

complemented with others who use that method, such as Clifford Ando's *Matter of the Gods*, Jason von Ehrenrook's *Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome*, and Sonja Anderson's forthcoming *Idol Talk*.

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***Cult of the Dead: A Brief History of Christianity.* By Kyle Smith.**  
Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. xxii + 333  
pp. + 16 plates. \$29.95 hardcover, \$34.95 eBook.

What is the nature of the Christian religion? *Cult of the Dead* answers this question implicitly, presenting a wide-ranging, thematic overview of Christianity that focuses on its cult of the martyrs. At times a rather personal account, written in a lively and engaging style, the book takes its reader on a nonlinear journey across time and space, from the New World to the Old, from Canada, Roman Judaea, Persia, and the late antique Mediterranean, to medieval and early modern Europe, the Caribbeans during the “age of exploration,” the author’s own adventures in the Judaeen desert, the Reformation and its impact (especially in England), and nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical scholarship. The book flouts scholarly apparatus and conventions, targets a wide audience, and is richly illustrated, punctually engaging with visual representations of the topics it discusses.

Mainly known in scholarly circles for his studies of Eastern Mediterranean, and particularly Syriac, martyrs, Kyle Smith is a sure guide to the topic at hand. He tackles his subject in eight evenly divided chapters, in addition to a preface, an introduction, and a postscript. A section of “Notes for Further Reading,” a minimalist sort of annotated bibliography, takes the place of customary endnotes or footnotes. Chapter One sets the tone by presenting how early followers of Christ, the model for all subsequent martyrs and their *imitatio Christi*, established martyrdom as the highest form of Christian devotion. In Chapter Two, Smith takes us through his field of expertise by narrating how Eusebius and other late antique scholars pioneered a new genre that catalogued the martyrs and the saints, focusing especially on the importance of Syriac manuscripts held in various Egyptian monasteries that made their way to Western Europe in the nineteenth century. This is a good example of the way that most chapters ebb and flow between the different periods of the past, weaving a narrative that engages with both ancient authors who documented the subject the chapter studies and the scholars of later centuries who read them, elaborated on their work, and analyzed and criticized their work. Although this feature might be confusing to novice readers, presumably the target audience of this work.

The all-important physical remains of those considered holy by Christians, the relics of the saints, are the focus of Chapter Three, while Chapter Four gives an overview of the way that martyrs and saints led Christians to reconceptualize their organization of time. Indeed, from the fourth century onward, calendars included the feasts of saints and martyrs, a good indication of the progressive Christianization of society and

culture, with the culmination of the AD system of counting the years. To this reviewer, the more detailed coverage and more arcane nature of the topic made this chapter the most interesting of the book. Monasticism and its occasional more extreme forms are the topic of Chapter Five, while Chapter Six focuses on miracles, as well as pilgrimages to sites that became famous because of their associations with saintly interventions. In Chapter Seven, Smith's purview is more narrowly focused on the Reformation and the martyrs it created in England during the reign of "Bloody" Mary, using Adam Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1563) and the history of its composition as a narrative fold. Finally, Chapter Eight presents how the legends of the saints evolved and transformed from the time of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth to the early twentieth century, ending with the critical enterprise of the Bollandists, the creators of the *Acta Sanctorum*, and its most famous twentieth-century practitioner, Hippolyte Delehaye.

Despite its subtitle, readers expecting a traditional history of Christianity will be disappointed. Going from the martyrs of Roman persecutions, who became the Christian saints, to late antique, medieval, and later interpretations and uses of the stories told about them, the book is an overview of the origins of the cult of martyrs as a fundamental characteristic of Christianity, but most importantly it is an exploration of the *reception* of the saints and martyrs. While an enjoyable read, the experience will evidently vary greatly according to the reader's background and expectations. As a scholar of Christian history, and I can only analyze it in this perspective without projecting myself into a putative theoretical reader—a meaningless exercise, the book suffers from two main weaknesses: it lacks an argument and specific references.

The lack of scholarly apparatus can be incredibly frustrating for scholars, since the book eludes page numbers of modern writers or references for ancient texts it quotes, with the exception of occasional in-text scriptural references. It does refer to the work quoted in the bibliography, but only in the most general terms. Admittedly not the work's purpose, given its target audience, adding page numbers and specific references would have added to the book's value by including scholars among its potential readerships. The bibliography's coverage is also somewhat arbitrary, divided into two sections of "Ancient and Medieval Sources in English Translation" and "Modern Sources," yet leaving out everything in between, such as the works of Adam Foxe and other early modern writers discussed in some detail in the text.

Finally, whereas astute readers might detect an implicit argument in the title and overall presentation of the subject, the text itself bypasses discussion of the book's main questions, its argument, its methodology, and approach to sources—all features that readers of recent historical scholarship have come to expect. Instead, *Cult of the Dead* is mostly a thematic narrative of Christianity's history viewed through the lens of its martyrs and saints, and the fundamental ways they have shaped the societies and cultures where Christianity dominated across the centuries. It may be of interest to students of the history of Christianity, with appropriate expectations, because its target audience is a wider public with little knowledge of its subject.

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