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Review of Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity, by P. Brown

Joseph F. Kelly, John Carroll University

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BOOK REVIEWS


This latest book by the prolific Peter Brown brings together previously published essays and some book reviews on his favorite topic, the relation between society and the holy in the Late Roman world. The word 'holy' is fortuitously non-localized. Brown writes of the holy man (occasionally the holy woman), the holy object, the holy place, all of which helped the people of this period to understand their world and their place in it.

All Late Antique religious groupings, pagans, Jews, and Christians, believed not only in a spiritual world but a spiritual world constantly interacting with this one—interacting with, not infringing upon, because the supernatural intervention was natural. Modern sceptics rightly reject miracles because of the obvious superstitious overtones but also because miracles are philosophically offensive—why, if a supernatural being exists does he or she not leave us alone to be fully human? Antique people had no such qualms; indeed, they were comfortable with the supernatural.

Brown demonstrates that the reason they were comfortable was because of the holy, which he understands as a means for ancient people to deal with unseen powers, beneficent or malevolent. The holy became the threshold, a point of entry to a different existence. The holy man could tame and domesticate the supernatural forces. These could, to be sure, still act harshly but at least they acted justly. Humans who offended the gods or demons or their earthly hierophanies (holy people or places or objects) expected retribution; anything less would have been a sign of impotence. People living under a government which left the remains of executed criminals in public squares where even small children could see them were accustomed to severity by the powerful.

The real value of Brown's work is for the historian, not the sociologist. He is a classicist who has discovered the value of sociology and anthropology for understanding facets of Late Antique life. Earlier classicists dismissed Late Antiquity as a decline from the higher (intellectual and cultural) standards of the Golden Ages of Greece and Rome, as a time when Oriental, that is, Jewish and Christian, ideas perverted the Western heritage. A cardinal proof of this decline was the veneration of the holy, a replacement of classical values by Levantine superstition. Brown laudably rejects such bigotry and demonstrates that a sympathetic, sociological approach to the cultural shifts in the Roman world reveals the vitality and creativity of Late Antique society. The 'decline' is there only in the minds of classicists who petrify the myth of a Golden Age and who refuse to accept the inevitable change and development of any society. Although Brown is an amateur at sociology and does not approach the standards of someone like Victor Turner, he has done an important job in waking up his fellow classicists to the importance of the social sciences.

John Carroll University
Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A.

Joseph F. Kelly

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