

NONFICTION

Looking at Early Christianity Through a Different Lens

In “Christendom,” the medievalist Peter Heather takes on a crucial millennium.

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Did Constantine I's legendary conversion herald the Christianization of society — or merely the Romanization of religion? Pictures From History/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

By Paul Elie

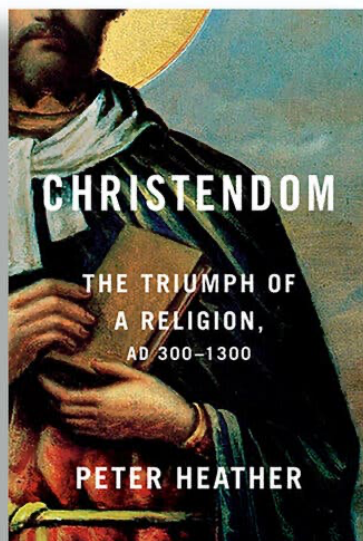
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CHRISTENDOM: The Triumph of a Religion, AD 300-1300, by Peter Heather

In 1987, the Oxford professor Robin Lane Fox published “Pagans and Christians,” a landmark narrative history of late antiquity, focused on a moment that Fox called, memorably, “the point at which the ancient world still touches ours directly.” That turning point involved the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, in A.D. 312, and the acceptance of Christianity as the state religion of the empire.

The subsequent spread of Christianity across the Western world drove developments from the founding of cities to the framing of the idea of original sin to the suppression of religious diversity through violence. Fox gave fresh emphasis to the “pagans” in the story, consolidated a generation’s worth of scholarly breakthroughs and reached a broad public.

One picks up Peter Heather’s “Christendom” — also published by Knopf — with the earlier book in mind. Heather is the chair of medieval history at King’s College, London. His book, too, runs over 700 pages, and deals with a number of recent developments in related fields: “New Testament studies, Early Christianity, Oriental studies, Islamic studies, and, particularly, religious and legal studies of the central and high Middle Ages.” He also foregrounds Constantine’s conversion, which he suggests led not to the spiritualizing of empire but to “the Romanization of Christianity” — religion turning itself into a branch of the Roman state.



And just as Fox saw the end of the fourth century as akin to the end of the 20th, so Heather sees the period — the so-called Dark Ages — in light of the present. Most previous Western accounts of the era were produced in predominantly Christian societies, and they tend to frame it in terms of Christianity's prevailing — light over darkness, as if ordained by God's own purposes. But in Heather's view, trends in Europe today have created a need for historians to "reassess ... Christianity's rise to pre-eminence in the light of its modern eclipse."

So his intent is to re-examine "the historical processes that first generated the defining coincidence between Europe and the cultural dominance of the Christian religion," to view Christianity as diverse, and to see its spread as contingent: Things could have gone differently, and "official Christianity" found resistance at every turn, not least from other Christians — those long dismissed as eccentric or heretical.

It's admirably strict and straight, as objectives go. The narrative approach is likewise austere. "Christendom" doesn't feature protagonists, stories, rising and falling action, or shifting points of view. It's a series of set pieces in which the animating presence is the historian.

Heather weighs evidence, unpacks problematic assumptions, dismisses familiar ideas. Some of the letters of Paul, for instance, are "fakes"; Constantine probably didn't convert to Christianity at all, but "probably always was a Christian and revealed it only in stages, as it became politically safe to do so." He avoids the familiar: the sack of Rome, Irish monks saving civilization.

The result is an extraordinary synthesis — and one that is, for the most part, extraordinarily hard going. Following Heather through the history of Europe from 400 to 1200 is like joining an expert climber on a sheer ascent of a daunting cliff-face in heavy weather. You traverse pages, looking for footholds: the Goths ... iconoclasm ... monasticism ... Abelard and Heloise. Mostly, it's hard surfaces. "When Geiseric's comparatively soft religious policies are added to what we know more generally about the nature of the Vandal-Alan coalition he led to North Africa," reads one typically dense passage, "it's probable that the undoubted damage the king visited on the Nicene Church of North Africa — even in Proconsularis — was not the direct result of targeted persecution." When you do make it through, another challenge awaits (the "twin processes" of "cultural interaction and legal subordination" that brought about conversions from Christianity to Islam), and then another (the Magyar threat to

the East Frankish dukedom in the 10th century). And you've been forewarned that there is no rest at journey's end: The "triumph" of the subtitle is no good thing, just another development in need of scrutiny.

It's deeply reassuring to know that there's a person alive in our time who has mastered all this history. And it's to Heather's credit that for the most part he doesn't try to simplify the material. When he does, he is less than persuasive. The first chapter opens with an allusion to a "game of thrones"; the Irish missionaries are said to have won converts because they had "all the best stuff."

His most prominent interpretive motif is that Christianity thrived through "an almost limitless capacity for self-reinvention" — a "chameleon-like" ability to adapt that enabled it "to meet the very different religious needs of the widely varying bodies of religious consumers it encountered and encompassed at different points in its unfolding history."

But what quality in Christianity fostered such reinvention? We never find out — and the religion-as-marketing interpretation also runs against Heather's stress on Christianity's diversity, which means Christians can't easily be divided into rulers and ruled, producers and consumers.

For most of its reading, the strongest impression the book leaves is of how remote the history of those times and places feels when the notion of Christianity's exceptionalism is left out. That, it seems, is by the author's design: This will be a free climb, with no master narratives to cling to.

But then, two-thirds in, we are suddenly on solid ground. Christianity is reinvented for cities and for monasteries. Peter Lombard writes the "Sentences" — "the first systematic work of Christian theology ever produced" — and in turn a Catholic "new learning" emerges that gives rise to the universities of Paris and Bologna. Bishops at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome clarify doctrines of the seven sacraments and the need for kings and peasants alike to seek penitence from the church — codifying the "economy of salvation." Francis and Clare in Assisi and Benedict in Nursia "tackle the problem of selling complicated theological messages to a mass public"; the Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen brilliantly combines visionary experience, poetry and new models of the contemplative life for religious women.

Heather's argument becomes clear and strong, too. What he calls Christendom is the result of two intertwined developments: one that "brought the population of Europe from an original position of enormous religious diversity to Lateran uniformity"; and another that transformed Christianity from an imperial religion to a remnant of lost Roman dominance to a shaping force behind the emerging "new imperial dynasties, who provided unified religious leadership to most of the Latin west again across the last quarter of the first millennium." But, alas, the clarity does not last: Heather argues in a final chapter that the complex developments he has rendered with such care were forms of coercion.

In all this, something is missing — or has been left out, once again by the author's design, as far as I can tell. This is any recognition of religious faith as a quality unto itself, not just an expression of other, firmer-seeming qualities — a desire for order, a will to power, a means of rallying the troops when the flesh is weak. It's no special pleading to suppose that faith is the key to Christianity's capacity for self-reinvention — the quality that Constantine, the Irish monk-copyists, the bloodthirstiest crusaders and Hildegard somehow had in common. Without it, "Christendom" is more learned than persuasive.

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