

*The cult of the saints. Its rise and function in Latin Christianity.* By Peter Brown. Enlarged edn. Pp. xxxv + 187. Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2015 (first publ. 1981). £12.50 (\$18) (paper). 978 0 226 17526 3 *JEH* (67) 2016; doi:10.1017/S0022046916000762

It is not evident how to review the new edition of a book which was published thirty-four years ago, was then much discussed, raised vivid criticism and even more vivid applause, and profoundly influenced studies on late antique religiosity. All the more so as in the new edition the core of the book has not changed. The content of the six chapters, including notes, is as it was in 1981. They are preceded though by a new preface of twenty pages on which the reviewer should focus his attention, since most readers are probably familiar with the first edition. Yet since the title of this book, which is quoted in virtually every study on the cult of saints, seems to have a life quite independent of its contents, it is perhaps not out of order to start with a short summary of Brown's argument.

In chapter 1 Brown shows how profoundly new was the phenomenon which emerged in Christianity in the fourth century. This demonstrates that the traditional notion of the banality of the cult of saints, perceived as just a manifestation of a perennial and unchanging 'popular religion', cannot really explain this phenomenon, for it deprives it of its history and makes it an impossible object of historical research. The rest of the book shows specific religious, political and above all social conditions which gave rise and shape to the cult of saints. The story told by Brown is focused on two groups whose role was essential for this development. The first of these was the aristocrats who found in the cult of saints an ideal pattern of patronage, clientage, friendship, community and power, which not so much reflected earthly society as showed how this society should look. The second group was the bishops whose position demanded an acceptable way of spending some of their swiftly growing wealth. The social background to the cult of saints is the leading theme in the book, but Brown shows also purely religious changes which contributed to its rise: the growing fear of death, the awareness of sin and the need for intercessors who would be efficient in connecting earth and heaven.

In the 2014 preface Brown presents the background to his writing of the book at the end of the 1970s when new studies on popular religion, the Roman aristocracy and the saints in Islam became available, making him try to heal a split between the extensive Bollandist, textual knowledge of the cult of saints, and the ignorance of its role in late antique society. Brown also tells us what we have learnt since 1981. We know that the cult of saints should be studied against a wide geographical background, since it differed locally more than we suspected. We know that it was less unanimously accepted than we thought. We know that the cult of saints and its specific practices satisfied diverse needs, and, for instance, common people, feasting on the saints' *laetitiae*, did not necessarily follow the theological ideas of the bishops. We know more, though still little, about the private dimension of the cult of saints, which was certainly more important than the extant evidence suggests. Brown admits that he put too much stress on the role of the aristocratic impresarios of cult; not that their role should be reduced, but that it should not obscure a more shadowy presence of ordinary people. He also recognises that he was too ready to claim that the cult of saints 'humanised' the supernatural,

ignoring the survival of miraculous springs, trees and other objects at the end of antiquity.

Brown's book had two essential merits. First, it linked the cult of saints with social history, showing not only that cults of specific saints were popular in or destined for specific social groups, which medievalists had been aware of for a long time, but that the very phenomenon was deeply rooted in concrete social conditions. Even if Brown's vision of the link between the cult of saints and social reality was not unanimously accepted, it enhanced reflection in this field. Even more important, Brown showed that the cult of saints as such had its history, and that its evolution can be studied.

*The cult of the saints* was not meant as an all-comprehensive study of the phenomenon, even in the West (the subtitle which specifies that the author's interest is focused on *Latin Christianity* seems often to pass unnoticed). Thus, it would be unfair to criticise what Brown did not write about. Yet it is worth naming some issues, important for our understanding of the cult of saints, which, years after the first edition of the book, still need investigation.

One of them is the evolution of the phenomenon. If Brown made the development of the cult of saints an object of historical research, the history presented in this book is somehow limited to the big change at the end of the fourth century. This change is also illustrated by the later evidence, for instance from late sixth-century Gaul, but this only suggests that after the big shift not much happened, and this seems to me to be not entirely true. The evolution of the phenomenon in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries needs to be documented and explained.

Another issue which demands further study is the cult of holy monks, the super-heroes of early hagiography. In the West, as in most regions of ancient Christendom, they did not have any cult, at least not until the very end of the sixth century. What was the link between the two phenomena, namely admiration for living monks and for dead martyrs? Why did the former, when alive, function in a similar way to the latter, but cease to do so after death?

There is also the question of the relation between the cult of saints and the cult of relics. It is true that few cults developed without relics, and that most of those which did subsequently 'produced' holy objects. But it seems that there was a perceptible shift between the start of saintly cult and the emergence of relics. For a while many saints could do without relics. Also, the cult of relics cannot be considered to be simply an aspect of the cult of saints, for the bones of martyrs were not the only holy objects which started to be venerated and considered to be sources of power.

Another topic which is only touched upon in the book is the re-emergence of the belief amongst Christians that miracles could still happen (and that these were not confined to biblical times). Brown deals with this phenomenon seriously, but does not ask how this started in a society in which there is little evidence of an expectation of miracles. Once this phenomenon began it kept working by itself, but how did it start if people who knew about the miracles of old did not expect them to occur in their lifetime?

Thus the image presented by Brown, thirty-four years after the publication of his book, certainly can be both discussed and completed. But it is still inspiring. When reading *The cult of the saints* again for the purpose of this review I found there

several quotations and ideas which I was sure I had discovered myself and was not entirely happy to realise that it was probably not so.

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*Strange beauty. Issues in the making and meaning of reliquaries, 400–circa 1204.* By Cynthia Hahn. Pp. xiv + 302 incl. 126 colour and black-and-white ills and 1 frontispiece. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. £36.95 (paper). 978 0 271 05078 2

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Since the mid-1990s Cynthia Hahn has been one of the principal voices in the study of relics and their containers (known as reliquaries) and the questions that relic cults – a central aspect of medieval devotion – raise for both art historians and historians of religion. Major exhibits, preeminent among them ‘Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe’, mounted in Cleveland, Baltimore and London in 2010, and recent scholarship on the saints, most importantly Robert Bartlett’s *Why can the dead do such great things?* (Princeton 2013), have made the role in European history of holy people and the holy places associated with them a topic of increasing urgency. It is therefore hard to understand why Cynthia Hahn’s intelligent and important book, *Strange beauty*, which sums up and carries forward her work of the last two decades, has been neglected in the review sections of journals of general medieval and ecclesiastical history.

Hahn’s book is an extremely useful survey of reliquaries, organised according to type or genre. Hence it provides a partial update of Joseph Braun’s classic *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* of 1940. But *Strange beauty* is much more. It raises questions that every medievalist and every art historian of the period between 300 and 1700 needs to consider – questions not only about the nature of relics but also about how bodies, objects and matter itself become holy; about how the form of an image structures devotional response; and about the fundamental issue of the nature of representation. Hahn’s study has implications for art historians and historians working well beyond her cut-off date of 1204.

Organised chronologically and according to type, Hahn’s book moves from early Christian reliquaries, such as purse-shaped or casket-shaped containers, which often worked to obscure the nature of their contents, to the thirteenth century, when what she correctly calls ‘shaped reliquaries’ (in contradistinction to the German term ‘redende Reliquiare’ or ‘speaking reliquaries’) became more common but by no means universal. She underlines the newer approach to relics, pioneered by Julia Smith and others, that rejects older definitions of relics as body parts and understands them instead as bits of holy matter that have been in contact not only with the tombs and bodies of the saints but with holy places – such as the Holy Sepulchre or the Field of Blood (Akeldama) in Jerusalem – as well. In line with the new art historical interest in materiality, she considers not only the form but also the materials of reliquaries. See, for example, her discussion (p. 46) of why objects that image resurrection are made of ivory, a substance that reflects as well as contradicts the nature of flesh and thus explores what it would mean for body to endure for all eternity. In a