

ANTIGONE SAMELLAS

Death in the
Eastern Mediterranean
(50–600 A.D.)

*Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum*

12

Mohr Siebeck

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Antigone Samellas

Death in the Eastern Mediterranean (50–600 A.D.)

The Christianization of the East:
An Interpretation

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

I am intrigued by subjects that defy the facile scholarly categorizations which assume that the universal and the particular, the objective and the personal, the diachronic and the contingent, belong necessarily to different fields of study. For that reason I chose to examine from a historical perspective phenomena that seem to be most resistant to change: beliefs about the afterlife, attitudes towards death, funerary and commemorative rituals, that is, acts which by definition are characterized by formalism, traditionalism and repetitiveness.

I decided to study the process of Christianization because of all social and philosophical structures religion was the one I could understand the least. It was difficult for me to specify the distinctive traits of the Orthodox faith or to explain, in a satisfactory manner, the resurgence of militant Islam, the appeal of Buddhism to Europeans, and the enduring prestige and institutional power of the Church in many countries of the West. I was hoping that my immersion into the documents of the past might help me gain a more profound insight into the problems of the contemporary world.

In retrospect I see that this work did not just answer preexisting questions but also revealed to me viewpoints and interests I had not even suspected. That it is impossible to treat social history as a field of inquiry which is independent of, and separate from, political history became evident while I was examining in what way the appropriation of funerary and commemorative rituals by the new religious elite of bishops contributed to their rise to power and, conversely, how the emergence of the episcopal elite influenced the form and content of ritual. I discovered that emotions might have their own history by exploring the political, social and psychological parameters which made possible the birth of the largely unknown to the pagan world feelings of compassion towards the poor, the lepers and the strangers who had been left unburied. Furthermore, I examined the religious colourations that Christianity gave to the experience of grief and the influence it had on the current attitudes towards death.

What made me persevere in the difficult task of making sense of the disparate testimonies of the inhabitants of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, was my conviction that the dead had something worthwhile to say

about the meaning of life, especially, for those of us who are almost certain that the decipherment of the genetic code, with all the gifts of Time that it promises, will solve the problem of existence.

The book is a revised and abridged version of the dissertation that I completed at Yale University in May 1999. I would like to express my gratitude to Harry Attridge, Andrew Gregory, and to my advisor, John Matthews, for respecting my ideas. I would also like to thank William Harris who followed my work in the very early stages and Yale University which gave me an A. W. Mellon fellowship in the year 1995-96.

I am indebted to Zlatko Pleše for discussing with me the philosophical chapters, as they appeared in my dissertation, and to Mariana Quintana and Carol Triantaphyllou for being perceptive readers. I would also like to thank my parents for their support and, above all, Stavros who was always near me.

Among the many reasons I have to be grateful to Guy Stroumsa, I singled out that he was human. Finally I would like to thank Professor C. Marksches for agreeing to publish a relatively long manuscript, with many footnotes, in the series *Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity* in an era when commercialization threatens to nullify every intellectual effort.

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Introduction

The overall aim of the book is to register and explain the religious transformations that marked the passage from antiquity to the middle ages and, more specifically, to explore: How and why the inhabitants of the Roman Empire converted to Christianity? What was the “comparative advantage” that the new faith had over Judaism and the numerous cults of paganism? Which of the innovations it introduced offended the religious sensibilities of the adherents of the traditional cults? If, according to E. Durkheim “neither the thought nor the activity of religion is evenly distributed among the believers; according to the men, the environment and the circumstances the beliefs as well as the rites are thought in different ways,” would it be possible to establish which were the points of contact between the language of Christian belief and the existing class and cultural idioms?¹ Finally what was the impact of the new faith on the prevailing ideologies, mentalities and social practices?

I have been mainly interested in the regions which were the first to receive the message of Jesus: Syria, Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Palestine, Edessa — a city in Mesopotamia where all kinds of Christian creeds flourished — without neglecting, wherever the evidence permitted, to shed some light on the religious and social history of Nestorian Persia, Monophysite Mesopotamia or semi-Arianizing Armenia. The sources I had at my disposal, funeral orations, consolation decrees, funerary art, epigraphic and archaeological evidence, historical, legal, philosophical and medical texts, hagiographies, church canons and the homilies of the Greek and Syriac-speaking Church Fathers, enabled me to examine religion as a “total phenomenon” and to probe, on the one hand, the possibilities and, on the other, the limitations of the most influential theoretical approaches to Christianization.

The psychological perspective, which has its roots in Marx and Freud, views religion as a symptom of a pathology that develops in times of distress. According to E. R. Dodds, the climate of insecurity which began to prevail after the reign of Marcus Aurelius, owing to political instability,

¹E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (1965), p. 17.

military upheavals and economic crisis, prompted the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to embrace the eschatological and moral doctrines of the new faith. Increasingly anxious about their future and desperate to find a way out of life-in-the-flesh, men and women of all social classes became easily proselytized to an otherworldly religion which offered miraculous salvation and eternal life to all.²

In the first chapter I argue that there is no sign that the inhabitants of the East felt any particular anxiety about their fate in the other world or that they craved for the eschatological certainties that the doctrine of resurrection allegedly provided. Till the end of late antiquity the orthodox creed remained subject to multifarious heretical interpretations that tried to reconcile the Christian dogma with Jewish theology and the Greek philosophical traditions. Furthermore, a non-negligible minority who could be convinced neither by the rational arguments of bishops nor by god-sent miracles about the truth of Jesus' promises, still clung to the Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis and the belief in the immortality of the soul or, in contrast, appeared perfectly reconciled with the prospect of absolute non-existence.

What the quest for salvation implied was liberation from the tyranny of the passions. In Roman antiquity, philosophers of all persuasions, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, asserted that the Word, as this was understood by their school of thought, had the power to heal the soul from every affliction. In a similar manner bishops later proclaimed that the teachings of Jesus were a panacea for grief and the other disturbing emotions. The Christian physicians of the soul assimilated and enriched the philosophical remedies that were currently in use. To the therapy of the Word, which included recital of well-crafted orations and familiarization with the soothing wisdom of ancient poetry, was added the perusal of the Bible. The therapy of Reason which the Stoics applied to forestall the shock of unexpected misfortune became identical to a life-long preparation for death that centred on ascetic practices which brought about the separation of the soul from the body. Finally the content of the Epicurean palliative of pleasant thoughts was transmuted into musings concerning the resurrection while a religious kind of grief was invented, contrition, to take the place of the wild grief that overwhelmed the bereaved during the practice of ritual lament.

Inheriting but also accentuating the "psychotherapeutic" orientation of Hellenistic philosophy, Christianity gave an all-embracing solution to the problem of death, asceticism, which influenced, to a certain extent, the

²E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), passim.

way men experienced their emotions and the prevailing modes of commemoration, as well.

Asceticism was a transcendental existentialism which demanded to render oneself an animate image of the divine prototype by fully exploiting the morally transformative power of the will. The emergence of the idea of man as a work of art in Platonic circles and its later elaboration by the Church Fathers contributed, on the one hand, to the eclipse of the sculpted funerary portrait and, on the other, to the spiritualization of the image and the birth of the icon. The ethics of interiority affected the form and content of the lapidary communication that had been established between the dead and the living. And in conjunction with the mid-third century economic and military crisis it made the epigraphic and artistic traces of the departed vanish in many regions of the East.

In the first three chapters my purpose is to discover the eclectic affinities that Christianity had with Judaism, paganism and Greek philosophical thought. Subsequently I explore in what ways it constituted a radical departure from the intellectual traditions and moral norms of the past.

In open violation to the existing pollution taboos that kept away the holy from anything that might have been stained with the impurity of death, the followers of Jesus sanctified the remains of mortals and erected cultic edifices over them. The propagation of the blasphemous innovation had as a corollary the desacralization of the pagan religious hearths, given that, often, it was on the foundation of temples, which had been profaned by relics, that the victorious monotheists raised their churches.

The violent dissemination of the cult of the relics constituted the sinister aspect of Christianity's disrespect towards the prevailing pollution taboos. In contrast, the tactile revolution, which caused the arduous followers of Jesus to approach the till then abominated bodies of lepers, to take care of the infectious victims of plague, and to bury the corpses of strangers, was the appealing aspect of its iconoclastic break with tradition. Owing to the birth of a novel sensitivity towards the poor and the ethically-motivating force of Christian otherworldliness the stigma of impurity was removed from the dead and all the marginalized social groups.

In the fifth chapter, I assess the effect of religious change on the ideological function of ritual to highlight the particular characteristics of the elite of bishops that put into place the philanthropic ideals and to show in what way its authority differed from that of the city-councillors from whose ranks it arose. In order to measure the scope of episcopal influence on the society at large, I examine the impact of Christianity on the affective, solidaristic and honorific functions of ritual. In the end I argue

that the emergence of a charismatic elite, which was far more authoritarian than the pagan priests and the Jewish rabbis, and the consolidation after the mid-third century of a rigid ecclesiastical structure, together with the philanthropic values and self-conscious exclusionism of the new faith, were of crucial importance for the formation of the idea of the cemetery and the dissemination of the charitable practices.

In the sixth chapter my main interest is to prove, on the one hand, in what fashion the antagonism between the different heresies was conducive to the expansion of the charitable schemes and, on the other, to examine the factors which hindered the development of the Christian "welfare state."

Last, I simply put on record the survival of the spirit of paganism well beyond the end of late antiquity and the eventual accommodation of the new faith to those attitudes towards death that it condemned.

Some of the conclusions I reach seem to confirm the views of the historians who claim that Christianity was imposed from above, by imperial decree, in the age of Theodosius. According to the most important exponent of the "coercion thesis," R. MacMullen, the pagan populations were forced to convert to the new faith owing to the intimidating tactics that provincial governors, bishops, monks and other religious zealots pursued against them, as they put into effect the laws which unambiguously dictated the destruction of the ancient places of worship and the persecution of the followers of the traditional cults. The only mode of persuasion that Christians knew how to use was the language of miracles. But, in fact, this discourse was also authoritarian since its unique force "lies in the fact that it destroyed belief as well as creating it — that is if you credited it, you had then to credit the view that went with it, denying the character of god to all other divine powers whatsoever."³

It is not enough to postulate that the production of miracles obeyed the logic of forced Christianization, but we also need to examine the oral and written means of ecclesiastical propaganda, the rhetorical strategies as well as the rituals which heightened the receptivity to the manifestations of the supernatural, making it, in this way, possible to believe that putrid corpses might turn into fragrant relics or that Seven Sleepers would be resurrected two centuries after their death in impeccably youthful form.

In empires that are manned by an exiguous bureaucracy, imperial officials cannot enforce the law unless they have the consent of local communities and magistrates.⁴ Therefore, it does not suffice to attest

³R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A. D. 100-400)* (1984), pp. 108-109.

⁴R. Van Dam, "From Paganism to Christianity at Late Antique Gaza," *Viator* 16 (1985), pp. 1-20; S. Bradbury, "Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century," *Classical Philology* 89 (1994), pp. 120-139 and esp. 132-139; concerning the way

Christianity's discordance with the harmonious polyphony of the pagan world, but we must also try to understand under what circumstances a religious elite arose which was willing to implement the harshest measures against its opponents, and by what means it was able to win the collaboration of the people in its destructive enterprises.

It is to the merit of the sociological approach that it has alerted us to the fact that a considerable number of pagans converted to Jesus' Truth on their own will, by stressing that it was mainly the spirit of self-sacrifice which the committed members of the Church showed during times of epidemic, the compactness and agility of their organizational networks and, overall, their charitable practices that explains the dynamic of Christian expansion. R. Stark, in particular, has helped us understand the mobilizing power that the exclusive dedication to one faith can have, the organizational advantages that the intolerant and fanatical monotheism had over the nonexclusive cults of pluralistic polytheism. However, he has also put forward unfounded generalizations, such as the following: the new religion was a "revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world."⁵ Archaeologists have demonstrated that the mature period of late antiquity (380-600), when the pace of Christianization quickened and the new creed began to predominate over the other cults, was an era of relative prosperity.⁶ The misery and exploitation of the labouring classes are constant variables in the period under study and therefore cannot account, by themselves, for the ascendancy of the expansive monotheism. Apart from the "life-opportunities" and the conditions of death of the poor, we have to explore the political dimensions of charity and to ask ourselves why the "Axial Age" dawned in the Eastern Mediterranean after the 250s and had divulged its full potential by the end of the fourth century; that is, why it was then that "a new type of intellectual elite became aware of the necessity to construct the world according to some transcendental vision."⁷ Furthermore, it needs to be shown how this transcendental vision was

that monks and bishops affected the process of law-making in late antiquity see P. T. R. Gray, "Palestine and Justinian's legislation on non-Christian religions," in *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean* (1993), ed. D.W. Hobson and B. Halpern, pp. 246-247, 254-263.

⁵R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (1996), p. 161.

⁶G. Tate, *Les Campagnes de la Syrie du Nord du 2e au 7e siècle: un exemple d'expansion démographique et économique à la fin de l'Antiquité* (1992).

⁷Introduction of S. N. Eisenstadt in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (1986), p. 1; in the "Axial Age" a tension begins to develop between the secular and the transcendental order: Ibid.; see also P. Bourdieu, "Genèse et structure du champ religieux," *Revue Française de Sociologie* XII (1971), 295-334, esp. 306-307.

related to the development of a more considerate attitude towards those who were in need.

When I say that I am going to offer an interpretation of Christianization I am not referring to a causal model of explanation where causation means "a regular sequence of antecedents and consequents with no inner logical connection between them," but rather to a structural model of explanation. "Structural systems imply relations of a quite different kind, correlative rather than sequential or consecutive." In my effort to understand why certain aristocrats began to be concerned with the problems of the indigent in late antiquity, I took it for granted that people have many different reasons for pursuing the same course of action and that there is a "specific plurivocity" to the meaning of social praxis.⁸ In addition to that, I took into consideration that human beings tend to idealize themselves and, accordingly, do not divulge first to their own self, let alone to others, which are the real motives of their deeds.

During the first steps of my inquiries it was not just the complications of human psychology but also the nature of the historical sources I had at my disposal which threatened to frustrate my effort to grasp why men adopt new religious beliefs and practices in a certain era. In antiquity, it was considered sacrilege to speak ill of the dead (Pliny, *Ep.* IX. 1). Funeral orations, commemorative inscriptions and funerary portraits reveal the attributes that an individual thought desirable and flattering to have, but not how the departed behaved in reality and what his or her actual appearance and character was. The second problem I had to face arose from the fact that the ecclesiastical sources, which provide the bulk of evidence about religious and social life in the early Byzantine era, tend to present the Christianization of pagans and Jews as a success story predisposing thus the historian to view the so-called triumph of the new faith as something inevitable. I overcame the initial difficulties by submitting, wherever that was possible, to source criticism the documents which honoured the memory of the dead and by garnering information about the most influential agents of the novel religious ideas, the Christian bishops. At the same time I tried not to succumb to the opposite temptation and examine history from the side of the defeated, as W. Benjamin would urge us.

My aim is to connect the religious structures which the new faith brought into being with the political and social structures of Roman antiquity and to explore in what way cultural traditions and class mentalities intersected with religious beliefs and practices. I wish to show

⁸P. Ricoeur, "The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. G. Thompson (1981, repr. 1994), pp. 213, 219.

that Christianity was an ideology which legitimised the new conditions of rule of the same civic elite and that, simultaneously, it was also a rational philosophy, a way of life which ideally made one impervious to grief, a faith, a cluster of moods and dispositions which were induced by means of ritual and became manifest in deeds of altruistic other-concern.

Chapter 1

50-600.

An Era without Eschatological Anxieties

Introduction

In one of the discussions he used to have about religion with his friend and mentor L. Wittgenstein, John Drury expressed his admiration for the vision of Origen, the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, according to which at the end of time even Satan and the fallen angels will recover their former glory. It is regrettable, he added, that this so generous theodicy received the brand of heresy. Wittgenstein objected that had it been otherwise, had the Greek understanding of the dogma of resurrection been accepted, life would have been left bereft of any solid value-system and therefore would have been deprived of its meaning, its seriousness. For he took for granted that those who seek salvation “believe themselves to be not so much imperfect, as ill.” They thirst for “certainty — not wisdom, dreams or speculation — and this certainty is faith.” Faith is what is needed by “their heart, their soul, not by their speculative intelligence.” Religious beliefs are beyond reason, beyond explanation and beyond contradiction.¹

Historians, unwittingly, have followed Wittgenstein’s line of thought. Religious intellectuals as well as ordinary converts, the most influential interpretation of Christianization assumes, “responded to the church’s promise of life after death and... felt terror before the threat of divine judgement too.”² According to another variation on this theme, the new faith prevailed over the rival cults because it gave men the unshakable certainty that eventually they would be able to obtain a final and irrevocable victory over death. While the original, unqualified formulation of the “credulity thesis” easily inferred that the Word of Jesus, by virtue of the miraculous power it had to allay the fears about the unknown was best

¹R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990, repr. 1991), pp. 540, 541, 383; Quoted phrases: *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. A. Kenny (1994), pp. 300, 301; see also pp. 302-304 and L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (1966), pp. 52-58. I found very helpful the analysis that the British anthropologist R. Needham makes of the nature of belief in *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972), *passim*.

²R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire. A. D. 100-400* (1984), pp. 72- 73.

suited to answer the psychological needs of an age of anxiety and superstition.³

Such interpretations attribute the appeal of Christianity to the absolutely simple and nonrational character of its eschatological message without taking into account that in the Greek East of late antiquity faith was hardly ever separated from reason, nor dogma from dialectic. In the circles of the educated the doctrine of resurrection was considered to be as irrefutable as the axiom of a mathematical syllogism, the self-evident *pistis* which makes possible the further investigation of truth. The religious elite, in particular, having set, from the outset, the premises of intellectual inquiry was willing to elaborate on the intricacies of Christian doctrine and invited its opponents to "debate in a philosophical manner about the world or the worlds, about the matter, about the soul, about the resurrection, the judgement, the retribution, the passions of Christ."⁴ In its view such discussions were beneficial for the interlocutor without, by any means, putting the fundamentals of faith at risk.

I hope that by the end of this chapter the following will have become evident: first, that because the Christians inherited the argumentative spirit and the philosophical methods of the Greeks, the new eschatological ideas remained controversial throughout the period under study; second, that the dogma of resurrection contradicted many of the theological and philosophical presuppositions which pagans and Jews respected and therefore had, at least initially, a limited appeal to the learned; and, third, that, overall, from the mid-first century till the end of late antiquity the intellectual and psychological climate remained the same. The novel eschatology did not replace the ancient beliefs about the afterlife, it was simply added to them. The inhabitants of the East, both before and after their Christianization, felt neither terror nor anxiety about their fate in the other world. What impresses the historian who reads their inscribed and written testimonies is the very different ways with which they reacted in the face of death, the variety of interpretations they gave to symbols of immortality, or to doctrines which proclaimed that God had the power to bring to its heels the till then indefeasible Hades.

³About the eschatological certainties that Christianity offered see R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (1986), p. 326. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), p.135. L. Feldman accepts without questioning Dodds' thesis and attributes to it explanatory value in L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (1993), p. 370.

⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* II. 9. 1-4; F. Solmsen, "Early Christian Interest in the Theory of Demonstration," in *Kleine Schriften* (1982), vol. 3, pp. 377-378; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 27. 10 (SC 250), p. 96 (quotation).

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