
This brief but informative study of the rise of the cult of saints demonstrates once again Peter Brown’s genius for sharing with his readers the fruits of not only his own painstaking and meticulous scholarship but also his penetrating understanding of the evolution of western culture as a whole.

In this instance he debunks yet another hypothesis from the many which mask the truth of our Christian western heritage. The cult of saints in late antiquity did not arise as a manifestation of popular superstition (accelerated by the influx of pagans into the Church of the fourth century) supposedly made respectable by ecclesiastical authority. It was, however, the expression of the corporate movement of contemporary society towards radically new forms of reverence whereby heaven and earth were seen and known to be joined at the graves of the saints and martyrs.

Peter Brown shows how the Christians of late antiquity viewed their world through ‘kinship coloured glasses’ so that religious practice took place within the family and for the family. The church was in itself an artificial kinship group and it is within this framework that one can best understand the rise of the Christian cemetery at Rome at the end of the second century with its newly founded post of clerk of works held by the deacon, later pope, Callistus, the man probably responsible for the employment of the fresco-painters. Yet the family graves were still to remain ‘fine and private’ places thus causing tensions and conflicts. Although on the one hand leading churchmen like Augustine and Vigilantius might decry public behaviour at the gravesides, it was the ‘elite’, whether from the old aristocracy or the new one of wealthy Christians and bishops, who orchestrated the cult at the cemeteries.

In his preface Professor Brown relates his personal discovery of the pleasures of the company not only of the visible greats of late antiquity but also of their ‘invisible friends’. In his text he examines in detail this attractive and ancient phenomenon of human experience and shows how the cult of saints opened up a fresh manifestation. For within the inherited framework of a world order which inhibited personal freedom, men could now seek reassurance within the tight web of known human relationships especially secured by those invisible friends who transcended the hierarchical order.

In the last three chapters, Peter Brown looks anew at the actualities of the deaths of the saints and martyrs – the ‘very special dead’, and shows how the horror of physical death with all its preceding suffering is transcended into an expression of beauty whether in poetry, art or liturgy. He explains the notion of the *praesentia*, the physical presence of the holy whether in a particular community itself or in the possession of the individual. The
faithful went to the shrines of their dead not only to seek favours or to bury their own relatives in close proximity but to meet a friend. Furthermore, as the presence of an invisible person could be found within the merest fragment of himself or his belongings, so the Christian world came to experience a world-wide contact with its past heroes. Such observations give an entirely new perspective to the cult of relics summed up in Brown's remark, 'Translations – the movement of relics to people – and not pilgrimages – the movement of people to relics – hold the center of the stage in late antique and early-medieval piety'. Finally the potestia – the power that surrounded the tombs and relics was demonstrated in acts of healing and exorcism and in rough justice whereby the prae sentica of the saint is made known in the outbursts of the human possessed in the identical format of the late-Roman judge in his court room. The power of the saint in his tomb was all-embracing. It made certain not only of the rhythm of the liturgical year but also laid down an etiquette towards the supernatural where every gesture was prescribed.

In conclusion Peter Brown spells out a message for our own 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.

This is indeed an excellent study and although no more than 127 pages of text, provides one with many many hours of thought-provoking enjoyment. As its author fervently hopes, it begs for further study and opens up fresh areas for research.

JOAN HAZELDEN WALKER


This book originally appeared as the final section of A History of Christian Doctrine (T. and T. Clark, 1978) edited by H. Cunliffe-Jones. John Kent, Professor of Theology in the University of Bristol, has provided a compact and devastating résumé of the history of Christian thought in the modern period (1760–1960), which well justifies its independent publication and fully lives up to the publisher's advertisement: 'There can be few more scintillating, or more depressing accounts of the theology of the last two hundred years than this.' Indeed the theological reader of this book will find that there is no hiding place left for theological assertion at the disordered centre of contemporary culture.

Professor Kent packs his book tightly with a heady concoction of daring