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Introduction to *Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*

Kimberly Bowes
*University of Pennsylvania, kbowes@sas.upenn.edu*

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**Abstract**
In Constantinople sometime in the 440s, the empress Pulcheria stood at the edge of an excavation trench. She was there under orders from none other than Saint Thyrsus, who had appeared to her in a dream and instructed her to find the relics of forty Christian soldiers who had perished on the ice of an Armeman Lake. Aided by clergy and palace officials she began a massive excavation, complete with its own public relations director, local church historian Sozomen, who recorded the event for prosperity. The excavation eventually uncovered a casket which, when opened, emitted the sweet odor of myrrh: the martyrs had been found. The day was proclaimed a public festival, the martyrs’ relics were processed through the city streets, and, with the empress and bishop standing by, the Forty were laid to rest alongside the relics of Thyrsus himself. Thus were the Fort Martyrs of Sebaste enrolled among the capital’s saintly citizens.

**Disciplines**
Arts and Humanities | Classics | Liturgy and Worship

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Introduction

In Constantinople sometime in the 440s, the empress Pulcheria stood at the edge of an excavation trench. She was there under orders from none other than Saint Thyrus, who had appeared to her in a dream and instructed her to find the relics of forty Christian soldiers who had perished on the ice of an Armenian lake.1 Aided by clergy and palace officials she began a massive excavation, complete with its own public relations director, local church historian Sozomen, who recorded the event for posterity. The excavation eventually uncovered a casket which, when opened, emitted the sweet odor of myrrh: the martyrs had been found. The day was proclaimed a public festival, the martyrs' relics were processed through the city streets, and, with the empress and bishop standing by, the Forty were laid to rest alongside the relics of Thyrus himself. Thus were the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste enrolled among the capital's saintly citizens.2

Christian ruler, aided by church officials, hunts for saints' relics amid public fanfare: as abridged in many ancient and modern histories, Sozomen's tale is reduced to a familiar headline, one which seems to embody the age itself.3 Indeed, the history of Christianity after the Peace of the Church often reads like a broadsheet report of that day in Constantinople: it is a history peopled by bishops and clergy, ruled by newly Christian emperors and empresses, and set against the backdrop of a new Christian polis with its churches and public liturgies. It is a history preoccupied with the development of Christian institutions, with the shifting forms of civic authority and with the new material language of Christian power. In other words, the history of late antique Christianity has traditionally been the history of a new and energetic public.

What is missing from these histories is what Sozomen actually witnessed that day and grudgingly, even disparagingly, recorded in his chronicle. For it
was not an empress or a bishop who originally introduced the Forty Martyrs to Constantinople. Rather it was an aristocrat named Eusebia, whose obvious wealth and piety Sozomen obsesses with insinuations of doctrinal deviancy. Eusebia did not place her treasure in one of the city's public churches, but in a private chapel on her suburban estate. Both she and her best friend, the wife of the consul Caesarius, were eventually buried beside the saintly remains, while a cadre of monks, specially ensconced on the estate for this purpose, prayed over their souls. Even Saint Thyrus, he who had appeared to the empress Pulcheria, came to the city in another private venture, this one instigated by the selfsame Caesarius who likewise constructed an estate-martyr shrine. In other words, what has been written out of the history of late antique Christianity is precisely what so troubled Sozomen: a vast and powerful world of private religiosity.

This book seeks to reexcavate this private. It investigates the phenomena of private churches and private worship from the fourth through the first half of the fifth centuries A.D. From the powerful private churches and monasteries of Constantinople to the great eastern churches of the rural western empire, from the reserved eucharist consumed in the home to healing rituals involving personal relics, the following chapters describe the physical shape and ritual content of those practices that took place outside the bounds of the nascent public church. Using both texts and material evidence to construct its narrative, the book describes the extraordinary range of private ritual activities undertaken by late antique people. Far from being an adjunct to episcopally supervised cult, private worship constituted a major force in late antique Christendom, dominating the ritual lives of the great imperial capitals and nurturing the first rural Christian communities. Outside the sparkling new basilicas and splendid public liturgies lay a thriving, heretofore unexplored world of private Christian practice.

Yet, like Sozomen's narrative, it was a world shot through with potential discord. The family and the household, this book will argue, lay unassailably alongside the nascent church, as ancient habits of doing religion organized around family and patronage failed, at least in theory, to mesh with episcopal authority and clerical hierarchies. Occasionally, this largely notional dissonance would explode into real-world clashes; private churches and private rituals attracted accusations of heretical practice, accusations that resounded with increasing hysteria in imperial law courts and church councils. At the same time, in growing numbers of ascetic handbooks and saintly biographies, the impersaries of private churches were lauded as examples of exemplary piety. Private cult was not simply a potent presence in late antique Christendom, but a matter of strenuous debate.

For within Sozomen's disapproving subtext lie the seeds of a problem that has never left us. Where are the public and the private, particularly as they pertain to religion? Do they even exist? If so, how are they related? Who determines their boundaries—scholars, theologians, politicians, or common consensus? From Cicero to the framers of the American constitution, politicians have proposed legal boundaries to separate public from private religious activities; and from Sozomen to the prelates at Vatican II, scholars of religion have ranked them, disparaging one at the expense of the other. Debate over public and private religion has for centuries, in large and small ways, saturated social discourse.

While the public/private debate may be both ubiquitous and enduring, the arguments themselves have a history, one whose ebbs and flows reflect and stimulate broader social changes. Sozomen's dismissal of Eusebia's private relic cult, this book will suggest, reflects more than the rank prejudice of an imperial knave; it is a buried echo of a public/private revolution. This revolution, which altered not only the terms of the public/private argument but also its intensity, was ushered in by the advent of a new public entity: the public Christian church. From sexuality and gender to inheritance and marriage, the slow development of public Christian institutions threw into question the relationship between individuals and a new Christian collective. The development of a newly public religious institution carried with it new ideas of public justice, increasingly centralized control over ritual and doctrine, and new expectations of personal virtue as a criterion for public office. At the same time, the rise of asceticism found some individuals isolating themselves from the Christian collective, creating elitist hierarchies centered on virginity and renunciation of worldly matters. Wives and husbands wrestled with a hodge-podge of new expectations of the marriage bed, while children were accorded an increasingly central place in religious thought and private law.

Perhaps in no place, however, was this debate more furious or the boundary between public and private more hotly contested than around the issue of private ritual and private churches. Family, friends, and dependents had formed the core of Roman religious life and continued to do so in the first centuries after the Peace of the Church. Yet in domestic churches like Eusebia's, at private masses, even in private prayer, families and individuals collided with the new religious public and its impersaries, Christian bishops. How were such private spaces and acts to be defined? Who should own and control them, heads of family or the episcopate? Private devotion raised thorny questions about the respective places for individual piety and collective identity in a Christian world, questions in which the very shape of a Christian society was at stake. What would form the nexus of Christian communities—the ancient prerogatives of aristocratic families or the newer claims of Christian bishops? What was the proper relationship between families and/or individuals and the religious community? As the problem grew weightier, public/private distinctions became increasingly important. No longer were "public" and "private" simply categories of religious life; now they were moral yardsticks, measures of heresy and sanctity, virtue and vice. In other words, through
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responses to projects like Eusebia’s, we catch a glimpse of a watershed in the public/private dialectic, a moment in which public and private became ever more important categories of moral scrutiny and the individual’s relationship with the religious collective was fundamentally altered.

HISTORIES OF LATE ANTIQUITY CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

If the history of Christianity from the fourth through the mid fifth century is typically told through the lens of its nascent public persona, the central character of these histories is most often the bishop. The lives of the episcopal’s most famous exempla, such as Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, or Basil of Caesarea, and their impact on doctrine, social issues, and community formation, form the punctuation marks of a complex institutional history. Bishops were, in one sense, the new dominus personae on a new public stage. Under bishops’ aegis, cities acquired a mantle of churches and martyr shrines. Bishops managed great public assistance programs to benefit the poor, old, and infirm. They orchestrated new public spectacles and processions centered on the cult of martyrs whose venerated bodies lay outside the city walls. Eventually, bishops would even claim the mantle of magistrate, handing down judgments from newly minted episcopal courts.

Until recently, scholars have tended to take the power of this new public collective for granted, assuming that bishops and the institutional church were every bit as successful in creating a new “Christian society” as they themselves advertised. A more recent body of scholarship, however, has suggested that these moments of episcopal power were rather fewer and farther between than previously thought. The average late antique bishop was a rather anemic creature with an uncertain job description and more authority than actual power. Even the likes of an Augustine or an Ambrose were confronted with limited financial resources, uncooperative elites and imperial bureaucrats, and a systemic inability to translate theological dictates into real-world practice. Other figures, particularly holy men and women and powerful laypersons, often rivaled or trumped bishops’ still-nascent authority. And while in some instances, holy man, aristocrat, and bishop merged into a single person, in the first century of public Christendom those well-publicized cases were probably more exceptional than typical.

This history of Christianity’s public face is well-known; more nebulous, but of increasing interest to scholars of all disciplines, are the histories beneath this developing public façade, specifically, the fabric of everyday lives and the changing character of the family. It is now apparent, for instance, that the physical and social makeup of the house underwent something of a metamorphosis in late antiquity. At the same time that a decline in mandatory public

euergetism caused the gentle decay of public building, the space of both the urban and rural private was slowly expanding. Earlier fora were subdivided into shops, and theaters and public basilicas were transformed into multi-family housing. At the same time, the great urban domus were growing, taking up ever greater portions of their cityscapes. Their vast dining rooms, reception halls, and peristyles were cities-in-miniature, and like the forum, they were stuffed with honorary inscriptions and played host to political meet-

ings and church councils. And yet, these “public” spaces were often kept at the house’s fringes, while other spaces, bedrooms, and more intimate dining and meeting rooms, were nestled in a protective cocoon of separating halls and courtyards. Likewise, in the countryside, huge sums were poured into the creation of great country houses; dining rooms, reception halls, and baths, all encrusted with mosaic floors, spelled out a new language of seignorial status. Great monuments of personal and familial power, these villas served as anchoring points for a vast rural familia of tenants, slaves, and workers; at the same time, they provided an ever more intimate refuge for aristocratic otium. The late antique house was, perhaps even more than its high empire predecessor, an intensely private ANID very private space, its two faces ever more emphatically defined.

Aristocratic families themselves were transforming, expanding their boundaries in certain senses while narrowing them in others. The expansion of the senatorial order throughout the fourth century meant that there were simply more elite families who claimed clarissimus status. As the order expanded so, too, did the diversity of the class, now embracing a huge range of wealth and backgrounds, from the landed aristocracy of old to military brats and merchants’ sons. The increasing numbers of novi homines among elite ranks meant that the familia in its narrow definition of only agnatic kin seems to have been less and less useful as a status determinant, since fewer families had long and prestigious blood lines to brag about. Instead, a broader familial unit of agnate and uterine kin, dependents, and even friends, all grouped under the heading “domus,” became a more rhetorically useful social category. Inheritance strategy similarly embraced a broader notion of family: although tradition and a certain body of law insisted that property was to be passed down through agnatic lines, in practice families were far more flexible in their testamentary strategies. Wealthy families targeted their wills at the desired descendents without much thought for tradition or long-term financial planning, while the law loosened to permit inheritance by groups outside the agnatic line, particularly between mothers and children. Yet in other ways, the nuclear family probably continued to form the nexus of everyday life, and in some matters, such as in death and in marriage, it may have grown ever more central. Late antique grave stones in the West increasingly mention only parents and/or siblings as dedicatees, suggesting that the care of the dead became a tighter family affair. In the East it has been claimed that close-kin
marriages and elaborate betrothal ceremonies were likewise the result of closer nuclear bonds. However, these studies have come under recent fire not least because they assume a socially homogenous third through seventh centuries, and it may be that the “collapse inward toward the nuclear family,” took place well after our period of interest.

The ideology of the family was likewise in flux. On the one hand, some Christian thinkers had long propounded a seemingly “anti-family” ideology, most starkly expressed in Luke 14:26: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” The Pauline and post-Pauline epistles employed a more positive rhetoric, insisting on filial obedience, the value of the marriage bond, and care of one’s relatives, while claiming the church as an alternative to blood-kinship: all Christians were adelphoi, sisters and brothers, and the church itself was a “household of the faith.”

The rise of the ascetic movement, particularly in its cenobitic forms, actually offered a new kind of physical dominus – the monastery – free of the blood family, while to some contemporaries, the loud praisers of virginity seemed to threaten marriage and family life altogether. Family members gradually ceased to appear on funerary epitaphs, while the great familial funerary monuments of the high empire gave way to more anonymous collective graveyards in churches. And yet, rumors of the family’s death, even as an ideological category, have been greatly exaggerated. Ascetic proponents like Augustine and Ambrose offered alternative readings of New Testament “anti-family” dictates, insisting on the value of the marriage bond and seeking ways to integrate familial and ascetic lives. Legal changes that threatened family bonds or reconfigured them in a Christian guise, like Constantine’s repeal of Augustan laws punishing celibates, were seemingly not motivated by Christian thinking at all but rather by a long-standing moral status quo gradually given legal expression.

Even the commemoration of the dead continued to be a family affair, as families continued to be the impresarios of funeral feasts while great familial mausolea, now attached to churches, continued to convert those familial bonds into permanent memories. While there is no doubt that the family as social group and ideological entity was shifting, families remained a potent social and rhetorical force throughout Christendom’s first four centuries.

The relationship between aristocratic families and the new Christian public was thus a complex one, filled with opportunities for both tension and overlap. For instance, the power that aristocrats commanded over their dependents could be enormous, as being a patron also meant being a dominus, or lord. At the same time, the new Christian hierarchy claimed spiritual lordship over these dominini and their dependents in an at-times awkward inversion of traditional status roles. Even more dramatically, the poor had emerged out of the corners of social oblivion to claim a place in a new spiritual economy; from previously invisible social refuse, they became a vessel into which the aristocracy might pour their excess, sin-producing wealth, or an image of apostolic poverty to be emulated by a new ascetic elite. Of course, aristocrats might become bishops, thereby nearly folding civic into spiritual authority and acting as über-eugene to the teeming masses. Yet aristocrats seem to have taken this step only infrequently, and broadly speaking, beginning only in the later fifth century. With the exception of certain regions like southern Gaul, bishops tended to be recruited from more middling classes and local senatorial elites continued to outstrip them in power and wealth.

Similarly, the cacophonous din of traditional aristocratic status proclamation now jolted with a new self-effacing Christian aesthetic. Great circus and gladiatorial games continued to be given, largesses was publicly distributed and silk-clad clavis imperatoris paraded the streets accompanied by their entourages. Equally extravagant displays of status were also conveyed through Christian asceticism; sackcloth and a pale face took the place of silks and jewels for some aristocrats as “holy arrogance” became a new language of spiritual elitism. Between the traditional and the radical lay the large and small gestures of Christian public giving, from the construction of public basilicas by pious elites to the penning of Christian poetry for consumption in elite salons.

Private worship, private churches, and the piety of the individual stood in the tectonic boundary where these worlds met, between the new Christian public and traditional family life, and between old modes of status distinction and new kinds of collective eucharism. As an aspect of “private life” which influenced the nascent public church, private worship pulled together the needs of personal religiosity, the social structure of family, and the dictates of Christian liturgy, and gathered them in the space of the home or estate. That gathering, however, was not without risk. As we shall see, for the pagan aristocrat of the high empire the estate temple was simply the culminating manifestation of seigniorial power, and its worshippers community of both family and dependents echoed the social hierarchy of the dominus. To construct a Christian estate church, on the other hand, and to select its clergy from among the estate’s peasants, was not to bridge the two worlds of the public Church and the private Christian, but to probe the tension-filled space between these worlds. Which of the available social hierarchies would govern that church? How would ties of blood and dependency interact with ties of clerical duty? Into which mighty economic engine, the rural estate or the church coffers, would such a church feed the donations of the faithful? The history of private worship thus forms part of the late antique struggle to determine what it meant to be Christian and what it meant to be a member of a familia.

Private worship also calls into question many of the scholarly assumptions about these public and private histories. The briefest trawl through the evidence for private worship forces a radical reconsideration of scholarly categories for Christian identity – clerical, lay, and monastic – by focusing on a practice shared by all types of Christians. It likewise challenges the bishop’s
pride of place as creator and leader of Christian communities, emphasizing instead the lay aristocrats who not only converted family, friends, and dependents, but constructed the edifice for an entire Christian life within homes, themselves entities of complex familial, economic, and religious composition. Most importantly, the history of private worship further challenges the presumed symbiotic relationship between aristocracy and clergy, exposing the chasms of social and economic difference that separated them. These chasms were deep enough not only to set layman against clergy, but also to set an individual against himself, as clergy members struggled to reconcile the dictates of their office with the simultaneous and age-old demands of friendship, kinship, and the other baggage of being a “private” person. Thus, this relatively narrow history of private worship might thus be used to probe the broader historical edifice of late Roman social history, exposing and challenging some of its basic tenets.

HISTORIES OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

Galvanized by Anales school historians such as Philippe Ariès and George Duby, the historical study of “private life” has flourished, in perhaps no period more than late antiquity, where the discipline’s muse, Peter Brown, has inspired a thriving “private life” industry embarking subjects as diverse as the family, sexuality, housing, dreams, and travel. In other periods, private devotion and personal piety are rarely clasped among such “private life” social history. However, there exists no comprehensive examination of private worship in late antiquity and only a handful of allied studies, most of which is dubious methodological foundation or with a primary focus on later periods.

A series of early articles, spurred by the work of Ulrich Stutz, described the private churches of the early Middle Ages as products of a particularly Germanic religious mentalité. These “nation-origin” theories were quickly dismissed and replaced by more sober studies, principally on the later manifestations of the problem in the Byzantine east and medieval west. While excellent in their own right, these studies have as their aim the explicatio of the phenomenon in the high Middle Ages or the middle Byzantine period, times when private cult and private churches enjoyed better documentation than during late antiquity. Thus the late antique material is treated summarily, a phase of “becoming” on the way to the real object of inquiry. The last two decades have produced a series of more late antique-specific studies; these tend to be regionally based catalogues, typically focused on either the textual or archaeological evidence, and thus side-step the broader historical questions raised by the phenomenon. In no case has the phenomenon of Christian private worship been laid against pagan precedents, or integrated into broader socio-religious history. The present study thus represents the first history of the practice in its many facets.

Why private worship in late antiquity should have excited so little interest, given its centrality to developments like the evolution of monasticism and the creation of a Christian aristocracy, is in itself illuminating. The most obvious reason is that private devotion is hard to see. Our knowledge of ancient private life is paltry compared to that of political structures, rhetoric, and public cult. This disparity reflects the simple fact that the ancients poured their writing and building talents into the creation and maintenance of status, and status was principally defined through the public sphere. In late antiquity, the textual and archaeological corpus is dominated by the writings of churchmen anxiously trying to create a new public institution and by the splendid remains of new Christian basilicas. excavating the private from amongst the overwhelming detritus of the public requires no small amount of effort and the results are often meager—a brief mention of a domestic ritual, the foundation walls of a private church.

And yet, the lacunose study of private worship cannot all be laid at the door of evidentiary troubles. Private worship challenges many basic assumptions about the history of Christianity and like an embarrassing relative, it has proven easier to ignore than to invite to the table. One such assumption is that a conversion of Constantine in 312 seems to provide a precipitous, episodic boundary separating the illegal “cult” of the first three centuries a.d., when it is frequently grouped with other so-called mystery cults, with the religion of empire of the fourth century. This pre/post Nicene periodization rests heavily on autonomistic notions of private versus public. Lacking legal status and set in private homes, pre-Nicene Christian practice is persistently located in an ill-defined “private,” along with the so-called pagan mystery religions. The “triumph” of the Church, ushered in by Constantine’s conversion, is marked by a departure from the private house, a victorious procession to newly minted basilicas, and the rightful assumption of Christian worship and Christian ritual in the public sphere. In large part, this public/private divide is rooted in a Protestant teleology that read the history of Christianity as the tragic, headlong rush away from an a-Christian “private.” While its assumptions have been largely demolished over the last thirty years, a public/private binary still runs through most modern histories. This tacit approval of a public/private divide, brokered by Constantine and witnessed by the replacement of the private house church with the public basilica, has not only diminished the profile of private worship after the Peace of the Church, but forced most considerations of these practices into the teleologically marginalized position of “vestiges,” or “residues” of a fast-disappearing pre-Nicene past. Even the study of late paganism has been tarred by the same brush; as Christianity “triumped” in the public sphere, paganism is said to have retreated to the private
where its manifestations, like those of pre-Nicene Christianity before it, are understood as a last-ditch "resistance." Within this historiographic context, post-Nicene private worship of any flavor is hard to examine on its own terms and within its appropriate historical framework.

Just as problematic is the historiographic paradigm that has done the most to foster the study of private worship—the concept of "Christianization." "Christianization," broadly defined as the conversion of various groups, the development of new Christian institutions, or the creation of new Christian material culture, continues to form one of scholarship’s most important lenses on late antique history. Christianization is typically, although almost always tacitly, understood as the process by which something—be it people, actions, or things—"became" Christian. Christianization narratives generally tend to formulate these social changes as a swap sale; they describe how the senator exchanged his consular toga for bishop’s miter; how the civic bureaucracy was charged with building churches and hostels instead of amphitheaters and baths; and in this particular case, how Roman homes and families were enfolded into the "family of Christ." This unalloyed confidence that one practice, thing, or social role was exchanged for another assumes a tacit teleology. The Christian end of the equation is already known and tends to be the object of inquiry, that is, the Christian basilica, the episcopate, or the Christian family. The job of the historian is to discover what practice or thing preceded it, that is, the dining room, the civic aristocracy, or the pagan domestic shrine, and to elaborate the functional similarities that bound antecedent and successor. At their worst, then, Christianization histories are framed less around a historiographic model than a pre-packaged plot-line, grinding inexorably towards the same, inevitable finale, namely an a priori conception of Christian society, or in this particular case, the Christian house and family.

Christianization models also tend to assume that consensus-building is the principal, if not only means by which social change happens. In other words, the swaps from aristocrat to bishop, from familia nobilis to familia Christi are assumed to have been successful; by filling the same functional/societal need, they usher in gradual social change, but through processes of integration and consensus that render change relatively seamless and untroubled. These swaps also succeed because “religion” and “society” are assumed to be umbically tied, the two changing in lock-step. Thus, religious change, that is, a person or family’s conversion to Christianity, is presumably accompanied by concomitant social change, that is, an alteration in the social structure of the family or estate to incorporate episcopal authority.

The problem in these histories lies not so much in the stories they tell as in what falls outside their tacitly unidirectional trajectories, namely non-conformity with the developing consensual Christian community, or community non-success. Typically, “dissenting” elements in these stories were placed under the headings of paganism and heresy, their marginalization reinforcing the primacy of consensus as social-historical paradigm. Indeed, “Christianization” is frequently framed as the effort to either eradicate or enfold these “others.”

As this book will suggest, the practice of private worship, the construction of private churches, and the maintenance of family or patronage-based church communities are phenomena which fit poorly into Christianization models of late antique religious history. These practices constituted a challenge to the developing idea of a Christian community defined by a shared location, a bishop- leader, and an accompanying clerical hierarchy. That is, these persons, in the moments they engaged in private worship, formed a sub-community of Christians defined not by their membership in a community of faithful led by a bishop, but by their membership in a Christian family or patronage group. And yet, those who engaged in private worship were not necessarily pagans, heretics, or rebellious malcontents, but very much part of the Christian community. For much of the time, these differences were passed over without comment or problem, while in other moments those who engaged in private worship found themselves set uncomfortably apart from the broader community. “Christianization,” imagined as the formation of a community, through a uni-directional convertive process, typically does not acknowledge this kind of practice nor integrate it into histories of late antique religiosity.

Scholarship of the last decade has subjected “Christianization” and its teleological assumptions to an increasingly critical gaze. Rather than the great impertinence of the Christianization process, bishops are emerging as weaker figures, frequently failing to enforce changes in their communities and resorting to their “private” non-episcopal status to accomplish their goals. The history of doctrine is no longer narrated by the triumph of orthodoxy, but rather as the construction of the concept of orthodoxy, hammered out by competing churchmen who used labels of heresy and orthodoxy to bolster their own status claims. Ascetic practices are revealed as having been extraordinarily diverse, propounding competing ideals of spiritual excellence. And families are in the center of the mix, serving as models for ascetic communities, continuing their own burial and commemorative traditions, and opposing, as well as colluding, with episcopal power. To paraphrase Greg Woolf’s manifesto on the problem of Romanization, becoming Christian, it is now clear, was not a matter of acquiring a ready-made cultural package so much as joining the debate about what that package ought to comprise. This book thus joins a growing number of studies that describe a highly heterogeneous early Christendom, whose historical development was driven in large part by its own internal fractures, and whose ties to pre-Christian and pre-Nicene worlds were different and far stronger than had previously been supposed.
DEFINING THE PRIVATE

The term “private” used to pass in scholarly discussion with nary a raised eyebrow; scholars routinely labeled things—be they buildings, objects, genders, or jobs—public or private, and they framed these concepts in binary opposition. But decades of study on everything from the Roman house, Roman women, even Roman sex and deception have shattered an easy bifurcation of public and private. The private in general, and particularly in the ancient world, is a notoriously tangled concept, so much so that at least one scholar has doubted that it can be made to do any substantive work at all. Studies on seemingly the most private of ancient places, the Roman home, illustrate the problem. The most public of the home’s spaces, the atrium, experienced radical shifts in privacy from morning, when the space would be crowded with clients and the owner’s admiring public, to afternoon, when the same space might be occupied by the close, gendered community of the home’s women, engaged in weaving. Similarly, what would seem the most private of spaces, the inquinum or bedroom, might be used to hold dinner parties or political debates, whose social meaning differed radically from the same events held in different areas of the house, like the dining or reception rooms. The ancient “private” thus appears so much more “public” than its modern equivalent and so context-dependent that scholars now typically frame the term in quotes, signaling that, if not for expediency, they would prefer to avoid the word altogether.

To dismiss the ancient private, however, would be a mistake. While the inherent slipperiness of the concept resists a stable, monolithic definition, it is surely wrong to conclude that the private is thus incapable of performing analytic work or that public and private were not important ancient categories. Indeed, central to the importance of the private as an historical category is its very subjectivity. The private is a relatively stable entity, definable only through qualification and juxtaposition with its opposite, the public. That is, the private, either ancient or modern, cannot ever be defined, but only gestured at through a series of comparisons with something else. In this sense, it is a dialectical category; to describe something as “private” is to argue for its placement at one point of a slippery scale, which itself has no existence apart from that created by those same arguments.

It is this dialectical property that makes “the private” an historically relevant field of inquiry. From the Augustan marriage reforms to the uncertain fate of the modern American family, it is the debate about what constitutes privacy, rather than any clear or consistent idea of what privacy is, which makes the private so interesting. That is, an historical private may be defined by the dialectic around which definitions of privacy circled in any given time. Privacy defined historically and dialectically sidesteps the impossibility of an objectively defined private, focusing instead on the period-specific debates surrounding the concept itself and its attendant, ever-diverse definitions. As this dialectical private is, by definition, a relative one, this study omits the qualifying quotes around terms like public and private, assuming their relativity as a point of departure.

In fact, by focusing on the debates about privacy rather than any a priori category, we shall find a private even more public, at least from a modern perspective, than previous studies have led us to expect. Following the preoccupations of its debating protagonists, the private of this book will lead us over huge stretches of countryside, into courthouses, even within the imperial palace and senate. Debates about privacy embraced the whole of ancient civic lives, themselves a complex and often tension-ridden melange of personal, familial, and dependency bonds. In other words, by examining the dialectical private, this book will blur anachronistic public/private distinctions even further and like the above-mentioned studies, describe an ancient private that was both immense and wholly permeable, even integrated, with the public.

The greatest challenge to examining this dialectical private is locating it: just as the abortion controversy in the United States is often framed as a debate on women’s rights or the boundary between church and state, so, too, ancient debates about the religious private are rarely framed as discussions of a sancta private. Yet the public/private controversy is wound through some of the period’s most momentous social changes—doctoral and disciplinary debates, the rise of asceticism, discussions on magic and sorcery, and Christianity’s fight against paganism, just to mention a few. By perceiving beneath and across these controversies, one catches glimpses of a strenuous public/private debate waged through other names.

The present study is particularly focused on the context and development of Christian private worship. Thus, a working definition of a Christian private will be drawn from the general debates about privacy that surrounded the growth of a concomitant public, namely, the episcopally led church. For the purposes of this study, the private as a spatial entity may include any buildings, streets, and lands outside institutional church buildings and the full range of people who might inhabit these times and spaces, including both the laity and clergy, families and individuals, men and women. While this “private” will tend to emphasize places owned by, and thus the property of, the worshippers in question, ownership (rarely demonstrable in any case) is not the sole criterion. In the interests of space and comprehensibility, this study will focus on lay practices in the home. However, periodic references to other spaces and persons will provide a constant reminder of the artificiality of this boundary.

If the private can be said to be nebulous, the concept of “worship” or “ritual” is only slightly less so. It could well be argued that Christianity, whose fundamental ritual is defined as a sacrifice by and for a community of the faithful, has no truly private rituals. The rite of the mass and the offering of the eucharist is, as Dom Gregory Dix once defined it, “the solemn corporate worship of God,” [emphasis added] thus begging the question of how rites
whose theological and ritualistic bases rest on a communal foundation might contain even a notional tie to the private. This study is not concerned with ferreting out a place for the private in definitions of the mass, but with observing how communally defined actions, such as the mass, were co-opted by individuals and subsets of the Christian community for use outside the institutional church, such as the home or estate. Christianity is also rich with other kinds of ritual, such as periodic prayer, the lighting of lamps, the burning of incense, and the use of holy relics, in which a community is not presupposed and in which the individual’s direct communication with the divine provides the ritual raison d’être.

For the purposes of this study, then, private worship will be defined as the practice of ritual outside the space and/or supervision of the institutional church and/or its bishops. The laywoman who, alone in the middle of the night, doused herself with the eucharistic bread and wine to heal a mysterious ailment, the monk who built a church on his estate and stocked it with a collection of Holy Land relics, even the bishop who stole his cathedral’s liturgical plate for use in his own chapel, are all examples of individuals engaged in the practice of private worship.

Space necessarily factors into any definition of the private, and as so much of the following pages will be concerned with the space of private worship, a definition of the private church and shrine is doubly necessary. Defining any kind of private space is, as should be clear from the above discussion, an epistemological tangle, for the privacy of action might be defined by both the space and circumstances in which it takes place. Legalistic definitions based around ownership provide only the roughest outlines of what might constitute private ritual space; a church built by a private individual on private land but used by the local episcopate for public services is surely not to be understood in the same way as a privately owned church, inserted into a private home for the use of the family and dependents. These examples mark the two extreme ends of a private ownership/use spectrum that embraces hundreds of situations in between.

It is quickly apparent then, that there was no one kind of private church or shrine, but a whole range of buildings, foundations, and institutions that might lay claim to the descriptive “private,” yet whose cumulative heterogeneity is so great as to make any study of the whole corpus cumbrous and potentially misleading. The limits of space and the need to draw practical boundaries around the subject will dictate a far narrower definition of private church than might be theoretically possible. A private church will thus be considered as any space designed particularly to accommodate Christian ritual, which is built and financially supported by a private individual for the principal use of his or her family, friends, and dependents. As we shall see, both patrons and even (if somewhat grudgingly) bishops regarded such churches as being “owned” by their founders. This definition thus embraces both familial churches built into urban homes, as well as large, freestanding churches constructed on rural estates for the use of both owner and dependent estate populations. It sidesteps those churches built by private lay donors but turned immediately over to the supervision of the episcopate for public use. However, the general problem of private church ownership and maintenance will be considered, particularly as it impacted the legal and financial relationships between private individuals and the episcopate. A private individual is defined as any person, lay, clerical, monastic, or imperial, who acts on his/her own behalf, using his/her own funds rather than those of a collective institution.

While seemingly straightforward, even this narrower definition is complicated in the case of churches known only from archaeological evidence. How can archaeology document ownership or administrative rights? How far can material evidence describe the social composition of worshiping communities? The short answer is that archaeology can do neither of these things very well, and thus, a degree of uncertainty must accompany almost all archaeologically-identified private churches. The presence of a functioning lay residence, adjacent to or containing the church in question, while it cannot indisputably frame the private as we have defined it, does point to it with high probability. Thus, in the case of archaeological examples, this study will examine only those churches set within or adjacent to a contemporary functioning residence.

Given the diverse forms and locations of these private ritual spaces and the concomitant impossibility of making any quick or easy assumptions about their various functions, this study will avoid both the English “chapel,” as well as the Latin *matrimonium*, terms which appear regularly in the scholarly literature, but which in the first instance carries with it the assumption of liturgical dependence on a diocesan church, and in the second instance is so inconsistently employed by ancient authors as to merit study in its own right. Instead, the term “church,” will be used to describe all Christian private spaces, regardless of size or function; “shrine” will be used to describe niches and aedicular monuments, pagan and Christian; while “temple” will be used to describe freestanding pagan structures. These three terms have the advantage of providing the most basic formal distinctions, while being relatively function-neutral.

This book presents a series of case studies; it makes no claims to be comprehensive, but rather presents a series of place- and problem-specific narratives. My intention was to both make a case for private worship as an important late antique phenomenon, and to inspire further interest in its study, but as the book’s many omissions (deliberate and otherwise) are testament, this is far from being the last word on the subject. These case studies are principally
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restricted to considerations of elite private worship: this is largely a factor of the evidence, as both the stones of elite homes and the writings of aristocrats themselves form the bulk of the evidentiary corpus. The final constraint is temporal: the book focuses principally on the fourth through mid-fifth centuries. The reasons for this restriction are two-fold. First, I wanted to juxtapose the continuity of private ritual praxis over the Nicene divide with the discontinuity of ideologies about that praxis in that tumultuous century and a half after the Peace of the Church. It is also increasingly evident that this period has its own historical qualities, which demand a separate treatment. The late fifth and sixth centuries present a significantly altered scene: in the East, the Council of Chalcedon signaled the triumph of ecclesiastical law over extra-communal entities, be they monks or family groups. While in the West, the fortunes of ancient Roman families began to fade even as the treasuries and powers of the episcopate began to rise. While private worship continued to play an important role in these years, affecting the development of the parish church and attitudes to the liturgy, it is the institutional church which is now the principal protagonist, and it is to the church — its bishops and its laws — that private worship increasingly responds, rather than the other way around. In many respects, it is a tale of the early Middle Ages and deserves its own narrative.

The book begins with an extended prolegomena of “the private” in the religions of the high empire. The goal is to trace the very different ideologies that governed traditional Roman versus Christian notions of the religious private, and to illustrate the socio-religious habits that would influence late antique Christians. While Roman polytheism maintained very careful legal distinctions between public and private religion in practice these spheres overlapped almost completely, the result of families’ powerful presence in every aspect of cultic experience. Private religion was thus a vast sphere of activity, embracing everything from household cult to the so-called mystery religions. Given its ubiquity in Roman religious life, it is hardly surprising that tensions around public/private issues were generally low. Pre-Nicene Christians thought about the relationship between the public and private, or better, the collective and the personal, very differently. Already in the later second and third centuries, Christian authorities tend to privilege the former over the latter, a tendency that increased with the development of the monopastorate. The result was a far greater anxiety over public/private dichotomies. The remainder of the book traces the affects of these two conceptions — a Roman habit of family based religion and the Christian, particularly episcopal, discomfort with individual/familial worship — on the Christian world of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Chapter 2 considers private Christian worship in two of the empire’s capitals, Rome and Constantinople, where, it will be argued, private worship played a major role in Christian experience. The archaeological and textual evidence describes a thriving network of domestic and other kinds of privately funded and controlled churches, structured around age-old social habits of patronage and aristocratic religious self-sufficiency. Bishops in these two cities exhibited very different responses to these communities ranging from rage to encouragement, but were in all cases forced into a delicate dance between episcopal prerogative and aristocratic privilege.

Chapter 3 investigates the estate church and private piety in the countryside. In many areas of the rural West, estates were the impresarios of the earliest Christian buildings and Christian communities. Yet estate domini were hardly episcopal agents. Even more strongly than in the cities, estate churches mimicked the social structures of the estate itself, serving as monuments of seigniorial power and less frequently agents of proselytization. Tensions between these estate churches and far-off bishops could run high, as these inward-looking, self-sufficient communities simply ignored episcopal dictates.

Finally, Chapter 4 returns to the issues raised in the first chapter by looking at Christian ideologies of the religious private. While familial and estate-based communities were thriving, the debate over the proper place of such communities and the private more generally was growing. The chapter examines the two most extreme manifestations of this debate — the accusations of heresy that dogged private worship, and the ideal of the saintly, housebound woman. Both had their origins in traditional Roman ideologies of the private, yet in both cases, those ideologies were intensified and made to bear new moral weight. Public/private distinctions, no longer simply legalistic divisions with little practical applicability, had become moral yardsticks, used to measure and define heresy and sanctity. The strong continuity of private religious habits, now practiced in a world struggling to articulate a new kind of public, produced a crisis in the public/private debate, changing forever the terms on which it was waged and the power it commanded.