



➔ **Book Review – SS**

## **"Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, The Fall of Rome, and The Making of Christianity in The West, 355-550 AD" (P. Brown)**

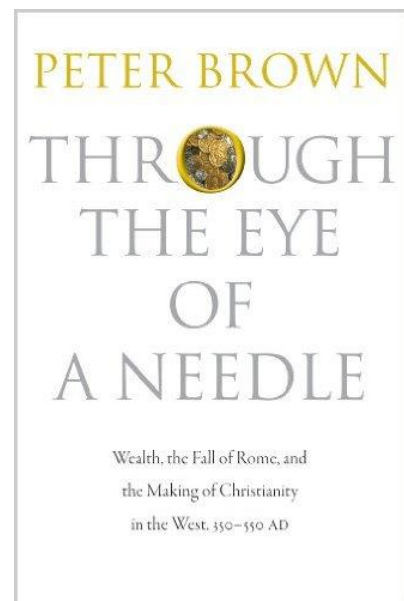
**Syed Uddin-Ahmed**  
*William Paterson University,  
Dept. of Geography, USA  
uddins@wpunj.edu*

Brown's work is a commendable contribution to our understanding of the evolution of Christian society as he takes on a unique project examining the role of "pious giving" and the growth in the wealth and prestige of the Catholic Church. I must admit this idea of piety via charitable acts does in fact require a more critical evaluation and needs more explanations than what we already know.

Furthermore, he systematically unravels some of the greatest myths when it came to the rise of Christian after the pagan Roman system because through his investigation of major Church fathers such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome. The Church was, in fact, an institution which had disavowed worldly things such as money or so we have learned to believe. However, what we are able to ascertain from Brown's immense project was, that was all just pious rhetoric. These saints and fathers of the church were no different from the pagan Roman elites in the sense that they were well endowed, and even the noble ideals of charity had serious political and social agendas. Many of these fathers themselves were very generously funded and supported often even by non-Christian power players.

For example, he expertly focused his eyes on how bishops such as Cyprian were able to use the funds collected via alms to help ameliorate serious social problems. Carthage was a wealthy city and much like Rome, the power structures of the Church were no different here. The wealthy members of The Church patronized people like him. The wealthy supporters received a closer shot to heaven, the fathers secured their social/political position, and The Church advanced.

However, the irony remained that the actual act of giving become a ritual more than an act of kindness or uplifting of the destitute. It became a ritual which had social, economic, and political benefits. What was not clear in this examination was the concept we have historically associated this charity to being an act of kindness and piety. This was fine because what the act allowed for, is to have a semblance of harmony and social cohesion. The act of giving alms became critical because this charitable act kept people in line and avoided revolts. Moreover, much like an IMF/World Bank, it created a pre-modern form of dependency. This chronic dependency was great for the Church fathers because it re-affirmed their positions of power.





Finally, the text focused our attention on the fact that The Church itself was no different from Roman Empire in the economic solvency was an issue from the time of Constantine. The Church fathers were even more than pious fathers they were new technocrats that were ushering in a new era. They mimicked politicians and economic managers more than an impoverished set of priests, the portrait painted by Brown was power players who were politicking and created a system of power via alms-giving.

## REFERENCES

Brown, P. (2014). Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD. Princeton University Press.

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