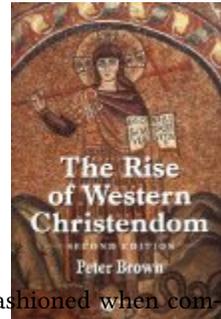


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Brown. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. x + 625 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-22138-8.

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Although second editions rarely merit reviews, this one does. The original *Rise of Western Christendom's* 368 Arabic-numbered pages are now 625. Three maps have become ten. The appended chronological tables have evolved into ten separate chronological inserts prefacing individual sections as well as into an expanded set of “co-ordinated chronological tables” at the end. Yet all these impressive quantitative changes may still be less important than the qualitative ones.

Brown claims to have revised his original work in order to deal with “the veritable ‘dam burst’ in the study of late antiquity and of the early Middle Ages which has taken place within the last five years” (p. 1). But there may be more to this story. The first edition was far from perfect. In my undergraduate early medieval class, it flopped: it presumed too much, covered too much ground too quickly, failed to drive home its major themes, and awkwardly combined a wide-ranging topical approach with a rough chronological framework. Without specifically noting the fact, Brown’s second edition of *The Rise of Western Christendom* systematically attempts to correct these deficiencies.

Brown now sets the book into its historiographical context by means of a greatly expanded introduction (three pages have become thirty-four). He clearly indicates his intent to describe the triumph of Christendom, but not the Rome-centered Western Christendom that was the subject of Christopher Dawson’s famous work of that title. Brown will present the triumphs of a host of “micro-Christendoms,” not only in his primary subject area, the Latin West, but also, when comparisons seem useful, in a broader arc that extends all the way to China. In Brown’s view, different Christianities helped define different peoples (passim, but especially p. 3). Such a

perspective may seem a little old-fashioned when compared to the work of those scholars who insist on the alterity of the Middle Ages, but Brown insists unapologetically that transitional Christianities were important steps on the way to our own world, the first manifestations of what would ultimately develop into a distinct western Christendom.

Although Brown basically retains his original structure and narrative, he has made significant changes. He now introduces people, places, and concepts in ways that take very little for granted. For example, as in the first edition, Brown begins by invoking Bardaisan (fl. 222), a Christian philosopher of Edessa whose treatise on free will both evokes and takes for granted a wide-ranging world of Christianities. Now, however, we no longer read only of “Edessa (modern Urfa, Turkey)” but of “Edessa (modern Urfa) [which] now lies in the southeastern corner of Turkey, near the Syrian border.” Then Brown goes on to explain the city’s relationship to the Fertile Crescent, to today’s archaeological landscape, and to the ancient urban landscape that once surrounded it (bringing forward some material that had appeared later in his original narrative). A half sentence has become a whole page! Thanks to Brown’s gift for vivid description, the result is not too heavy handed. And now even the most clueless reader should be able to imagine Edessa as an actual place. Also typical of the new edition is the way that, after Brown has discussed Bardaisan, he takes additional space to explain exactly why that opening anecdote prefaces the book and how it epitomizes the book’s perspective.

On the simplest level, these changes are reflected in more explicit transitions. In front of or following Brown’s magnificently flowing sentences, we now find

added signposts (or perhaps in some cases bill boards): “Distant Britain was one such slow moving society” (p. 76); “Even what now seems most ‘barbarian’ in the jewelry of the time was, in fact, produced by Roman emperors for the senior officers of the Roman armies!” (p. 101); “Education was as important as miracles” (p. 427). Now cross references abound, systematically directing readers to any character or incident previously mentioned.

Changes in chapter structure provide more signposts. One is the division of what had been part 2, “Divergent Legacies: A.D. 500-750” into part 2, “Divergent Legacies, 500-600,” and part 3, “The End of Ancient Christianity: A.D. 600-750.” Alas, although this appears to promise a chronologically tighter narrative, most of the material in the new part 3 actually pertains to events prior to 600. Subtitles have been added, albeit not into the index. They can be helpful, but are more arbitrary than organic when the prose has not been recast enough. For example, a subchapter on “The Conquest of the Cities” (pp. 77-80) begins with an initial page on Constantine’s churches, does eventually note the importance of cities to the spread of Christianity, but then finishes up with Athanasius and Ambrose. Subtitles do not suit all literary styles. While reading this book, I began to dread the prospect that someday an enterprising publisher would decide to insert them into Brown’s masterful Augustine of Hippo.

Brown adds substantive background. For example, we now learn more about the “fierce mood of Christians in the fourth century A.D.” (pp. 73-74) and about barbarian ethnogenesis (pp. 102-104). The history of the English Church is told rather than assumed (pp. 340-344). Perhaps too pessimistic is Brown’s new description of early medieval Rome (pp. 429-30, cf. Thomas Noble’s *Republic of Saint Peter*, which is missing here from the notes and bibliography).

Brown offers new evidence to support his arguments, largely drawn from recent research. Criticized on occasion for too readily accepting literary accounts as objective history and for failing to take enough of a “literary turn,” Brown has now included some pages on the creativity of the historians of the barbarians (pp. 139-141). He uses additional archaeological examples from Monte Cassino (p. 221), Gudne (p. 324), and San Vincenzo al Volturno (p. 446). He showcases the new research on Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury (d. 690), whose cross-cultural connections exemplify this book’s perspective (pp. 368-371). His treatment of the Vikings is 20 percent longer (pp. 463-488). Readers will welcome the fact that this new edition’s notes cross-reference another half-dozen years of Peter Brown publications.

How different this book is from those second editions which seek to sell more copies by incorporating just enough changes to render their originals obsolete! Not only has Brown updated notes and examples but he has also systematically restructured the text in order to make it more accessible to readers. But to what readers? Professional historians and students alike will be delighted with the guidance provided by the new introduction. All readers will also benefit from the subtle way that language evocative of the old “fall of Rome” model has been further diminished and by the way that the ending has been recast in order to focus attention more clearly on the book’s ostensible subject, the Latin West. Professional historians will appreciate the additional documentation. But students and an educated public are presumably the intended audience for the new date charts, subtitles, and background discussions. This helpful amplification comes at a high cost—a big book has become bigger still, perhaps fatally unwieldy. At best students will probably be assigned selected pieces rather than the full text, and this will be a pity because the book’s major strength is Brown’s overall breadth of vision.

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