

Peter Brown — *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. Pp. xx, 504.

This is one of the best history books I have ever read. It is beautifully written. It will affect the work of social and religious historians not just of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but for all periods. It clarifies a whole range of murky subjects which are basic to women's historians' concerns about women and the Church from any period in which the ideas of Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom and the Desert Fathers were cited with regard to marriage, continence and women. Brown uses a wide range of Greek and Latin writings from the first to the sixth centuries A.D. to trace changes in pagan, Jewish and Christian teachings about sexuality in the face of established notions about familial, patriarchal and ultimately civic power within late Antiquity.

Brown ignores neither the new scholarship on the authenticity of Pauline letters, nor that on the frequently circulating texts now considered apocryphal, nor the works of writers later condemned as heretical. He states at the outset that he deals with "evidence of an overwhelmingly prescriptive and theoretical nature, written exclusively by male authors" (xvi), but like his earlier study of *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), *The Body and Society* proceeds beyond the pronouncements of Church Fathers to see the social and political reality that often inspired their actions, their statements and their positions in religious debates. By describing the interplay between the writings of such male (and elite) authors and what we know about the lives of Christian men, women, children and slaves in the Mediterranean world of the first centuries A.D., he has provided a balanced view of the contribution of Judaism, paganism and the early Church to later attitudes about marriage and sexuality — attitudes pervasive in the middle ages and which are still with us today.

It is in this consistent restoration of the writings of the Fathers and their humbler colleagues to a more complete contemporary context that Brown's brilliance in this book is most apparent. For example, sections of the pamphlet *Adversus Jovinianum* by Jerome have frequently been cited by feminists as evidence of the church's increasing misogyny. After reading Brown, one realizes that the situation is much more complicated. Jerome's misogyny was that of a satirist and borrowed from earlier pagan writers. His attitudes probably represent, at least in part, his own ambivalence about being dependent on wealthy women patrons and being isolated with them in Palestine. The tract was written in response to what he saw as a specific threat to monastic ideals of celibacy by a lapsed monk claiming that married couples, once baptized, were on the same level as consecrated virgins. Brown reminds us, moreover, that the pamphlet was unsuccessful — almost immediately withdrawn from circulation by Jerome's friends —, and does not represent the opinion of most Church leaders of the time.

Brown describes this period's great debates over heresy and the authenticity of prophecy as part of a larger struggle for control of the Church. That struggle was between the increasingly vocal ascetics and the still-frequently married or widowed, but usually continent, bishops and clergy of what he calls the Great Church. This struggle for authority, centering on the second and third centuries, he describes as part one of "two silent revolutions that would determine the future development of religion in Europe and the Near East — the rise of dominance of the rabbis within Judaism, and the creation of a strict division between clergy and laity in the Christian

Church" (142). Obviously, sources are difficult to find for these processes and even where they exist, Brown does not elaborate on the process within Judaism. However, the very fact that Christianity appears to have paralleled a contemporary struggle in Judaism suggests an inevitability to the process of separation of clergy and laity in the Christian Church.

Brown also shows how despite its being the purveyor of patriarchal sentiments to later ages, Christianity was nonetheless a liberating force for women, children and slaves of late Antiquity. In the extremely patriarchal society of pagan Rome, a child was a person only once it had been lifted from the floor by its father — otherwise, it was left as a foundling. As he describes it, only the ideals of the philosophers regarding proper decorum in marital relations, and the necessity of providing heirs to continue civic traditions protected young brides and their children from this terrible patriarchy. He also calls to mind the pain and suffering which the high mortality of the late Antique world placed on women, who were constantly expected to bear, nurse and care for children. Pagan society could continue to replace itself only by nearly full female participation in reproduction. Thus, however unsympathetic to women we may find our Christian "inheritance" from this period in which were formed the Church's views of sexuality, abortion, contraception and a woman's right to control her own body, Christian patriarchy was limited in comparison to what had preceded it.

Thus, Brown makes it clear that the life of the consecrated virgin or widow must have provided a welcome escape for women of the period, and that Churchmen were frequently defensive about such women as a result. Tracts such as Tertullian's objection to consecrated women — *On the Veiling of Virgins* — were motivated in part by the need to placate traditional Roman patriarchs (its protectors and "big donors" to the Church) as asceticism began to remove the bodies of more and more women from reproduction. Yet that tendency towards female asceticism was hard for the Church to resist, for as he points out:

In Christian circles, the vocal advocacy, for well over a century, of extreme views on continence had brought about a situation unheard of in Judaism. Married men trembled on the brink of being demoted to the position of women: their physiological involvement in sex made them ineligible for roles of leadership in the community. Some women, however, edged closer to the clergy; continence or widowhood set them free from the disqualifications associated with sexual activity (146).

What is interesting to feminists in this regard is Brown's argument for a "structural" basis for the widespread participation by women in the new Christian religion. Women are not simply more saintly than men, and women are simply not more susceptible to religion than men. Brown sees increasing female participation in the Church at that time as a result of demographic circumstances and social ambiguities within the new religion. He explains that

in reality, continence was often the only option that young persons could take. In a small group, where marriage with pagans was severely discouraged, and yet where considerations of social status had by no means been suspended among the saints..., many believers simply avoided *mésalliances* by encouraging their children to grow up as virgins.... An 'order' of widows sprang up in all churches from an early time.... What we know of other groups where remarriage is discouraged indicates that widowed women would have become a numerically important element in any Christian church" (147-148).

Brown's will undoubtedly not be the last word on such consecrated widows for he discounts the religiosity of their behavior, but he neither denies women's participation in early Christianity nor overly romanticizes it — a welcome balance.

Brown never forgets that early Christians thought differently than we do about religion and sexuality, nor does he trivialize into a "topic" the complicated intertwining of sexual fears, misogyny, patriarchy and the Roman civic duty to reproduce and raise children, as recent writers on misogyny have tended to do. He convincingly shows that late antiquity was a period in which many voices were speaking about body, sexuality and the renunciation of reproductive activities. It remains for medievalists and modern historians to begin reevaluating the contributions of the Greek and Latin Fathers to later debates on monasticism, asceticism, clerical celibacy and Christian marriage. To do so with the same consciousness of context which Peter Brown has brought to the origins of those notions in late antiquity will be a difficult task, but he has certainly provided us a solid place from which to start.

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Ken S. Coates and William R. Morrison — *Land of the Midnight Sun. A History of the Yukon*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988. Pp. 336.

It has been an interesting year for students of the history of northern Canada. Characteristically, the list of publications relating to northern history is brief and decidedly thin, but with the release of Catharine McClellan's *Part of the Land, Part of the Water*, new life was injected into a somewhat dejected body. Morris Zaslow has completed his second northern volume for the Canadian Centenary series, and now the productive team of Ken Coates and W.R. Morrison has assembled a volume which surveys Yukon history from ancient times to the present. Although much of the ground covered in this book is not new, *Land of the Midnight Sun* does provide a convenient single reference source with numerous illustrations and several helpful maps.

In many ways, this book is very traditional history. It begins with the now-obligatory chapter on native peoples before contact in which Indians and geography are described together as a sort of "natural history" background scene to the real action, which occurs as the Europeans arrive on stage. To the authors' credit, the impact of various events in Yukon history on the aboriginal peoples is noted throughout the book, but the emphasis is such that this is clearly a non-native point of view. Even in the chapter devoted to the fur trade, native responses are discussed only briefly and the real concern is with European exploration and competition. There is little reference to the current scholarship which has changed radically our perceptions of culture contact experiences in the subarctic.

The chapters which cover Yukon mining exploration and society from 1870 to 1918 are much more lively. Here, the authors mix anecdotal, personal vignettes with analysis and presentation of the broader context to produce a colourful and entertaining description. There is also an interesting chapter on whaling and Herschel Island, an important though little known aspect of Yukon history. While much of the