

The main premise of this paper is that behind the confrontation between O'Donnell's "Reformers" and "Counter-Reformers" (*BMCR* 2005.07.69) lies the critical issue of finding the proper place for religion among the numerous important facets of late antique life in the Mediterranean. Using the earlier, "pagan" Roman Empire as comparison, I suggest that we need to examine to what extent the apparent difference of these two periods is a consequence of our own definitional biases (such as prioritizing the Judeo-Christian sense of religion) and to what extent they correspond to actual historical differences between the earlier and later Empires.

As a thought experiment of how a history of late antiquity would look without its "Reformist" appreciation of the religious, the first half of the paper turns for the sake of comparison to the relative insignificance attributed to mainstream religion in shaping social and political life in the earlier Empire. This question is even more important because part of the "Reformist" approach has been a renewed emphasis on continuities between the earlier and later Empires. Although scholars recognize the ongoing association of imperial power with religious forms of representation for the earlier period (most obviously in the imperial cult), the connection with power is generally taken as a marker of the emptiness of these religious forms in terms of spiritual or transcendental content. In fact, there is a tendency to shift our search for authentic religious experiences outside the immediate realm of political power, towards the new religions of the period, whether they worshipped Mithras, Isis or Jesus. I would consider such an approach as to be a *narrow* understanding of religion, insofar as it arbitrarily limits the areas of life that can potentially have transcendental reference. On the other hand, following in Peter Brown's footsteps, the "Counter-Reformers" of late antiquity seem to work with a *wide* conception with regard to the potential influence of religion in other areas of life. On such a reading, religion can even transcend historical realities to shape conceptions of power and politics, poverty and wealth, to mention only a few obvious examples. The contrast between these narrow and wide approaches appears to extend even to the evaluation of religion in the earlier and later Empires as respectively exhausted and vigorous.

In the second half of the paper I pursue this comparison of earlier and later periods further in a theoretical direction. As an avenue for further investigation, I will suggest that an important part of the difference may reside in the development of institutional structures that sponsor widespread support for preferred religious values and interpretations, as well as in the decreasing tolerance towards the public espousal of alternative religious forms. Yet both of these and many other similar developments originated in the pre-Christian imperial system (*e.g.*, the developing persecution of Christians), the details of which appear to have little to do with any religious difference between Roman religion and Christianity. I conclude that religion in the earlier as in the later Empire was inevitably bound to its larger social and political context, and arguments disregarding these connections would shortchange our evidence. However, I also maintain that this should not stop us from trying to analyze exactly what areas of life and specifically in what ways were influenced by discourses and actions that referred to matters transcendent and eternal. Working with a culturalist understanding of religion does not, and does not need to, equal an unqualified conceptualization of how religion worked in the ancient world.