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Through the eye of a needle: wealth, the fall of Rome, and the making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD, Peter Brown (book review)

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Christianity’s Growth


Well known for his biography of Augustine of Hippo and his other books on religion in the era of late antiquity, Brown (history, emeritus, Princeton Univ.) traces in this newest work the establishment of the early Christian Church and its tense, complicated relationship with money in the western Roman Empire. Beginning just after the rule of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, and with extensive references to the lives and writings of major Christian writers, Brown traces the growth of the Church and the evolution of what it meant to be a Christian in this era—in particular, the religion’s gradual impact on the social ideas of privilege and philanthropy, and how these ideas affected the people of the empire in ways both material and spiritual. VERDICT The sheer scope of this history is daunting, but scholars, theologians, and anyone interested in late Roman history or early Christianity will find this a fascinating view not only of the Church’s development, but also of the changing concepts of wealth and poverty in the last centuries of the Roman empire.—Kathleen McCallister, Univ. of South Carolina Lib., Columbia


In this ambitious book, Wilken (history, Univ. of Virginia; The Spirit of Early Christian Thought) aims to present not just the history of a religion but rather the history and development of a “religious community.” A major theme is that Christianity is a “culture-forming religion.” It is because of its transformative force that Wilken extends his account beyond the early Church to a millennium; many of the transformations did not reach fruition until that much time had passed. VERDICT Given the vast scope of material covered, it is perhaps unavoidable that the book becomes dizzying and superficial at times, leaving readers asking questions and, most likely, looking to other books for further detail. However Wilken’s descriptions, particularly of the often-neglected locations of early Christianity (e.g., Armenia, China, India), make this a worthwhile read. Serious readers seeking an introduction to early Christianity or seeking to contextualize its global growth will find this useful.—Fred Poling, Long Beach City Coll. Lib., CA


Architectural writer Weder, along with longtime Selwyn Pullan associate Barry Downs, architectural historian Donald Luxton (Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia), and Kiriko Watanabe (assistant curator, West Vancouver Museum), each contribute an essay to this companion to the West Vancouver Museum’s forthcoming fall exhibit on Pullan, who was known for work that was well composed and quite planar, celebrating the abstraction of North American modern architecture before postmodernism took the stage in the 1980s. The volume chronicles...