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*Review Essay**

Earthly Treasure Spiritually Refined

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A trustworthy guide to all students of Christian antiquity, Peter Brown is Princeton University's Rollins Professor Emeritus of History. Born in Dublin in 1935, Brown was influenced early on by the *L'École des Annales*, a group who took its name from their work in the journal *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*. These forward-thinking scholars sought to break from traditional historiography in order to pay attention to all levels of society, taking into account not so much a seemingly monolithic doctrine, which emerges only retrospectively, but the collective concerns of a larger and more complex society. *L'École des Annales* formed Brown in such a way that he has helped generations of academics pay attention to more than just major players and canonical doctrines. Rather, they read the traditional narratives in the contexts of wider cultural, economic, demographic, religious and familial concerns, mundane matters unavoidably shaping how any group of persons thinks of historical issues. He accordingly opens this gargantuan work by admitting his debt to modern French historiography—singling out the sociologist and philologue, Louis Gernet (d. 1962)—who stressed how the memorable and well-cataloged aspects of a people actually invent nothing. Rather, Gernet asserted, the elite portion of any given people reflects and thus captures what the many below hold dear. Given this lifelong influence, it is no surprise that Brown would eventually turn his erudition into a study on a common universal that instantaneously unites as well as divides, one that characterizes both elite and plebe alike—money.

Brown's overall contention in *Through the Eye of a Needle* is that in reconstructing the concept of religious giving and renouncement, we see how an

* Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton University Press, 2012). 792 pp. $39.95 hb. $24.95 pb. Page references to Brown's book appear in the text.

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ecclesialized economy based upon beneficence (both temporal and eternal) gradually replaced the Roman civic system based on entitlement and euergetism. With the expansion of Christianity, the exclusively "top-down" care of the Roman state by its aristocracy was replaced by a more democratic understanding that all the baptized could somehow contribute to the welfare of the Church. Furthermore, while the Church enjoyed an ascendancy in the fourth century, the collapse of Rome's centralized civic authority a little over a century later created a vacuum that the Church's structure and systems would inevitably come to fill. In this sometimes hostile takeover, the Church moved from a budding community of renunciation to an established structure of security. In Brown's telling of this transformation, the mainstay of the Roman countryside is not the mega-estate of popular imagination but the *microfundium* (the smaller farm of self-sufficient landowners), churchmen display an unrivaled ability both to raise as well as to relinquish wealth, and eleemosynary activity emerges as an uncanny theology of material compilation and contribution.

As such, these pages are divided both chronologically and constructively into five main parts: (1) "Wealth, Christianity, and Giving at the End of an Ancient World," (2) "An Age of Affluence," (3) "An Age of Crisis," (4) "Aftermaths," and (5) "Toward Another World."

The first main part, "Wealth, Christianity, and Giving at the End of an Ancient World," consists of the opening four chapters and serves to set the stage of what the economic world of late imperial Roman society was like. This was what Brown calls the "age of gold" and he is quick to point out the clear stratification of society such an economy inevitably yields. The welfare of the state and the state of the cities were thus provided de haut en bas and while some continuity is evident from the aristocracy to the apostles, Christianity brought some significant changes as well. Like the nobles before them, the *episcopoi* were (literally) named in order that they might look out for those beneath them; but unlike the aristocracy, the bishops were not to be the rich's social equals. As the fourth century unfolded, wealthier and wealthier *nobiles* sought baptism, and many inevitably sought ecclesial leadership as well. Suspicions arose and canons were accordingly put into place, keeping the clerical class from being taken over by the wealthy. This new access to wealth that Constantine granted the bishops was meant for others. For with the Constantinian legitimization of Christianity, new sources of gifts, tax reforms, and clerical privileges, the Christian emperor now ensured the Church a level of security, providing monies for both internal growth and care for those on society's margins.

Such changes in fiduciary policy began a societal (and still at this point largely symbolic) sea change, but even more significant was how Christians provided almsgiving with a new vertical dimension. In the mid-fourth century, giving meant not only the betterment of others on earth; it also meant storing up treasure for oneself in heaven. Alms thus not only provided for others here and now; they

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also helped oneself in the world still to come. This "supernatural efficacy of the Christian gift" (p. 83) hence joined heaven and earth in ways up till now unrealized. To make his point, Brown fast-forwards a bit to the epitaph of Bishop Hilary of Arles (d. 449). While the first line on his sarcophagus would sound quite familiar to any pagan aristocrat ("he has left the husk of his flesh to fly up to the stars"), the next would ring foreign: "and he bought up heaven with his earthly gifts" (*Caelum donis terrestribus emit*). It was this new pattern of other-worldly giving that secured a greater bridge between rich and poor within the Church that Rome had never known. Almsgiving was now injected with eschatological expectancy, gathering together many diverse congregants: "To hold together such a socially differentiated group of givers was one of the great achievements of the Christian churches . . . based on a creative synergy between new wealth (brought by rich Christians) and a low-profile religious group that had already been schooled to engage in collective ventures" (p. 87). In this way wealthy donors came to see they needed the poor, upon whom they could not only lavish their own largesse but through whom they could manifest their new Christian charity.

The lengthy second part, "An Age of Affluence" (chapters 5–17) next turns to the standard figures of these years. Brown opens with the pagan noble orator, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (ch. 5–6), in order to show how the world of privilege and patronage worked when the Christians found themselves more and more mainstream. Symmachus (d. 402) is truly a bridge personality: one of the "last pagans" of old Rome, and among the new figures who find themselves contesting against a novel and foreign creed swallowing up many of his own neighbors (or as Brown sees it, Symmachus was "the first prefect to find himself dealing with an unprecedented and unwelcomed situation. The majestic consensus of the Senate had been shaken by a hitherto unheard-of religious issue" [p. 105]). We thus know Symmachus not only as the foe of Ambrose, as the patron of the Manichean Augustine, and as a leading figure of the fourth century clerisy. We also know him as the *princeps senatus* who had to argue against the Christian emperor's slow disendowment of ancient privileges (e.g., the closing of non-Christian temples and the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Senate). As such, Symmachus stands as the ideal transitional figure: in his riches and in his self-originating comforts, he chose to dwell in a world that was comfortable and recognizably Roman; yet in his public persona, he was forced to witness a people and their treasury in transition. In Symmachus we see the ancient Roman understanding of largesse: providing games and other civic duties for the plebs of Rome showed others his *potentia*. At this same time, others were also straining to show power and civic care, but not through charioteers and gladiators. Men like Ambrose, Paulinus, and Augustine learned from Symmachus, knowing firsthand the legacy and the power of such *Romanitas*. But at the same time they also knew that if such ambition were going to last (forever), it would have to be directed not only outward but upward as well.

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To show this shift, Ambrose (d. 397) appears next (ch. 6–8). Here we receive Brown's analysis of how monumental Ambrose's surprise election as Bishop of Milan in 374 really was: "both a symptom and a cause of changes in the texture of Christianity that were more decisive, in the long run, than had been the conversion of Constantine in 312" (p. 120). Recall the three things that struck the young Augustine (who had just been called to Milan by Symmachus, the prefect who was responsible for securing a suitable candidate for the imperial oratory post) when he first laid eyes on Ambrose: he was incessantly available to all who sought his counsel, he was celibate, and in his humility, he was content reading silently to only himself (*Confessiones* VI.3.3). In such shows of external lowliness, however, hid unmatched power: Ambrose is the first Latin *episcopus* to chastise an emperor openly, he was powerful enough to keep the Catholics united and the Gothic "Arians" at bay, and he would come to be regarded as a Christian leader who was welcome not only in the houses of his congregants, but in the halls of high politics as well (the image Brown uses to describe this new manner of leader is that of Symmachus on stilts teetering over the masses, while Ambrose was bonding directly with his flock). What moved Ambrose, with Brown focusing mainly on his *De officiis*, was not limited to a direct care for the poor but a larger program: radical social cohesion and true justice uniting all. Such *iustitia* aimed not only at uniting all as brothers and sisters but, even more organically, uniting all people equally to the earth's resources—but also, of course, at uniting all in a harmonious worship of the one true God. Ambrose did not simply want to alleviate the plight of some poor: he wanted to eradicate all of poverty. Because the benevolence and union experienced in pre-lapsarian Eden was his goal, he therefore insisted that avarice and the obvious concupiscence of the materially rich must be eradicated if all of humankind would ever again know paradise.

Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) is appropriately treated (ch. 9–11) after Ambrose. Brown next moves us from Northern Italy to North Africa, from the great imperial city to the more rustic surroundings of the dusty Mauritanian plains. Augustine's intellectual career was indebted to the ancient patronage system, with Romanianus, a true *amator patriae*, seeing something special in this young boy from Thagaste and thus providing for his later schooling. These sorts of connections, the trust and reciprocity that attended them, thus became the building blocks of Augustine's life, lessons he would never abandon. Unlike Ambrose's more grandiose plan for society, his African catechumen was content on a smaller scale: intimate communities, tightly-knit friendships and even *deificari in otio*—becoming deified in leisure (*epistula* 10 to Nebridius)—just might prove to be the sources of societal change. Brown points out these contrasts as he takes us through Augustine's life, from Manichaeism to his experience of the learned Christianity that would guide him into the Catholic Church, to a brief taste of monasticism, up through his decades as an ordained servant-leader of that very same body.

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Following Cicero's insistence that private property is in fact of the *ius naturale*, Augustine sought not to abolish wealth per se but the pride that imprisoned the rich to hold on to it for themselves only. This not only marked a break with Ambrose but also characterized Augustine's overall pastoral work. Whereas the followers of Pelagius (known for his rubbing elbows with the wealthy of Rome) could claim that if we were to get rid of the rich, we would no longer be bothered with the poor ("Tolle diuitem et pauperem non inuenies"; the Pelagian work, *De Diuitiis* §12.2), Augustine warned against the pride that threatened every created soul. It was not the riches but the worth we invest in them that corrupts: so, get rid of pride and wealth foregoes its ability to harm ("Tolle superbiam: diuitiae non nocebunt"; *sermo* 37.4). In this way, Brown rightly observes, Augustine warned against judging externals and thereby sought to squelch any divisions within his congregations. The Bishop of Hippo was not out to foment class warfare but to help every person hearing and reading him come to terms with how God was acting in his or her own soul. What mattered for Augustine was therefore not *how much* one doled out to various causes, but *the manner* in which it was given—to whom and why. What was at stake here was not the amassing of wealth but the appropriate care of God's affairs: the care of clergy, the building of churches, and concern for the poor. Of course, the rich had a particular role to play here. They were now expected to ensure that the Catholic way of life and worship was supported and starkly obvious in any given city; but the middle and lower classes too were expected to show care for the upkeep of their local Church as well as for those whom they inevitably found with less than they.

When Brown turns next to Ausonius (ch. 12), we are brought back to the clash between Christian and Roman. A poet from a wealthy Christian family, Ausonius (d. ca. 395) was introduced to a true "up and comer," a young *nobilis*, in Trier: none other than Symmachus who came to town in 369 in order (what else?) to give Valentinian I a massive sum of gold in order to fund imperial campaigns in Germany. This exchange enables us to see how abundance was enjoyed on both sides of the religious and cultural divide. But what marked one like Ausonius was his old-school Christianity, which worshiped heaven but left this world comfortably alone: "what was close to Ausonius was the *mundus* and all that went with it—the shimmer of the landscape, the sparkling variety of ancient literature filled with delightful stories of the gods, the warm breath of the Muses on the hearts of poets like himself. Christ did not challenge Ausonius' world. From a safe distance beyond the stars, He simply guaranteed it" (p. 202). This ultra-mundane theology was slowly being replaced, however, and no comfortable Catholic in the mid-fourth century could see what was in fact coming. Men like Ausonius who lived bifurcated lives between their villa and their sanctuary were going to be challenged by those who would tolerate wealth only as a heavenly conduit. Earthly treasure would have to be spiritually refined, if not seriously renounced.

And such radical renunciation is found in Ausonius's dear friend, Pontius Meropius Paulinus (ch. 13–14). Better known to us as Paulinus of Nola (d. 431), his

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life spanned the devastating civil wars and the unavoidable stress of Roman politics at the end of the fourth century. In these swift-paced decades, Paulinus publicly imitated the Rich Young Man and succeeded where the latter possibly failed. He left public office, gave away what he had (although he continued to live off and donate the income from his estates), and funded building projects at the shrine of St. Felix in the Neapolitan commune of Cimitile (the nearby necropolis for the city of Nola). This is how the businessman Paulinus of Bourdeaux eventually became Saint and Bishop of Nola, or as Augustine warmly remembered him in the opening pages of *De Ciuitate Dei*: this is *Paulinus noster*, who, although rich as one could be, made himself poor, with the result that when he was taken prisoner by the barbarians in 410/11, he could pray: Lord, I am no longer troubled by losing riches since you have become my treasure (*ciu. Dei* 1.10). As such, riches were nothing more than divine gifts to be shared and votive giving by this time could be aimed at both human bodies and heavenly buildings. These two converged at Paulinus' shrine where rich met the poor as pilgrims and together they worshiped God in their own way, thus achieving "a mystical symbiosis" (p. 235) wherein a modern-day *Diues* could finally provide for Lazarus who, in turn, offered his grateful prayers.

This new sense of symbiotic exchange was also publicly evident in the titular churches throughout Italy. Pope Damasus (366–384) marks a new awareness of patronage, as the wealthy could provide a place of worship and warmth for those who would otherwise go without (ch. 15). In churches now beautifully built in honor of the divine persons, various saints and particular Christian devotions, the wealthy brought the opulent houses of a few rich Romans down into the busy streets of all, and in so doing brought not only succor to the stricken but honor to the saints. Both pastor and patron, Damasus knew how to "work" this new system, utilizing love of leisure and of opulence of the wealthy for the glory of God. But as any fund-raising pastor has ever known, the rich are able to exert their influence and impose themsevles in perpetuity by exchanging their private wealth for public recognition, evidenced most clearly by dedicatory inscriptions on *objets d'art* and even family mausolea near the saints' bodies. Damasus's onetime secretary Saint Jerome (d. 420) helped to expand this sense of elite giving by raising an awareness of churches further east and could therefore easily translate almsgiving and material beneficence into fundraising for the construction of new monasteries and churches (ch. 16). Any discussion of Jerome invokes images of his friend and erstwhile editor Paula. It is thereby fitting that Brown concludes this lengthy section on women, patronage, and learning (ch. 17). Not only Paula but Melania the Elder and other lesser-known women like Theodora of Rome, an Ucceia from the Balkans, as well as Faltonia Betitia Proba (composer of the first Christian cento and a member of the extremely wealthy Petronii Probi, whom Brown treats only later and insufficiently in two brief paragraphs [p. 313]) read the scriptures closely, exhibited innovative pedagogies, taught the faith diligently, and played their own unique roles in these transitional years.

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Part III takes up "An Age of Crisis" (ch. 18–24), bringing us to the Fall of Rome in 410. Alaric's invasion of Rome marked the symbolic passing of an age, with the old Italian families as well as the new religious faces like Pelagius now unearthed and unsettled. As Rome found itself in transit, there came a greater awareness that no *gloria mundi* would go untouched: so, as the Visigoths descended upon the so-called eternal city, those who could afford to leave did. Most of Rome's wealth thus abandoned Italy and came to Roman Africa. In the chapters that follow, then, Brown returns to Hippo and to how the later Augustine came to view wealth. Not much has changed in his mind, but in his world North African Christianity was now able to boast more and more ornate places of worship, better-paid clergy, and deeper coffers intended for the poor. Augustine relied unabashedly on the clear structures provided by imperial strength: it was a providential fact that the Church should find a place in this world, and it was the bishop's job to provide something more important than material necessities. His divinely-ordained task was to impart existential (which meant eschatological) security. Brown has addressed this more extensively in his classic work *Augustine of Hippo*, but Augustine's stress on divine predestination gave the otherwise fragile late antique mind the security of knowing that despite how unsure everything in this passing age might be, the elect were held securely in the hands of the Almighty Sovereign.

In "Aftermaths," Part IV opens in Roman Gaul and the situation with the *sancti* of Provence (Marseilles, Arles, and Lérins, 400–440). Brown's guides through the first two chapters (ch. 25–26) are John Cassian, Hilary of Arles, Prosper of Aquitaine, and the Christian chronicler Salvian (d. 450). This swift canvassing of the Gallic Church reveals in fifth century communities a continuation of many of the same previous tensions. Cassian held that the monk alone contributes truly to a society that has for far too long exploited the weak; Hilary exploited all his connections to entrench his rigid view of ecclesiastical governance. Prosper challenged what he saw was becoming a dangerous divergence between the Christian in the pew and the one seated comfortably in the cathedra. But what Brown spends most of his time on is Prosper's very Augustinian notion that the merits of Rome have contributed ultimately nothing to the success of the Church: just as one's own personal history does not determine God's grace, Rome's ways cannot be said to have at all provided for the Church. Salvian's influential *De Gubernatione Dei* thus assures his Christian readers that God is the true helmsman of his barque and that even though the glories of Rome are certainly waning, the Lord is still guiding his people. To round out these reflections, chapter 27 transports us to fifth and sixth century Italy (and Pope Leo, Peter Chrysologus, and Pope Symmachus) in order to show what was happening with Rome's new understanding of itself, as well as the more practical implications that this new situation would have on the public treasuries and what that meant for the Church's wealth in light of larger society's growing impoverishments. The steward, not the stasher, could alone become a saint.

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In the fifth and final part, "Toward Another World" (ch. 28–29), these sixth century travails come to a close. Brown emphasizes how the clear division was no longer between Rome and Church but between cleric and lay. The embers of a pagan empire lingered, and any individual church's prosperity had by now become identified with its local ordinary. These bishops and monastic superiors were thus entrusted with a wealth to be held in trust for those entrusted to them. Accordingly, these bishops and abbots would be judged not by what they owned but by the degree to which they made "their" riches available to their congregations' needs. As different as empire and ecclesia may have appeared, human nature remains a constant, and Brown reminds us that the greedy autocrat—emperor or bishop—was most often removed by assassinations. While there are plenty of examples of the former dying in his own blood, the latter was removed from office by assassination of character, rumor campaigns, and infelicitous innuendo, for which Brown provides many examples as well. We finish not with the many "thugs, would-be warriors, and lordly rulers" (p. 505), but with the managerial bishop who looked out for his flock in the face of secular rulers (like the Frankish King Chilperic of Neustria, 561–584, who usurped money directed toward Christian development for lavish amphitheatres and other worldly matters) who also had to worry about balancing their own books. The imposition of priestly celibacy and the effects this would have on the clergy's own understanding of what they needed to live in this world (and what they needed to leave), the role of donors, and a renewed eschatological importance of almsgiving round out this final section.

Brown admits that keeping all these figures, facts, and movements of societies has proven "the most difficult book to write that I have ever undertaken" (p. xxvi). Notes and bibliography alone take up almost a whopping 200 pages of text (p. 533–717), while a very helpful index rounds out this work. Throughout these five sections and 30 chapters (including an all too short *Conclusion* [p. 527–30]) students of late antiquity and those taken by the emergence of a Christian culture are entertained and educated. By focusing on the understanding and use of money, Brown shows how Christianity sought its own advantage by uniting not only the rich and the poor but, more importantly, heaven and earth. The liquidity of currency was translated into alms and buildings, but it could also be exchanged for the hope of eternal salvation. This emerging theology grew as the Church found herself no longer as a persecuted superstition, but now as a leading agent in cultural and economic reforms. In the end, Brown's unmatched historical awareness proves refreshing. While it is true that we meet a Church with the clichéd cheaters and phonies in charge, for the most part the Christian coffers were controlled by people who at once tried to keep up with the unknown changes they faced, the new secular power they had been handed, as well as the obviously higher mandate to pass a camel through the eye of a needle by feeding Christ's sheep.

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