

Response to Wilken's *The First Thousand Years*

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A STUDENT in any branch of knowledge who is invited to set before a popular audience, within the space of four hours, the gist and upshot of his studies, may do well to submit himself to the discipline implied. He knows that the expert will frown upon some of his statements as questionable in content and dogmatic in tone, and will mark the omission of many things for which no room could be found. But it will do him good to sit back in his chair and look for the main outline, so often obscured by detail.

Francis Cornford, author of the formidably titled *From Religion to Philosophy: A study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (1912), made this observation in the preface to *Before and After Socrates* (1932), which began as four invited lectures to the Workers Educational Association.¹ Eight decades later, scholars are often invited, even expected, to set out their central concerns in a way that reaches beyond their specialist colleagues. Robert Wilken is particularly well placed to do this, for he is always a lucid writer, and he shares with Augustine of Hippo, whom he greatly admires, a commitment to explaining theology so that anyone who comes to listen can understand. But, like so much that does one good, sitting back and looking for the main outline is not an easy task, even when there are many more than four hours available for expounding *The*

¹ F.M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912); Cornford *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

First Thousand Years. In one's own field of expertise, the writing of every sentence prompts, "Do I in fact know that? How do I know?" Beyond that field, there is the question of when to rely on the judgement of a fellow scholar, and when to return to that scholar's sources, if indeed one has the languages and the expertise to do so. No wonder *The First Thousand Years* was, as the publisher puts it, "ten years in the making and the result of a lifetime of study."

Even more challenging is the "popular audience." Wilken writes for the elusive "general reader who may have little background in the history of Christianity."² The wider the envisaged audience, the less can be taken for granted and the more explanation is needed; but still without obscuring the main outline, overloading the text, and discouraging the reader. Thinking about this also does one good, but it is not easy to decide how much knowledge to assume. Many authors address this problem by envisaging the students they teach, and when writing the history of Christianity, they may also envisage the congregation they serve. But these contexts vary greatly. In my country, for example, universities are secular, departments of theology and religion are not confessional, and in all subjects there are many students who have no experience of any faith-community and have only basic information about the religions they are likely to encounter. Early Christian studies flourish in the context of late antiquity, especially among graduate students, but these students and their advisors are often located in classics or history; it does not follow that they have no interest in religion, but they read Augustine or the Cappadocians in relation to late antique philosophy and social history, not in relation to later theological debates. Church history and patristics are not absent from Theology and Religion, but these departments are changing their traditional Judaeo-Christian profile, so new appointments are likely to be in other faiths or in the sociology of religion. Only a few universities have Byzantinists, or offer teaching (even at graduate level) of relevant languages other than Greek and Latin.

Publishers and series editors can make the audience question more manageable by setting limits and offering guidelines: you have so many thousand words, with perhaps a modest budget for illustrations; you must (or must not) give references, and must keep footnotes or endnotes to a minimum or leave them out altogether; you must give timelines and maps and guidance on further reading; you are writing, to take an example from my own experience, "in the first instance for students

² Robert L. Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 6.

and teachers of Classics and Ancient History.”³ *The First Thousand Years* is not part of a series. As befits Yale University Press, the book is beautifully produced, there is a generous range of colour illustrations, and the illustrations and maps are of high quality. But there could be more help for a “general reader” who wants to learn more about a topic when Wilken has shown how interesting it is. Only Bible quotations (and not all of them) are referenced, there are no footnotes or endnotes, and the index could be improved. There is a useful list of sources in translation, but the list of secondary “suggested readings” is in alphabetical order of author, not arranged by topic. Compare, for example, Philip Rousseau’s *The Early Christian Centuries* (2002), which ends each chapter with a brief discussion of starting-points for further reading and selects one for “where to begin,” or Morwenna Ludlow’s *The Early Church* (2009), which offers a bibliography of sources for each chapter, gives references, and provides notes on new or controversial material.⁴ Many wide-ranging books, designed to welcome the general reader, do offer references, endnotes, and guidance on bibliography. Recent examples include Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (2013); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (2009); and, with the longest time range, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (2009).⁵ Three thousand? Yes, for the “millennium of beginnings” starts in 1000 BC.

Wilken aims to select, for a general reader, “the central developments in early Christian history with an eye to the form of Christianity that spread around the ancient world and endured into the Middle Ages.”⁶ His choices deserve attention, not only because they are the choices of a leading historian who has done so much for the study of early Christianity. They are concisely presented, but they have wide implications for the writing of history.

³ Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, Key Themes in Ancient History, eds. P. A. Cartledge and P. D. A. Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ Philip Rousseau, *The Early Christian Centuries* (Harlow: Longman, 2002); Morwenna Ludlow, *The Early Church*, I. B. Tauris History of the Christian Church vol. 1 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

⁵ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000*, rev. ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin, 2009); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁶ Wilken, 5.

The First Thousand Years begins with a quotation from a Lithuanian poet: “What power preserves what once was, if memory does not last?” Some readers will know that Lithuania, now a member of NATO and of the European Union, kept through the years of Nazi and Soviet occupation the memory of its Christian tradition and of its earlier independence from foreign rule. Some may also know that, in an earlier period of occupation by Russian imperial rulers, teaching or printing the Lithuanian language was banned after an uprising, but books were printed across the border and smuggled in. The close connection of language and Christianity is a theme of *The First Thousand Years*. Missionaries to Western Europe taught Latin; missionaries to eastern regions translated.⁷ The Scriptures were translated into Gothic, but without the books of Kings, because Goths needed no encouragement to war.⁸ (Why were they not translated into Punic? Augustine tried to find Punic-speaking clergy for country districts.)⁹ The learned monk Mashtots, a former imperial official who knew Greek, Syriac, and Persian, worked with a calligrapher to devise an Armenian alphabet for people who had previously managed on spoken translations of Bible readings in Greek or Syriac.¹⁰ For the Slavs, Cyril devised the Glagolitic script, then the followers of Cyril and his brother Methodius adapted the Greek alphabet to produce Cyrillic script.¹¹ When Arabic became the dominant language of administration and of daily life, there were many Arabic-speaking Christians, but Coptic language and culture survived in Egypt, and Latin continued in Spain.¹²

Without memory, the past will vanish and the dead will be forgotten. That is why Christians preserved the *memoria* of a martyr, the shrine and relics, and retold the martyr’s story. Wilken wants also to remember missionaries and bishops, monks and monarchs, theologians who advanced understanding, and founders of enduring forms of life in community.¹³ Commemoration, “lest we forget,” has been a motive for historians ever since Herodotus set out the findings of his research (*História*) “so that what people did should not fade away with the passage of time, nor should great and marvellous deeds of Greeks and foreigners lack

⁷ Ibid., 345.

⁸ Ibid., 258.

⁹ Ibid., 320; Eric Rebillard, “Punic” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 656–657.

¹⁰ Wilken, 230.

¹¹ Ibid., 345–346.

¹² Ibid., Coptic: 211, Latin in Spain: 328.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

glory, especially the cause for which they fought each other.”¹⁴ Herodotus moved at once to the different accounts given by different people, and Wilken goes on to say that memory is selective: “Our knowledge of the past is not objective, but personal and participatory.”¹⁵ By “participatory” he means, I think, that memories are shaped by what matters to us as part of a community. The community in this book is not limited by denomination, but inclusive of all who have tried to be faithful Christians. The tone is characteristically benign and courteous. Wilken explains why Christians differed on the interpretation of Scripture and on the implications of belief statements. In tracing, with impressive clarity, the sequence of debate on the union of divine and human in Christ, he exemplifies how useful history can be as a way in to central theological questions. He acknowledges political factors, but makes few adverse judgements on behavior or character, preferring “the mood changed,” “the tide turned,” or the gently ominous “Things did not go well.” He recognizes difference, for example, in the celibacy requirement for clergy, in the response of other ancient churches when bishops of Rome claimed primacy, and in the veneration of icons.¹⁶ He also recognizes the importance of local tradition and practice in sustaining local Christian commitment.

Much has been written (too much of it in a far less lucid style than Wilken’s) on cultural and collective memory and on its relation to identity and to history.¹⁷ Historians challenge memories: there is a difference between writing the history of what people remember and how they interpret their past, and asking what is the evidence for these memories and what has been forgotten or, deliberately or unconsciously, redacted. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann has invented the term “mnemohistory” for reception theory applied to history,¹⁸ and this concept is the starting point for another recent work. Josef Lössl begins *The Early Church: History and Memory* (2009) with a chapter called “What is the early church and why would we want to study it?” and follows this with a chapter on the history of such study, before addressing questions of origins and identities, literature and practice, doctrine and organisation.¹⁹

¹⁴ Herodotus, 1.1.

¹⁵ Wilken, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., Clergy celibacy: 227–228, 299; claims to primacy: 165; icons: 297–306.

¹⁷ For an introduction, see Josef Lössl, “Memory as History? Patristic Perspectives,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. LXII, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 169–183.

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Josef Lössl, *The Early Church: History and Memory* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

Wilken has chosen not to say more about the relationship of memory and history, or about his own “position in the story.” This phrase comes from Diarmaid MacCulloch, who briefly describes his own position because he thinks that the reader of a book on religion “has a right to know.”²⁰ There is indeed a difference between historians who are sympathetic to religion and historians who think that religion is politics, or repression, or irrelevant except as a tribal rallying call. (Some years ago I was invited to submit a proposal, for the Oxford University Press series of Very Short Introductions, for a volume on Late Antiquity. One of the external assessors asked why there was so much about religion: surely that belongs in Theology?²¹) Historians of all subjects are sometimes urged, though not as often as they were in the 1970s and 1980s, to abandon the “impersonal omniscient” mode and to declare themselves. The difficulty comes in making such a declaration useful, or even understandable, to a reader who comes from a different tradition. Many historians prefer to outline the scope of their work and their approach to the material, leaving reviewers to identify the characteristics of a particular training. Wilken follows “Our knowledge of the past is not objective but personal and participatory” not with autobiography, but with the simple statement, “In writing the history of the first thousand years I have chosen to highlight those events and persons that, in my judgement, are worthy of remembrance at the beginning of the third millennium.”²² The choices outlined in his Introduction say something about, so to speak, academic cultural memory: that is, the topics which are important, in the early years of the third millennium, to the community of scholars who, from their various perspectives, work on early Christian history.

The First Thousand Years (2012) almost coincided with the new edition (2013) of Peter Brown’s *The Rise of Western Christendom*. Brown observes in his Introduction that the book began, in 1996, as “a relatively short essay (virtually without footnotes),” part of a series on the Making of Europe.²³ This was a theme of great interest in the 1990s, as Eastern Europe rejoined its neighbours and questions of history and culture and religion influenced European Union debates on the limits of expansion. The second edition (2002) was in effect a new, much bigger book. It took into account the many changes in scholarship, not only on the formation

²⁰ MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, 11.

²¹ Gillian Clark, *Late Antiquity: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²² Wilken, 1.

²³ Brown, *Western Christendom*, xi.

of Europe in the “barbarian kingdoms” and the “Dark Ages” that followed the end of the Western Roman Empire, but also on the wider context of Christianity in both west and east, in relation to earlier religions and to the coming of Islam. Brown’s “Western Christendom” now covers almost the same geographical range as Wilken’s “global history,” which traces missions to Nubia, India, and China as well as the task (evidently heroic) of taking Christianity to the British Isles.²⁴ In his Introduction to the 2013 edition, surveying a further decade of scholarship, Brown observes, “The reader should know that chapter thirteen, on the Christian communities under Islamic rule, was prepared and written before the tragic events of September 11, 2001.”²⁵ I think this means that Brown’s assessment of the evidence was not influenced by these events; he does not suggest that in the light of these events, he would now change his assessment. But it is the case that, since 2001, the study of early Islam has become much more prominent. Wilken says, “I have made the rise and spread of Islam integral to the history,” and in his Afterword he observes that earlier textbook accounts of continuous Christian growth disregarded the impact of Muslim conquest, which led to the decline and sometimes the extinction of ancient Christian communities in the Middle East, North Africa, and eventually Asia Minor.²⁶ The Islamic world was part of late antique and Byzantine studies for many years before 2001; the first volume of the series *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* appeared in 1992.²⁷ But the practical difficulties were (and are) the problems of the sources and the shortage of Arabists, who are sought after by business and by government agencies, and until very recently were unlikely to find an academic post even if they wanted one.

Peter Brown is unusually good at remembering how and why his perspective changed, and which people and books and events influenced his way of thinking. Many historians find that change has happened imperceptibly. It was not always evident that people include women, that culture includes material culture, that experience includes experience of time and space and the senses, or that Judaism and traditional Graeco-Roman religion continued to develop and to interact with early

²⁴ “The daunting task of carrying Christianity to the peoples living north of the Alps and in the British Isles was carried out, in the main, by brave and hardy Latin-speaking monks and bishops” (Wilken, 269).

²⁵ Brown, *Western Christendom*, xix.

²⁶ Wilken, 3, 358–359.

²⁷ Averil Cameron and Laurence Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Sources*, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, vol. 1, part I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Christianity. It was also not always evident that the spatial boundaries of the late antique world did not coincide with those of the Roman Empire and its immediate neighbors, that its languages were many more than Latin and Greek, and that its boundaries in time did not end with the coming of Islam in the seventh century. These days there are many more references to Eurasia and to “global history,” that is, to the history of the world that was known in the relevant time period, and to the “long late antiquity” that integrates Byzantine with classical and Western Medieval Studies. Much more source material in languages other than Latin or Greek is being made accessible, and some graduate students choose to learn Syriac or Coptic before Latin or Greek. The transformation is exemplified in a book that appeared after Wilken’s: Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused*.²⁸

Wilken ends with Jerusalem as the center of the Christian world, just as it was in the medieval Mappa Mundi. His narrative sequence ends in 988 with the baptism at Kiev of Vladimir prince of Rus; as Ukraine debates alliance with Europe or with Russia, it seems likely that Slavic medieval history will attract more academic interest. There is no decisive end date, but Wilken thinks that “only towards the end of the first millennium did the form Christianity took in history come fully into view. . . . By the year 1000 the map of the early Christian world was largely complete.”²⁹ *The First Thousand Years* is a “global history” of Christianity in the sense that it covers the world to which Christianity spread in that time frame, including the regions that were subsequently conquered by Islamic rulers. “Map” is easier to interpret than “form,” which could mean “doctrine” or “structures” or, as Wilken emphasises, “culture.” He says that “the principal theme of this book is the slow building of a Christian civilization,” or “more accurately several new civilizations,” because so many languages and locations were involved.³⁰ Culture “has to do with the pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities embedded in rituals, institutions, laws, practices, images, and stories of a people.”³¹ Conversion typically begins with the decision of a monarch: it was “not a warming of the heart, but a change of public practice.”³²

The theme of culture and public practice is also expressed in recurrent

²⁸ Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: the First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁹ Wilken, 1.

³⁰ Ibid., 1–2.

³¹ Ibid., 2; cf. 54.

³² Ibid., 3.

comments on the relationship of “the Church” and “society.” It seems that “the Church” is the community of all who accept the beliefs and disciplines of the Christian Church as they know it. In many respects, these Christians are indistinguishable from the society of which they are part, but in other respects they differ because of their beliefs, their pattern of worship, and their moral standards; and, as is demonstrated by the strongly expressed view of their many bishops, they make a distinction between the proper concerns of the emperor and the proper concerns of the Church. In *City of God*, Augustine gave a rather different answer. Wilken gives Augustine a chapter to himself, quietly disregarding recent attempts to set him more firmly in his late antique context.³³ Augustine himself might deprecate the first part of the judgement: “Augustine knew that he was a great man, a towering figure whose many writings would be quarried to support all sorts of opinion.”³⁴ But he certainly knew that his writings would be quarried: he had often been the target, as well as the agent, of quoting selectively and out of context.³⁵ One of the most widespread later misinterpretations is the equation of the Church with the city of God and secular government with the earthly city. For Augustine, the Church is the blessed company of all faithful people in all times and places: it is the part of the city of God that, for now, is away from its home in heaven. But citizenship depends not on membership of an institution, but on whether you are motivated by love of God or love of self. So Augustine said explicitly that some future citizens are not now members of the Church, and some who are now members and share in the sacraments are not future citizens.³⁶

Wilken accepts diversity of belief and practice, but not to the extent of joining those who speak of “late ancient Christianities,” in the plural and belonging to a particular time period. This is a history of Christianity in which there are boundaries between Christians and non-Christians, especially between Christians and Muslims, and in which Islam is monolithic. Many recent historians are more inclined to see changing and contextual identities: that is, they see people who in some contexts call themselves Christian, but in other contexts are more concerned with

³³ Notably, James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Sinner and Saint. A New Biography* (London: Profile Books, 2005).

³⁴ Wilken, 184.

³⁵ Caroline Humfress, “Controversialist: Augustine in Combat,” in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell 2012), 323–335.

³⁶ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 1.35.

family and social relationships and do not agree with their bishops on the boundaries of acceptable behavior.³⁷ But Wilken's acknowledgement of diversity within Christianity does something important. Memories are central to identity; remembering differences and resentments can perpetuate an identity that depends on opposition. But history can remind all concerned that their particular tradition of belief and practice and organisation was not in fact accepted *semper, ubique et ab omnibus*. In this spirit, Peter Brown warns against claims about the "Christian roots of Europe," which may slide into assumptions that Christianity is European; and Gillian Evans, as editor of a multi-volume *History of the Christian Church*, has the explicit purpose of challenging assumptions that Christians have always done things in one particular way.³⁸ Remembrance can work for reconciliation, and Wilken sets an example of courteous and thoughtful discussion. N&V

³⁷ E.g., Éric Rebillard, "Religious Sociology: being Christian in the time of Augustine," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 40–53.

³⁸ Brown, *Western Christendom*, preface to the Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition, xvi.