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# The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity from Peter Brown's Perspective

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**Abstract**: *In this article, the great historian Peter Brown's conception of the origins and development of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity is presented. Peter Brown's contribution to defining the concept of "Late Antiquity" is also highlighted.*

**Keywords:** *Peter Brown, Late Antiquity, the cult of the saints.*

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## 1. Late Antiquity - a response to the idea of decadence induced in history by Christianity

Christoph Keller (Cellarius) (1638-1707) was professor of history and rhetoric at the University of Halle. He was remembered by his fellow colleagues for his monumental *Historia universalis breviter ac perspicue exposita, in antiquam, et medii aevi ac novam divisa, cum notis perpetuis*, which established the division of history into three great epochs: antiquity, the Middle Ages and the modern era, a division still used in historiography today.

Keller's work undermines a long-standing historiographical tradition in Europe built around the idea of "translatio imperii". Literally, 'translatio imperii' means 'transfer of power'. More precisely, this concept presupposes the existence of a single world political power (empire), legitimised by divinity. By God's will, the centre of this power (imperium) has changed its geographical location, but in essence the reality has remained the same: one God in heaven, one emperor on earth (Whalen, 2007).

History thus amounts to a succession of "empires", the list of which varies according to the interests promoted. For the most part, the list began with the Assyro-Babylonian, Persian and Macedonian empires, with the Roman Empire being the obligatory stopping point. From this point, opinions dissipated, depending on interests. For example, in the German-speaking world, the "translatio imperii" was conceived according to the following scheme: Roman Empire - Byzantium - Empire of Charles the Great, proclaimed in 800 AD - Empire of Otto I the Great, proclaimed in 962 AD. In fact, the empire created by Otto was officially called the "Holy Roman Empire", with the addition of the words "of German descent" in the 16$^{th}$ century (Freising, 1980; Wilson, 2017).

This scheme, concerned exclusively with the idea of continuity in terms of political legitimacy, did not consider the demise of the Roman Empire as a problem. Keller's scheme introduced the idea of discontinuity, change, beginning and end. It was combined with a cultural perspective which occurred during the Renaissance. Humanists were great admirers of classical Greco-Roman culture, which they sought to revive in all aspects of life. For them, the era in which this classicism did not manifest itself was a 'dark age', an unhappy interval between two periods of light (Thompson, 1996, p. 13). "The 'dark ages' and the 'middle ages' merged, so that the Middle Ages came to be seen as a period of backwardness, a regression of civilisation, dominated by superstition. At the same time, the 'Middle Ages' overlapped with the period that is said to have marked the height of the

influence of Christian religion in the world. Naturally, many historians and scholars have wondered about the role of Christianity in shaping the civilisation of mankind, and more specifically, to what extent was Christianity to blame for the 'decadence' and 'darkness' of the Middle Ages? This question opened up a veritable "culture war" which, in another form, is still being fought today.

Discussions focused mainly on the problem of the "decline" of the Roman Empire, the political vector of classical Greco-Roman culture. The touchstone in these disputes was Edward Gibbon's (1737-1794) famous work, *A History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon believed that the Roman Empire declined, and eventually died out, due to barbarian invasions, which were greatly aided by the Romans' loss of those civic virtues that had helped them become a world power. A major factor in the soul-transformation of the Roman world was Christianity, which discouraged, through the promise of salvation after death, the interest in solving worldly problems (Liebert, 2022, pp. 93-126).

Gibbon was quoted extensively by authors hostile to Christianity, who argued for an "age of reason" marked by the continuing progress of mankind. This goal could be achieved by abandoning Christianity, which was not considered compatible with reason, activism and militancy. The collapse of the Roman Empire was the best example of how the loss of rationality and civic sense can lead to the demise of a civilisation.

The promoters of this movement met historians from Protestant backgrounds in their assessments. Keller himself had set as the boundaries of the Middle Ages the reign of Constantine the Great as the beginning and the beginning of Martin Luther's preaching as the end. Such a choice was motivated by the Protestant view of the history of Christianity. After the early age of apostles and martyrs, the church was considered to have become captive to imperial power, as Constantine's measures against the church were in fact a poisoned gift, and the large number of converts, whether Roman citizens or barbarians, without proper catechesis, filled Christianity with heresies and superstitions, which were only removed with the Reformation in the 16$^{th}$ century (Breisach, 1994, pp. 166-170). In such a vision, the Catholic and Orthodox churches became mere repositories of 'pagan' views. These ideas were later turned into various 'secularist' views.

Not by chance, the desire to revise the image of the "decadence" of the Roman Empire and the "dark" Middle Ages has animated especially historians with a strong religious conscience or at least educated in a Catholic environment. We mention here the most important ones: Henri-Irénée Marrou (1904-1977), one of the great historians of the 20$^{th}$ century,

concerned with the relationship between Christianity and culture (Riché, 2003), author of the monumental work *Saint Augustine and the End of Ancient Culture* (1938), and Peter Brown (1935-), born in Dublin, with solid historical and theological studies, professor at first in Great Britain (at Oxford and the University of London), then in the United States, at Berkeley and Princeton, as he is considered the "father" of what is today called "Late Antiquity". In Orthodox circles, this phenomenon has found its pendant in the long-neglected revaluation of the history of Byzantium (Iorga, 1972).

Very generally and simplified, in France the debate started from the criticism of a model established by French historiography, since the 18th century, which distinguished between the "Haut-Empire" (the Roman Empire until the middle of the 3rd century AD) and the "Bas-Empire" (covering the period 284-476 AD) (LeBohec, 2017). The term 'Bas-Empire' has over time taken on strongly pejorative overtones, being associated with the idea of decadence. For this reason, various historians, including Marrou, who were opposed to such a view, proposed the term 'Late Roman Empire' and went further by using the more neutral notion of 'Antiquité tardive', which was established by Peter Brown in his English version in the consciousness of contemporary historiography as a period not of decadence but of great transformation and exceptional creativity (Brown, 1978).

## 2. The problem of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity

One of the most controversial issues in the history of Christianity is that of the cult of saints, a cult which came to being along with Late Antiquity. For Orthodox and Catholic believers, the cult of the saints is a very natural fact, as it is an essential part of the life of the Church. However, over the years, there has been much opposition to this phenomenon, not only from outside the Church, but also from people who consider themselves Christians. In ancient times, pagans categorically rejected the cult of saints as an unthinkable religious innovation (Brown, 1995, p. 19). So did the followers of the Reformation at the end of the Middle Ages and in the pre-modern period. Nowadays the cult of saints, with its specific manifestations, is a favourite target of secular-humanist currents.

Whoever reads a history of Christianity written from a Protestant perspective will easily notice the differences in emphasis compared to a history written by an Orthodox or Catholic author regarding the development of Christianity in Late Antiquity. Here are some obvious elements:

1. Constantine the Great and his relationship with the Christian religion. In Orthodox circles, we speak of Saint Constantine the Great, the equal of the apostles, the great benefactor of the Church, while in Protestant circles the era of Constantine the Great is considered to mark the beginning of the domination of political power over the Church (Caesaropapism).
2. Monasticism. Monasticism is an essential aspect of church life in the Orthodox view, and Late Antiquity is considered the golden age of this way of life. In the view of Protestant and other authors, monasticism has some historical, strictly contextual merits, but it cannot be justified by the Holy Scriptures, introducing a form of existence contrary to the true spirit of Christianity.
3. Holy Fathers. In the Protestant writings, great importance is given to St Augustine, who is highly esteemed by Martin Luther, but less present in the Orthodox writings, and among the Eastern Fathers, special mention is made of St John Chrysostom, whose exegetical method is considered more appropriate than that of other theologians, who are inclined towards an excessively allegorical interpretation of the Bible. John is considered closer to a literal interpretation of the sacred text and more concerned with the practical application of Christian teachings to people's everyday needs.
4. The cult of the saints. In the Protestant view, the cult of the saints is not justified by the Scriptures, being a practice of pagan origin, introduced late in the life of the Church by the many insufficiently catechised converts who appeared once Christianity became the official religion under Constantine. To these were added the barbarians, who equated the saints with various heroes and gods. The ecclesiastical elites accepted the majority's argument and tolerated the phenomenon, which was essentially a 'paganisation' of the church, an unnatural assumption of superstition.

The differing views of the Christian confessions are also reflected in the strictly historical approaches, which are not intended to be apologetic arguments. There are now many works of Christian history which are not written from a confessional perspective, but which in one way or another have inherited various distinctions which were originally precisely the product of a confessional approach.

One such case is the cult of the saints, already mentioned, which has been a subject of interest for many historians and anthropologists. The debates that have arisen have been dominated by the view that an ignorant majority has imposed its agenda on the church, as explained by various denominations. This time, secular historiography explained the phenomenon by resorting to the so-called "two-level model". This has become such a convenient explanation that even representatives of the cults that accepted the honouring of saints have accepted it, admittedly seeking to give it positive valences.

As in many cases when it comes to Late Antiquity, Peter Brown deserves the credit for questioning this model in a book, *The Cult of the Saints*, which has also been translated into Romanian. Brown indicates the starting point of the two-level model in the analysis of the cult of saints as the work of the philosopher David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, in which the illustrious thinker was concerned with the reality of a *de-facto* polytheism in the consciousness of most people, despite the triumph of monotheistic thought. For Hume, this reality is perennial, not because of original sin, but because of "the intellectual limitations of the common man" (Brown, 1995, p. 25). To conceive of monotheism, Hume believed, was equivalent to having a rational, coherent conception of the world, capable of bringing out the Supreme Being, and the 'commoner' lacks this capacity: 'The commoner, that is, indeed, all mankind, with few exceptions, as it is ignorant and uneducated, never exalts its contemplation to heaven'. The permanent tension between the "commoner" and the "elite" is likely to generate, on the religious plane, "an ebb and flow" in the consciousness of the individual and society, people having "a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism and to descend again from theism to idolatry".

Edward Gibbon, Peter Brown goes on to say, took over Hume's ideas, pointing out the following when it comes to the worship of saints: 'The imagination, which has been raised by painful effort to the contemplation and veneration of the Universal Cause, has enthusiastically adopted such inferior objects of worship , more suited to its vulgar conceptions and imperfect qualities. The sublime and simple theology of the primitive Christians was gradually vitiated,... was degraded by the introduction of a popular mythology which tended to reinstate the dominance of polytheism" (Brown, 1995, p. 26).

Even modern apologists, such as Dean Milman, saw the cult of the saints as a means of reaching the souls of "ignorant" barbarians: "As Christianity has descended to the lower classes of society, as it has received

the rude and ignorant barbarians into its bosom, the general effect can only be that the age will bring religion down to its level" (Brown, 1995, p. 26).

In *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown does not advocate the honouring of saints' relics, nor does he question whether or not this cult is correct from the perspective of Christian doctrine. Simply, by using the tools of the historian and scholar, the author wants to see whether or not the "two-level model" holds true, whether or not it can provide a coherent explanation of events.

There are some starting points in the approach of the illustrious historian, insights that call into question traditional representations of the genesis and development of the cult of saints. A first question is how the great personalities of the patristic age, whose intelligence and theological strength can in no way be questioned, spoke in unison, in the most enthusiastic way, about saints and their cult. Even St Augustine, in his capacity as Bishop of Hippo, constantly took part in the ceremonies held at the tomb of St Stephen of Uzalis. Was it mere opportunism and submission to the whim of the commoners in bishops who did not hesitate to confront the emperor and actively fought heresy and "superstition"? (Brown, 1995, p. 36).

Another problem is the attitude of the pagans towards the cult of saints and the honouring of relics. All the doctrinaire enemies of Christianity in late antiquity, led by Emperor Julian the Apostate, were horrified by the "irrational" devotion of Christians to "bones", which were not left in the tomb but carried in procession through the city. This happened because, in the traditional view, says Peter Brown, there was a complete break between the world of the living and the dead. The two worlds could not mix. Cemeteries were located outside the city, and there was a connection, stronger or weaker depending on the context, between the family and the deceased. The honouring of ancestors and the funeral banquet are elements of ancient traditions that have been perpetuated in Christianity - Christianised, we add - (e.g. the traditions linked to the Passover of the Blajins, the funeral feast). However, the link between the living and the dead is an emotional one, the awareness of separation being radical. The cult of the 'ordinary' dead cannot therefore explain the cult of the 'very special' dead, who are the saints (Brown, 1995, pp. 16-18).

The "ordinary" grave, Brown tells us, was "a pleasant and intimate place" ("burial place" as we say today), cared for by the family (Brown, 1995, pp. 33-35). In the saint's tomb, "heaven and earth met". These are in fact 'non-burials' because there is a belief that saints are really present in the places where their bones are laid, acting as intercessors between God and people. Some 'bones' and a tomb thus become elements of mediation

between the divine and human planes, something new in relation to the old religious representations (Brown, 1995, pp. 33-41).

Peter Brown does not tell us whether this conception is correct or not. He notes that the origin of the cult of saints is neither a late acquisition (from the 3rd-4th centuries AD) nor a mere pagan influence, but can be fully explained coherently in the historical development of Christianity from its beginnings.

Christians broke away from their old communities, creating a new one of their own, which, if not persecuted, was at best tolerated, with the danger of repression descending upon them at any moment. Like any community of that time, right from the beginning Christians sought to have their own cemeteries, such as the famous catacombs in the Eternal City. These galleries, outside Rome, were first used by Jews to bury their dead and were later used by Christian communities.

Among the "ordinary" dead, victims of persecution and martyrs were buried here. Peter Brown captures the extreme heinousness of those *pasio* (descriptions of the torments suffered by martyrs), which describe in detail all the torments the tortured go through, which in relation to nowadays sensibilities is strange to say the least (Brown, 1995, pp. 86-92). Another seemingly surprising element, the tortures are received with a disarming serenity that nothing can overshadow. Where some see mere stereotype, Brown sees the spiritual dimension of these stories. The future martyr is usually brought before his judges, who turn out to be the tools of the devil, trying to make him give up his faith, in other words, to give up the truth. But he who is brought before the judgment does not want to give up the truth; he confesses and thus becomes a martyr. The martyr endures with serenity all the tortures (which become more and more atrocious, which is natural because the tortures are carried out by the ungodly) with God on his side, who shows Himself to him at the moment of death, the martyr being immediately placed at the right hand of the Father, becoming a saint. Crucified, dismembered, scattered, the body of the martyr is practically recomposed from the matter of holiness, becoming 'something else' than mere bones, the proof being their 'good fragrance', the myrrh that springs forth in certain situations. This initial 'dispersion' will open the door to the subsequent displacement, 'dispersion' and fragmentation of the relics, a phenomenon specific to Christianity which is not found in this form in other religions. Even in some branches of Islam, people are honoured as saints, but their remains remain sealed in the tomb.

Carefully gathered, the saint's remains are buried in a place of honour in the catacombs. For Christians, these catacombs are not just places

for the dead, but, because of the harsh conditions, religious ceremonies are held here and not in the city, which raises suspicion from pagans. In permanent contact with their dead, convinced of the reality of the Resurrection, Christians are not reluctant to create another relationship with this world - traditionally separate from the world of the living - especially with these 'very special dead' who are the saints, who live both in heaven and on earth, in the tomb in which they were laid to rest. The saints in the tombs have 'presence' (*presentia*) (Brown, 1995, pp. 95-110) and 'power' (*potentia*), says Peter Brown, who explores these concepts in detail. One of the concrete manifestations of the *potentia* of the saint is the casting out of devils from people (Brown, 1995, pp. 111-130). He who was once questioned by devils through people, comes to question the servants of darkness. The saint's *potential* and *presentia* leads Christians to want to bury themselves as close as possible to the saints ("*ad sanctos*" burial). The fervour becomes so great that we see real "privatisations" of relics, with wealthy members of the community obtaining the martyrs' bones by various means, and these become the object of a cult limited to one family (Brown, 1995, p. 40).

It was in this context that church leaders intervened to bring order to an area that had begun to be dominated by "superstition".

The Latin term *superstitio* meant any cult, belief or attitude towards the divinity that was manifested outside the public cult (*religio*), offered to the gods of Rome by officially appointed magistrates and priests. Extrapolated to Christianity, superstition is that which is outside the officially established teachings and rules of the Church. Or, Peter Brown suggests, it must be properly understood what the bishops and theologians of Late Antiquity meant by "superstition" when they referred to the cult of the saints. They were not questioning the reality of the cult of the saints, but they were resisting the "privatisation" of the saints and the elevation of their worship above that due to God (Brown, 1995, pp. 41-43).

With the triumph of Christianity, the burial places of the martyrs were transformed into *memoriae to* which crowds of believers flocked. These *memoriae*, outside the traditional city, radically change the relationship between the city of the living and the city of the dead. In the space once reserved for the dead, where people were reluctant to linger too long, places of worship and social settlements are now being built where people come to spend time in the company of the saint.

Roman civilisation was a civilisation based on the patron-client relationship and, from this perspective, Late Antiquity is no exception. Even the Christian bishops were practically patrons of their flocks. In turn, the saint becomes such a *patronus*, an unseen one, offering an alternative to the

sometimes constraining patronage of the ordinary world. Thus, pilgrimage to the saint's tomb, Peter Brown points out, helps to redefine in part social barriers, but also economic relations between different groups of people (Brown, 1995, p. 47).

Roman society was dominated by a political model in which the unit was the city, in which a clear distinction was made between citizens and non-citizens. In the late Roman Empire, the old distinctions began to fade, and an economic model based on the distinction between rich and poor began to emerge, with the rich having an obligation to help the poor. A society under siege, such as that of Late Antiquity, placed great emphasis on solidarity, and the Christian message was, from this perspective, highly appropriate in the form of philanthropy. Peter Brown shows how, in Rome, aid for the poor given by public dignitaries in consecrated spaces in the city became less important, at least in symbolic terms, than that distributed in the name of Saints Peter and Paul, whose tomb on the Vatican hill outside traditional Rome grows exponentially in significance.

The Church's ability to freely accumulate wealth, following the measures adopted by Emperor Constantine, allowed the erection of great monuments in honour of the saints and the aid of the poor in their name. Masses held in honour of the 'unseen patron' are occasions of joy for a homogenous impoverished people, who are no longer discriminated against according to their legal status (citizen-non-citizen), all being people of God. The joy of masses dedicated to the saints is recorded in the writings of the time, with Brown specifically mentioning the bishops Paulinus of Nola and Gregory of Tours (Brown, 1995, pp. 44-51).

Alongside the poor we find women. Strictly controlled, they find a certain freedom during the processions dedicated to the saints and find solace near the grave. Sometimes derided without justification, widows played an enormous role in the life of the Church, from simple women who put their energy into the good upkeep of the space patronised by the saint, to extremely wealthy widows, the wives of senators, to whom society did not recognise any public role. Christian philanthropy is the door that opens to these people a presence on the public stage. Before, Brown says, philanthropy was considered a political act and politics was only for men. In the Christian religious community, these women are becoming increasingly important, with a strong voice in the life of the church and, as the bishop's political role grows, in the life of the city (Brown, 1995, pp. 52-55).

Thus, the saint and his tomb enter into a complex relationship with the city, the tomb having the potential to become the main reference in the life of the community. One step remained...

"In Milan," Peter Brown tells us, "the discovery of the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius in 385 was an exciting event. But it was not the first time that relics had been discovered or received in Milan. Christian cemeteries were dotted with rather large *memoriae* of the martyrs. What proved new was the speed and certainty with which Ambrose gathered the relics. He moved them after only two days from the tombs of Saints Felix and Nabor, where they had been dug up, to the new basilica he had built for himself; and he placed them under the altar, where his own sarcophagus was to stand. By this move, Gervasius and Protasius became inseparably connected with the everyday liturgy, in a church that the bishop had built, in which the bishop himself often officiated. Thus, they are an asset to the whole community" (Brown, 1995, p. 46).

Thus, in Peter Brown's words, Ambrose "tied the threads together", establishing full coherence between the community of believers, the inhabitants of the city, the cult of the saints and the role of the bishop, who becomes the seen patron, in turn under the protection of the "unseen patron". The "privatisation" of the cult of the saints is limited, the saint links the whole community, becoming the patron of the city. Charitable works are organised in the name of the saint, and miraculous healings become public shows demonstrating the power of true Christian faith over heresy and pagan beliefs, over "rustics" and barbarians. The saint becomes a centre that agglutinates multiple energies, including social and political ones. Especially in Western Europe, where the Roman Empire is collapsing, these episcopal centres, linked to the Roman throne, become the network that orders society. Where there are no martyrs' bones, they are 'imported', the 'trade' or exchange of holy relics constituting a form of unity in the Mediterranean Christian world (Brown, 1995, pp. 96-97).

The saint, as I said, is the unseen but fully accepted patron, for his patronage recalls the words of Matthew 11:30: "My yoke is good, and my burden is light." People feel fulfilled, happy in the presence of the saint, and a bishop like Paulinus of Nola, of senatorial origin, speaks of his relationship with St Felix, the martyr who patronises his episcopate, in terms of *amicitia* (friendship).

The special link with the saints, but also other elements, will make the bishops of Late Antiquity exceptional personalities, many of them becoming in turn saints - patrons of the cities they guided (Testa, 2010).

These "invisible threads" that Peter Brown speaks of in the case of the cult of the saints can also be identified in imperial politics. Constantine the Great built the Church of the Holy Apostles (now lost), in which he wished to gather together the remains of the 12 apostles, with whom his

descendants on the imperial throne were to be buried 'ad sanctos'. From the perspective of what has been presented so far, the symbolism is obvious.

In conclusion, far from being a superstition, the cult of the saints is a phenomenon that has become intimately intertwined with the life of the Church, with profound political and social implications. As Peter Brown puts it, "As remote as Rouen and Cappadocia, men and women were ready to put all the resources of high society in the late Roman world at the disposal of the cult of the saints. Far from describing a concession made by force to the blind customs of the 'herd', we met a group that took initiative and invented a public language that was to last, throughout Western Europe, well into the Middle Ages" (1995, p. 56).

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