’t make for good reading. Referring to a purely laudatory review Brown wrote on *Pagans and Christians*, Cantor argued, “There is a tactic in scholarly debate, risky but sometimes workable, that if you laud your opponent uncritically, you reduce him to imbecility. That seems to have been Brown’s method in this case,” 363.

More encompassing, although still limited in scope, is Alexander Murray's 1983 article, "Peter Brown in the Shadow of Constantine," an extended review essay that considers several of Brown's early works, including *Religion and Society*, *The World of Late Antiquity*, *Society and the Holy*, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, and *The Cult of the Saints*.⁷² The core of Murray's treatment rests in his belief that, in one way or another, all of Brown's work relates to the fundamental problems that resulted from Constantine's reign as Roman emperor: ecclesiastical-political relations, Christianity's rise to dominance, and the move of the imperial capital to the East.⁷³ In the process of fitting Brown's major books and articles into this framework, Murray criticizes Brown on several general counts. He calls attention, for example, to Brown's ambiguous and often confusing use of the term "Mediterranean" in referring to the provenance of late antique Roman culture. Though in some cases limiting its meaning to only those lands touching the Mediterranean Sea, in other works Brown applies the same model to northern Gaul and even Ireland.⁷⁴ Interestingly, Murray's more serious criticism reminds the reader of MacMullen's, for Murray, too, defends the "two-tiered" model from Brown's attack, contending that conceiving of late antique events within those two tiers has actually served historians quite well, and should continue to do so.⁷⁵ Regarding elitist sentiments towards the religion of the "vulgar," Murray maintains the innocence of such an interpretation, exhorting even Brown to reconsider the use of perhaps a modified "two-tier" model. In spite of these censures, however, Murray unquestionably remains a great fan of Brown's style and literary expression, saying of their possessor, "A logician who contradicts himself says nothing. A historian who does so usually says two things, both of value. This is because a poet who does so normally says a half dozen things."⁷⁶ Murray's essay thus ends by portraying Brown as almost a greater poet than a historian—a subtle comment often repeated since.

While apparently shaky ground upon which to build an argument, it becomes a bit more solid in light of Alexander Murray's statement that, "When he [Brown] writes of named contemporary scholars, in reviews or elsewhere, he is more than a gentleman, he is noble in generosity. But like most original minds he retains, deep down, a certain pugnacity. It is spice to his prose. The reader is seldom unaware for long of what accepted views are on the subject in hand, and that they are mistaken." (Murray, 202.)

⁷² Murray, 191–203.

⁷³ Ibid., 192. Murray actually got the idea for such an approach from Brown himself, who stated that the "Constantinian Problem lies at the root of Later Roman history." See Brown, *Religion and Society*, 255.

⁷⁴ Murray, 202.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 201. Murray, too, harbors strong feelings on the issue: "No medievalist can be indifferent on this point. For a 'two-tier' model is too useful to dispense with in the interpretation of certain shifts in medieval religious belief and practice."

⁷⁶ Ibid., 202.

Given the abundance of material published by Brown since 1983, one may be surprised by the absence of other, more recent, historiographical essays. This lacuna becomes a bit more understandable, however, when one considers Brown's syncretic style and the resulting nature of much of his work since then. *The Body and Society* serves as a prime case in point, for while this book certainly can be regarded as Brown's masterwork thus far, it is also very much a synthesis of most of his earlier propositions and theses, many stemming from before 1983. But, as Robert A. Markus alternatively pointed out in a recent review of *Authority and the Sacred*, Brown has also reconsidered and even changed his former opinions on the role of so central a figure as the "holy man."⁷⁷ Considering this kind of flexibility and willingness to re-evaluate his own influential positions, it is obvious that Brown's work and impact will require renewed evaluation in years to come.

In his response to Peter Brown's presentation to the Center for Hermeneutical Studies' 1983 colloquy on "Augustine and Sexuality," J. Patout Burns offered the following appraisal, which, in effect, could just as easily apply to much of Brown's overall career as a historical artist:

In this paper, as in so many others, [Brown] sets particular questions and texts in a context which illuminates their implications and meaning. He sets the backdrop and the foreground in which a particular issue is discussed.... He paints on a large canvas and with a wide brush. Yet when one looks to the details and attempts to locate them, it turns out that they do fit. One discovers that the presentation is indeed the result of a careful reading and collecting of a large number of small pieces which are then molded into a synthesis. Brown does not build mosaics out of carefully crafted small pieces but he carefully grinds and mixes the pigments for the painter which seem so effortlessly applied.⁷⁸

Though the long-range impact and influence of Peter Brown is impossible to predict, historians of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages can expect to grapple with the issues he has raised for years to come. For while one of Brown's greatest strengths has been his ability to uncover new and exciting areas of potential research, he also has exhibited a tendency to only scratch the surface of those rich resources, leaving readers wanting more. Indeed, some have criticized him for what they see

⁷⁷ Robert A. Markus, review of *Authority and the Sacred*, by Peter Brown, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (Oct., 1996): 710–711.

⁷⁸ Brown, Discussion of "Augustine and Sexuality," 14. This passage features the comments of J. Patout Burns, then Associate Professor of History and Theology at Loyola University of Chicago.

as a seemingly shallow, fleeting approach to history.⁷⁹ Undoubtedly much of this type of criticism has resulted from Brown's preference for the article, essay, or lecture, as opposed to the definitive tome, a writing habit he is likely to continue for the rest of his career, *The Rise of Western Christendom* notwithstanding. And yet it is fitting that one of the earliest, if not the very first, reviews of his work pointed to that very style as a potential strength:

Not that Mr. Brown fails to place Augustine firmly in his environment of thought and event. Quite the contrary; but he chooses to do it through short, *pregnant* chapters and scores of perceptive remarks, deftly placed as occasion demands.⁸⁰

Now, upon surveying the works of a historian who has dedicated his career to the study of the lives, thoughts, and works of early Christian ascetics and virgins, one can appreciate the irony of that perceptive, almost prophetic remark.

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⁷⁹ Joseph Kelly, review of *The Making of Late Antiquity*, by Peter Brown, in *Catholic Historical Review* 66 (July, 1980): 475. Kelly goes on to indicate his hope that Brown may someday "return to at least some of these themes at greater length and in greater depth."

⁸⁰ "Father of the African Church," review of *Augustine of Hippo*, by Peter Brown, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (Nov. 30, 1967): 1173 (italics added).