



The Second Church Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400

By Ramsay MacMullen

Christianity in the century both before and after Constantine's conversion is familiar thanks to the written sources; now Ramsay MacMullen, in his fifth book on ancient Christianity, considers especially the unwritten evidence. He uses excavation reports about hundreds of churches of the fourth century to show what worshipers did in them and in the cemeteries where most of them were built.

What emerges, in this richly illustrated work, is a religion that ordinary Christians, by far the majority, practiced in a different and largely forgotten second church. The picture fits with textual evidence that has been often misunderstood or little noticed. The "first" church—the familiar one governed by bishops—in part condemned, in part tolerated, and in part reshaped the church of the many. Even together, however, the two constituted by the end of the period studied (A.D. 400) a total of the population far smaller than has ever been suggested. Better estimates are now made for the first time from quantifiable data, that is, from the physical space available for attendance in places of worship. Reassessment raises very large questions about the place of religion in the life of the times and in the social composition of both churches.

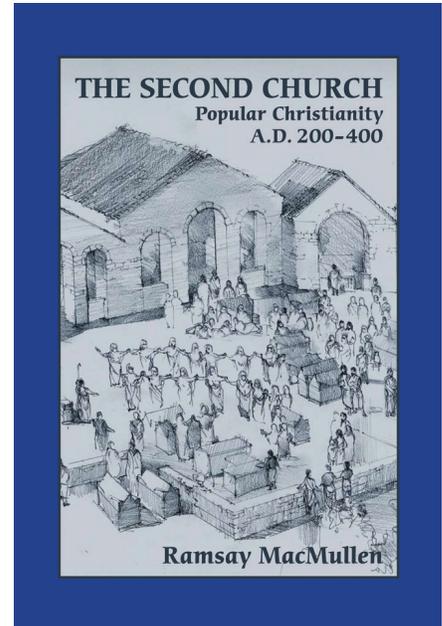
"Ramsay MacMullen—for many years the spokesman for the majority of the people who are not represented in the writings of the elite—here focuses on the beliefs and practices of the mass of Christians. He brings forward impressive evidence, mostly archaeological, for the third and especially the fourth century C.E., showing the persistent predominance of pagan rituals among the vast majority of Christians, especially in burial practices and veneration of the dead. While only a small minority of them went to church, most could have been found celebrating the memory of the departed with food and wine at the cemeteries, often in a manner that their bishops hardly approved.

For the first time most of the relevant materials with illuminating illustrations have been brought together in this publication, which should be on the reading list of all courses teaching the history of ancient Christianity."

— Helmut Koester, John H. Morison Research Professor of Divinity and Winn Research Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Harvard University

"Do not let the small size of this book mislead you. Anyone who wants to know what Christianity was like in the crucial two centuries discussed here—not just what the bishops and theologians were thinking, but what the other 95 percent were doing—will discover the weight of this book to be many times its physical heft. MacMullen, one of our most distinguished historians of Roman antiquity, tries here to refocus 'the mind's eye,'—the only tool we have, finally, to imagine that 'second church'—to sweep away the double astigmatism that besets our usual scholarship, skewed by what our texts say Christians *ought* to be and what we *want* them to be. The result is history purged of wishful thinking, and it should make us all blink."

— Wayne A. Meeks, Woolsey Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, Department of Religious Studies, Yale University



“If you wish to know what it was like to be one of the ordinary Christians who lived in the Roman Mediterranean, then begin here. Through artifact and word, by means of a scholarly excavation of detail and fact from great metropolises and isolated hamlets strewn around the central sea, MacMullen brings to life the varied and contradictory life of Christians at ground level.”

— Brent D. Shaw, Professor of Classics and Andrew Fleming West Professor of Classics, Princeton University

Ramsay MacMullen is Dunham Professor Emeritus of History and Classics at Yale University. He is the recipient of a lifetime Award for Scholarly Distinction from the American Historical Association and the author of numerous volumes on Christianity and the Roman Empire.

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Society of Biblical Literature
P. O. Box 2243
Williston, VT 05495-2243
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