

## CHAPTER ONE

# Religion in Late Antiquity—Late Antiquity in Religion

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*Thomas E. Hunt*

### Introduction

Religion, wrote Daniel Dubuisson, is a construct of the West and provided the “nucleus around which the West has constructed its own universe of values and representations” (Dubuisson 2003: 39). During the military and political upheavals of the Reformation and in the wake of encounters with non-European societies, people living in Europe constructed an object called “religion” and then began to study it (Kwok 2012: 288–290). The category of “religion” was critical to the articulation of European modernity and it therefore denotes a cluster of concepts that are not easily transferred into pre-modern societies. Dubuisson himself, however, locates the roots of “religion” in the writings of the Church Fathers (Engler and Miller 2006: 167). Late Antiquity and religion are bound together.

“Late Antiquity” was born of a revolution in methods. The term “Late Antiquity” was first systematically applied by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (Riegl 1889: XV; 1901). He deployed the term *Spätantike* to mean a specific period defined by particular artistic sensibilities, heavily influenced by the classical tradition and yet distinct from it (Marcone 2008: 11–12). Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, he insisted that Art History could be counted as a true *Wissenschaft* because it adhered to the same cycles of discovery and research that marked, for example, Philology (Olin 1994: 107).

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His work was shaped by two themes. First, he showed that artistic critique could be applied to objects traditionally overlooked by historians of art (Rampley 2009: 446). Second, he argued that the work of art was generated through *Kunstwollen*. This technical term has a long and complicated reception, but it was used by Riegl to express how the artist was shaped by the formal conventions of her time (Elsner 2002: 359–360). By examining the artifact, he argued, it would be possible to infer conclusions about the wider culture that produced it (Cordileone 2014: 286). At the beginning of his *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, he argued that the traditional model of late Roman decline into barbarism could be reimagined through a close examination of the everyday items produced in the later empire (Riegl 1901: 7). Through applying a new conceptual vocabulary to overlooked sources, he was able to show how “barbarians” renewed late Roman art. After this methodological innovation, the *Spätantike* could be identified as a discrete period of creative innovation and its distinctive forms could be studied (Elsner 2002: 362–363).

At the opening of *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie* Riegl declared that he was venturing forward into a “dark continent on the map of art-historical studies” (Riegl 1901: 2). The language is telling. He was an imperial adventurer, hoping to open up historical and cultural territories previously unknown to the Viennese of the cosmopolitan imperial center. The goal of Riegl’s *Wissenschaft* was to bring to that center a better notion of the history of the world and the place of Austria–Hungary in that history. Anxieties around civilizational decline, imperial power and cultural reproduction shaped Riegl’s Late Antiquity, marking it out as “rhetoric of modernity” (Giardina 1999: 157–159). Like all “modernities,” it has an underside of empire and coloniality (Mignolo 2007: 465). It is from these antipodes that it is possible to frame the deeper connections between, on the one hand, the study of religion and, on the other hand, the study of Late Antiquity.

## The Study of Religion

The small town of Loudun sits in western France roughly equidistant between Tours and Poitiers. In 1632 a group of nuns cloistered in this town began to act strangely. Judging this behavior to be symptoms of demon possession, the townsfolk and the Church hierarchy began a series of exorcisms, trials, and interrogations. In his analysis of these events Michel de Certeau showed how they were the product of numerous tensions already present in the cords of prestige and power that bound together the society of seventeenth-century France (de Certeau 2000). He noted that the

involvement of clergy, physicians, and lawyers in this process was motivated not by compassion for the nuns, but by concerns to maintain their own cultural authority through the application of their specialized knowledge. Similarly, he points out, the modern historian deploys their own knowledge to explain the odd behavior of the nuns. Loudun should make the historian cautious, for conversation about “other times and other places ... has critical effects. It reflects back on the historian’s presuppositions, relativizing them and our investments in some version of the present order of things” (Seed 2014: 12). De Certeau’s analysis highlights the ways in which historians deploy terms to explain human behavior that their subjects would never use. Instead, these concepts are created by scholars through comparison and analysis. “Religion” is such a concept, created through an “act of second order, reflective imagination” through which the familiar and unfamiliar can be explained (Smith 1982: xi).

For de Certeau, the Loudun possessions reveal tensions within French society and the way those tensions manifested themselves in people’s encounter with the world. Confronted by the writhing bodies of the nuns, the residents of Loudun sought to explain their behavior by situating them against other examples of demon possession. In so doing, they were able to integrate this unusual, unsettling behavior into a much larger conceptual universe, drawing on abstract notions of good and evil, cosmology, and the material presence of the demonic in everyday life (de Certeau 2000). Similarly, “religion” is not an objective concept, but is a particular category that has been developed in order to compare and analyze human behavior. As such, “*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (Smith 1982: xi), a concept created to give meaning to the material products and behaviors of the humans being studied. To approach religion from such a constructionist position is not to deny that something called “religion” exists. It certainly does and its effects can be seen in the world around us (not least on the shelves of libraries and in books like this one) (Engler 2004). Contemporary explanations of the events at Loudun reveal unspoken but powerful forces in French society of the seventeenth century. In a similar way, the naming of some human behavior as “religious” reveals wider cultural assumptions about human beings that can be mapped and studied (Broucek 2015: 115–116). Seventeenth century explanations for the nuns’ behavior were influenced by the power, prestige and ambition that shaped French society at the time. Similarly, twenty-first century historians’ accounts of the past are shaped by contemporary structural and social pressures. Recognizing that “religion” is produced through scholarly activity demands that scholars conduct that activity responsibly (Engler 2004: 300).

When people from Europe began to sail across the Atlantic in the sixteenth century they encountered a “New World.” The novelty of this world lay not only in its terrain but also in its people, who behaved in ways unfamiliar to the Europeans. As they sought to understand this new world, they drew on concepts and terminology from the old. When a Jesuit missionary-scholar from Spain called José de Acosta observed behavior that he considered to be a “deed,” a “rite,” or “idolatry,” he explained this behavior through terms like “custom,” “superstition,” and “religion” (*religión*). Acosta took a term that often denoted someone entering a life bound by order and rules (a *religio* in Latin) and applied it to explain human behavior in this new world (Biller 1985: 355–360; Smith 1998: 170). In this encounter Acosta explained particular sets of actions through the term “religion.” His analysis of human behavior is an attempt to understand and give meaning to the new data accrued from living in the new world (Smith 1998: 275). Three things are happening as he does this. First, *religión* is being applied to explain things unknown before. It is not native to this context but is a category “imposed from the outside.” Second, Acosta is claiming that the actions of people in the new world are the same, in some way, as the actions of people in the old. This universal category of activity is what he labels “*religión*” (Smith 1998: 169). Finally, as it is applied in this new world so the meaning of the word *religión* changes. Confronted with the strangeness of God’s creation, Acosta tries to express himself in conceptual language that strains under this novelty (Jennings 2010: 84–85). He utilizes the language of the old world as he seeks to describe the new, but in so doing he transforms that language, revealing the old in a different light (Stroumsa 2010: 15). This ethnographic endeavor would come to embed itself into encounters between European and non-European peoples, binding itself to “the cultural imaginary of empire” (Kwok 2012: 288).

The power of “religion” to regulate the colonial encounter shaped the development of the discipline of Religious Studies. Dialogue between Protestants and Catholics had been continuing since the Reformation (Stroumsa 2010: 5–6) and historical scholarship of the eighteenth century had drawn comparison between ancient phenomena and contemporary religions (Said 1978: 117). By the late nineteenth century this critique of religious practice had extended beyond Europe to encompass a comparative analysis of the world’s religions. This comparative enterprise was founded on a more-or-less explicit assertion that “religiousness” was a universal human trait, a position that developed from Protestantism and that was essentially theological (Fitzgerald 2000: 32–43; although see the critique offered by Broucek 2015: 104–105). Together with other cultural products like travel literature, novels, scientific papers, and art, this scholarship on religion was a

tool by which European people imagined and articulated the difference between themselves and those other peoples over the sea (Jennings 2010: 84–85; Said 1993). The developing scholarship on religion emerged through recognition of geographical differences, but it also articulated temporal difference. Through the designation of some religions as “primitive,” the colonial difference was extended through time as well as space (Mignolo 2007: 470). Academic scholarship on religion therefore functioned as part of the larger cultural apparatus by which “vast ... domains [were turned] into treatable and malleable entities” (Said 1978: 115) and difference could be given value (Mignolo 2002: 71).

As the world was described through the shaping of disciplinary knowledge, so European societies began to change. The marking of colonial difference outside European societies precipitated the delineation of differences within them (Foucault 2003: 60–62). As religion emerged as a subject of study—shaped by wider notions of spatial and temporal difference—so European people framed some aspects of their own lives as religious while naming others non-religious or secular (Masazuwa 2005: 20). This was not merely a stripping of religion from the world (Taylor 2007: 26). Rather, it was a sustained transformation in the way that people understood the world and their place in it, including their obligations and relationships (Taylor 2007: 159–162). Human experience of the world was thus reordered. People reimagined their encounters with others, their own bodies, and their sensory experiences (Asad 2011: 51–52). Emerging from this new epistemological order, the “secular” stood in opposition to the religious, being the space of universal rationality, science, civil society, economic activity, and the dynamic operation of the nation state (Fitzgerald 2000: 5–6). In contrast, religion could be imagined as archaic, innate, and distinct from the everyday. A universal distinction was made between the world as it was understood in religion and the world as it really was, objectively observed.

The growing scholarship naming and comparing “religion” ushered in further changes. When religion was imagined as innate to humanity, those non-European peoples who did not have a religion recognizable to Europeans could be designated as less human (Maldonado-Torres 2014: 641). Other models of religion distinguished between Christianity and “primitive” religions (Smith 1998). By these designations European supremacy in global production and population could be scientifically explained as a product of innate superiority. Colonial adventures could therefore be justified (Dussel 2002: 183–185). At the same time, religious concepts provided the grammar by which European peoples began to speak the language of nationalism. This further legitimized the power of the nation state, first in Europe and then in its (former) colonies (Peterson and Walhof 2002: 2–7). The development of

a distinction between the secular and the religious runs parallel to Europe's rise to global material supremacy (Mignolo 2002: 59). The identification and classification of religions was always a process tightly bound into the developing power of European nation states.

Scholarship on religion was part of the process by which new sciences like philology or anthropology (and, eventually, art history) made sense of the world. This epistemological transformation was tied to a vision of religion that saw it as both universal and distinct from the secular. Acosta's identification of *religi6n* shows how knowledge about religion came to govern what could be meaningfully said about the world (Foucault 1970: 138–144; Said 1978: 119–122). This process of explanation was also implicated in the material transformation of the world through the actions of capital. Comparison of human behaviors allowed the racial classification of human bodies (Maldonado-Torres 2014), facilitating the functioning of imperial administrations, the circulation of wealth, and the subjugating of people (Chidester 1996). New knowledge shaped the disciplinary systems by which human bodies were ordered (Foucault 2003) and the expansion of these disciplinary systems in turn opened up new areas of research for the scholarly disciplines:

The expansion of Western capitalism implied the expansion of Western epistemology in all its ramifications, from the instrumental reason that went along with capitalism and the industrial revolution, to the theories of the state, to the criticism of both capitalism and the state. (Mignolo 2002: 59)

When scholars of religion say things like “there is no data for religion” (Smith 1982: xi) what they mean is that there are no objective “facts” on which scholarship can rest; rather, the very act of identifying something as “religious” is already theory-laden (Engler 2004: 298). When Acosta, for example, wrote of the behavior of other human beings he called that behavior *religi6n*. In so doing he made implicit statements about the nature of human beings and about *religi6n*. He also implicated himself and his subjects into a wider network of geo-political power that stretched from Spain to the New World and back into the past (Masazuwa 2005: 180). This network was critical in the establishment and maintenance of both the epistemological and the material order of European empires.

Given the significance of “religion” in the formation of these epistemological and material regimes, together with their ongoing influence over our lives, scholars of religion have come to focus less on what religion is than on “what the definition includes and what it excludes – how, by whom, for what purpose, and so on. And in what historical context a particular definition of

religion makes good sense” (Asad 2011: 39). Religion is so deeply bound to other ideas like the secular, the market, or the liberal state, that it comes to seem natural, universal, and given. It is not. Translating words or ideas from pre-modern societies (for example) as “religion” glosses over the differences between that society and the scholar’s own world (Nongbri 2013). The concept works to mystify people’s behavior, to reorder the world, and to disguise the play of power in a social situation (Fitzgerald 2000: 14–15). To put it another way, using a word from Althusser, religion is interpellative; it offers a classification by which people are constituted as thinking, acting subjects (Althusser 1971; McCutcheon 2015: 131–132). As such, the discipline of religious studies has been critical to modern practices of discipline and governance, either through providing a framework for subjectification (McCutcheon 2003) or through cooperating with the state’s regimes of surveillance and management of its citizens (Asad 2011: 36). Seen in this way, study of religion ought to address itself to the various shifting ideologies and institutions that enable “religion” to be identified, formalized, and reproduced.

Although this is the general consensus across the Religious Studies spectrum (Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014: 495–496), the continued debate indicates that more theoretical work remains to be done (Engler 2004). Attempts to critique or nuance this constructionist model of religion have focused on the distinction between the “raw materials” of scholarship and the interpretive construct provided by the scholar (Benavides 2000: 116). Constructionists have been accused of being crypto-realists, working with a fixed understanding of religion which they refuse or are unable to acknowledge (Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014). Equally, to say religion is merely a construct does not mean it is analytically useless; all aspects of human society are constructs. While the concept of religion might have emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, there are now groups of people that identify themselves as a religion. “The fact that ‘religion’ is socially constructed does not imply that it does not refer to a thing (namely, a social thing) and therefore it does not imply that the term is analytically useless” (Schillbrack 2012: 101). If scholars choose not to apply the term “religion” when it is not a native category, then many other analytical tools are also lost. Concepts of culture, class, and gender would likewise be suspect and the term “religion” has an ambiguous usage even in societies that do use it (Broucek 2015: 101–103, Schillbrack 2012: 102). Continuing debates about the theoretical validity of the term “religion” reveal the historical roots and “ideological trajectories” of the field (Engler 2004: 309).

Colonial encounter and imperial venturing brought people from Europe into contact with other peoples. Contemporary academic research in the humanities was deeply influenced by this process, not least because new human

sciences were developed to make sense of the data produced from these encounters. Religion and its study emerged from this combination of material greed, humane curiosity, and institutional power. “Religion is the creation of the scholar’s study” because the scholar’s pen is moved by this trinity. Understood as a universal, innate in human behavior, religion became a means to order knowledge about the world. The language of natural religion and secular human science obscured the cultural and historical contingency of this study. As it is so deeply bound up in the material transformation of the world through imperial governance and capitalism, the study of religion is also the study of how institutional power subjugates and governs people. The responses to the possessions at Loudun show this process in action, but are also a reminder that the student of religion remains implicated in these networks of ideology and subjectification as they explain and interpret human behavior.

### **Scholars’ Studies and the Creation of Late Antiquity**

Conscious of his approaching death, the elderly Augustine, bishop of Hippo, asked for some psalms to be copied and pasted onto the wall of his bed-chamber. With his close companions he made plans for the continued care of his church and its possessions, especially the libraries that he had amassed there and in his own private study. This little story reminds us that our understanding of Late Antiquity is contingent on the evidence we have at our disposal, evidence that is marked by the twin actions of preservation and erasure (Muehlberger 2015). Archives like the one Augustine left behind are collected for posterity, for the future, as a prosthesis to stand in the place of that which is lost through the ravages of passing time (Derrida 1996: 36). In his works, says Augustine’s biographer, the bishop continued to live. While Augustine’s writings were copied again and again, in new libraries and under unfamiliar hands, other writings were lost. The study of Late Antiquity began as a study of archives like the one collected by Augustine and passed on so carefully to others. As with the invention of religion, this scholarly labor was an attempt to make sense of the scholar’s own world. In this way, “Late Antiquity,” like religion, is the creation of the scholar’s study. In particular, it was Augustine who was to be the early focus of scholarly labor.

The study of Late Antiquity began in attempts to make sense of either the religious or the political formation of post-Reformation Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, texts by Augustine and other “Fathers” were used either to support or refute Protestant or Catholic readings of Church history (Wood 2013: 10–11). By the Enlightenment,



historical studies of religion were explicitly addressing contemporary anxieties. In this period, Christian study of ancient Israelite religion drew connections to contemporary Judaism in order to resolve the perceived ambiguous place of Jewish people in modernity (Grafton 2009: 182–183; Stroumsa 2010: 42–49; Sutcliffe 2003). Contemporary anxieties about religion and politics also shaped Enlightenment histories of Late Antiquity. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts like Hotman's *Franco-Gallia* (1573/4) had already argued that late antique and medieval history was important to understand contemporary politics (Wood 2013: 11–12). This trend continued in the Enlightenment. Influenced by his own distaste for religious enthusiasm, Gibbon's analysis of the late Roman empire was a demonstration of the dangers of religious passion to political communities (Wooton 1993). For de Volney, writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, an encounter with the ruins at Palmyra acted as the centerpiece in his defense of revolutionary change in Europe (Hell 2010). Although there were notable exceptions, like Tillemont and Gibbon, before the nineteenth-century studies of Late Antiquity generally traced the origins of either the political or the religious tensions in contemporary Europe.

This divide in the historiography between religion and politics persisted into the nineteenth century. During the Catholic revival of the nineteenth century, the late antique period was mined for theological inspiration and exemplars of piety. Work by historians like Frédéric Ozanam argued that the Christian Church preserved the fruits of Roman civilization for later generations (Wood 2013: 140–144). Near contemporary scholarship championed by liberal Protestants in Germany focused on situating the texts produced by the early Church within their wider contexts, a methodological approach that was to bear fruit in the United States (Clark 2011). At the same time, study of Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages was also influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism. Around the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, for example, the question of the Germanic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries became more acute in the historiography. Historians struggled to ascertain the precise nature of the invasion's violence as well as its institutional, social and racial legacies for France and Germany (Wood 2013: 154–198). Significant methodological advances (in philology, for example) were often shaped or received by nationalist concerns. Nineteenth-century scholarship on Late Antiquity followed one of two routes. Either it was influenced by the enthusiasms of Catholic and Protestant piety, or it responded to the deep currents of European nationalism.

The division between “Church history” and the political history of the late Roman empire began to be broken down after 1945. Studies of Augustine, for example, placed his work within a longer history of literary history (Vessey

2015: 455–458). Other scholarship addressed itself particularly to the divide in historiography between Church and political history. The clearest example of this process in action is in the work of Arnaldo Momigliano. An émigré from Mussolini’s Italy, Momigliano established himself in post-war British scholarship through a number of studies that offered re-evaluations of intellectual history. In these essays he made extensive use of the resources available to him at the Warburg Institute in London, the library of which was richly stocked with work on art and material culture (Christ 1991). His usual method in these studies was to hold together two opposing themes and, in the process of an argument that drew on both textual and material sources, demonstrate how these apparent contradictions might be overcome to offer a new vision of the problem (Grafton 2009: 235). Nowhere is this clearer than in the collection of papers assembled at a conference at the Warburg in 1958, subsequently published as *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (1963). In the editorial forward to this collection and in his own contribution, Momigliano argued succinctly and persuasively that the study of the late Roman world must attend both to the religious and to the political realms. Methodological innovation was a recurring theme in his work, and in his later life he would urge younger Italian historians to travel to France, the UK, and the US to learn how to use sociological methods in their own studies (Momigliano 1971). In conjoining both the social and the institutional in his depiction of the Mediterranean world of the late fourth century, he focused attention not on abstract institutions like “Empire” or “Church” but on the lives and actions of people. Through setting up and resolving apparent antinomies, Momigliano was able to deploy a new palette as he rendered the familiar landscape of the late Roman world.

While Momigliano reframed the historiographical divide inherited from the nineteenth century, students of the late Roman world also reshaped the study of literature. Philological work by Courcelle, Henry, and others had shown the richness and sophistication of fourth- and fifth-century Latin texts, particularly Augustine’s collection of writings. Archeological discoveries in North Africa also forced a reappraisal of this literature. Increasingly attuned to the partiality of the literary record, a new generation of historians situated these texts within the wider context of the material traces of fourth and fifth century North African Christianity. Two biographies of Augustine published in the late 1960s—by André Mandouze and Peter Brown—show the fruits of this labor. Although different in form and explicit intent, both demonstrated how the writings collated in Augustine’s library emerged from the material, social, and cultural background of fourth- and fifth-century North Africa (Brown 1967; Mandouze 1968; Vessey 2015). Developing his work in the 1970s and 1980s, Brown drew on social historians like Evelyn

Patlagean, on intellectual historians like Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, and on anthropologists like Mary Douglas (Brown 2003). Brown used these methodological resources to depict the complex play of change and continuity that unfolded in the society of the late Roman Empire. In particular, models which emphasized civilizational decline were revised in favor of accounts of cultural transformation unfolding over long periods of time and broad sections of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Brown's identification and articulation of "Late Antiquity" therefore combined a focus on the social and cultural context of the late Roman world with a challenge to the historiographical boundaries of chronology and geography. The development of the concept of "Late Antiquity" was rooted in the archeological discoveries of the 1940s and 1950s and the new sense that they gave of the hinterland of literary artifacts.

Late Antiquity as a distinct field of study emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as historians began to perceive the limits of the historiography and pushed beyond received methodologies. The following generation of historians would develop this focus on the social and cultural circumstances of Late Antiquity. For example, the incorporation of gender critique combined with an increasing sensitivity to the textuality of late antique documents led to a number of re-assessments of late antique religion and its study, mirroring developments in other historical disciplines (Clark 1998, 2001, 2004: 178–181; Cooper 1996). In the 1950s and 1960s, archeological and material evidence reshaped the field. By the mid-1990s new methodological approaches had transformed the picture of Late Antiquity, drawing it into conversation with literary and critical theory. Contributions by Clark and others toward this linguistic turn continue the tradition of examining the textuality of late antique documents that gave birth to the field of Late Antiquity itself (Clark 2004).

Some recent studies have noted that the new "orthodoxy" of Late Antiquity risks distorting our picture of the late ancient world; viewed from the late 2010s, Late Antiquity is clearly a product of modernity, shaped by the ideological presuppositions of twentieth-century academia (James 2008). The broad model of continuity and transformation that Brown and others developed has been challenged through recourse to archeological evidence (Ward-Perkins 2005). These revisions of Late Antiquity are timely reminders that its study—as with all academic scholarship about the past—is an exercise governed by "ideological systems" (Clark 2001: 426). We should be careful, however, to avoid the notion that a pristine reconstruction of past societies is possible. Descriptive accounts of ancient societies seek to describe through using the classifications of the cultures being studied; redescriptive accounts use categories "foreign" to that society to organize, compare, and analyze human behavior (Smith 2004: 29–32; Nongbri 2008: 442–443). Terms like

“religion” or “Late Antiquity” are redescriptive categories and their application in “the scholar’s study” does not produce or recreate the culture that they describe (Frankfurter 2015).

Nevertheless, particular ways of describing late antique society show clearly the ways that scholarship is shaped by its social and cultural context. For example, the suggestion that the religious environment of Late Antiquity was a “marketplace” in which people, like pliant consumers, chose particular religions, is clearly modeled on late modern notions of economic exchange and liberal freedoms (Elsner 2003). As the arguments about the nature and study of “religion” demonstrate, academic practice and the generation of knowledge is always structured by ideological commitments. Not least of these is the commitment to integrate “religion” as a central component of the lives of people in the late antique past. Late Antiquity is a “rhetoric of modernity” and as such is constituted around and through its relationship to religion. “Late Antiquity,” like “religion,” is interpellative, constituting subjects through their commitment to particular ways of naming the past and the place of religion in human societies.

When Smith suggested that religion was the product of the scholar’s study, his intention was to urge students of religion to recognize the ways in which religion as a category of human behavior was generated through the scholar’s own acts of comparison and redescription. In a similar fashion, “Late Antiquity” emerged from a particular redescription of society in fourth and fifth century North Africa. Integrating literary and philological examinations of texts into a developing body of archeological scholarship, the biographies of Augustine published in the late 1960s marked a break in historiographical tradition already foreshadowed in the work of Momigliano. The malleability of the late antique text formed a key element of the development of late antique studies in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the heart of the late antique project is a desire to connect literary texts to the social and cultural life of people in the Mediterranean around the second to the eighth centuries. The religious character of these textual survivals meant placing religion at the heart of Late Antiquity. Born in the decades after the Second World War, Late Antiquity was a “rhetoric of modernity” (Giardina 1999: 158–159). As with modernity itself, religion provided the nucleus around which Late Antiquity was constituted.

## **Recent and Future Trends**

A number of recent trends in the methodology of late antique studies show some ways in which the field is adapting to the challenges of studying human behavior in the past. A turn toward examining the sense-world of late antique

people, informed by a theoretical commitment to the body as socially constructed, has emphasized the multiplicity of religious practices in the ancient world. Innovative engagement with native categories of thought, particularly focusing on grammar, has produced impressive results. Text-centered methodological approaches continue to be shaped by critical theory, with particular interest in uncovering networks of imperial power, knowledge production, and difference. The re-evaluation of Late Antiquity as a category of academic inquiry continues as scholars have focused on the wider questions of the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Finally, the growing methodological sophistication of the digital humanities is leading to significant contributions. Whether they focus on the late antique past, or on the representation of that past in secondary sources, these studies continue the reflexive examination of religion in Late Antiquity.

In a recent introductory chapter to the *Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Talal Asad suggested that the examination of belief ought to be complemented by “ethnographies of the human body” that model the “architecture of the senses” (Asad 2011: 51). Focusing on this sensory architecture allows one to map ways in which the bodily senses are experienced in a world that always exceeds human control and understanding (Asad 2011: 54). Asad’s remarks mirror some recent shifts in discussions of embodiment in the late antique world. Developing from a focus on the body as the site of discursive practices of discipline (Brown 1988; Foucault 1988; Shaw 1998), a large literature has examined late antique sensory experience. These texts have tended to be shaped by interdisciplinary studies of literature, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and cultural history (Ackerman 1990; Classen 1993; Wolfson 1994) or have positioned themselves as part of an ongoing theological examination of sense and spirituality (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2011). These studies have integrated “religious” ways of seeing into a wider late antique sensory world, showing how particular smells, sights, or noises came to be attached to particular experiences, both intellectual and affective (Frank 2000, 2001; Harrison 2013; Harvey 2006; Neis 2013). Focusing on the sensory architecture of late antique people has integrated late ancient religious practice more fully into the late ancient world while also showing the diversity of such practices (Harvey 2015). It also models a kind of religious behavior apart from claims about belief.

These studies of the senses are part of a wider attempt to approach religion through the native categories of human experience in Late Antiquity. Studies of sight in the late ancient world have tended to draw on the concept of *ekphrasis* to explain the connections between the world as sensed and the world as represented (Frank 2000; Neis 2013). In so doing, practices re-described as religious are integrated into a wider late antique textual culture.

Drawing on the connections between material culture and literature (Roberts 1989), as well as studies of the material and ideological conditions of education (Bagnall 2009; Kaster 1988), recent studies have shown how the production and consumption of late antique texts became imbued with religious meaning (Chin 2008; Krueger 2004). Situating Christian textual practices (exegesis; heresiology; hagiography) within the wider context of Late Antiquity breaks down the polemical distinction between Christian and non-Christian textual practices (Young 1997). It also shows how it was these very models of textuality that provided the conceptual and material tools to construct Christianity as something separate and distinct from non-Christian things (Boyarin 2004; Jacobs 2012). Chin, for example, approaches the construction of Christianity through grammatical education. In so doing, she marks an important distinction between the categories of thought native to her subject (letters; words; sentences; canons) and the redescription of that subject with reference to poststructural critical theory (Chin 2008). These works build on the linguistic turn in historical studies, showing how representations of the world in late antique texts have social, cognitive, and material consequences (Jacobs 2004: 9) while also recognizing the partial and contingent nature of their own scholarly work (Clark 2004: 157).

Shifts in the methods through which late antique religions have been identified have led to new ways of conceptualizing the period. Recent evaluations of early Islam have demonstrated the way in which Islam either conforms to or is paradigmatic of specific late antique forms of religiosity (Al-Azmeh 2014: 1–41; Cameron 2015). These studies re-evaluate both the emergence of Islam and the shifting theological and social patterns of thought in Christianity and Judaism in the eastern Mediterranean during the sixth and seventh centuries. Situating Islam within the wider scope of a long Late Antiquity is not new, but earlier scholarship on Islam's relationship to late antique society tended to position as derivative of the "Judeo-Christian" world or as emerging complete and distinct from the deserts beyond Europe (Cameron 2015: 250). Situating Islam firmly within the development of Late Antiquity is also a more-or-less explicit claim to situate Islam within the history of Europe itself. A recent book on the Qur'ān, for example, subtitled "A European Approach" (*Ein europäischer Zugang*), directly engages with the way that Islam has been constituted as Europe's Other both historically and in more recent scholarship (Neuwirth 2010). This pattern in late antique scholarship is mirrored by the growth in academic study of the Abrahamic religions and the centrality of Late Antiquity to the development of the figure of Abraham (Stroumsa 2013, 2015). While countering iniquitous discourses around the dangers of Islam, the concept of "Abrahamic religions" emerges from a long history of supersessionism and religious polemic that

ought to be recognized and acknowledged (Hughes 2012). The question of what constitutes “late antique” “religion” has become more obviously ideologically charged and future attempts to reframe the periodization must recognize this.

Riegl’s identification and analysis of the forms of late antique material culture was an attempt to situate Art History as a legitimate *Wissenschaft*, which was itself based on a methodological transformation. Despite this and other methodological innovations, the material products of academia have remained relatively recognizable until recently: books, journal articles, translations, critical editions and so on. The application of digital technologies, however, brings methodological transformations and also changes the nature of academic labor. This is most obvious in two ways. First, in analysis of texts. Extensive text corpora, digitized during the past few decades, produce large blocks of data. Close analysis of these data can allow identification of common authorship and networks of influence, as well as analysis of form and genre (Zeldes and Schroeder 2015). It also, however, remaps the contours of academic work, challenging traditional models of editing, peer review, ownership, and access to data (Baumann 2015). Second, the construction of gazetteers of late antique places integrates cartography and geography into late antique studies. A gazetteer and map project called *Pleiades*, which focuses on the ancient Mediterranean, has been expanded to take in the classical Islamic world, mirroring shifts in the concept of Late Antiquity (Jackson *et al.* 2016). Gazetteers like this enable the stable identification of places and the connections between places and people. The fruits of these data are visible, for example, in the “Migration of Faith” project, which catalogues prosopographical data on clerical exiles and visualizes these data through *Pleiades* (2014). These large collaborative projects based on open data show how digital humanities can challenge existing models of ownership, publication, disciplinary structure, and collaboration.

From its deployment in the work of Alois Riegl, the late antique has always been a fecund site of methodological innovation. The intersection of religion and Late Antiquity poses a number of methodological and theoretical challenges that are now being confronted in scholarship. The question around the representative character of both primary and secondary sources demands continued theoretical engagement with the nature of textuality and the redescriptive processes by which academic knowledge is created. This focus on textuality is complemented by an increasingly nuanced understanding of human life as affective and embodied, a theoretical position that has underpinned much of the study of the sensory architecture of late antique people. Academic scholarship, like all aspects of human social life, traces ideological trajectories. Discussions of late antique religions that recognize and seek to address the ideological hinterland behind the construction of categories like

“Abrahamic,” “Islam,” “Christianity” and so on are exciting developments that will recast the history of scholarship. Such approaches would take seriously the material and ideological conditions that govern the production of knowledge about late antique religion.

## Conclusion

The words “Late Antiquity” and “religion” are familiar companions, but as Gil Anidjar has pointed out, such companionable conjunctions are often haunted by the (physical, epistemic, colonial) violence of joining (Anidjar 2002: 10). “Late Antiquity” developed in the second half of the twentieth century in a collection of academic studies that described the social behaviors of people in the past. One of the ways in which this behavior was explained was through the application of the anthropological and sociological category of “religion.” “Late Antiquity” was produced when sociological definitions of religion were applied to explain human societies far away in time. A volume entitled *Religion in Late Antiquity* is one that names this originary joining. “Religion” is a concept created as people from Europe struggled to make sense of their world and so it is deeply indebted to the ways that these people were shaped by the past, particularly late antique texts (Engler and Miller 2006: 167; Stroumsa 2010: 58–59). To put it another way, the anthropological or sociological category of “religion” was produced when late antique texts were used to explain human societies far away in space. A volume named “Religion in Late Antiquity” also names the late antique in religion.

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**FURTHER READING**

Smith (1998) offers a crucial introduction to the history of “religion” as a category of analysis in early modernity. This can be complemented by Stroumsa (2010). The importance of the idea of religion and “the secular” to the emergence of modernity is traced in careful detail in Taylor (2007). Studies by Quijano (2007) and Mignolo (2002, 2007), as well as classic work by Said (1973, 1993), show how the production of knowledge is determined by the wider economic and ideological conditions of colonialism. Clark (2004) and Wood (2013) are important introductions to shifts in historiography and their importance for the study of pre-modern past, while the “Introduction” of Chakrabarty (2000) outlines the links between historiography and colonialism. Good, brief, and provocative methodological reflections on “Late Antiquity” can be found in Muehlberger (2015) and the other posts in that Blog Forum. The intersection of colonial structures and the theorizing of religion is also traced by Masazuwa (2005).