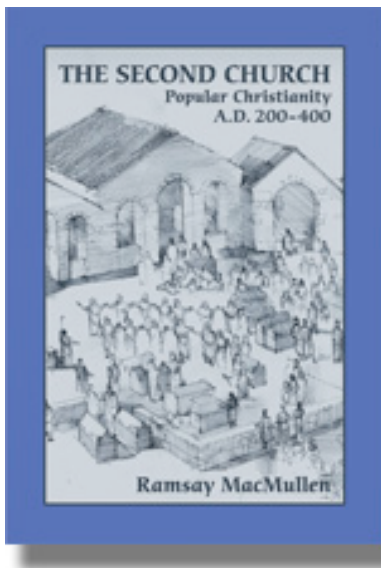


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MacMullen, Ramsay

The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400

Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement
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Ramsay MacMullen, Dunham Professor Emeritus of History and Classics at Yale University, has written another important book. *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* advances certain themes found in his earlier work, notably *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (1986) and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (1997). In these earlier books MacMullen encouraged us to pay attention to the myriad ways in which ordinary Christians and pagans influenced each others' piety and religious behavior in the early Christian centuries, this despite protestations and harangues from their social superiors. As a social historian, MacMullen focuses on what sacred space and ritual action can teach us about the common religious life of all levels of ancient society. As a historian of ancient religion, MacMullen serves us as an adept compiler and interpreter of the archaeological remains of religious belief and practice, the manner and placement of tombs and inscriptions and churches. In both capacities he asks and answers questions in such a way that the reader, specialist and nonspecialist, is drawn into the inquiry and left with a greater appreciation of what may and may not be known about a large facet of ordinary life in the ancient world.

This book is no different. In a manner not unlike Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (1934), MacMullen surveys the various regions of the Roman Empire for evidence, mostly physical in this case, of the belief and practice of

what he terms “the second church.” Beginning on the eastern border in Dura-Europus, MacMullen weaves archaeological site descriptions, observations, and inscriptions with written sources such as Didache and Didascalia, to present an alternative picture of Christian life and practice in the period before Constantine. The focus here is on a detailed description of the Christian house church complex at Dura-Europus, the most important Eastern Christian archaeological site dated prior to Constantine (third century). Scrutiny of the remains here reveals a hierarchical and gender-divided religious society, largely mirroring the ancient society within which it was found. But the more important conclusion, and one that is repeated throughout the book, is that the meeting space at Dura would have been far too small to accommodate even the small number of Christians in the city. There were other places in the Christian East, infinitely larger spaces, wherein Christians gathered, ate, and worshiped: the ancient cemeteries beyond the walls of any particular *polis*.

Following the peace of Constantine in the fourth century, the situation remains largely the same in the Christian East: church space remains sharply hierarchical (e.g., a raised platform for the clergy marked out by a low wall) and divided by gender. In addition, there would have been enough room only for a small percentage, perhaps 5 percent, of Christians to actually attend services in the churches. Here again the second church, the vast majority of ordinary Christians, would have gathered outside the walls in the cemeteries and the newly emerging martyr shrines resulting from Diocletian’s persecution. There they practiced a much more ancient and common form of religion, both feeding the dead (holes drilled into sarcophagi for this purpose) and communing with them (tables or *mensae* having been set out in or near the tombs). To the recorded chagrin of the more socially elite religious leaders, here there would have been dancing and singing and pleading for divine succor for very ordinary lives. The story of the church in the East both before and after Constantine is a story of two churches.

In the second and third chapters MacMullen pulls together what can be known about church buildings and other physical remains (inscriptions and martyrdoms) in Greece, the Balkans, and North Africa. A detailed examination of the archeological stages revealed in the excavations of the church at Philippi, for example, reveals a relatively constant pattern of church growth throughout the fourth century followed by—consistent with other sites explored in the book—a more exponential growth of church membership in the fifth century. But in Philippi, again consistent with Christian remains elsewhere, the focus of the church structure was not upon God or even Jesus but upon the hero, the unknown semidivine figure (martyr?) around which the church at Philippi was built and rebuilt several times. So also the description of the Manastirine cemetery just outside Philippi gives evidence both of martyr veneration and the cultic practice of the second church, again through gathering and feeding. As MacMullen so adeptly describes it: “They were

focused on the simplest realities, the merit of those who dared to face the persecutions, the saving power earned by such champions, and their power in turn to answer to the needs of others in this life on earth” (50).

A review of Christian archaeological sites in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa reveals that fully three-quarters of the Christian structures have been built outside the cities. These cemeteries and martyr shrines again attest to the ubiquity and popularity of the martyr cult. Augustine’s mother Monica avers to the practice of bringing wine and cheesecakes to the martyr shrines with enough to share with others. MacMullen quotes the archaeologist Frederik van der Meer, “*mensae* shot up everywhere out of the ground like mushrooms” (63), and his own statistical data to show that it is quite apparent that the second church thrived in North Africa as well.

MacMullen’s description of Rome (and Italy) is particularly detailed and instructive. Here we have enough evidence above and below ground to posit some pretty hard evidence for the existence and practice of the second church. Calculating the population of Rome in the second century, the number of burials needed per year would be around 22,500. Land outside the walls of Rome would have become more and more expensive. This of course led to the propensity of those of lesser means, including the second church, to burrow deeper and deeper into the ground in order to bury people literally one on top of the other (*loculi*). Here also as some Roman Christians became wealthier, we find a few able to afford larger tombs (*cubicula*). Here both furnishing and wall painting provide evidence for funerary dining with the deceased.

Drawing all this detailed description—perhaps the most useful aspect of book—into an extended commentary and conclusion finds MacMullen at his best as provocateur and scholar. First he challenges our modern notion of religion as primarily spiritual as opposed to cultic or ritual. The religion of the second church was precisely cult and ritual rather than creed and catechism. The ubiquitous gatherings at the cemeteries and martyr shrines to eat and drink with the dead and to ask for their favor antedate Christianity and continue among Christianity’s pagan neighbors. Second, MacMullen highlights the class distinctions inherent in much of the written literature of ancient Christianity: theological explanations and sermons by and for the propertied class (those who owned slaves, for example) served perhaps just 5 percent of the church’s total population. Meanwhile the entire Christian church in the fourth century, at most, constituted perhaps 5 percent of the empire’s population. Further, MacMullen points out that the expected church attendance in the fourth century, garnered from calculating the space available within the churches he so carefully surveys, was somewhere between 1 and 8 percent of the general population of the empire. There were fewer Christians than previous scholarship has supposed, and the vast majority of those Christians generally practiced Christianity

outside the walls, outside elite social structures and norms, and outside rigid definitions of orthodoxy. So there were indeed two churches in the empire: a more elite church represented in the written record and a second, more popular and populous church represented in the continued pagan-Christian cult of the honored dead. And while the first church often rails against the beliefs and practices of the second church, such protestations, along with the stones themselves, only point all the more to the latter's ubiquity and influence.

If I may add, there is only one glaring weakness I find in this book (literally). Throughout its pages MacMullen depends on detailed notes of physical sites to advance his carefully constructed argument. Unfortunately, these necessary notes are found at the end of the book: one flips back and forth, back and forth. Surely the Society of Biblical Literature, of all publishers, would understand both the importance of keeping notes and text together and possess the technical prowess to accomplish the task.