

The Workings of the Spirit

Peter Brown *The New York Review of Books* June 6, 2024 issue

A new history of Christianity traces its transformation over a thousand years from an enormous diversity of beliefs and practices to Catholic uniformity.



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The Council of Nicaea, convened by the Roman emperor Constantine I in 325; illustration from a seventeenth-century Ethiopian manuscript

Reviewed: **Christendom: The Triumph of a Religion, AD 300–1300** by Peter Heather

Peter Heather's *Christendom* is a colossal book written by a colossus in the field. Aptly subtitled "The Triumph of a Religion," it covers a millennium, from the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 312 to the

baptism of Grand Duke Mindaugas of Lithuania, the last pagan ruler in Europe, around 1250. Heather has always had a vision of Europe as a whole, Mediterranean and northern, eastern and western. His *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (1991) introduced us to the Gothic society that once spread from Crimea to the Danube, across the plains north of the Black Sea that are now war zones in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Since then he has closely studied both sides of the fateful confrontation between the Roman Empire and its neighbors.

Throughout his career Heather has been an advocate of the sheer weight of the wider Europe that lay beyond the knowledge and sympathies of the Roman Mediterranean. He has shown how the Huns opened trade routes between Central Asia—even China—and the Danube. His studies have done justice to the importance of the Amber Road, along which amber and other such goods moved from the Baltic to the Adriatic. He knows Eastern Europe from late antiquity to the Middle Ages. One of the many exciting new discoveries that enliven the grand sweep of *Christendom* is his use of state-of-the-art dendrochronology—the study of tree rings—which revealed the forts and settlements that accompanied the rise of Christian kingdoms in Bohemia and Poland around the year 1000.

But Heather also knows his Romans. In *Christendom*, as in his earlier work, he characterizes with particular clarity the Roman governing class, its recruitment practices, and its outlook. He gives special attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the unique classical culture that bound the Roman elite together like a mandarin in their own Celestial Empire. He follows the profound changes that took place when this thousand-year factory of superiority lost its purpose as the empire receded from Western Europe after 600 and as men of the sword replaced men of the pen in all but the higher reaches of the clergy. With that change, Europe is said to have entered “the Dark Ages.” Heather reminds us that this image of darkness is not the whole story. It was a negative image “largely constructed by outraged classicists” who were blind to the new literary forms that were created for a more restricted elite of monks and clergymen—a silent mutation of an entire culture that has been studied with greater sympathy by recent scholars of early medieval Europe.

This range of interests makes Heather uniquely qualified to tell a grand story that has often been told before, but seldom with such a sense of freshness and the unexpected. So what are the “takeaways” from this thick volume? And do we need to agree with all of them? First and foremost, Heather resolutely rejects the romantic notion that Christianity rose to the top of late Roman society by its intrinsic merits alone, without the help of the powerful. His attitude is close to that of J.B. Bury, who argued that “it must never be forgotten that Constantine’s revolution was perhaps the most audacious act ever committed by an autocrat in disregard and defiance of the vast majority of his subjects.”

To justify this view, Heather offers a cogent analysis of the structure of Roman upper-class society and its relation to the Roman state—a relation that made elites peculiarly vulnerable to pressure from a Christian court. If pressure was exercised by Constantine and his Christian successors on the wider population, it was the gentle violence of a state that lacked the strength and organizational capacity of modern dictatorships. The late Roman state was not “a decadent Leviathan,” as many scholars from the 1930s onward deemed it to be. These scholars saw the later empire as a warning for their own society, faced with the rise of totalitarian states in Europe and with what struck some of them as the ominous expansion of government associated in America with the New Deal. As a result, they greatly exaggerated the Roman Empire’s coercive powers.

Heather points out that the late Roman state could not enforce an ideology; it was too “rickety.” But it could seduce. Its immense ambitions depended on networks of friends and clients that stretched from the court to the lower reaches of the gentry in a never-ceasing waterfall of favors asked and favors received. If one wanted to get anything done, one had to please someone. And ideally this was someone who had pleased the emperor and those around him.

Once the emperor made plain that he was an orthodox Christian and that he would shut the “divine ears” to the petitions of heretics, Jews, and pagans, the message trickled down with surprising speed. A confessional state was born. Beginning in the reign of Theodosius I (379–395), access to public office and to the full privileges of Roman citizenship was restricted to coreligionists, who held something like party membership in a modern totalitarian country. As Heather notes, it was only then that the Christianization of the Roman world could be said to have begun in earnest. And it began very much from the top down.

There were problems with this solution. Not every Christian was entitled to this membership. It was limited to those who adhered to the Nicene Creed (which asserted the absolute identity and equality of three High Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in a single mysterious Trinity), laid down at the Council of Nicaea in 325. But many Christians did not adhere to it. Goths and Vandals followed a variant of the creed that had been accepted as perfectly orthodox by the emperors before Theodosius—Constantius II (337–361) and Valens (364–378), with whom the Goths had close relations in the Balkans up to the crisis that led to the crushing defeat of Valens in the Battle of Adrianople (now Edirne, Turkey) in 378. These Christians—Romans and barbarians alike—were called Arians (but only by their enemies) because they accepted the views of Arius, an early-fourth-century teacher from Alexandria who was revered by many but whom the Nicene Christians dismissed as a rogue intellectual.

The Arians saw Christ as “similar to” but not identical with God the Father. For only from an ever so slightly different level (from one step down, as it were) could Christ play the all-important part of divine intercessor with a distant God in favor of the human race (an imaginative pattern that echoed the relations between lowly clients and their patrons in the favor-ridden world in which they lived).

Once the Goths and Vandals became masters of the western Mediterranean, they set about creating their own version of a confessional state. To establish Arianism as the official religion of their kingdoms, they used the same cocktail of blandishment and constraint that had been used so effectively in the Roman Empire. And recent research has proved that they came “within a whisker” of success, to use Heather’s vivid term. A document discovered in Laon Cathedral in northern France and recently decoded reveals that in 484, 20 percent of the Catholic (Nicene) bishops in Vandal Africa had lapsed (or “perished,” as the document puts it) and joined the Vandal church. Plainly the cocktail had worked. This raises the possibility that Western Europe could have become—and remained—Arian under “barbarian” rule. As Heather points out, this hardly supports the usual triumphant story of a Catholic Church heroically resisting Arianism in the West.

Christendom is full of such salutary surprises. It spans the centuries with a single robust argument: throughout most of this millennium, lay rulers, first the emperors and then the local potentates, called the shots. All over Western Europe, from the Atlantic coast of Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries to Iceland in the tenth, the well-trying formula—the combination of the carrot and the stick—was sufficient to create Christian communities, which were then served by local bishops and clergy as effectively as their means permitted. A central ecclesiastical authority was largely absent; as Heather explains in the last chapters of his book, a powerful papacy developed only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

What we gain from this robustly nonclerical approach is a sense of adventure. In Heather’s account, every generation produced its own style of Christianity, as different notions and practices were brought to the fore by changing circumstances of the society in which it had come to be so deeply embedded. We are not presented with a single juggernaut-like Christianity, proceeding with little change all the way from Galilee until it came to rest, in 1250, on the shores of the Baltic. Instead we have a series of Christianities, each so distinctive and different that we are invited to play games of time travel, in which we can imagine Christians of one age being “dumbfounded,” as Heather writes, when confronted with the practices and worldviews of Christians of another age. To read *Christendom* from cover to cover (an exercise I would advise, if only to savor its Gibbonian sweep

and control of infinitely varied evidence) is to experience the whoosh of a roller coaster as Christianity passes from one form to another against the background of an ever-wider Europe.

It is also a lesson in historical perspective. Heather ends with the Lateran Council of 1215, at which Christianity once more transformed itself. But this time, for good or ill, it became the Catholic Church that we can recognize: the church of the Crusades and the great cathedrals of Gothic Europe. It was now a church centered firmly on the papacy. It legislated on every detail of the Christian life. Its representatives and decrees reached the farthest corners of Europe. Alas, it was also a church flexing its muscles for the first time by turning random local prejudices against heretics and Jews into the Inquisition—the product not of mindless bigots but of professors in the dynamic, newly founded universities.

We tend to think that Catholic Christianity had been like that throughout the early Middle Ages. Far from it. What Heather offers us is a thousand years of rich, decentered creativity in which the population of Europe moved—and moved mercifully slowly, many of us think—“from an original position of enormous religious diversity to Lateran uniformity.”

What can we add to this robustly argued story of the perpetual entanglement of religion with state power that lies at the roots of Western Europe? I suspect that Heather imagines many of his readers to be what the English call “blokes”—average Joes with their heads screwed on and with little time for metaphysical matters. They relate easily to scenarios in which Roman mandarins and pagan warlords slip into Christianity as a result of a little nudge from on high. “Aggregate behavior” in a governing class interests them more than stormy accounts of individual conversions, such as the one Augustine provided in his *Confessions*. The result is reassuringly easy to imagine, as when, around 600, the Saxons of Kent trooped into their new church, recently converted from an ancient temple: “Some participants would presumably get the point that, ideologically, the world had nevertheless changed; others would have their fingers firmly crossed behind their backs...and others were probably still there, as they always had been, primarily for the beer.”

But is that all there is to it? Heather is scrupulously fair in this matter. He does not treat what he calls “spirituality” as being of no importance, but he gives it a minimal place in the “triumph of a religion.” It counts for little compared with the heavy systemic forces of patronage, wannabe-ism, and the threat of dishonor. It seems to me that Heather’s model of Christianization from the top down makes average believers seem more passive than they really were. He often writes of the progress of the Church as if he were a CEO viewing with contentment the smooth functioning of his enterprise: by the twelfth century, the Church is possessed “of an expansive and coherent delivery mechanism...unified corporate standards and operating procedures...[and] is now set to sell it to the mass of Latin Europe’s religious consumers.”

Let me make a suggestion: modern historiography of the expansion of the early Church seems to have left little room for the Holy Ghost. Don’t get me wrong: I do not speak as a theologian but as a historian. We should remember that the people we study lived in a world crowded with invisible beings. Some of these beings were demons driven by chill malevolence. We hear much about them in literature and in contemporary belief. But humans could also be touched by the warm presence of benevolent spirits, seen as ever ready to protect and to inspire individuals. We should not forget that even the classical Muses, outdated though they might appear, continued to be surrounded by a numinous aura. When the senator and poet Paulinus of Nola announced to Ausonius in the late fourth century that he had been converted to Christianity, it was enough for him to explain to his old mentor that he had found that the mighty wind of Christ blew into his heart with greater warmth than did the plump classical ladies still displayed on innumerable works of late Roman art.

A language of inspiration, based on belief in the proximity of nurturing powers, served to explain unusual actions, new departures, and unprecedented acts of creativity. Praying in church around 270, Anthony, a comfortable Egyptian farmer, was inspired by the words of Christ in a Gospel: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). This inspiration came to him in a manner described in a contemporary Syriac version of his *Life*: he prayed “that a thought of righteousness might rise up in his heart.” Some divine power had bubbled up within him. And hearts kept bubbling in this way all over Europe and the Middle East. Such experiences were by no means random and marginal. Major cultural enterprises got underway because they were conceived of as driven by the Holy Ghost. Mesrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet in the fifth century in order to translate the Bible. He was said to have had a vision of this alphabet being written on hard stone by the hand of God “as clearly as if on a field of snow.” In 680, in Whitby on the Yorkshire coast, Caedmon, a humble equerry, was inspired by an angel to sing a short hymn of praise in a high Saxon speech previously limited to elite warriors.

Those who felt themselves moved by the Holy Spirit (or by other spirits) in this way were not peripheral figures—random “enthusiasts” to one side of the aggregate behavior of the majority. They often were the ones who moved the horizons of Christian endeavor ever further forward. Take, for instance, Drythelm, a landowner in southeastern Scotland around 700. He received gripping visions of a Hell colder than any winter stream and of a Paradise that was “a very broad and pleasant plain, full of the fragrance of growing flowers.” But this was not the end of it. His guiding angel explained to Drythelm that he was seeing things that were different from Heaven and Hell as they were commonly believed to be and had doubtless been preached to him in church. In between Heaven and Hell there was a middle space: a near-Heaven and near-Hell where believers could purge themselves of sin. Drythelm—not a learned monk but a married layman—became the figure to whom people in the region turned for guidance on matters of the other world. His notion of a middle state anticipated the official articulation of the doctrine of Purgatory by many centuries.

Equally transformative was a figure who has been wrapped for centuries in a veil of false familiarity: Saint Patrick, long known as the Apostle of the Irish. Patricius (as he was called) was a Romanized Briton whose father was a civic worthy and slaveholding landowner. He suddenly springs out at us—as if caught, for a moment, by a vivid flash of lightning—in the ink-black darkness of Britain in the last days of Roman rule, from which few written sources survive. We meet him first in *Christendom* around 400, as “the last individual known to have been educated by a professional [Latin] grammarian.” His chances of further education in the Roman manner were brutally cut short. Caught in a raid by Irish slave traders, he ended up in the far west of Ireland, in what is now County Mayo, looking out across the immense Atlantic. For all he knew, he had reached the very end of the world. He escaped his master—his account is the only record in ancient literature of the adventures of a runaway slave. Returning to what remained of his kin and country, he shocked them all (good late Romans in their last days) by announcing his intention to return to Ireland and live among the “barbarians” as a Christian preacher. He seems to have succeeded.

Everything we know about Patricius (except from notoriously unreliable later legends) comes from two documents written in his own hand, perhaps in the 450s: his *Confession* (not a confession of sin so much as a declaration of his God-given right to act as a bishop in Ireland) and his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* (a swinging rebuke to a fellow Briton and warlord whose slave-raiding expedition in Ireland had swept up newly baptized Irish Christians—possibly during a mass baptismal ceremony—to sell to the heathen Picts of southwestern Scotland). Given the near-total absence of written evidence from Ireland and Britain at this time (and the tantalizing quality of the archaeology of the period, which seems to show unexpected continuities with the Roman past in some regions and complete breakdown in others), Patricius’s *Confession* and *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* are priceless documents. But perhaps their main significance is that they bear, as it were, an Irish postmark: they were written *Hiberione* (in Ireland). They are the first extensive works of Latin literature to be composed beyond the frontiers of Rome, in a “barbarian” land. Patricius had achieved his goal: a church

of the Irish alone (though partly ministered to by a British clergy), most probably situated in the west of the island.

How had he done it? We still do not know. Patrician scholarship is littered with hypothetical scenarios. What we do know, from Patricius's repeated (indeed, insistent) presentation of himself in both the *Confession* and the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, adds a missing dimension to Heather's *Christendom*. Patricius saw himself, and expected others to see him, as a man "filled with the spirit" in an ancient tradition that reached back to the visionary experiences of Saint Paul. He identified himself so completely with Paul that it is often hard to decide whether he is speaking of the unruly Ireland of his own times or of the riotous cities of Asia Minor in the early days of the Roman Empire as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

What we know of Patricius from his writings is, in fact, the story of Patricius and the Holy Ghost. It is a dramatic tale. Even when he was a teenager in captivity, the Spirit would "come to the boil" as he prayed a hundred prayers a day. The heat from his devotions shielded him from the cold of a rainswept Irish winter. He was not alone in receiving physical protection from faith: in the late 400s Saint Severinus—like Patricius a wandering stranger—walked barefoot across the frozen Danube. As late as 1958 the distinguished scholar of Sufism Annemarie Schimmel traveled across Anatolia in the depths of winter with a mystic in the act of composing a hymn: "The inner heat of the singing...warmed up the car to such an extent that the windows became fogged."

Patricius's visions continued after his return to Britain and his second journey to Ireland. They have a surreal intensity about them: "And again I saw Him praying within myself,
And I was as if inside my body,
And I heard over me, that is, over the interior man,
And there He was praying vigorously with groans
and amidst these things I was stupefied and I kept thinking
Who He might be who was praying in me
But at the very end of the prayer thus He spoke out that he was the Holy Spirit."

It is the language of Saint Paul—"The Spirit helps the weaknesses of our prayer...and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26)—turned into a gripping picture of the mind. Such visions were never random events. Every appearance was a call to action. Each validated a stage in Patricius's creation of an indigenous church. To envision a church in Western Europe in the 450s, beyond the reach of Rome, was as adventurous a leap across ancient frontiers of the mind—a moving forward of the horizons—as the translation work of his faraway contemporary Mesrop Mashtots. Altogether, in Patricius's *Confession* and *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* we dig down to find, surprisingly close to the surface, the extensive groundwater of belief in the workings of the spirit lying beneath so many Christian endeavors that defied the prudential calculus of those whose aggregate behavior is so well studied in Heather's book. There is room in the history of Christendom both for those who "were probably still there...primarily for the beer" and for those who were "filled with new wine" (Acts 2:13), with unpredictable results, such as still amaze and delight the historian of every aspect of the triumph of a religion.

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