

IV

The Growth and Establishment of Christianity

1. IGNATIUS AND DOCETISM

For we can have no life apart from Jesus Christ; and as He represents the mind of the Father, so our bishops, even those who are stationed in the remotest parts of the world, represent the mind of Jesus Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch
Epistle to the Ephesians 3.¹

In the century following St. Paul's letters the Christian movement inevitably matured.² The improvident enthusiasm of youth gave way to a more settled resolve as the postponement of the end of things became evident, and permanent arrangements grew up for the ongoing life of the Church. As the need to distinguish the true Church both from heretical sects within and competitive groups without became clear, belief was more and more closely defined. Toward the end of the first century a canon of Sacred literature began to grow, necessary to insure unity and stability in doctrine. In the usual course of events, the majority of a congregation remained unified while splinter groups forced the core to find the political leadership to formulate and enforce its views. As a result, though no larger political authority formed within the church for some time, in each town the elected bishop grew nearly absolute in his power. The formation of a hierarchy was necessary for the Church's survival, but its authority could not yet be maintained by force, hence the support of the larger and more influential part of the community had to be maintained through open election of the Bishop. It was generally recognized by that larger and more influential part that only the Bishop's absolute authority once elected could preserve unity and discipline. In practice, this led to a considerable degree of local autonomy, and naturally one community would often find itself suspicious of the behavior and beliefs of another, but differences were tolerated in the absence of any effective means to enforce a wider unity. Still, a continual exchange of visits and letters, with occasional meetings of the bishops in councils, maintained the larger community in rough doctrinal synchrony through discussion and persuasion, even when isolated

¹Translation from Staniforth (1968).

²See Harnack (1961), Book I, Chapter I, which lists the characteristics of the early Church that distinguished it from the Church in later ages.

groups, and sometimes whole regions, splintered off into sectarianism. Fairly quickly, of course, the hierarchy itself began to shape doctrine, and it naturally aimed at unity to reenforce its own authority, once that had been established, and to provide evidence for the correctness of its views. Though the initial stress on morality continued, the rigorous expectation that the baptized would be utterly sinless in the Spirit faded, and provision was made for forgiveness even of serious sins in the faithful. With the passing of the expectation that every true Christian be possessed of the Spirit, the test of conversion became orthodoxy in belief and commitment to the organization.³

In all of this a central set of beliefs and goals was what identified and defined the Church. The organization was essentially there for the purpose of preserving and spreading those ideas, just as the body of an animal might be taken to have as its central purpose the preservation and spreading of the genes that form it. Just as the body must somehow distinguish its own genetic makeup from that of the parasites that would exploit it and its resources for their own purposes, and fight off those parasites, if the genes expressed in the body are to reproduce and persist in the population of the species, so the Church needed to be able to identify heresies, and other, non-religious goals and ideas that wished to exploit its growing resources. Identifying what the religion itself really is, and its function in life, hangs on the decision which aspects of the Church should be regarded as parasitic, or perhaps only harmlessly (even beneficially) commensal, but still alien, and which should be regarded as part of the animal itself, just as we might be concerned in dealing with a person which traits, convictions, commitments and habits are neurotic or otherwise parasitic, and which are central to the personality and the self. In the case of the person, we might, under one view, think well of her, and despair of the neurotic tendencies that undermine her true self, or we might decide that the neurotic tendencies in question *are* her true self, and come to think considerably less well of her than before. In the same way, we might identify the Church, or Christianity, as a noble thing with fine religious aims, taking intolerance and other nastier aspects of the Church as adventitious and parasitic, or we might identify it as fundamentally nasty, taking its intolerance, its oppression of women, its support of an exploitive ruling class, and the like as essential elements of its truest self. Like a person, the Church had its own opinions about what constituted its true self, indeed, beliefs about one's own identity and the concept of a self (a unified faith) are an essential part of the complex of beliefs, goals and so on that constitute a person, or an institution such as a religion or state. The constitutive beliefs for the Church were developed and guarded by its intellectual leaders, and it strove to live

³I *Timothy*, written 100–125, provides evidence of this development.

up to its picture of itself as best it could, just as a person does. If we take a person, or the Church, at its word, sharing its sense of its self, we will take one view of its history, probably a relatively favorable one. If we take the person, or the Church, to be self-deluded and naive about its real convictions and its own deepest motivations, then we will take quite another, rather less favorable, view. If we do not identify a self at all, then we might talk about the events that make up the life of a person or institution, but we cannot put them together into a story about it, since we cannot even pull a picture of it together separating it from its background.

Turning to our story, we get our first glimpse of the situation after St. Paul in the seven surviving letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, written between 69 and his martyrdom in Rome, some fifty years after Paul's death, in 107.⁴ Polycarp's account of Ignatius's death helped make martyrdom popular in the Church, at least as a literary theme. Ignatius not only accepted martyrdom, but sought it out, writing to Rome to ask that there be no intervention on his behalf, for such a death in imitation of Christ was a sure way to heaven.

Ignatius's letters reveal that there was still a group of Jewish Christians in Antioch, as well as a sect that has come to be called "Docetists." The latter thought that Jesus was not a man, but a Spirit that had taken on flesh for a time to communicate with human beings. Ignatius takes this to amount to the unacceptable view that the man Jesus was merely an appearance taken on by God, God in disguise, as it were. These people seem to have been more democratic than the orthodox, holding their own meetings outside the bishop's authority, and allowing laymen to give the sacraments. Ignatius emphasized the authority of the bishop against them, asserting that the sacraments are valid only if the bishop presides.⁵ His emphasis on the authority of the hierarchy goes back some time in the Church, and seems to have been based on Apostolic succession from the beginning,⁶ but

⁴For translations of his letters and Polycarp's life, see Richardson (1970), and Staniforth (1968). Ignatius's letters either cite without attribution words of Jesus reported in *Matthew* and *John*, or, perhaps more likely, are drawn on by those authors (Ellegård (1999) 203-205). In any case, his letters seem to be of the same school as these Gospels. There is no similar evidence for connections to *Mark* or *Luke*. Originally thirteen letters were attributed to Ignatius, but Bishop Ussher showed that six of them were forgeries, and identified forged passages in the seven genuine letters. This was during the dispute in England over the antiquity of the Episcopate, which Anglicans argued was a legitimate office in the Church, while more radical reformers such as John Milton, argued it was not ancient, and should be eliminated. Ussher's establishment of the authentic letters of Ignatius succeeded in making his point—the office of Bishop is indeed a very ancient one. (Ehrman (2003) 140–141.)

⁵*Smyrneans* 8.1–2. Of course, in the absence of the military force available to the civil power, the surest way to enforce his authority was for the Bishop to wield the power of excommunication, and it was essential that his flock believe excommunication would leave them helpless to find salvation.

⁶The *Epistle of Clement*, often dated at about the same time as Ignatius, was written from Rome to Corinth to object to the dismissal of certain elders there without cause, and bases the authority of the elders on apostolic succession. It seems to presuppose a loose organization of authority in the Church at large, not just in individual congregations. The "bishop" and deacons were appointed by the Apostles, he says, but their relation to the elders is unclear. It is not at all clear that there is only one bishop, and references

it is to be noted that Bishops were not around 60 years earlier, when Paul wrote his letters, for he calls on the Church as a whole to resolve its problems, and there seems to be no one in charge he can address.⁷

Ignatius's *Letter to the Ephesians* states the Church's position against the Docetists.⁸

The Physician is one, flesh yet spirit, unborn yet born, God existing in the flesh, true life in death, both from God and from Mary, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.⁹

This is the earliest surviving assertion that Jesus is God,¹⁰ the God in question being the god of Middle Platonism, which the Greeks had recognized in the *Old Testament* Yahweh.¹¹ So in his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius describes God as outside of time, impassible, and inaccessible to the senses.¹² This bears on the rationale for the Docetists' position, for they saw a contradiction, one Ignatius revels in, in the notion that a man could be

to the 'episcopacy' seem to be to the body of elders. The letter argues as Ignatius does, though less urgently, that obedience to the hierarchy was necessary to insure unity and orthodoxy. It seems that *Clement* was written about 64. See Ellegård (1999) 36-45. For a translation, see Richardson (1970) or Staniforth (1968).

⁷The pastoral epistles, 1 and 2 *Timothy* and *Titus*, written a decade or two after Ignatius's death, are addressed to Pastors of the churches, and indicate qualifications for the offices of Deacon and Bishop. But these are not by Paul.

⁸The Gospels contain anti-Docetist stories, for instance, *John* 20:24–29, *Matthew* 28:9, and *Luke* 24:39, and *Luke*, *Matthew* and *John* try to clarify *Mark* in places that might be cited to support Docetism. For instance, *Mark* 15:21-25 was taken by some to mean that Simon had been the one crucified, and not Jesus, and *Matthew* changes the sign on the cross, referring to "King of the Jews" in *Mark* 15:26, to include Jesus's name, at 27:37. The *Leucian Acts of John* contains pro-Docetist stories to the effect that John talked with Christ some distance from the place of execution while he appeared to be on the cross, and that he found nothing solid on several occasions when he tried to touch Christ. The letters of Ignatius can be found in translation in Richardson (1970), which has a brief but excellent scholarly introduction, and Staniforth (1968).

⁹*Ephesians* 7.2, translation from Staniforth (1968). It is not clear if Ignatius knows John, and it is perhaps to be noted that the doctrine that Christ is the Word of God is not stated here directly, though Christ's pre-existence and share in creation, which were later associated with that doctrine, are asserted. Ignatius clearly knew some of Paul's letters, *I Corinthians*, for instance, but he seems not to have possessed Paul's teaching on justification by faith, and he does not see flesh and spirit as opposed to one another the way Paul does, and so makes little of the spirit dwelling in us.

¹⁰See also *Smyrnaens* 1, *Romans* 6, *Trallians* 7.

¹¹The *Old Testament* often says that God does not change, but the intention seems to be, as Rabbinic interpretation suggests, that God remains faithful to the Covenant, and does not change his values or personality, not that he is strictly immutable after the Platonic fashion.

¹²*Polycarp* 3.2. In *Ephesians* 19 he says that magic can no longer be done, since the incarnation has robbed the demons of their power, reflecting a Platonist's view of magic, and establishing the authenticity of any miracles that might seem reliably reported. The appearance of the new star at Jesus's birth appears to disrupt all astrological calculations. He also claims that the incarnation and the death of Christ were concealed from the devil, which sounds Gnostic. Perhaps it is rooted in the secret in *Mark*, and it may reflect the tale in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, that Christ was the bait set for the devil, to draw him into a violation of the rights of God, thus voiding his right to rule mankind, who had given their fealty to him.

such a God, or even the Logos, and of course, no one who had known Jesus personally remained alive. Ignatius certainly makes no appeal to a personal acquaintance with Jesus in answering the heretics, but argues that if Jesus was not genuinely man, did not genuinely die, or rise again in the body, then our hope of resurrection is vain.¹³ It was the necessity of the real humanity and death of Christ to confirm the orthodox account of his sacrifice for our sins that made Docetism impossible.

There is more going on here, though. The hope of resurrection was a serious concern, but underlying it is the issue of the preservation of a central authority, the authority of the bishop, so necessary (in the eyes of the orthodox) to avoid anarchy and, with it, the eventual destruction of the true faith. On the view of the orthodox, the Apostles, including Paul, had been privy to Jesus's thoughts, and no one else since the ascension of Christ into Heaven has enjoyed contact with him. So an issue of faith had to be decided, always, from the testimony of the Apostles. The current leaders of the Church, successors of the Apostles, were charged with preserving the faith established by Christ. Heresy was always presented by the orthodox as innovation, and whenever a new doctrine or a more refined definition of an old doctrine was introduced among them it was considered necessary to show that it was implicit in the Scriptures all along. One way to challenge such authority would be to insist that Christ appears even now to certain people, and imparts to them new doctrines or reinterpretations of old doctrines. This is impossible, though, if Ignatius is right, for Christ appeared only *in the flesh*, even after his resurrection, and after that he ascended to Heaven and will not return until the last days. So, given the withdrawal of the fleshly Christ, we must rely on the tradition preserved by the successors of his Apostles, and on the scriptures they interpret, for all our knowledge of holy things. If it is claimed, taking another tack, that the Holy Spirit could provide new doctrine, it will be objected that the Spirit is perhaps a Comforter, sent in Christ's place, perhaps a healer of the soul restoring us and curing the effects of sin, but not a source of doctrine.

The Apostle Paul presents a difficulty for this position, since his conversion experience involved a vision of Christ disembodied (a clear indication that such appearances of Christ were not initially disallowed), and the Gnostic Valentinus, a few decades later, would claim that his new revelation came from Theudas, a disciple of Paul. Valentinus was the most dangerous of the Gnostic teachers, for he tried hard to adapt to

¹³*Smyrnaeans* 1.1–3, 3.1. He refers to Luke 24:39. Ignatius's martyrologist, Polycarp of Smyrna (taught by John the Apostle, lived from 69/70 to his martyrdom in 155), also attacked the Docetists in his *Letter to the Phillipians* 7, insisting on the death and resurrection of Christ and urging the acceptance of martyrdom in imitation of Christ's suffering..

orthodox views and remain associated with the mass of believers, and here we see him, in his conciliatory way, avoiding any claim to a personal revelation from Jesus. But the orthodox not only conceived Paul's experience as quite exceptional and unrepeatable, they also argued that no new doctrines had been imparted to Paul by Jesus out of the body.¹⁴ Nonetheless Paul did claim to be on the same level of authority as the Apostles who had seen Christ in the flesh, due to his experience of Christ out of the flesh, so one might be tempted to hold, like Valentinus, that the new doctrines he had learned were kept secret, and preserved for the more spiritual, or like Marcion, that Paul's new teachings were hidden by corruptions and additions in the text of his letters, or one might even regard Paul as a model and expect new revelations from Jesus oneself. The accounts of mystical encounters with Jesus in Gnostic works often seem to imitate Paul's experience, reporting, for instance, the vision of a bright light.

Quite probably the Docetists of Ignatius's time, like the Gnostics later, insisted that Christ, being a mere manifestation of God, and not flesh, could appear even now to the Elect, and impart new revelations unauthorized by the tradition protected by the Bishops. Indeed, Jesus might need to do so to explain the real meaning of the events of his life, which eye witnesses, enmired in love of the flesh, had not appreciated. After all, even in the canonic Gospels the Apostles are often represented as ignorant of what Jesus is up to, enough for some to justify a challenge to conservative ecclesiastic authority. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene receives in a vision certain astonishing revelations from the Lord about the career of the soul after death, and, asking how one sees such a vision, is answered that it is through the mind. When Andrew and Peter doubt Mary's report of Jesus's words to her, they are answered by Levi, who defends her, claiming the Lord has made her worthy to hear him. She lacks credentials, but her vision, and perhaps the coherence and spiritual sense of the words she attributes to Jesus, authorize her to establish new doctrines. In fact, Levi even charges Peter not to introduce any rule or law beyond what Jesus has said, perhaps implying that Jesus, when in the flesh, never gave such authority to Peter as would be needed to put down Mary, and certainly suggesting that accepting what Jesus says in a vision is not to go beyond what he says.¹⁵ Ignatius would have seen a threat here

¹⁴The orthodox could get away with this only by repudiating Jewish Christianity. Paul's novel doctrines defined their orthodoxy, and they were attributed by the Gentiles to Jesus himself and the other apostles, ignoring the testimony of the Jewish Church to the contrary.

¹⁵*Gospel of Mary* 10.17–21, and 17–18, Robinson (1988) 525–527. This is cited in Pagel (1979) 11, who takes it that a denial that the vision is produced by a bodily Lord, through the eyes, is intended. In Pagel (1995) 66–68, she suggests that the document is the product of an early Christian group in Palestine that saw itself opposed to the rival group led by, or claiming to have been founded by, Peter.

that had to be dealt with. The revelation had to be closed off, and put in charge of the bishops, and so neither the Docetist doctrine, nor any other view allowing that Christ might appear to people spiritually after his death, could be tolerated.¹⁶

How might the Docetists have responded to Ignatius's charge that our own hope of resurrection fails if Christ is not resurrected in the flesh? Again, we can get some clue from later Gnostic documents. The author of the *Treatise on Resurrection* says,

Do not suppose that resurrection is an apparition. It is not an apparition; rather, it is something real. Instead, one ought to maintain that the world is an apparition, rather than resurrection.

The intellectual or spiritual world is more real than the physical to this thinker, and so the resurrected Christ, for all his lack of physicality, is more real than one's own body. He seems to think that our real, living, immaterial self, as opposed to the body, which is dead already, does not die at all. (He speaks as though this living self were spatially extended, but it might still be non-physical, and he may well mean this only metaphorically, especially since much of what he says is ironic.)¹⁷ By the end of the 2nd century the orthodox opinion would insist that it is this earthly body that is resurrected, though it is changed in the process, and that it does suffer death, both views this author rejects.¹⁸ The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* tells us, "Those who say the Lord died first and then rose up are in error."¹⁹ And so the Docetists no doubt responded to such as Ignatius. It is simply a crudity to imagine that eternal life hangs on the survival of the body, for the true self is a Spirit or mind. It is not through some sort of sympathetic magic that Christ brought it about that what was no more would be restored, rather Christ awoke us to our true selves, so that, no longer trapped in illusion, we could lay claim to our heritage of life. Indeed, for the Gnostic, and presumably the Docetist, we are not fundamentally natural beings of this world at all, but supernatural, divine beings, and it is our recognition that we are not, and never were, of this world, but rather divine beings summoned to reunite ourselves to the

¹⁶For this paragraph, see Pagels (1979) 10 ff. Note that the Spiritual, anarchic sort of person is threatening to those seeking a settled authority from the beginning. Paul has his problems with those who speak in tongues, for instance.

¹⁷*Treatise on the Resurrection* 48.10–15. Translation in Pagels (1979) 12, see also Robinson (1988) 56.

¹⁸Paul, I *Corinthians* 15:35 ff. is a bit hard to interpret, but seems to suggest that our earthly body is resurrected, though it is altered to a spiritual body when this happens. So he says at 15:51-52 that those still living will be changed. Assuming he identifies the person with the body, that is, taking the easiest reading, makes him deny the Docetist position, but he does not *explicitly* deny it.

¹⁹*Gospel of Philip* 56.16–19, Robinson (1988) 144.

Godhead, that is the key to our salvation.²⁰ In the *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus presents the arrival of the Kingdom as a matter of discovering who one really is:

The Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father.

Speaking to Thomas, Jesus says:

I am not your Master, for you have drunk, and become drunk from the bubbling stream I have measured out. . . Whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and myself will become that person, and things that are hidden will be revealed to him.²¹

Particularly revealing is the Gnostic use of the story of Eden. Orthodox Christians viewed the story as one of Adam and Eve's illicit sin, which gets them in trouble with God, the legitimate authority, and take the serpent to be an evil demon, Satan himself, who is in rebellion against the legitimate God, and draws our first parents into rebellion with him, for which they are justly condemned. The Gnostic reading of the story is hostile to the notion of legitimate authority on several levels. For one thing, the serpent is taken to be our Instructor, who informs Adam and Even how to come to recognize good and evil (which is surely a good thing) by eating the fruit of the tree.²² Moreover, the God who commands them not to eat of the tree is a false authority, who attempt to imprison human beings by keeping them from realizing who they really are, that is, people quite capable of choosing the right way for themselves without guidance from the rulers of this world. In one text the Spirit of Wisdom who speaks through the serpent takes on a double aspect, for it is one thing in reality, and another thing in the view of the rulers of this world in which human beings are imprisoned:

I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the bride and the bridegroom, and it is my husband who begot me. I am knowledge and ignorance. . . I am the one they have called life and you have called death. . .²³

As for Eve's temptation of Adam, this can be taken as the female wisdom, our instructor, calling out to the soul

²⁰And so Valentinus held that Man was the primal beginning of things, and the savior, of course, is the Son of Man, and both are above the creator of this world. Pagels (1979) 122–123, citing Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I 12.3–4; I 30.6.

²¹Cited and translated in Pagels (1995) 70-73.

²²*The Hypostasis of the Archons*, cited in Pagels (1988) 67, from Robinson (1977).

²³From *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, in Robinson (1977), cited in Pagels (1988). If the reader needs a hint or two, she has begotten herself, as one must create oneself to be saved, she is subordinated (a wife) and independent (a virgin),.

to awaken to what it is.²⁴ What orthodox Christians take as a Fall from grace, requiring punishment and atonement, the Gnostic Docetists take as an initiation into wisdom, giving no hint of any sense of sin that would give authority a grip on their being. What Orthodox Christians take as rebellion from just authority the Gnostic Docetists take as legitimate awakening to one's true self, and the assumption of mature autonomy.²⁵

Now, setting aside all consideration of the authority of bishops, this is a very different spiritual vision from that of the orthodox. That such anarchic visionaries, given to withdrawal from the world and its authoritarian power structures, never gained control of the power structure within the Church should not surprise us, nor can we be surprised that they were attacked, not only as a threat to that power structure, but also as a threat to the spiritual vision of the mass of the faithful. The Docetists and the orthodox could not, in the end, live together in the same organization.

Another issue made it even more difficult for the Docetists to maintain their position against the orthodox, their rejection of the growing enthusiasm for martyrdom revealed in Ignatius's own life. Again we have to depend on later Gnostic texts to see what was probably going on. Many, though not all, Gnostics denied that Jesus in fact suffered and died on the cross. So the *Apocalypse of Peter* has it that Peter saw the true Jesus glad and laughing above the cross as the "fleshly part" of him suffered in substitution for him.²⁶ The *Acts of John* has Jesus appearing to John in a cave at Gethsemane, while he is apparently dying on the cross, to explain to him that he is suffering none of the things that it will be said he suffered.²⁷ The late Valentinian *Treatise on Resurrection* holds, in a conciliatory fashion typical of Valentinians, that considered as human, Jesus died, but the divine spirit within him did not die or suffer.²⁸ Now if Jesus did not himself lead the way by suffering and dying on the cross, one might wonder what sense it makes to allow oneself to be martyred, and

²⁴So in the *Apocryphon of John*, in Robinson (1977), cited in Pagels (1988).

²⁵It is commonplace that someone with a strong sense of the individual self find himself restricted and at risk when the individual is suborned into a larger self, and must conform to its standards to avoid being identified as an alien infection in the community. The conflict is an unavoidable consequence of the constitution of these larger, institutional selves from collections of individuals. The question is whether the ideas that constitute these institutional selves are alien to the individual, or constitutive of him. In truth, of course, at least some are constitutive, for an individual cannot be the individual he is outside his social order, but at the same time, surely not all are, for he has his individual history in which he can choose what role to take in society, or even create a new role if he is talented and powerful enough.

²⁶*Apocalypse of Peter* 81.4–24. The same view is presented in the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 56.6–19.

²⁷*Acts of John* 92.

²⁸*Treatise on the Resurrection* 44.13–45.29.

that question precisely is on the mind of those Gnostics who held that Jesus never really suffered on the cross. So the *Testimony of Truth* argues that those who hasten toward martyrdom actually fall into the clutches of the Powers of this world, because of their manifest ignorance who Jesus really was, and who they themselves really are, taking what is spirit for body. In particular, the treatise considers it absurd that a martyr's death, rather than insight into one's true self, should lead to forgiveness of sins, or gain resurrection. We ought not to seek out such suffering, or praise those who seek it out. The real meaning of Jesus's apparent suffering on the cross was not that he died, and then was resurrected, but that he never really suffered at all, for the true Jesus was not the body. Nor are we our bodies.²⁹ The views presented by Gnostic works often allow that Jesus did share our suffering, but they always insist that he never abandoned his spiritual nature and his awareness of himself, emptying himself to become wholly man, as the orthodox would have it, and that he shared our sufferings in order to be able to speak to us and show us our real natures, not for any other purpose. The Gnostics allowed that one who had to face martyrdom might draw help from Christ's suffering, for it shows them who they really are, and assures them that they shall not really suffer death, and they do not appear to have deliberately avoided martyrdom by giving in to the authorities, sacrificing to the Roman Gods, or denouncing Christianity. But neither did they seek it, being willing to keep quiet and live a Christian life if they were allowed to do so. Nor did they take it that a martyr is necessarily more holy than one who never sought martyrdom, but led a holy life.³⁰ These sensible views gave the defenders of orthodoxy their chance. The Gnostics were accused of showing contempt for the martyrs, and undermining the solidarity of the faithful with those held under arrest by Rome,³¹ and however hysterical and overdrawn the accusation may have been, it no doubt stuck, and turned

²⁹*Testimony of Truth* 31.22–32.8, 33.25–34.26. The *Apocalypse of Peter* 72–83 presents similar views.

³⁰So, Clement, *Miscellanies* IV 70.1 – 72.4, where the Gnostic attitude to martyrdom is expressed in Heracleon's remarks that all true Christians confess Jesus in their conduct and faith, which is the important thing, but a verbal expression of faith before the authorities will follow on this when it is necessary, and reason requires it. This implies that one should not seek out martyrdom, but it is also urged that the truly faithful will not deny Jesus before the authorities in order to avoid it.

³¹So Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III 18.5–6, where it is argued that Christ asks us to take up our cross, for whoever loses his life will find it (*Matthew* 16:24–25), that is, he asks us to suffer martyrdom, and he asks us to turn the other cheek, but he has no right to do these things if he did not himself suffer, and die in the flesh, and it is denied that “taking up the cross” is a matter of gaining some spiritual knowledge of the cross above. Some of the Orthodox, however, found reason not to seek martyrdom actively, but only to accept it if it comes—So the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp suggests that those who seek out martyrdom may become terrified in the end and make the sacrifice. Presumably if God does not send the trial, it may be because one's strength is not up to it, and it is therefore best not to seek it out oneself. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4. Polycarp had to be hunted down by the authorities, so the passage may have an apologetic purpose, but the apology must have stricken many of the faithful as a reasonable one.

many Christians against the Gnostics in times of persecution.³²

2. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . . And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of his Father, he has made him known.

John 1:1–5, 9–14, 16–18.

The *Gospel of John*, written perhaps between 110 and 125, gives us a picture of things just a little after Ignatius. It is a most interesting as a counterpoise to the message of Paul and the other Gospels, and for the novel and idiosyncratic solution to the problem of the lateness of the second coming that it evolves from its spiritual vision. The suggestion is that Christ will not come again, but sends the Comforter or “Paraclete,” though only the faithful can experience his presence.³³ No other coming of Christ is to be expected.

³²For this paragraph I depend on Pagels (1979) Ch. 4, and for the earlier discussion of the Docetists I depend on Pagels (1979) Ch. 3. The account of Ignatius’s enthusiastic martyrdom by Polycarp became very popular in the Church, and it may be that the opposition to such enthusiasm among the Docetist-Gnostic Christians developed as a direct criticism of Ignatius’s level of spiritual understanding, for his letters were kept by many churches as scripture by which such Christians could be rejected. Of course, the criticism of Ignatius is natural, given the Docetist-Gnostic understanding of Jesus’s message.

³³This view may not strike the reader as odd, but we should note that John seems to attribute the unbelief of the Jews to their being the children of the Devil, which lends itself to a Gnostic interpretation, making the saved and the damned different in their personal essence from the beginning. The children of God would appear to be aliens in this world (Satan is clearly referred to as the ruler of this world), who are to be rescued from it, and have the capacity to understand and perceive the Spirit not shared by the children of the Devil who are native to this world.

If you love me, keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father to give you another Paraclete [Comforter, Advocate] to dwell with you forever, the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you shall know him, for he will dwell with you, and be in you. I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world no longer sees me, but you see me, for I live and you shall live . . . He who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.³⁴

Those who have faith in Christ were promised eternal life, and would leave this world when they died to be with him, but no apocalyptic vision for the world itself was entertained. Christ rescues the children of light from the darkness, and the children of darkness are left to their own miserable devices afterward. John has Jesus speak of the presence of his body and blood in the Eucharist, the mystical union of the members of the Church in himself is maintained by the Eucharist, and John clearly intends that Jesus's death is some kind of sacrifice, for he dies just as the lambs are being slaughtered for Passover. But it is unclear that the sacrifice is for the forgiveness of sins, for Jesus is simply assigned the authority to forgive sins by his Father, and it is never suggested in the Gospel that he gains this authority through serving as a sacrifice of atonement. Indeed, Jesus claims that he judges no one,³⁵ and to escape judgment it is only necessary to have faith in him. It is likely that the reading Irenaeus will later give the sacrifice of Jesus and the Eucharist, that our participation in it provides us with immortality through our identification with God, is what *John* intends.³⁶ The power of this world expels Jesus from this world when he can, but Christ has already delivered his message by this time, and provided his faithful with the medicine of immortality through his very death. His resurrection demonstrated that Satan has no power over him, and will have no power over those who trust in him. Moreover, after Jesus departs to be with the Father, he sends the Paraclete in secret, a messenger to his faithful who cannot be detected by the powers of this world, when he returns to the Father. Since no atonement is envisioned, it is not surprising that Christ in *John* shows very little humanity, and certainly never suffers in any human way. It is not his suffering for our sins, but simply his dying, and then his resurrection, in which we may share through the Eucharist, that is needful. He is God's messenger, the Word made flesh. It was necessary that the Word be made flesh in order

³⁴*John* 14:18-24: Compare 1:5, "...and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness grasped it not."

³⁵*John* 8:15. Chapter 8 also contains, in many manuscripts, the story of the woman taken in adultery, whom Jesus does not judge, of course.

³⁶It is certainly strongly suggested by *John* Ch. 6, which contains no hint of the atonement theory.

that he could communicate with the children of the light in this world, and so that he could set up the magical merging of himself and his faithful, so that those who have received and accepted the message can join him after this life in heaven.

The Gospel tends to psychologize Satan and his demons. The temptations of Christ are conducted by the Devil in person elsewhere, but in John the same temptations are presented by people dominated by demonic impulses—the crowd that would make him King, demands that he provide them with miraculous bread, and Jesus’s own brothers challenge him to display his powers to the world.³⁷ *John’s* Salvation is a psychological drama, not an externalized apocalypse.

John presents the drama of Jesus’s career as a cosmic one, in which Jesus represents the light, and the Jews the darkness that desires to murder the light. It is far and away the most anti-Semitic of the Gospels, representing the Jews for the most part as children of the Devil about the Devil’s work. None of the Jews except the eleven faithful disciples seem to believe, though Samaritans and Gentiles accept him as counterpoint to the unbelief of his own people. Jesus’s speeches to the crowds in Galilee are not instruction, but condemnation. The crowds take him to be the Messiah when they see miracles, and wish to make him King, but he evades them. They will not accept him in his own terms, but only in worldly terms. Even when Jesus is supposedly speaking to those who have believed in him in the temple, it turns out that their belief is temporary and inadequate, and the address reverts to the usual hostility within a few verses, and informs these people, the Jews, that their father is the devil, not Abraham or God.³⁸

John, like Ignatius, insists that Christ lived in the flesh, and that Jesus *is* God, and, like Paul, makes Jesus the pre-existent Word of God, the Logos, through which all things were made, and which became flesh. He shows some awareness of difficulties in the equation of the Son and the Father. The Father is the source of all power, so that the Son can do nothing without him, but he shows the Son all that he does, so that the Son, who agrees with the Father in all things, does it, too. Only the Son has seen, or apparently can see, the Father. The Father has given the Son his authority to judge men, and those the Father gives to the Son as his are saved, so that the Son consistently mediates between the Father and his creation, although the power resides in the

³⁷*John* 6:16, 30-31, 7:1-5 . Pagels (1995) 99-111 for *John*.

³⁸At *John* 8:31.

Father, and the Son sees and agrees always with the Father's intentions.³⁹ The Comforter does not merely comfort, but also will teach all things, and bring to remembrance all that Jesus said.⁴⁰ This seems to authorize theological speculation, at least on the meaning of Jesus's sayings.

The Logos doctrine, the view that Jesus Christ was the Word of the Father, had momentous consequences for Christian philosophy, for it authorized the use of Platonic metaphysics in the explanation of Scripture, and in the elucidation of doctrine, in particular the difficult doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine was apparently rejected by a conservative group of "alogoi," who lived in Asia Minor, and were particularly hostile to Montanism and the claims of prophecy in general.⁴¹ They rejected John's Gospel and Apocalypse, claiming that they contradicted the Synoptic Gospels, and were Docetist in orientation, so that, for instance, no account of Jesus's birth is given in them. In particular, they rejected the Logos doctrine, and the pre-existence of Jesus.⁴² Their approach seems to have been hostile to Adoptionism, as well, the view, descended from the exaltation Christology of *Acts*, that Jesus was divine and the Son of God through adoption.⁴³ They roundly asserted the divinity of the man Jesus, identifying Cerinthus (ca. 100), who held that the Christ descended on the man Jesus at his baptism, and left again before his crucifixion, as the heretical author of *The Gospel of John*. They saw the Logos doctrine as an ally of Adoptionism, then, and it is perhaps in response to such critics that the orthodox insisted on the identity of the Logos, Christ, and Jesus, setting themselves a difficult philosophical problem in doing so, for it is hard to see how such an identity could hold.

3. BAPTISM AND THE EUCHARIST

³⁹John 5:19–23.

⁴⁰John 14:16-17, 25-26. Thus the secret of *Mark* is adverted to, for the Comforter reveals to the disciples at last what Jesus really meant (so in 12:16 the disciples do not understand Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on a colt, but after he is glorified they remember the event and trace it a prophecy to be fulfilled in Zechariah).

⁴¹For this group see Epiphanius, *Against Eighty Heresies* 51, and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III 11.9 (who refers to them as "Encratites"). My discussion depends on Harnack (1961) III Chapter 1. Irenaeus and Hippolytus treat the group, not as heretics, but as schismatics, who are unwilling to remain within the body of the Church because of the hypocrites within it. In brief, they see the Alogoi as over-conservative allies against the Gnostics.

⁴²Here they would presumably have to contradict Paul as well as John, and we don't know how they handled that, but they might have rejected portions of Paul's letters, as Marcion did.

⁴³The "exaltation" view takes Jesus to be a man who attains a special status, thereby gaining the authority to forgive sins. Adoptionism takes a somewhat different view of the thing, hypostasizing this status as a divine being that descends upon Jesus and explains his power to remit sin.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin.

Paul, *Romans* 6:3–7.

For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it, and broke it, and he said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.” In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, “This cup is the new covenant of my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.”

Paul, *I Corinthians* 11:23–26.

The chief rite of the new religion was originally Baptism. *Hebrews* (ca. 60) makes baptism the only sacrament for the forgiveness of sins, and claims it can only be carried out once. If one sins after baptism there is no help for it.⁴⁴ Christ is represented in a Pauline fashion here, and said to have been tempted just as we are, but to have remained free from sin, showing that we can do this too, after Baptism.⁴⁵ About the same time, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 65) suggests that there is a second remission of sins after baptism, probably at one’s death, if there is repentance, to resolve the problem.⁴⁶

*I John*⁴⁷ approaches the problem in the 2nd century in another way, suggesting that it is mortal sins alone that cannot be forgiven after baptism. The letter expands at length on our duty to love our brethren, and the point appears at the end—we do not love them if, for sins that are merely venial, we expel them from the communion of the faithful. It is conceded that there are mortal sins, and that we should not even pray for those

⁴⁴*Hebrews* 6:4–6, 10:26 ff.

⁴⁵*Hebrews* 4:15.

⁴⁶*Shepherd*, Command. 14.3. For the date and a general account of the *Shepherd* and *Hebrews*, see Ellegård (1999) 45-50, 59-62.

⁴⁷*I John* 5:16–17.

who commit such sins, but it is unclear how often, if ever, the author would confess to having encountered such a sin. Right at the beginning he tells us, “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,”⁴⁸ an apparent reference to those who would stone the woman taken in adultery in the *Gospel of John*—“let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”⁴⁹ The whole epistle is an appeal for mercy for one’s sinful brethren, mercy that we all need ourselves, in the end.

The Eucharist gained importance quickly, in part because it provided a third solution to the problem of sin committed after Baptism. So long as one was admitted to the communal meal, and this not through any imposture or deceit, one remained within the community and so was presumably forgiven any sins one had committed. Thus one might attribute the power of remission of sins and conferral of immortality to the Eucharist, as well as to Baptism. Paul certainly views the Eucharist as more than a merely symbolic act. It involves powerful spiritual forces, so that one who eats the consecrated food without taking it seriously, or while impure or in a state of sin, may become sick and die.⁵⁰ Paul also warns against non-Christian mysteries in a way that suggests they involved a union with the demonic.⁵¹ But the Christian magic could only work in the Christian community. Even intellectuals at odds with the community’s cruder reading of things, such as Origen and his followers, still saw membership within it as crucial. Origen never once considered simply withdrawing from the Church, expecting to be saved by private devotions. Excommunication would be death. So one need not have viewed either rite as efficacious in itself—one could have viewed the membership in the living community magically identified with Christ as what was truly efficacious.

People took it in their own way, with Paul’s theology of Jesus’s sacrifice to aid them. Until late in the 4th century the view was that one partook *individually* of Jesus’s sacrifice in the Eucharist and in Baptism, through a magical identification with Jesus. (It was not generally assumed that Christ’s sacrifice was in any way

⁴⁸I *John* 1:8.

⁴⁹*John* 7:53-8:11. Note that the incident was apparently not part of the gospel originally, and may actually have crept into it in conjunction with I *John*.

⁵⁰I *Corinthians* 11:23–34. But he warns against eating meat sacrificed to the gods (only portions of the beast were burned, and the rest was eaten or sold by the temple) only because some might be squeamish about it—we ought not to scandalize them or act boastfully. The complaint that Christianity had so spread in a temple district that the temple could no longer find anyone to buy its meat led to the accusations dealt with by Pliny the Younger, discussed below.

⁵¹I *Corinthians* 10:14–22.

repeated, nor that any transformation of the elements occurred.)⁵² In *John* the doctrine of the Eucharist is fully formed—it equates the bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ, and claims that eating the bread and wine gives one eternal life.⁵³ The same view is found in Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, though in other words, for they held that the consecrated elements had the body and blood of Christ *in* them.⁵⁴ In *John* the disciples complain that it is a hard saying that they should eat Jesus’s flesh and blood, and Jesus responds that “it is the spirit that gives life.”⁵⁵ Clement uses this passage to distinguish the spiritual and bodily blood of Christ.⁵⁶ His view was apparently that the spiritual body and blood of Jesus was present in the bread and wine. We ourselves will have a spiritual body after the resurrection, so Clement’s view might have been only marginally less crude than what had bothered the disciples, but Clement’s successor, Origen, held that the Lord’s supper was entirely an affair of the spirit, and denied any actual presence of Christ’s body and blood at all in any form, as well as any magical action due to the ceremony. The eating and drinking are merely symbols that help the average man to attain the required spiritual state.⁵⁷ The ceremony symbolizes the rational understanding of the Word, which is the only thing that has any real effect.

If whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and so passes on, even the food sanctified through the word of God and prayer, because it is material, enters into the stomach and passes on,. But the prayer that has come upon it turns it, according to the proportion of faith, into a benefit and a means of clear vision for the mind that beholds what is beneficial. It is not the matter of the bread but the word pronounced upon it that is beneficial to him who does not eat it unworthily of the Lord.⁵⁸

⁵²It was late in the fourth century that the Eucharist was shifted from the evening meal to the morning service, perhaps reflecting the new understanding of it.

⁵³*John* 6:48–60.

⁵⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV 18, V 2; Tertullian, *On Prayer* 6, *Against Marcion* I 14, IV 40, III 19, *On the Resurrection* 8.

⁵⁵*John* 6:64.

⁵⁶Clement, *Tutor* II 2.

⁵⁷Origen holds up *John* 6:53 as an example of the letter that kills in *Homilies on Exodus* 13.3. His comment on the feeding of the five thousand in *Matthew* 14 treats the distribution of bread as a symbol for inspired preaching. In *Homilies on Numbers* 16.9, Origen says the congregation drinks Christ’s blood when they hear the word, and in *Homilies on Exodus* 13.3 he reproves the congregation for scrupulously eating every crumb of the bread, but failing to pay attention to the sermon, which is a sacrilege against the Word as well. See also *Contra Celsum* VIII 33.

⁵⁸*Commentary on Matthew* 11.14. For all of this I have used Trigg (1983) 194–196.

But Origen's expressions of his intellectually enlightened view of the matter serve only to underline the distance that often stood between him and his fellows.

One might wonder why, if the effectiveness of the sacraments is entirely a matter of the spirit, and a magical interpretation of them is to be eschewed, someone might not find salvation quite alone, outside the Church, if he got his relationship to Christ right. Working within Origen's framework, the argument would rely on the social nature of the individual self. The choice lies between membership in a society devoted to sin, the demonic society of the Romans, or a society devoted to the cultivation of true virtue. One cannot go it alone, for to change oneself one needs the help of a virtuous community. In the end, it is only the community that can be saved. There is no salvation outside the Church, for it is only the Church that provides a community devoted to virtue.

The rise of regular sacraments is closely connected with the institutionalization and bureaucratization of the Church, for the sacraments very quickly came to require a priest to administer them. The point of the sacrament, Origen or the author of *I John* might say, is to remind one of God's forgiveness. It need only remind those who have faith in God's love. But to most of the community, who are of weaker faith and in need of reassurance, who perhaps hesitate to approach God directly, thinking that an intermediary must intercede for them, who look for some *mechanism* guaranteeing their sins are forgiven, the sacrament becomes a sort of magic, requiring someone with a special relation to the divine to conduct it. And so the forgiveness of sins and the gift of immortality may be from God, but now it passes through the hands of the institutional Church.

Baptism's career parallels that of the Eucharist. From about 150 baptism was held to provide not merely a pardon for sins, but actual sinlessness—in particular it was held to remove original sin, and thus empower (and obligate) the convert to avoid sin henceforth. Either baptism or martyrdom was necessary for salvation. People worried whether one should baptize infants, to insure they would not die in original sin, or delay the sacrament until just before death, so that no new sins would be committed after it, sins now without remedy. Eventually the Eucharist and Confession grew into the role of providing for such sins, even when they were mortal. But even before this process was complete, by 150, say, the issue had been resolved in favor of baptism of infants, though adult converts often delayed baptism as long as they could, despite the hierarchy's disapproval. Tertullian objected that infant baptism could not be efficacious since babies have no faith, but Augustine's answer that the faith of the God-parents stood in for that of the child seemed acceptable. The ceremony was obviously thought to be magical, anyway, not only because it was taken to be effective for

infants, who have no faith, but also to be unrepeatable, despite the possibility of a renewal of faith, to remove the pollution of original sin, which the postulant had never herself committed, and to be capable of postponement with the intention of putting off the necessity of a pure life as long as possible. Augustine tried to make sense of all these features of the rite within the context of moral reformation, and, faced with what can only be seen as unreconstructed primitivism among his parishioners, relied on the Platonist faith that lower urges and plain error are but inadequate expressions of higher desires and the truth.

Origen, also a good Platonist, echoes the usual teaching, but often betrays his failure to accept the magical qualities of the sacrament. He urges catechumens not to expect the Holy Spirit to remove sins they have not first removed themselves.⁵⁹ Baptism gives the power and shows the way, but it takes time to become like Christ, and it must be followed by continual association with the church if one is not to lapse back into old ways.⁶⁰ Baptism marks the turning away from sin,⁶¹ and if one lapses back into sin, then a “baptism of fire,” usually taken to be martyrdom, but taken by Origen as instructive chastisement, is needed to turn one back again to the truth.⁶² So in his view baptism symbolizes gaining the power to avoid serious sin by one’s association with the Church an acceptance of its teachings, and one’s determination to turn away from sin. (Perhaps he viewed original sin as the sinful tendencies inherited from one’s rearing in and association with a Pagan community. Infant baptism would then be welcoming the infant into the community of salvation, and assuring it that it would not suffer original sin.) It has no magical power to remove pollution. But again, Origen’s understanding is more subtle than that of most of his congregation, and doctrine would eventually have to satisfy the congregation.

There is a certain logic to the insistence that baptism and the Eucharist actually remove sins, a logic rooted in the contrast of justice and mercy. A just God, it might be claimed, could not simply decide to ignore our sins, forgive them, and still meet the demands of justice. So something has to remove our sins, and Christ’s sacrifice will have to do the trick, since we cannot remove them ourselves. This logic is not far from Jesus, who thought that suffering was needed to atone for sin, and that his suffering would atone for the sins of the Jews.

⁵⁹*Homilies on Luke* 21.4.

⁶⁰*Series Commentary on Matthew* 16. *Commentary on Song of Songs* 2. *Homilies on Leviticus* 9.7.

⁶¹In *Homilies on Joshua* 1.1 Origen likens baptism to the crossing of the Jordan. The Wilderness is behind one, but Canaan remains to be conquered.

⁶²*Homilies on Jeremiah* 2.3. Again I have used Trigg, *Origen*, 191-194.

Thus Christ's sacrifice can be seen to serve the function of reconciling God's justice and mercy. But not everyone accepted the dilemma. Marcion insisted that Jesus's God was merciful, and therefore not just.

4. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MARCION

For why should God, the founder of the universe, the Governor of the whole world, the Fashioner of humanity, the Sower of universal nations be believed to have given a law through Moses to one people, and not be said to have assigned it to all nations? For unless He had given it to all by no means would He have habitually permitted even proselytes out of the nations to have access to it. But—as is congruous with the goodness of God, and with His equity, as the Fashioner of mankind—He gave to all nations the selfsame law, which at definite and stated times He enjoined should be observed, when He willed, and through whom He willed, and as He willed.

Tertullian, *Answer to the Jews* 2⁶³

The very *Old Testament* of the Creator itself, it is possible, no doubt, to charge with foolishness, and weakness, and dishonor, and meanness and contempt. What is more foolish and more weak than God's requirement of bloody sacrifices and of savory holocausts? What is weaker than the cleansing of the vessels and of beds? What more dishonorable than the discoloration of the reddening skin? What so mean as the statute of retaliation? What so contemptible as the exception in meats and drinks? The whole of the *Old Testament*, the heretic, to the best of my belief, holds in derision.

Tertullian, *Against Marcion* V 5⁶⁴

The retention of the *Old Testament* as sacred literature among the Christians was chiefly due to the prophecies of Christ supposedly found in it, but also useful were its statement of the moral law, its stories of the repeated falling away of the Jews, the monotheistic creation stories in *Genesis* with the story of the Fall of Adam, and the confessions of faith in *Psalms*. The *Old Testament*, especially *Genesis* and *Psalms*, soon became the special realm of the exegete. In the Middle Ages, we shall see, the *Song of Solomon*, which seems to be a collection of love poetry, came to be of special exegetical interest as well, and was used in support of the

⁶³Translation by S. Thelwall, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III.

⁶⁴Translation by D. Holmes, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III.

“mystical” wing of Christian practice, which emphasized the experience of God in the soul as a central religious aim.

The ritual law provided one problem of interpretation. Christians took it that God’s commands applied to all nations alike, and were to be identified with the plain demands of the moral law, and so had to find a way to reject the ritual law peculiar to the Jews. Paul’s rejection was mild compared to the reactions of some later writers. *Barnabas*, an attack on the Jews in the 70’s, claimed that the covenant of God with them ended when Moses broke the tablets, apostasy putting a finish to the thing before it had barely begun.⁶⁵ The ceremonial law was taken literally only due to the influence of demons, and had been intended figuratively.⁶⁶ So the *Old Testament* is a Christian book, and not for the Jews, who do not understand it. *Barnabas* also holds that Christ came in part to bring the sins of the Jews to a head.⁶⁷ Justin Martyr and Tertullian are less extreme, and allow that the ceremonial part of the Law was given by God, but suggest that it was in part intended to mark the Jews off from other nations so that they could be effectively debarred from their own temple and persecuted by the Romans, who serve, like the Assyrians and other nations before them, as God’s tools in their punishment.⁶⁸ The *Old Testament* often claimed that the Law served as a sign, marking the Jews as a special nation belonging to Yahweh, making them holy, and this gave room for Justin and Tertullian’s altogether more hostile interpretation.

Another strategy was to argue that elements of the ceremonial law were ethically relevant, but intended to direct the Jews in special circumstances. Thus Justin also makes the Law a pedagogic measure to eliminate idolatry, and Tertullian argues that the law of the Sabbath was a temporary provision for those who could not follow the stricter, purely ethical, requirement that one refrain from “servile work, which does not pertain to life” not one day in the week, but always, so that they would at least be separated to some degree

⁶⁵*Barnabas* 4:6–8, 14: 1–5.

⁶⁶*Barnabas* 9:4. For instance, the seventh day was to be kept holy, but this was not intended as an injunction against working on the Sabbath. Rather, since “a thousand years is as a day in the Lord’s sight” (2 *Peter* 3:8, cf. *Psalms* 90:4), it meant that the seventh millenium after creation, which would occur after the apocalypse, was going to be kept holy, for then, at last, there would be a holy people who could do that.

⁶⁷See Ellegård (1999) 54-59 for the date and a general characterization. A translation of the *Epistle of Barnabas* can be found in Staniforth (1968) 187–222.

⁶⁸Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 16, and Tertullian, *Answer to the Jews* 3, both argue this concerning circumcision.

from their sin.⁶⁹ The implied reading of “servile work” as work involving sin seems strained, but Tertullian, if pressed, would no doubt have argued that the livelihoods of the Jews were all of them deeply involved in sinful activity, in the same way as he insisted the civil culture of Rome was inextricably involved in idolatry. Looking at it from the point of view of the Gospels, sin may seem almost inevitable wherever competition for scarce resources occurs, and so any way in which one might make a “decent” livelihood in this world perhaps involves sin. Thus, only by accepting poverty, making only what one really needs to live, can one avoid sin. This throws light on Jesus’s insistence that we rely entirely on God for what we need, and his insistence that we need precious little, when you come down to it, and God *will* provide that little we need. Here on Earth, we must stand back from the competition, and in Heaven there will be no need to make a living, competing with and exploiting others, but all will be provided by God, making perfect virtue consistent with prosperity.

More in general, both Justin and Tertullian took the side of the Prophets in their criticisms of the strict, but hypocritical, observance of the Law, taking these criticisms to mean obedience to the Law did not really please God at all (though he demanded it), only true morality did, but the Law was imposed by God because of the hardness of the people’s hearts, who could only be kept from even worse practices, for instance, idolatry, by such irrationalities as blood sacrifice to Jehovah. Their line of thought follows *Matthew 5*, where Jesus, like the Prophets before him, says the laws concerning divorce were given not because they were right, but because of the hardness of the people’s hearts—if they would not do right, at least they could be induced to do less wrong, and so prepared to meet stricter requirements later.⁷⁰ Here the purpose of the old Law is clearly to train people in virtue so they can take the next step—“think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them,” that is, to complete the work they began. At the end of the chapter the point is made quite clear—“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.” No longer is it enough to acquiesce in moral demands only as long as they are not too impractical.

Although the orthodox branches of the Church accepted the *Old Testament* as the word of God, and used its prophecies to prove Jesus’s status as Messiah and Son of God, one sect of Christians arose in the middle of

⁶⁹Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 18–22, Tertullian, *Answer to the Jews* 4, and similarly of animal sacrifices, 5. Tertullian is more interested in pointing up the contrast between the temporal and carnal Law of the Jews, and the eternal and spiritual law of Christ (which contains the ethical law and is binding on all nations), than in explaining how the Jewish law instructs them, but my account seems implied, and might be assumed from *Matthew 5*.

⁷⁰*Matthew 5*: 17-48.

the second century that did not. Its founder, Marcion, was born about 85 in Pontus, where he seems to have been raised a Christian. He traveled to Rome about 138-140, and was excommunicated in 144 for claiming that the *Old* and *New Testaments* were incompatible with one another.⁷¹ After that he traveled widely, preaching wherever he went. Marcion considered himself an orthodox Pauline Christian, and he arrived at his unorthodox views through biblical criticism rather than philosophical reflection—he steadfastly refused the use of allegorical readings to reconcile the *Old* and *New Testaments*.

Marcion thought there were two Gods where the Orthodox saw only one. There was Jehovah, the just God that created and runs this world, who is capable of evil,⁷² and who chose the Jews as his people and promised a Messiah to them who will come and save them through warfare,⁷³ and then there is Jesus's God, who can only do good, and who frees the people from the law of the just, but merciless Jehovah. Jehovah is neither omniscient nor omnipotent.⁷⁴ In fact, he is incompetent and vacillating,⁷⁵ and subject to vices such as jealousy, pride and personal favoritism.⁷⁶ Still, Marcion thinks he is eternal and uncreated, though he seems to have suggested also that he would perish with this world, self-destroyed in frustration at his failure.

The good God of Jesus does not punish men, but simply refuses to have anything to do with them if they won't accept Jesus and his salvation. Salvation is offered, not imposed by force. But everyone who fails

⁷¹His proof text was *Luke* 5:36, "No one tears a piece from a new garment to put it on an old one." The chief evidence for Marcion is found in the various works against him, most especially Tertullian's *Against Marcion* and *On the Flesh of Christ*, and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. For my treatment of Marcion, see esp. Pelikan (1971) I:71-81, Trigg (1983) 46-50, Harnack (1961), and Jonas (1963). The early Fathers speak of Marcion's teacher, Cerdo, in terms that suggest that Marcion simply passed on his views, but most scholars are doubtful about this figure, and it may be that Tertullian exaggerates his similarity to Marcion to rob Marcion of any claim to originality. For Cerdo, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 27.1.

⁷²See *Isaiah* 45:7 and *Amos* 3:6. Possibly Cerdo thought Jehovah was just, while Marcion at first thought that he was simply evil, and only later came part way round to Cerdo's view (Pelikan (1971) I:74). Irenaeus tends to attribute justice to Marcion's Jehovah, while Tertullian usually describes him as simply violent and evil.

⁷³Jesus is not this Messiah, of course. The Orthodox, to defend the view that he was, relied especially on the second coming, apportioning the prophecies of the Messiah that promised a humble, suffering servant, as in *Deutero-Isaiah*, to the life of Jesus as a man, ending in the Cross, and those that promised a conquering hero to his second coming. See, for instance, Tertullian, *Answer to the Jews* 14, who is quite open about the strategy.

⁷⁴He had to ask Adam where he was, and had to descend to Sodom and Gomorrah to see what was going on there.

⁷⁵He forbade the making of images, then told Moses to produce a brazen serpent.

⁷⁶Marcion found it especially odd that he should favor the bloodthirsty bandit, David, so. He took it that *Luke* 6:43-44, asserting that no good tree bears bad fruit, and each tree is known by its fruit, to indicate that the creator of this world, full of bad things as it is, cannot be good.

to accept Jesus's salvation will be punished for his sins by the creator of this world, and Jesus's merciful God will not interfere. Jesus's God had no part in making man, and is in no way akin to man as the divine principle is in Gnostic systems. He only wishes to save man from what he regards as cruelty, and will do that only if we ask his aid. Christ purchased us by his sacrifice, his blood is not for atonement, but to cancel the creator's claim to his property. Without this purchase we are the creator's property.

Here, perhaps, is the original of the notion in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* that Jesus tricked Satan into taking him as his own into Hell, so that Satan's presumptuous violation of his rights as a vassal of God made it permissible for God, now justly at war with Satan, to accept the fealty of any vassal who cared to rebel against him. The story makes much more sense between equals like Marcion's Gods than between a Lord and his rebellious vassal. That Christ suffered in the body probably came to be viewed among the orthodox as essential to explain how Christ could save us chiefly because of the arguments against Marcion. This means, of course, that the view was based chiefly on reaction against Marcion's picture of Christ's work in saving us, but the view came to characterize orthodoxy, and when it became clear that Marcion's view of the economy of salvation was to be rejected, people cast around for other arguments for it.

Though Christ suffered and died, being alien to this world, he had no earthly body.⁷⁷ His saving work really is essential, since no one can live by the law, which is much too difficult for Jehovah's imperfect creatures to observe, so that everyone remaining faithful to Jehovah, without exception, will go to Hell.⁷⁸ Irenaeus reports that Marcion thought Jesus could take from Hell only sodomites and the like, for the just patriarchs thought their God was only testing them once more, and would not trust Jesus.⁷⁹ If we accept him, Christ will dwell in us and aid us to be good, but we cannot really be held responsible for our sins when we are thrown on our own resources, though the imperfect God who made us can.

⁷⁷*Galatians* 3:13, and *Romans*, form the basis of this account. Tertullian denies that Christ could have suffered and died if he had no body (*Against Marcion* III 8). Marcion would have argued, one supposes, that physical bodies were the creation of the god of this world, so that Christ could not have had one, but that he had a spiritual body which could suffer and die, even if it did not make use of food or such. Pelikan (1971) I:76 points out that Marcion though birth and generation unworthy of Christ's divinity, and holds that he simply appears full grown in the world at the beginning of his mission, but did not find death and suffering unworthy of him.

⁷⁸By the Old Testament account, of course, all men go to Sheol. Marcion's notions are very sensitive to the old Near Eastern religious views, and can take such cynical works as *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* pretty much at face value as reasonable reactions to the plight men were in.

⁷⁹*Against Heresies* I 27.3. The implicit anti-Semitism here is typical of Marcion.

Marcion found in the letters of Paul a special revelation,⁸⁰ for the disciples thought Jesus was the Messiah, which he is not. Jesus had to be mysterious in his teachings to fool Yahweh into thinking he was really one of his own creatures, and that is why the disciples did not understand. But Paul too has been misunderstood, and his letters altered, so that a Marcionite canon is needed to establish the correct texts of revealed scripture. Marcion's faith, like *John's*, is distinctly otherworldly. Jesus's God does nothing to aid us in this world, but only evacuates us from the place upon our deaths, to enjoy a better world. Jesus forbade marriage in order to deprive Yahweh of new subjects.⁸¹

Marcionism formed a strong minority in the Christian movement in the second half of the second century, but thereafter it declined. It was absorbed into Manichaeism in the West, and though some groups survived in the East until the fifth century, the movement drifted toward extinction, its prohibition against marriage in particular counting against its long-term survival. But another problem that has sometimes been identified with Marcionism was a certain rigidity of doctrine that resulted from its approach to Jewish scripture. The orthodox approach, treating the *Old Testament* allegorically, as a source of prophetic, typical and allegorical texts whose meanings were unsuspected by the Jews themselves, was used to support doctrinal innovation, for instance, in the Trinitarian and Christological disputes of the 4th and 5th centuries, since allegorical interpretation of the *New Testament* was not accepted in most circles. If one wanted to bring precision to ambiguous *New Testament* texts, or support readings of those texts that would avoid embarrassing consequences, it was generally necessary to go to allegorical readings of the *Old Testament*. Moreover, a somewhat similar pattern to the reinterpretation of the Jewish *Old Testament* as referring to Christ and his new dispensation,⁸² was followed in later breaks with tradition as Christian thought grew and developed. So Athanasius interpreted the rather odd language of many earlier Christian thinkers to support his Trinitarian views, Augustine read Pelagianism out of the Greek fathers, the opponents of Gottschalk reinterpreted Augustine, and so on.⁸³ A religion rooted in tradition needs some way to change if it is to survive, and this generally requires the

⁸⁰Critical here is *Galatians*, which mentions the Judaizing Christians in Jerusalem as having a different gospel from his own.

⁸¹Marcion found the details of sexual reproduction and the discomforts and dangers of pregnancy and childbirth repulsive, something deliberately devised by Jehovah to humiliate and punish us.

⁸²Justin, in the *Dialogue with Trypho* 29, says that the Jewish Scriptures are not really the property of the Jews at all, but belong to the Christians, who know how rightly to interpret them.

⁸³Pelikan (1971) I:15.

reinterpretation of the views stated in older authorities. Marcion's approach to Jewish and Christian scripture, it might seem then, made change impossible.

But the case seems to be overdrawn, for an insistence on taking the *Old Testament* literally, and avoiding the often astounding allegorical moves needed to bend it to Christian doctrine, need not rule out less radical reinterpretations, from time to time, of other authoritative texts. The career of Apelles illustrates this. Apelles declared that there was only one God, not two, and we are told that this was not on the basis of prophecy or *gnosis*,⁸⁴ that is, he had a rational argument for the position. Quite possibly his argument was that used among the Apologists to establish monotheism—the argument going back to Xenophanes that a true God would not be limited by anything else, and so there cannot be two such gods, for they would limit each other. Certainly Marcion's Yahweh is limited in his power by the God of Jesus. Apelles probably held that Yahweh was not a god at all, even if it turned out that he was not created by the true God, and that he created this world. Apelles also held, it seems, that Christ had a body after all, but one made of the same material the stars are made of.⁸⁵ This, again, seems to be an argued position, for a common objection to Marcion among the orthodox was that Christ had no body according to his view, and so could not really have suffered, and so was cheating if he claimed to have a just claim to human beings because of his suffering. These objections were answered by Apelles's view. It seems clear that there was room for Marcionite doctrine to change and adapt, then, room provided by the possibility of fitting different rationally argued systems of belief to scripture, which was imprecise enough, even when taken literally, to allow this, so that one could pick that system that seemed most rationally defensible.

5. THE FORMATION OF THE CANON

There is in circulation also one [reputed letter of Paul] to the Laodicenes, another to the Alexandrians, both forged in Paul's name to suit the heresy of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received into the Catholic Church; for it is not fitting that gall should be mixed with honey.

The *Muratorian Fragment* (about 170)⁸⁶

⁸⁴Eusebius, *History of the Church* V 13.5.

⁸⁵Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 6.3.

⁸⁶Cited in Bainton (1960) 133–4, from the translation of J. Stevenson in the Loeb Library, *The New Eusebius*. It now appears that the fragment may be much later than 170.

Before 150 or so, one could be considered an orthodox Christian who accepted the authority of the Apostolic fathers, and accepted the core books of the *New Testament*. But the combat with heresy demanded a more rigid test, which was finally provided by the baptismal creed, which defined the faith and ruled out all views generally recognized as heretical. This formalization of the orthodox view in Christianity was accomplished by about 185, with creeds like those suggested by Irenaeus and Tertullian, though new disputes arose in time, and we shall see successively narrower definitions of orthodoxy reflected in creeds agreed on in various general councils of the 4th and 5th centuries.

Another result of the defense of the Faith against heresy was the formation of the Canon. The present-day list of the canonical books of the *New Testament* dates from the fourth century. Before then, each local church had its own books. The chief book was originally the *Old Testament*, and the original service was a synagogue service, with readings from the Law and the Prophets. Paul's letters were kept and read in the services by 150, but only in the second generation of Christians were the oral traditions behind the Gospels and *Acts* written down.

The initial impetus to establish a formal canon came from Marcion's establishment of his own list of canonical books. Marcion included ten letters of Paul, *Galatians*, I and II *Corinthians*, *Romans*, I and II *Thessalonians*, *Laodiceans* = *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, *Philemon*, and *Phillipians*. No doubt these were edited and freed from "corruptions" that did not fit Marcion's teachings, most especially from references to Old Testament prophecies as proofs of Jesus's status. These were no doubt supposed to have been added by the Judaizers that Paul warns against in *Galatians*. He left out the Pastoral Epistles, possibly because he knew they were not by Paul, but also possibly because they did not yet exist, and were written in part to combat Marcion, and so attributed to his favorite apostle.⁸⁷ Marcion also accepted *Luke* as a Gospel written by Paul, but with deletions (no birth stories, for instance). He wrote his own *Antitheses* to replace the *Old Testament*, showing how it conflicted with the *New Testament* and contradicted itself.

Orthodox writers responded by insisting that the best and most widely accepted Christian works, from which Marcion had made his selection, were all divinely inspired and on a par with the *Old Testament*. Most references to the new orthodox canon, and insistence on its divine inspiration, come in the last thirty years of the 2nd century. So Theophilus of Antioch says the Gospels are inspired by the Spirit just as the Prophets were (177 CE). Since these inspired works had to carry sufficient authority to reprove and correct the speculations

⁸⁷Perhaps I *Timothy* 6:20 alludes to the *Antitheses*. 4:1-5 alludes to false teachers who will forbid marriage.

of the ordinary Christian bearer of the Spirit, it came to be thought that the Apostles had the Spirit in some superior way. So Tertullian says that

Indeed, the faithful have also the Spirit of God, but not all of the faithful are apostles... For strictly speaking, the apostles have the Holy Spirit, which they possess fully in prophetic works and the efficacy of powers and the testimony of tongues, not merely in part, that they enjoy.⁸⁸

The prophets and apostles are not usually equated, but Tertullian speaks of Moses and the Prophets as apostles, and it does make a parallel between the *Old* and *New Testament* authors to do so.⁸⁹ All *New Testament* books were supposed to be Apostolic by the end of the 2nd century, and were granted authority by the same Apostolic rule that applied to the Bishops. By this time a reasonably well-defined group of books was generally regarded as Apostolic, and used widely for readings in the services. (In the Council of Carthage in 397 it was suggested that readings in the services be restricted to canonical books.) From the end of the second century on the Gospels and Paul's letters, with *Acts*, were present on everyone's list. The rest of the present canon, *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache*, the *Revelations of Peter*, the *Acts of Paul*, and various other gospels and letters were appended to these in different places. The present canon was entirely settled only by about 500.

6. MONTANISM AND THE TRUE CHURCH

And there will be great contention about his advent and his coming... And the Holy Spirit will withdraw from many. Nor will there be in those days many prophets or those who speak things confirmed, except a few in a few places... And they will neglect the prophecy of the prophets that were before me, neglecting my visions as well.

The Ascension of Isaiah 3⁹⁰

“Who then are those [stones] whom they [the builders of the tower of the Church] have rejected and cast away?” “These are those who have sinned, and wish to repent. On this account they have not been thrown far from the tower, because they will yet be useful in the building, if they repent. Those then who are to repent, if they do repent, will be strong in faith, if they now

⁸⁸*Exhortation to Chastity* 4. Compare Clement, *Miscellanies* IV 21.135.

⁸⁹*Against Marcion* IV 24.

⁹⁰An apocryphal Christian addition to *Isaiah*. Cited in Pelikan (1971) I:99.

repent while the tower is building. For if the building be finished, there will not be more room for anyone, but he will be rejected..." "But who are these, Lady, that are white and round, and yet do not fit into the building of the tower?" She answered and said, "... These are those who have faith, indeed, but they have also the riches of this world. When, therefore, tribulation comes, on account of their riches and business they deny the Lord."... "When, then, will they be useful for the building, Lady?" "When the riches that so seduce them have been circumscribed, they will then be of use to God. For as a round stone cannot become square unless portions be cut off and cast away, so also those who are rich in this world cannot be useful to the Lord unless their riches be cut down..."

The Shepherd of Hermas
Vision 3.⁹¹

I hear also that there has been published an edict and a peremptory one too. The Pontifex Maximus, that is, the bishop of the bishops, has issued a decree. "I remit to such as have done penance the sins of adultery and fornication." O edict that cannot be called "approved"! Where shall this liberality be posted up? On the spot, I should suppose; directly on the gates of lust, beneath the roofs dedicated to it!... But this edict is read in church and proclaimed aloud in church, although the Church is virgin. Away, away with such displays from the bride of Christ.... "But," you say, "the Church has the power of forgiving sins." If, because the Lord said to Peter: "Upon this rock I will build my Church... to thee have I given the keys of the kingdom of heaven," or "whatsoever thou shalt bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed in heaven," you therefore assume that the power of binding and loosing has descended to you or to any Church related to Peter, what sort of man are you, overthrowing and transforming the manifest intention of the Lord, who conferred the gift personally upon Peter?... What now has this to do with the Church, and in particular your church, O follower of the Spirit? As this power was conferred upon Peter personally, so it belongs to spiritual men, whether apostle or prophet. For the true Church is by nature and origin the Spirit himself... He unites together that Church... So ever since then, any number of persons joined together in faith is accounted a church by its Author and Consecrator. The Church, indeed, will forgive sins, but only the Church of the Spirit, though the voices of spiritual men, not the Church which is merely a collection of bishops.

⁹¹Translated by F.A. Crombie, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II: 14–15.

Tertullian, *On Modesty*.⁹²

There was a shift in the conception of the church in the latter part of the second century, from the notion of a communion of saints to the notion of a mixed body of saved and damned, all of whom *sought* salvation. So Hippolytus reports that Callixtus, Bishop of Rome about 220 CE, maintained that the Church must have both tares and wheat—its type is Noah’s ark, which bore both the clean and the unclean animals.⁹³ The visible Church had become a political institution, whose membership was defined by means other than spiritual. The notion of a Christian shifted from one who believed in Christ and followed his commandments, to one who accepted the right profession of faith, from a full member of the community, sharing its moral vision and its endeavor for perfection, to a communicant, who partook of the sacraments, paid money into the coffers and recognized the authority of the Bishop. In the end the Church rather than the community of the saved came to be viewed as the vehicle of salvation, and formal excommunication by the hierarchy, even of entire Christian communities, now threatened hellfire, whatever the quality of the excommunicants’ faith and virtue.⁹⁴

But even in the 4th century a rearguard action continued over whether a serious sinner, one who has committed adultery, murder, or apostasy, could be retained in the Church. Those who stuck to the original conception of the Church generally held that strict adherence to the moral norms was necessary for membership. They seem to have been a minority from the 2nd century on, but the minority persisted, asserting itself especially in persecutions, when it was argued that all who sought safety by repudiating their faith were to be banned permanently from the Church. This was a natural position, of course, for those who had taken great risks to maintain their faithfulness. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a 1st-century book recounting a series of prophetic dreams and allegories, defended the practice of forgiving serious penitents, even apostates and adulterers, at least until the completion of the period that God has set aside for the growth of the Church, and

⁹²Translated by Shotwell and Loomis, *The See of Peter* (1927), cited in Bainton (1960) 143-4.

⁹³Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* IX 2.

⁹⁴One can see some of the problems with the earlier notion of the Church quite early on in Paul’s treatment of those who prophesied and spoke in tongues (I *Corinthians* 14:29–33, 39–40). Those with the appropriate talents might lord it over the others, of course, but more important was the fact that they could provide a source of division in the Church, at least if it was allowed that they could introduce new doctrine or reinterpret the old. So I *John* tells Christians, “it is not every spirit, my dear people, that you can trust; test them, to see if they come from God...” (4:1), and then insists that the spirit must say that Jesus came *in the flesh*, thus repudiating Docetism, to be genuine. See *The Shepherd of Hermas* Command XI, *Didache* 13 and 15, *Matthew* 24:11 ff., which connects false prophets with the notion that one does not have to obey the rules of morality to be saved. II *Peter* 3:15–16 and II *Peter* 3:15–16 show us some claiming the authority of Paul and his emphasis on salvation by faith to support this view. To prevent the splintering of the Church and to preserve the Faith unaltered, the age of prophecy had to be brought to an end.

the beginning of the last days. It became very popular, especially in the East. The *Shepherd* was much cited in response to a Phrygian prophet, Montanus, who declared in the 170's that he was the Paraclete of John's Gospel, and advised Christians to retire, living together in isolation from the rest of the world so that they could avoid, especially, sexual sins, which were almost inevitable living in the midst of the sexual license of Pagan society.⁹⁵ There was initially a strong expectation of an imminent second coming, but that faded, leaving a morally rigorous community closed off from the world. In effect the style of the early Church was maintained. Montanists were schismatics, not heretics, for they accepted the canon and the apostolic rule of faith. But they did hold to a second charismatic revelation from Montanus (published perhaps around 155),⁹⁶ disallowed second marriages, espoused willing martyrdom, and cast out serious sinners, though they held that serious sinners could be saved outside the Church if they remained penitent to the end, and the faithful prayed on their behalf. They did not press the matter of the second revelation, never placing Montanus's works in their Canon, but were nonetheless rejected for their exclusion of serious sinners from the Church. Around 220 CE Pope Callixtus ruled that the Bishop of Rome could forgive serious sin (and, of course, delegate this authority to underlings), citing for the first time the passage in *Matthew* 16 in which Jesus gives Peter the keys to heaven in support of his authority as Pope. The Montanist line, he thought, smacked of salvation by works instead of faith. His position prevailed, despite the disapproval of Tertullian, who felt himself gradually driven from the Church into Montanism, and the orthodox view now insisted against the Montanists that only the clergy were required to obey the stricter moral commandments such as the one requiring poverty, and held that the age

⁹⁵According to Epiphanius *On Heresies* 51, some Christians in Asia Minor, joined by a presbyter named Gaius in Rome, responded Montanus by denying the authority of *John*, and basing their account of Christ entirely on the Synoptic Gospels. But it was already too late to challenge the position of the fourth Gospel as Scripture. See Grant (1961) 28–29. Origen cemented the view in place that *John* was to be reconciled with the Synoptics by noting that he attended to the divine side of Jesus, the Synoptics to the human. By the 180's the unity of the Gospel histories was more or less an article of faith.

⁹⁶Montanus was accustomed, when prophesying, to announce that he was the Paraclete, surely meaning that the Paraclete was speaking through him, and Montanists later referred to him sometimes as the Paraclete (Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 13.5). This was later taken to indicate heresy, as though Montanus asserted that he was the Paraclete in the way that Jesus was the Logos. Montanist prophets seem to have asserted the Trinity by announcing that they (the one speaking through them) were the the Word, the Spirit and the Power (Eusebius, *History of the Church* XVI 17), or similar terms, and this, too, raised eyebrows among the heresiologists. There is evidence that some later Montanists *did* identify Montanus and his prophetess Priscilla with the Spirit, however, and that they may even have baptized in the name of Montanus. There is also evidence that later Montanists, though not Montanus himself, held the three Persons to be strictly identical, merely different manifestations of one thing, so that the Father suffered on the cross, and so on. This, as Pelikan (1971) I:105 points out, suggests that a more lively apprehension of the identity of the three Persons by Montanus than usual in his time may have contributed to Tertullian's approach to the Trinity,

of revelation is past, for religious truth was now defined by the scriptures, not the outpouring of the Spirit.⁹⁷

Part of the dispute, of course, bore on proper behavior during persecutions. There were roughly three positions that could be taken. One could hold that it was permissible to do whatever was needed to preserve one's life, including sacrifice to the Pagan gods and denial of one's faith, though this was hard to square with the scriptures, which both specified that those who were persecuted were blessed, and that Jesus would present to his father in heaven those who confessed him, but not those who denied him.⁹⁸ One could hold that though one was not permitted such actions once in the hands of the authorities, it was still permissible to flee, since Jesus had said, "when they persecute you in this city, flee into another,"⁹⁹ or to bribe the police or take whatever other measures might prevent one's having to face the ultimate test. Given that persecutions were always local and short-lived, this often provided the circumspet with safety enough. Or one could hold that no manner of evasion was permitted, indeed, that one should volunteer oneself for martyrdom during a persecution. Montanists took the last line, the Orthodox the second, and, at least according to their enemies, the Gnostics the first.¹⁰⁰

The Montanists came into public view again in 251 after the Decian persecution. Novatian, who followed Tertullian in many of his views, held that the lapsed could not be readmitted to the church, since no one guilty of adultery, murder, or apostasy could be granted remission of sins. The Church could only intercede for these poor souls at the Last Judgment. Substantial Novatianist communities appeared in Asia Minor, where Montanism had by then run its course. Cyprian's *The Unity of the Church* addressed the problem. At first Cyprian had been inclined to Novatian's view, but after a while came round to the viewpoint of his opponent, Cornelius. Competing factions elected both Cornelius and Novatian Bishop of Rome in 251, but

⁹⁷For all of this see Tertullian, *On Modesty*. Hippolytus, in his *Exposition of Daniel* 13-14. argued that the Spirit had withdrawn after John had completed his works, so that if Montanist prophets were inspired by anything, it was by demons. We see in the Alexandrians that the role of the Spirit after the canon was completed is restricted to enlightening people on the allegorical intention of Scripture.

⁹⁸*Matthew* 5:11 and *Matthew* 10:32 ff.; *Luke* 12:8.

⁹⁹*Matthew* 10:23.

¹⁰⁰On this topic, see especially the excellent treatment in Barnes (1971) Chapter XII. Clement of Alexandria fled when persecution came to the town, while his student Origen, who leaned the other way, remained. Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, later fled a different persecution just as Clement had, and returned when Diocletian abdicated in 305, to write a treatise on those who lapsed during persecution which is preserved in collections of Eastern canon law. His tolerant approach to the lapsed oddly became canonical in the East in part because of his own martyrdom in 311, when Maximinus sent an agent to Egypt in secret who arrested the bishop and executed him on the spot. It became almost a commonplace to present the liberal Orthodox view from the mouth of a martyr.

Cornelius won out in the end. Cyprian's work maintains there is no salvation outside the Church, but allows apostates to be restored after suitable penance.

The same problem arose again in Africa after the persecution of Galerius and Maximus in 311–313. The Donatists held not only that sacrifice to the Pagan Gods constituted apostasy, but that the surrender of the sacred books of a church did so, and refused to allow an apostate reentry to the Church. The sect persisted long enough to attract the attentions of St. Augustine, who wrote against it.

In the Gnostic view of the Church, not discipline and morality, but insight and mystical experience defined the Christian. Usually this view led to the rejection, as a counterfeit church, of the ignorant and unspiritual, and of the power structure that makes membership a matter of meeting formal criteria.¹⁰¹ The true church is an association of equals who have the Spirit, who aid but do not try to dominate one another. They saw the Christian as alien to this world, and saw the mission of Christ not as sacrifice for our sins, but as bringing us a message about who we are, a mission which involved deception of the powers of this world, not confrontation with them. So they saw no need for the Christian to undergo the sacrifice of martyrdom—what are we proving, and whom are we convincing, by such an act? And why do we need to be truthful with Roman magistrates? Withdrawal of the Gnostic sort entails a certain deception and concealment of one's true convictions. The Western Valentinians under Ptolemy and Heracleon adopted a compromise position, viewing the church as two-sided, including both Spiritual and Psychic members. "Many are called, but few are chosen." The Spirituales are the few chosen ones who understood what is really going on, and will bring the whole Church to *gnosis* and salvation,¹⁰² but it was necessary often for Spirituales to conceal their true views from their ignorant fellow-religionists. For the most part, the Orthodox saw this as subversion and lies, but some, particularly intellectuals such as Origen, did not entirely disagree. Though they insisted that the faith as portrayed in the Creed is literally true, and complete for purposes of salvation, barring any addition of the Gnostic sort that might lead to a radical reinterpretation of Christian belief, they nonetheless thought many were ignorant, even among bishops, and insisted that we need not follow the majority in every matter. The similarity of such views to that of the Western Valentinians explains a good deal of the hostility to Origen, in particular. The fight against heresy would make the inclusion of philosophy within the Church a problem for

¹⁰¹So the *Gospel of Philip* 64.23–24 says that many receive nothing in baptism, and the *Testimony of the Truth* 69.22–24 claims that true baptism is found in the renunciation of the world. Pagels (1979) 104–111.

¹⁰²Pagels (1979) 115; (1973) 66–74; Heracleon, Fragments 37–38, in Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.33.

the Orthodox.

8. PERSECUTION, ROMAN AND CHRISTIAN

No device availed, neither public largess, nor princely munificence, nor placation of the Gods, to dispel the infamous suspicion that the fire had been started at the [Emperor's] command. Therefore, to quiet the rumor, Nero cast the blame on and ingeniously punished a people popularly called Christians and hated for their crimes. They took their name from Christ who had been executed in the reign of Tiberius during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate. This noxious superstition, suppressed for the moment, broke out again not only in Judaea, where it began, but even in Rome itself, where the scum of shame flows and becomes the vogue. Therefore those who confessed were taken and on their delation, a vast multitude was convicted not so much of arson as of hatred of the human race. To their sufferings was added mockery, for they were sewn in the skins of beasts and torn to pieces by dogs. Many died on crosses or at the stake. Others, as the day declined, were burned to illumine the night...

Tacitus, *Annals* XV 44.¹⁰³

The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.

The superstition of the people was not embittered by any mixture of theological rancor; nor was it confined by the chains of any speculative system. The devout polytheist, though fondly attached to his national rites, admitted with implicit faith the different religions of the earth. Fear, gratitude, and curiosity, a dream or an omen, a singular disorder, or a distant journey, perpetually disposed him to multiply the articles of his belief, and to enlarge the list of his protectors...

It is not easy to conceive from what motives a spirit of persecution could introduce itself into Roman councils. The magistrates could not be actuated

¹⁰³Translated in Bainton (1960) 87.

by a blind, though honest, bigotry, since the magistrates were themselves philosophers; and the schools of Athens had given laws to the senate. They could not be impelled by ambition or avarice, as the temporal and ecclesiastical powers were united in the same hands... whilst they acknowledged the general advantages of religion, they were convinced, that the various modes of worship contributed alike to the same salutary purposes; and that, in every country, the form of superstition, which had received the sanction of time and experience, was the best adapted to the climate, and to its inhabitants... Rome gradually became the common temple of her subjects; and the freedom of the city was bestowed on all the gods of mankind.

Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* I 1

The earliest notice we have of the Christian religion among the Pagan Romans is the account in Tacitus of Nero's persecution of the Christians at Rome in 64 CE.¹⁰⁴ At this time the Romans already distinguished Christian and Jew, probably because the Jews themselves, especially the most respectable of them, rejected the Christians.¹⁰⁵ It is worthwhile to consider Tacitus's accusations if we want to understand the Roman hatred of these people. Above all, the Christians were accused of "superstitio" and a "hatred of mankind." Plutarch tells us that the superstitious person has no world in common with the rest of us,¹⁰⁶ that is, he does not share the common public religion and the common culture that this religion entails, and he is actually afraid of the Gods, being so lacking in sense that he thinks they are easily offended.¹⁰⁷ The charge might well be leveled against someone involved in a minority religion today. Such people abandon the common culture of their community, isolating themselves, and taking their religion entirely too seriously, shunning the common customs. They may, for instance, be vegetarians or teetotalers, or excessively concerned with sexual purity, so that they seem to

¹⁰⁴See also Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero 16, which states that permanent laws were established repressing Christianity, though many scholars doubt if the persecution actually extended outside Rome itself.

¹⁰⁵But also, presumably, because the Christians made the distinction. Tacitus surely gained his information about Christianity from the Christians themselves being held captive. Sulpicius Severus, writing on the siege of Jerusalem six years later in 70 C.E., regards Christianity as a Jewish superstition. After the Jewish revolt Christians were careful to distinguish themselves from the Jews.

¹⁰⁶Plutarch, *On Superstition* 166C.

¹⁰⁷Plutarch, *On Superstition* 166c, 170e. On this latter point Lucretius agrees in *On the Nature of Things*, though he extends the charge to all of religion, and Plutarch, 167 d-e, remarks that superstition leads to atheism, since those who fear the gods would rather believe there are none.

look down on the rest of us, and have difficulty associating with us, all because of crazy extremist ideas about God's strict expectations and his harsh punishment of those who don't live up to them.

St. Augustine remarked that the Roman civic religion scarcely even believed itself, and Varro, as though granting the point in his defense of the religion, emphasizes the utility of Roman beliefs in encouraging community solidarity and good citizenship, not their truth.¹⁰⁸ His opinion was the usual one among the intellectuals in the ruling elite, whose intellectual sophistication, like that of such intellectuals in all cultures, ruled out the commoner's naive belief, but saw the necessity of professing belief, nonetheless. Cicero, for instance, argued that the disappearance of piety would lead to the disappearance of loyalty, social cohesion, and justice among the citizens.¹⁰⁹ It has been suggested that not belief, but adherence to the public rites was what was important, and that Roman religion was not a personal religion aiming at salvation for the individual, but a civic religion prescribed by the state and giving a shape to communal life. But that is all much overdone, and takes as a majority view the view of the most highly educated in the Senatorial class. Roman religion was no mere imposture foisted on the masses by their rulers, nor a purely public cult lacking all bearing on personal life. The average person, even the average official, really did believe it, and the Romans viewed themselves as an especially religious people. When a very sophisticated Roman was asked to justify religious practices, he might, as we might, cast about for something that would appeal to a skeptic, and light on its social function, but that does not mean that his motives for following the practices were located in that function.¹¹⁰ At the least, loyalty to the beliefs and practices of one's ancestors, and probably also a genuine conviction that the gods had helped them personally at some time or another, and even the expectation of some personal salvation would all have figured in their motivation.

Moreover, personal salvation was not conceived by Roman higher culture as something that could occur without the person's entering into the proper relation with the community. It was personally advantageous to be virtuous and pious, providing meaning and direction to one's life, and one could expect

¹⁰⁸Augustine, *City of God* III 4; IV 31 and 32. One might, for instance, compare Plato's introduction of civic religion with at least some elements of deception in the *Republic*.

¹⁰⁹Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.5; 1.4.

¹¹⁰Nor does the fact that many Pagan practices originated with prophetic dreams of important persons demanding their institution a sign that they were set up as a matter of policy, even when they were clearly of political use. Virtually everyone in the Pagan world enjoyed prophetic dreams, and these dreams often solved real problems, of course, but that does not mean that they were invented or contrived. Dreams are like that, even the dreams of politicians.

to be rewarded for it after death. But virtue and piety could be realized only in the fulfillment of duties to the community, and it was as a member of one's community that one found meaning in life and related to the greater gods. Low culture was moved less by upper class sense of obligation to the community, and received much less in the way of personal rewards for attending to this obligation. It recognized a multiplicity of gods and cults promising aid, both spiritual or material, to the individual as such. One worshiped Jupiter only rarely, at great festivals with the rest of the community, but attended on Asclepius much more frequently and urgently, and Asclepius worked personal healing miracles just as much as Christ.¹¹¹

Most everyone except the Jews and Egyptians participated in the civic religion,¹¹² whatever their personal beliefs, and the Christian refusal to sacrifice to Jupiter or the Emperor was difficult for many even to comprehend, and impossible to accept. Personal religion was not unknown or even frowned upon, but it was assumed that a personal religion of any reasonable sort would be compatible with the public cult. An exception was made in the law, though grudgingly, to be sure, for the Jews, who had demonstrated their willingness to revolt rather than sacrifice to Zeus. But this was tolerated because the Jews had their own public cult, a cult that reached back into antiquity, which required exclusive worship of Yahweh. They were loyal to their own community, a virtue even if they were exclusive, displaying a certain hatred for the rest of mankind. But Christianity was a new invention, not the religious expression of an established national community—Christians had no excuse for their unreasonable behavior, and where would things end once one began to allow *new* cults that rejected the public cult? Moreover, the Christian refusal to have dealings with Pagan Gods meant not only that they did not participate in certain public events. They could not go to the

¹¹¹The cult of Asclepius, like most Pagan personal religion, was absorbed by Christianity. People remained at the tombs of saints and martyrs, where they received medical attention and sacred dreams, just as they had stayed before in a temple of Asclepius. See Aelius Aristides, *Sacred Teachings*, discussed in Dodds (1965) 42–46, for a devotee's account of the god.

¹¹²For the Egyptians, see Bowersock (1990), 55–56. The Egyptians seem not to have participated in the Imperial Cult, and they kept their own rites pure, entertaining the hope that the gods would arrange eventually for the foreigners to leave Egypt so that the Egyptians could live as they had before their arrival. The Romans were disposed to tolerance of their peculiarities because, (1) they did worship the emperors as Osiris, even if their version of the Imperial cult was unique and entirely traditional, (2) they did not leave Egypt, infecting other countries, where the usual arrangement was honored, with their exclusivity, nor did they come into conflict with the Hellenized people in their midst, but merely abstained from intercourse with them, and (3) they held a certain prestige within the Pagan communities as the source of many of the Greek Gods, so that Thoth was equated with Hermes, for instance, and exported a number of cults to the Pagan milieu which lived quite comfortably with the official cults of the Empire. Over time the Egyptians became Hellenized, forgetting the meaning of their own Hieroglyphic writing, and their religion became a relic preserved from the past, largely by scholars and priests with an increasingly Hellenic outlook. The religion was perhaps respected chiefly as a holy fossil by the Romans in the later Empire. When the place was Christianized, the old state religion having lost most of its relevance for the common man, it was with a local variant, Coptic Christianity, that preserved Egyptian exclusivity and ethnic pride.

games, which were opened with a sacrifice, or participate in any sort of eating club, guild or other organization, since these always had their patron gods, to whom sacrifices were made, or even stay over at someone's house, where prayers to the household deities would be made in the morning.¹¹³ It would be a bit like someone in nineteenth-century America who refused to attend any event where the flag was present or a prayer was said, since a sacrifice preceded every public function of any kind whatever. To become a Christian was to cut oneself off from the rest of society, and rely henceforth entirely on those within the Christian community for help and companionship. It was hard for a Pagan to believe that such behavior was anything but dangerous to the solidarity of the community.

In my own community, Jewish and Atheistic objections to the presence of the cross in the town seal recently raised similar reactions. Most Christians could not even see why it should bother anyone (perhaps they don't take their own religion seriously enough to see this, though the notion of removing the cross offended them deeply, for they take quite seriously the *status* of their religion, as the one defining the culture of the community). They accused the protesters of being hostile to basic American values. "Why couldn't they simply go along with the majority? They must be terribly arrogant to object to such a minor thing." Now, we not only have an official separation of church and state, unlike the Romans, but the Roman religion affected every aspect of life far more pervasively than Christianity does here, so the Romans would have had the same reaction to the Christians as my fellow townspeople did to these protesters, but much amplified.¹¹⁴ It is no surprise, if these Christians were converting people's relatives and children and criticizing everyday customs such as attendance at the Circus, that people were prepared to think badly of them, giving Nero, for instance, his opportunity to use them as scapegoats.

¹¹³For this see the treatises of Tertullian, for instance, *The Crown of the Soldier* (written 208), which opposes the wearing of garlands, and will not allow that a Christian can join the army, *On Spectacles* (written 196 or 197), against attending the games, theatrical performances and the like, and *Against Idolatry* (written 196 or 197), which forbids any practice or profession that might put one in the way of honoring the Pagan gods, even school teaching, at least within the Pagan milieu, since at the very least teachers traditionally collect their fees at certain festivals.

¹¹⁴For this whole subject, I am indebted to R. Wilken (1984), especially Chapter 3. In my own community, it should be noted, a compromise was arrived at, and in place of the cross we now have "In God we trust". There are too few atheists to mount effective opposition, and they are aware that a good deal of tolerance from the majority hangs on a willingness to allow the majority to speak for the whole community. After all, the community has to be defined by *some* beliefs, which will be expressed in its official literature, even if it tolerates a loyal opposition.

The charge of atheism was often brought against both Christians and Jews by the Romans.¹¹⁵ So Domitian, in 95 CE, charged his cousin Flavia Clemens and his wife Flavia Domitilla of “atheism, for which offense a number of others, also, who had been carried away into Jewish customs, were condemned—some to death, others to confiscation of property.”¹¹⁶ When Polycarp was martyred in 150 CE, the crowds shouted “Down with the atheists!”¹¹⁷ As in the charge of atheism brought against Socrates, the real thrust of the accusation is that the accused reject the gods of their native religion. Probably many people thought that anyone who rejected the common gods could not seriously believe in any God at all.

The persecution of the Christians, though sporadic, continued after Nero whenever the local community became upset with the Christians. There is a letter of Pliny to the Emperor Trajan (between 111 and 113 CE) in which he asks the Emperor how the laws against the Christians are to be executed. His procedure was to ask those accused of being Christians if in fact they were. If they confessed, he asked again, with the threat of penalty, and if they persisted, and would not worship the images of the Emperor and the Gods, and curse Christ, which he demanded they do in order to detect those who might lie about their faith, he ordered their execution simply out of frustration at their obduracy. Pliny seems convinced that the Christians were guilty of no sin beyond such obstinance, and relates the harmless customs and virtuous behavior that their apostates reported to him.¹¹⁸ The reply of the Emperor was that the Christians were not to be hunted down, but if they were turned in, Pliny’s procedure was correct. Anonymous accusations were to be ignored.¹¹⁹ Clearly these more liberal officials were chiefly worried about the spread of a general disrespect for the communal religion, which they thought would undermine public morals and the cohesion of the community, and did not have the stomach for persecution where the Christians did not flaunt their obstinate

¹¹⁵Jews have always been accused of atheism in Christian countries, right down to the German persecution of the twentieth century.

¹¹⁶Dio Cassius LXVII 14, 2.

¹¹⁷*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.

¹¹⁸Accusations were sometimes brought, for obvious reasons, that Christians ate babies, and their closed (“secret”) meetings led people to accuse them of incest.

¹¹⁹Pliny, *Letter X*, 96–97. Bainton (1960) 88–89. It should be noted that if an accusation was not substantiated in court the accuser, under Roman law, suffered the penalty for the crime, a common precaution in legal systems in which prosecutions are brought by private citizens rather than a public official. So a person would make an accusation anonymously to avoid the possibility of punishment if the charges could not be made to stick. In the case of Christians, the danger was serious, since a simple lie about one’s faith, together with a sacrifice to the gods, would be enough to establish innocence and throw the penalty onto the accuser.

refusal to participate. Under the rules laid down by Trajan persecution was sporadic, but mob hysteria was always a danger, for instance, if some calamity such as a drought was blamed on the anger of the gods because of the community's tolerance of those who would not honor them, and it was certainly dangerous to be a Christian. No doubt one effect of this persecution was to insure that the membership of the group was restricted to true believers.

Following Christian sources, the only sources we have, it seems this situation continued until the Severan dynasty, which adopted a policy of increased toleration, ca. 200–250, a toleration that seems to have reflected growing tolerance for Christians in the general population. No doubt this was a consequence of increasing knowledge of the religion's actual nature, due to apologetic work, perhaps, but also due simply to the spread of the religion, which brought more and more people into actual contact with Christians.¹²⁰ Indeed, the religion had spread chiefly among Greek speakers, hopping from one urban colony of Greek speakers to another, until the end of the second century, but then it began to appear among Latin speakers in the West, first in Carthage. So what might even have looked like an anti-Roman movement among the conquered Greeks now began to look like a harmless superstition with adherents even among loyal, Latin-speaking Romans.

The Decian and Valerian persecutions after 250 were, by Christian reports, very severe, as might have been expected if the anti-Christian party that sponsored them was getting desperate at their loss of influence with the average Pagan, and it might also have reflected the growth of episcopal institutions, which commanded the loyalty of a small, but increasing, unified and active part of the population. Some scholars say that only their brevity saved the Church, but they were brief, and in 261 Gallienus's Edict of Toleration left the Church in peace until Diocletian's succession.

Diocletian was the great restorer of the Roman Empire. Following a succession of disastrous short-lived administrations, he reformed the Empire's finances, took drastic and apparently successful steps to stabilize the cities and bring back the economy, rebuilt the army, and reorganized the upper reaches of government to assure an orderly succession and put an end to the continuous civil wars which had led Diocletian himself, the son of a freedman and a professional soldier, to the purple. The victory of his colleague Galerius over the Persians in 299 had rendered the East, for more than 50 years threatened by the resurgent Sassanid Empire,

¹²⁰So Barnes (1994) I, "Pagan perceptions of Christianity," marshals considerable evidence that the calumnies against Christians early on (that they indulged in orgies, at babies and so on) were replaced by a different view of Christians as relatively harmless fanatics as Rome entered the third century C.E.

safe again. But Diocletian's reforms included the court and state ceremonial, imitating the Persian model and making the Emperor an unapproachable and divine figure who ruled in part by overawing the population. He was determined to reinvigorate Emperor worship, following the old recipe of uniting the Empire's many local paganisms to that central cult. When making sacrifices at Antioch in thanksgiving for the Galerius's victories the animals were discovered to be abnormal, a terrible omen, and the incident was blamed on Christians who, some said, had been seen making the sign of the cross to wreck the sacrifice. Diocletian immediately set out to purge the imperial household of Christians by demanding that all make sacrifices to the Gods, then extended the purge to the army and the civil service. In 302, a Deacon, Romanus, burst in and interrupted a routine invocation preparatory to public business at the Imperial Court with a diatribe against Paganism. Diocletian, at the end of his patience, had the man brutally executed, and, then, advised by the oracle of Apollo that the Christians were preventing the god's communication with men, he decided to act. In 303 he banned Christian worship, ordered the Churches destroyed, and took a number of other measures to make the life of a Christian miserable. Perhaps most significant, he denied anyone who would not sacrifice to the gods at the beginning of the proceedings the use of the law courts. Those who resisted the orders, for instance, priests who refused to hand over sacred books for burning or publicly denounced Paganism, were executed. Then it was ordered that clergy be arrested and forced to sacrifice. In 306, ill, and fearful of the disorder if he should die in office, Diocletian retired, and the worst of the persecution was over. But Galerius continued it in the East until 311, when, on his deathbed, observing that the effect of the persecution had not been to return Christians to Paganism as had been hoped, but rather to leave those it did convince to leave the Church entirely godless, he canceled the edicts and asked Christians to pray for his health and the state.

But the traditional view of persecution I have been presenting may need modification. For one thing, Christian sources insist that the good emperors did not persecute, while the bad emperors did, and can even be caught out here and there misdating events to support this view.¹²¹ Indeed, there is some reason to think that the picture of alternate peace and warfare under different emperors is a false one, and that persecutions were carried out more or less at random when provincial governors wished it. It is clear that the governors actually carried out (or failed to carry out) the sentences, local magistrates holding the criminals until the governor arrived, and clear that in most cases the governors felt compelled to do so by the threat of mob

¹²¹So Eusebius, *History of the Church* VI 41, assigns a pogrom in Alexandria to the persecution of Decius which the Bishop Dionysius, whom he quotes, reports occurred several years before then. See Barnes (1971) 157.

violence from Pagans. Christian sources seem uniformly to fear the mob more than the government, as witnessed from the beginning with Pilate and Christ, with Polycarp, and in the testimony of Tertullian. This meant that persecutions tended to be sporadic, and generally brief, probably claiming few lives. Moreover, the threat diminished as the Pagan public's fear and loathing of Christians faded. But it was always there, and was perhaps especially potent, psychologically, precisely because the event was so unpredictable. Christians no doubt lived in fear, and were often subject to blackmail and bullying, just as Jews were later on in Europe.¹²²

The Christians tried their best to get along with the authorities, short of apostasy. Some even ceased taking a common meal at their meetings when it was explained that Trajan's legislation against secret societies would apply to them if they did so. (Meal clubs, in which the duty of providing a meal for the members rotated through the group, were politically important during the entire Ancient period, and so the Romans had forbidden them, rather ineffectually, one assumes, as potential centers of seditious activity.)¹²³ There can be no doubt that the Christian pacifist response to persecution had a great deal to do with the eventual success of the religion in the Empire. The Christian claim to superior morality seemed verifiable, and the more tolerant and liberal administrators were bound to feel uneasy persecuting such apparently harmless people, however obstinate they were in their rejection of the state cult.

But despite these pacifist tendencies, the Christians saw themselves in rebellion against the empire, and, viewing the Empire as subject to demons, they did not hesitate to attack the authority of a state so governed, and to assert the superior authority of God and his Church. Origen, in his work against Celsus, responds to the charge that Christians are in rebellion against the state with the claim that the Church is the nation that demands the allegiance of Christians, not demon-infested Rome.¹²⁴ This is not to say that political rebellion was advocated by Christians. That one must recognize the authorities of this world in their own sphere was accepted on all hands, and the advice went back to Jesus himself, forged in the crucible of Roman

¹²²For all this see the excellent discussion in Barnes (1971) Chapter XI.

¹²³Wilken (1984) 12–13, relates a case in which Pliny was advised by Trajan to avoid forming a volunteer fireman's association if possible, providing fire-fighting equipment at public expense and depending on the crowds that gathered to man it. A volunteer fireman's association would inevitably turn political, Trajan argued. Associations of merchants and religious groups such as the worshipers of Isis are known to have been politically active in Roman cities. The Roman administration, of course, wanted to keep the local level of political activity well under control.

¹²⁴*Against Celsus* VIII 73.

despotism in Palestine.¹²⁵ But one retains the right and duty of disobeying the laws of the civil government when they conflict with the law of God, and Origen goes so far as to argue that the people have a right to rebel against and assassinate a tyrant who would enforce the devil's law.¹²⁶ It is going too far to claim that a new conception was born here, a conception of a higher law that might justify rebellion against the government that ignored it, for we find the same conception, for instance, in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, but the long persecution of the Christians, extended by the experience of Arian "persecution" of the Orthodox in the West, brought the conception to the fore, and even when it withdrew into the background again, the tradition of the Hebrew Prophet joined with that of the Christian martyr to keep rebellion alive, if only in the shape of periodic waves of protest and reform, in Christian culture.

In any case, persecution had failed to destroy the Church, and showed no sign it would ever succeed. Moreover, increasingly it alienated the more humane and liberal of those Pagans who witnessed its prosecution. If Christians were to be brought back into the civic arena, another strategy was needed. And there was some need to bring the Christians into the civic arena, for the Bishops had become influential patrons especially of the commoners and the poor not represented by the traditional Pagan religious elites. The traditional Roman priesthoods were limited to the wealthy and powerful who were already represented in public office, while a bishop often rose to his position from humble origins, and the Christians attended to the needs of the poor in a way that no Pagan group ever did. (Indeed, among Pagans, only the Cynics seem to have had what we today might call a social consciousness, and their ideas on the matter were connected with a rejection of civil order, and never received any institutional backing.)¹²⁷

This point had an importance in the legitimation of the Emperor's rule that it would not have had before Diocletian. In the beginning, the Emperor had claimed legitimacy for his rule on the ground that the Senate, which represented every faction with enough standing in the society to matter, had given him his power. This was the meaning of Augustus's theatrical resignation of his powers in 27 BC, only to have them urgently pressed upon him once more by the Senators. This source of legitimacy was balanced by the

¹²⁵Cf. I *Peter* 2:13-16, where Christians are enjoined to honor the emperor, for his authority in civil affairs is from God. But one should perhaps bear in mind the Jewish God's penchant for giving just authority to the persecutors of Jerusalem, in order to Punish the Hebrews.

¹²⁶*Against Celsus* I 1.

¹²⁷For this point and much of the following discussion I have learned from H.A. Drake (2000).

Republican assembly, which originally consisted of the martial army, citizenship, as usual in ancient cultures, being the prerequisite of those who bore arms. The assembly survived under the Principate not in its own form, but in the habit Emperors had, beginning with Julius Caesar himself, of referring to the army's authorization of their actions, especially when those actions seemed suspect in some way, and even of their succession to power. This was no mere resort to raw power, for the army represented the citizens, and the assembled army could, in theory, make decisions on the behalf of the Republic. But, for obvious reasons, both the Senate and the army came to look like rather poor legitimizers to significant interest groups within the Empire. The membership of the Senate depended too much on the Emperor's whim, and the army was too patently a professional military that could not reasonably be taken to represent the Empire as a whole. In the mid-second century, the jurist Ulpian proposed that the Emperor had legislative power because the people "commits to him and into him its own entire authority and power, doing this by the *lex regia*."¹²⁸ The view had evolved that the Emperor's power rested on a historical action, rather than legitimization by existing bodies. But, of course, without the support of the more important interest groups in the society no Emperor could last long, and the question was left open how to decide who among the contenders for the purple was a legitimate contender, a question which had never been settled in a regular way, since the imperium was a bundle of emergency powers become permanent, not an office in the state. Before the collapse into disorder in 238, and throughout the years of disorder up to Diocletian's reforms in 284–305, the upper classes in the cities, perhaps 3% of the population controlling 40% of the liquid wealth, ran local affairs in the name of the Emperor, and assured that the taxes, amounting to about 5% of the annual agricultural produce, were channeled to the Empire. The mismanagement and disorder of the 3rd century led Diocletian to impose centralized control on local affairs, and the old magisterial elites of the cities found themselves hemmed in and regulated at every point by Imperial representatives. Indeed, in some rural areas the cities and their elites were simply bypassed, and imperial garrisons collected the necessary taxes directly.¹²⁹ Thus the uncertain procedures for legitimization of the Emperor reached a crisis, as a sullen resistance developed in precisely that class of people that had in the past been the chief support of the Empire in local affairs.

¹²⁸As cited in Drake (2000) 41. The *lex regia* was the traditional body of Roman law supposedly coming from the time of the Kings, older even than the 12 Tables. Ulpian's point is that in the people handed absolute authority over to the Emperor or Dictator.

¹²⁹Brown (1996) 18–20.

To resolve the crises facing him, the Emperor needed to find an acceptable base on which to establish the legitimacy of the Emperor's power and maintain the cooperation of the city-states making up the Empire. The old Pagan claim to personal divinity that Diocletian drew on seemed not to provide such a base, but another strategy was available. We find Constantine, and not only Constantine, assuring people on all hands that whoever worshiped the single God from whom the universe arose, and interceded with that God for the Emperor, who was viewed not as a god himself, but as a reflection of the highest God on earth, ruling in his name to maintain his just order—all such people were acceptable and to be considered as belonging to the public cult. Christians, philosophical Pagans, and more ordinary Pagans who honored the philosophical form of their religion as an esoteric doctrine, as well as Jews and sundry others, all fell under the umbrella. A few sects might not be tolerated, if they saw their God as opposed to this world and refused to see the state or its sovereign as following their God's plan, so that they genuinely refused to participate in those projects aimed at the public good, or if, in their intolerance, they refused to live together with honest men of other faiths who shared their devotion to the God who ruled the world. So, for instance, Manichaeism might still be attacked, and also the more intolerant and rigorist brand of Christian, who refused to enroll in the army or contribute in other ways to the public good. But Constantine hoped that the Christians might be convinced to follow the more liberal wing of their faith, the apologists who sought only to be allowed the practice of their religion and claimed to be better citizens than the Pagans, those Bishops who wanted peace with the Empire and were willing to allow their flock to take public office, to join the army, and in general to consort with Pagans, so long as they kept their own faith, those who were willing to see the Pagan as someone worshiping the same God in a mistaken way, rather than someone committed to the corrupt adoration of evil demons. The Bishops fostered this hope, but the Christian movement was firmly in control of its more extreme elements, and the hope was deluded from the beginning.

The question might yet be raised why Constantine took as much trouble as he did with the Christians, given their minority status and his public commitment to tolerance of every form of optimistic monotheism. The lessons learned in Diocletian's persecutions go far to answer that question. The Christian political structure, with its Bishops and Churches, had come to form a kind of shadow government, which could, if made friendly to the Empire in which it lived, be put to use by the authorities, particularly since the local government of the Pagan elite had become disaffected by its loss of autonomy under the reforms. The Bishops could mobilize a considerable body of public opinion, and greatly aid in administration in a government whose

administrative ability, due to limited funds, was always shaky. The strength of that political structure was manifested in Diocletian's persecution. The trick was for Constantine to ally himself with the more conciliatory Bishops, and bring Christianity back into the public arena, something he assumed most Christians wanted. As it turned out the less cooperative and less liberal elements in the Church were harder to keep under control than he had figured, but the strategy must have looked plausible at the time.

The history of Christianity in Rome is much like that of Communism in Russia or China. Fundamentally, both Communists and Christians were entirely opposed to allowing their ideological opponents any place at in the government, or, for that matter, in the polity. Their final aim was the extinction of their opponents. But they started off in a minority position, and so had to dissimulate their final intentions to make progress toward them. This was easily done through alliances with liberal elements of their opposition, appeals to liberal principles of toleration, and the natural development of a liberal wing to their own party, which could be pushed forward when toleration from their enemies was sought, or a way to worm their way into the councils of the state. We know this as a tactic of Communists, but it is also a tactic of Christian Apologists, writing when the religion is weak, which we have seen is abandoned once Christians are strong enough to have no further need of tolerance.

Again, like the Communist Party, Christians faced repeated crises as they succeeded in their aims. The liberal wing of the party had to be jettisoned once it had done its work, concealing the deeper intentions of the most zealous members of the party until they could pull off a takeover. Thus we see repeated purges of the Party as one phase of the struggle toward the bolshevization of society, and purges of the Christian hierarchy in the great disputes of the 4th and 5th centuries after control of the state had been obtained. Liberals might be very useful early on, while one is still concealing one's final intentions, but they must be purged later if one succeeds. If this seems cynical, well, for a Marxist and a Christian alike, the struggle is a sacred one, and therefore any means, including deception and violence, is acceptable for its prosecution. The Revolution, Mao reminds us, is not a dinner party. Christians never aimed to gain direct control of the armed forces and the government, and were content to reduce the government to the service of their religion, so that Christian Kings and Emperors had to be manipulated into doing what the Bishops wanted. But with that difference from Communism duly noted, the nature and rhythms of the struggle in the two movements is the same.

Both movements, of course, have noble aims of benefitting the human race and eliminating injustice from the world. Che Guevara had it that the true source of Revolutionary zeal is love, and Christian

persecution have always been traced by Christians to the same source. To a considerable degree, these noble aims are really sought, both for their own sake, and for the sake of political expediency. The Black Panthers, a similar revolutionary group that never got very far, in part because it never recognized the necessity of temporary alliances with more liberal elements until it rose to a position of power, really did do a lot of good for the poor in the central city, and Mao, at some stages of his career, really did do a lot of good for the peasants of China.

Again, in both groups the party intellectual plays a role. It is not so much that the intellectual can actually shape the Party's views. In fact, the view of the party tends toward those that will guarantee success in the revolution, for it is those views that will come to control the party if it is victorious. Among Communists this is sometimes quite frankly recognized, and even when it isn't it is generally clear that the pure intellectual, without contact with practicalities and the masses, that is, the fellow interested in the truth even if it is inconvenient and politically incorrect, is not going to get very far. Often, as is the case with both Ambrose and Mao, a necessary part of the strategy for gaining power in the party is to establish one's intellectual bona fides by writing meaty theoretical works.

One might raise the question which members of the Christian movement are the real Christians. In practice this question is generally answered by those who write the history. For a Marxist, an official party history is an important document, identifying the real Marxists along with their temporary allies, revisionists and the like, who were, necessarily, purged later. For a Christian, history is also a loaded subject, for we must identify the Orthodox and the Heretics, to justify the suppression of the latter. Generally, this can only be done in retrospect. At any given time, of course, there are a wide variety of levels of commitment and degrees of intolerance within the movement, but we tend to identify the movement with those who control it, and it is often a radical minority that drives things in unsettled times, and in conditions of political struggle. Note that a genuine liberal is far more useful to the intolerant minority than one of their own trying to pretend to be a liberal. Their opponents can be lulled into thinking that the liberals they know would run things once the movement succeeded in establishing itself. The wise hardliner will foster that illusion, moving to a purge of liberal elements from the party only when they are no longer useful. The movement will take on different complexions as events unfold and one party or another within it gains control, but if a single, unified and disciplined party with a clearly defined ideology ultimately gains control, we will see that group as the true Church from the beginning.

Which brings us to the last parallel between Communism and Christianity I want to point out, their shared belief in the apocalyptic last days, the Revolution, followed by Kingdom of Heaven, or the beginnings of world socialism. The Communists wish to bring the thing about themselves, while Christians, given their rather different relation to the government, the City of Man, expect it will be replaced by the City of God only when God Himself intervenes, but both seek an end of things and a new beginning on entirely different principles. And both view anyone who does not have faith in that apocalyptic expectation as unredeemed, and someone to be cast out from human society. It is this shared intolerance, and this shared apocalyptic expectation, rooted in a love for others that is determined to give them what they need whether they want it or not, which underlies the more superficial similarities between the movements.

8. CONSTANTINE AND THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

While that great body [the Roman Empire] was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capitol. . .

. . . but what were the . . . causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church. It will, perhaps, appear, that it was most effectually favored and assisted by the five following causes: I. The inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit, which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire.

Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* I 15

In this sign, conquer!

The inscription on Constantine's vision of the cross, according to Eusebius
Life of Constantine I 28

Constantius and Constans Augusti, to Taurus, Praetorian Prefect:

We have resolved that, in all places and in every city, temples are to be closed forthwith and that, by forbidding them access, all abandoned men are to be denied the opportunity to do wrong. We also desire that all should refrain from sacrifices. If any should happen to perpetrate such a crime, let him be laid low by the avenging sword. We decree also that the property of those executed should be claimed for the treasury and that the provincial governors be punished likewise if they neglect to visit penalties on such crimes. 1 December 356.

Theodosian Code XVI 10.4¹³⁰

In the early second century, there were Christian groups in thirty or forty cities in the Empire, their total numbers amounting perhaps to some fifty thousand in a population of sixty millions.¹³¹ How did this tiny minority sect, which most people had never heard of, persecuted, if only sporadically, by the state, entirely supplant the Pagan religion of Rome? Religion in the Mediterranean was a traditional affair, and however much the traditions had been shaken up by the mingling of religious visions in the political union of the Empire, it was unheard of for an entire culture to shift loyalties to a new religion unrelated to that of their ancestors. The event was to happen again, with Islam, and had already occurred with Buddhism, but nothing of the sort had happened or could have happened, it would seem, even a thousand years earlier. After it was all over, Christians pointed to the event as a miracle, explicable only by God's direct intervention. Given that the event is *not* unique, and that God is presumably not Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist all at once, we can reject that explanation, but what did happen?

The Roman Empire was the result of military and communications technology unknown to previous states. The Empire hung together only because of the roads and the Mediterranean sea, which enabled administrative orders, or, if need be, an army, to reach its periphery from the capitol quickly enough to make rebellion and external invasion impractical. It was only barely impractical—the Empire split into Eastern and Western halves in its later history precisely because it was too easy for an ambitious commander to establish himself in the East before Rome had a chance to react, something that was evident even in the succession struggles after the first Emperor, Julius Caesar. The only solution to the repeated civil wars after the failure

¹³⁰Cooke and Harries (1982) 19.

¹³¹Wilken (1984) 31.

of the Antonine dynasty was to split the Empire into two, closely associated, political units, each Emperor understanding the difficulties in attempting to impose his rule on the other half of the empire, and the advantages of a close connection and alliance with that other half.

The immediate result of the Roman conquests, religiously speaking, was the counter-invasion of Rome by the alien religions of the conquered. These religions were absorbed, more or less, by requiring everyone to participate in the official state cult, and allowing everyone private devotions of whatever kind they might desire. The arrangement was strained by Judaism and Christianity, but it worked in general, and was necessary in view of the failure of other solutions to the problem. Attempts to convert everyone to the Greco-Roman religion, for instance, had succeeded up to a point, but the uneducated lower classes, and resistant members of the upper classes, seem to have held out, especially in the Eastern provinces, where the Greeks and Romans were opposed by a culture as sophisticated as their own. One could convert the Gauls to Roman polytheism, perhaps, as Constantine was to convert the Goths to Christianity, but those who had their own high cultures at the time of conquest remained largely undigested, and their religions had to be tolerated. Worse than that, foreign religions contested the missionary fields among groups such as the Gauls, and even made frequent converts among the disenfranchised classes of Italy itself, a phenomenon deplored by the upper classes, but, again, demanding tolerance.

Many of these different religions became accustomed to thinking of themselves not as ancestral cults limited in their membership to those of a particular political and linguistic community, but as potentially universal, so that anyone might become a member. We have seen already how Judaism was transformed from a state cult to a personal religion capable of collecting converts, and a similar transmutation occurred repeatedly, as it became a survival trait for a cult's practices to be carried on independently of the state, so that it could gain as wide a membership as possible without antagonizing the imperial sway of Rome. In effect a free market of cults arose, all addressing the same personal needs for meaning and security, and using very similar techniques of dreams and divination, ritual, moral exhortation, asceticism and sacrifice. These cults were run by people who profited from a large membership, and were very much in competition with each other, and under the later Empire they tended to act politically, throwing their support to one or another contender in local elections, or civil wars. The state cult of Rome had been replaced by a multitude of cults, each capable of continuing without the support of the state, competing for political position. (It should be observed that ancient local practices, associated with local agriculture and trades and civic government, as well as home

grown mystery cults and the like, everywhere formed a substrate on which these mobile foreign imports and the state religion of Rome were grafted.)

When Diocletian retired, he assigned as his successors candidates proposed by his colleague, Galerius. Diocletian had reorganized the office of the Emperor to put an end to the civil wars incident on succession. Under his new plan, there would be two Augusti, senior emperors, in the East and the West. The Eastern emperor was top man, but the Western Emperor enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. Each of the Augusti had a younger colleague, his Caesar, to whom most of the military duties were entrusted, who was to move into the office of Augustus when the old Augustus died. In this way the designated successor would always be the commander of soldiers guarding the frontiers, and both in the East and the West, the distances would be short enough to forestall any rebellion by subordinate commanders. An end was to be made to the spectacle of provincial commanders marching on the capital with the death of the Emperor. In 306 Diocletian made four appointments. Galerius, his junior colleague, would become Augustus of the East, as expected, and Constantius, Constantine's father, the Augustus of the West. But instead of assigning Constantine the office of Caesar in the West, Diocletian assigned an old companion of Galerius this position. His intention was no doubt to strengthen Galerius, and make sure that the two halves of the empire did not separate into independent states, each with its own hereditary succession, but the move misfired. Constantine, upon the death of his father in 306, was declared Augustus by Constantius's army, and Galerius was forced to acquiesce in the decision. With Galerius's death in 311, the situation in the West deteriorated into civil war.

The Christians were by no means assured of becoming the sole religion of the Empire in 311, when **Constantine**, junior Emperor in the West, prepared to invade Italy to depose his rival Maxentius.¹³² The Church may have doubled its membership in the past hundred years or so, but probably still amounted to no more than five percent of the population, located in the cities and towns at all levels of society, but with very few members in the countryside.¹³³ This growth represents a significant accomplishment, but by no means

¹³²For Constantine, see Barnes (1994) III, "The conversion of Constantine," Fox (1986) Chapter 12, and Grant (1993). For the policies of the Christian emperors in general, see Croke and Harries (1982), an excellent collection of documents in English translation.

¹³³Fox (1986), 293, 317, 592. This is an important point. It has been argued by earlier scholars that Christianity dramatically expanded its numbers during the third-century peace under Galienus's decree of toleration, while Paganism, in the face of the unremitting disasters of that period, lost the faith of the populace, but Wilken (1984) 572–95 argues persuasively that the period witnessed neither this dramatic expansion of Christianity, nor a collapse of Paganism. The conversion of Constantine did not merely confirm the success of Christianity, which had already won the hearts of the Romans in the ideological struggle. It produced that success, and Christianity would not have become the majority religion without it.

indicates that Christianity was inevitably on its way to replacing the older religions competing with it. Christians were present everywhere, but remained, and looked likely to remain, a decided minority. Nonetheless, Constantine was sympathetic to the religion. Perhaps the Pagan leaders were aware of this, for the soothsayers observed no good omens for his march.¹³⁴ The Tetrarch was a genuinely pious man who believed in a single, supreme God, and had for some time been sympathetic to the Christians. He had already declared toleration for the Christians in 305, when he came into power in Gaul. Probably while marching on Rome, according to his report after becoming emperor, Constantine had seen a sign in the heavens—the sun gave the appearance of a cross.¹³⁵ That night, possibly after consultation with a Christian adviser, he dreamed of a handsome young man who instructed him to inscribe the sign on the shields of his soldiers. Constantine's father had favored Apollo, the Sun god, in his worship, viewing him, as many intellectuals did, as the supreme God, and the vision and dream, though they bear a Christian interpretation, might not have been far from what Constantine had observed happening to others. It might also symbolize a shift in loyalties from the Sun cult to Christianity, justified by the notion that in worshiping the sun he had been in touch with the supreme God, rather than the prey of demons, but had mistaken God's nature, so that the cross superimposed on the sun represented his own reinterpretation of his old religious practices. Constantine sought the support of the Christians, then,¹³⁶ and was a sincere Christian himself during his reign, but much of the public language and imagery he employed remained ambiguous. It could be read either as Christian or Pagan, and he left his subjects to make of it what they would. So it comes as no surprise that a Pagan report of Constantine's vision in 311 indicates that he had a vision of the Sun god, and Constantine actively abetted the impression that he espoused

¹³⁴Fox (1986) 613.

¹³⁵This is not, as Fox (1986) 616, and Grant (1993) 138, observe, so unusual an omen, the appearance of cross-shaped halos about the sun being a well known optical effect. Constantine's later interpretation of the vision (as well as political opportunism) no doubt shaped his memory of it, so that he reported to Eusebius that he saw an inscription above the cross. It may also be that he had seen the sign a year earlier, fighting against the Franks, and it was only the dream, reminding him of the sign, that led him to place the cross on the shields of his soldiers.

¹³⁶The support of the Christians was politically important, it would seem, chiefly after the victory. It provided Constantine with a committed Constantinian party. Maxentius had played up his devotion to the city of Rome with the same purpose in mind, though his efforts were only partly successful, due to heavy taxation to support public works glorifying the city. He had not been unpopular with the Christians, for he avoided seizing on any pretext for persecution, and even restored Church property, but Constantine outbid him, of course, not to mention the fact that there was no choice to be made between him and Constantine after Constantine's victory, when Christian support would first begin to count for something. Grant (1993) 31–32.

the Imperial cult of the Sun, placing an image of the sun on his coins throughout his reign.¹³⁷ This went deeper than conciliatory propaganda. Constantine, at bottom, took Christ as a God of Victory, the Son of the Most High, and shows very little knowledge or interest in the humble Christ who suffered on the cross for our sins. Previous Emperors had already established a political theology of monotheism, and Constantine's innovation was not so much a new political philosophy as a new identification of the God of victory with Christ.

Especially early in his career, Constantine's Christianity differed but little from Aurelian's worship of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun.¹³⁸ The cult of the Sun had been established by the Emperor Elagabalus (218–222), who imported a Syrian cult of the Unconquered Sun, but Elagabalus made himself unpopular by attempting to replace all other cults at Rome by this one. Aurelian (270–275) reintroduced the cult, elevating it above, but not replacing, the rest of the Pagan cults. The notion that the Emperor was himself a god had lost much of its appeal in the disasters of the third century, and Aurelian wished to refurbish the Imperial Cult by making the Emperor a reflection of the one ruling god, the Sun. The King, in effect, would be the “living law,” law here below paralleling the divine law above, embodied in the Sun.¹³⁹ Constantine, early in his career, saw himself in just this way as the “companion” of the Sun, receiving authority in trust from the god.¹⁴⁰ Constantine, then, pursued the vision of Elagabalus, aiming to replace all the various Pagan cults with one cult under the control of the state, but with a well organized, zealous and intolerant membership for the state cult already in place.¹⁴¹

In any case, to allow the conflation of Christ with the Unconquered Sun was certainly one way to get on with an administrative and military class that was almost entirely Pagan, and which saw the maintenance of Pagan ritual as essential to the safety of the state. Constantine was often addressed by Pagans as though he

¹³⁷Chadwick (1967) 126–7. The conflation is easier than it might seem. Christ was represented both in literary and visual art as the Sun, and Christians, of course, met on Sundays and prayed facing East. Christmas came to occupy the birthday of the Sun god, the Winter Solstice, December 25, early in the fourth century. Christ was identified as the Sun (young warrior son of the wise elder God) by some Pagans, who even thought Christians worshiped the Sun, given their sacred day (or so remarks Tertullian), and some Christians seem in fact to have made the identification (Grant (1993) 135).

¹³⁸Grant (1993) 147–152.

¹³⁹Fowden (1993) 51.

¹⁴⁰Grant (1993) 134–5. Herodian IV 5.7 reports that Caracalla (211–217) held that “just as Zeus alone of the gods holds power, so he gives it to one among men,” though his soldiers forced his deification after his death, and Diocletian, though he associated the two Augusti with Zeus and Hercules, made no claim that they were gods.

¹⁴¹For Constantine's adaptation of the existing monotheistic policy of earlier Emperors, see Fowden (1993) 86–89.

accepted their beliefs and practices, and he did not insult his subjects by letting on that he did not. He even continued in the position of Pontifex Maximus, and received reports of omens in his official capacity.¹⁴² Rome, after all, was the Acropolis of the Empire, where all the gods were worshiped for the good of the whole state, and the worship of the pagan gods at Rome was maintained to the end. Only Gratian (375–383) finally dared to repudiate the title of Pontifex Maximus.¹⁴³

But however politic and gradual the means by which he accomplished his policies, Constantine was a Christian, and intended the extirpation of Paganism from the beginning of his reign. His Christianity was confirmed in his mind by his continued successes after seeking the support of the Christian God for his own party. It has been claimed that he won the battle of the Milvian bridge because of an incredibly stupid blunder on the part of Maxentius, who might have held Rome indefinitely if he had not brought his army out to fight in the open field with a river at his back. This would suggest that Constantine thought he had been extricated from a difficult position by his God—but it is not likely that it is what happened. Constantine seems to have had the situation well in hand when he arrived before Rome. Maxentius's main army had been destroyed at Verona, and his support at Rome had evaporated, so his strategy at the Milvian Bridge was a desperate attempt to recover his fortunes. So it seems that Constantine declared his Christianity openly on the eve of a final victory that was fully expected.¹⁴⁴ In any case, he still attributed his victories to the Christian God, and became a convinced patron of his worship, building elaborate (and financially taxing) churches everywhere, donating great sums to Christian charitable endeavors, exempting the clergy from civic offices in return for their prayers preserving the state, making the Bishop's court a court of appeals higher than the civil courts, banning crucifixion and gladiatorial shows, declaring Sunday a holiday (though giving reasons that suggest Sun worship, to mollify the Pagans), and rewriting marriage law so as not to penalize celibates and unmarried widows.

¹⁴²Concerning the ambiguity of the Christian symbols he used, it is to be noted that the Chi–Rho symbol, which stands, to a Christian, for the name “Christ,” and was placed at the top of Constantine’s military standards, had been used before 311 as a standard sign for “*chrestus*,” that is, “good” or “useful,” in manuscript margins, and seems to have been used as an amulet, somewhat like the Egyptian *Ankh*, which resembles the cross. So a preexisting Pagan symbol was adapted to Christian use. A Pagan soldier could easily have taken the standard as indicative of sun-worship. Christians would have been used to a certain ambiguity in their own signs and symbols, to protect them in times of persecution, and would have understood the strategy for deceiving hostile Pagans. See Grant (1993) 141–144, 152–155.

¹⁴³Fowden (1993) 46–47.

¹⁴⁴For the latter account, which seems to me the best, see Barnes (1994) III 377–378, “The conversion of Constantine,” V 42, “The Constantinian reformation.” But see also Grant (1993) for a more traditional account.

Moreover, he interceded with his fellow Emperor in the East on behalf of Christians there, negotiating the Edict of Milan, published jointly by himself and Licinius in 313. This document went considerably beyond the Edict of Toleration of Galerius, recognizing the legal rights of Christians, and arranging for the recovery of some of their losses under the persecution.¹⁴⁵ But Licinius, seeing the Christians take Constantine's side, drifted into persecution, expelling Christians from the palace, requiring all soldiers and officials to sacrifice, and even proscribing the religion as such. In 324 Constantine defeated Licinius in a swift campaign which he publicized as a crusade to prevent a general persecution in the East.¹⁴⁶

The many advantages Christianity had gained over competing cults from imperial patronage were reinforced by the license Christian thugs gained to attack the Pagans after 324. Pagan sacrifice and the erection of cult statues was forbidden by Imperial edict, at least in the East, once Constantine had taken care of Licinius.¹⁴⁷ Presumably prayer in the Temples was still permitted, but many accounts must have been settled with Pagan persecutors now that the tables were turned. It became dangerous to be a prophet of Apollo, as even the most important were dragged before the courts and tortured until they confessed to fraud, but then, it was especially the priests of Apollo who had urged the Great Persecution preceding Constantine's conversion. Money was no longer as available as before to maintain Pagan shrines, and the more offensive temples, those which made prostitution part of the cult, for instance, and those located on Christian holy sites, were shut down by the Imperial government. The Christians had appealed to the lower classes in the cities all along because of their support of the poor, the sick, and widows,¹⁴⁸ even if the support was sometimes

¹⁴⁵For a discussion and reconstruction of the edict of Milan from the sources, see Grant (1993) 156–158. The edict in effect recognizes the failure of the policy of persecution, and instead endeavors to gain the favor of the Christian God, soliciting Christians to pray to him for the Empire. For the Galerius's edict of toleration see Grant (1993) 136–138.

¹⁴⁶Barnes (1994) IX 648 ff., "The Constantinian settlement."

¹⁴⁷Barnes (1994) VIII, "Christians and Pagans under Constantius." Like the edicts outlawing Christianity, this new law was at first enforced sporadically, and chiefly in the East, but over the long haul it came into universal force. It is to be observed that it was also upon Licinius's death that coins identifying Constantine as companion of the Sun ceased to be struck, the danger they addressed having been removed. The great statue to the Emperor at Constantinople, depicting him facing the rising sun, could be taken as indicative of Solar worship by the Pagans, or the emperor illuminated by Christ on the day of resurrection by the Christians.

¹⁴⁸That Christian charity could be abused was apparently well known. Lucian's *Peregrinus* (ca. 170 C.E.) describes how its picaresque hero, Proteus, became a Christian, and eventually a bishop, was imprisoned by the governor, and only defected after collecting a very handsome profit.

necessarily limited to sympathy and the provision of a decent burial.¹⁴⁹ Now the government, and wealthy converts, provided extensive monies to maintain charities on a much larger scale than ever before. Perhaps most important, the official patronage of Christianity and cessation of Pagan worship did not bring disaster, as had so often been feared.¹⁵⁰ Within a decade or so it had become apparent that the Pagan gods had no power, and obvious to the more pragmatic where to place one's bets, and the truly religious experienced a daunting trial for their Pagan faith, however much the more intellectual might claim that nobler ways of worshiping the gods than sacrifice remained available, and only the superstitious beliefs of the masses were truly refuted by events. All of this was probably effective chiefly against Paganism in the cities, where the important people connected with the central government led their lives. In the countryside, and in provincial backwaters, the impact would have been much less.

The best hope for Paganism in the cities lay in the educated classes that staffed the imperial bureaucracy, most especially the Senatorial class of land owners in Rome. The Senators were isolated from the rest of the community by their immense wealth, which purchased them privacy, for they could withdraw into their villas, and it enabled them to bring up their children in an honored old tradition which one could almost believe was the norm, given the infrequency with which one came into contact with anything contrary to it. But though they held on to their religion to the bitter end, they saw the supporting institutions for it stripped away one by one. In particular, when the *gymnasia* were shut down, with their objectionable nakedness and tolerance of homosexuality, Paganism lost its chief public educational institution. As for the less educated classes, whatever Christianity could not match in Paganism, it adopted into the cults of the Saints. The epiphanies of the healing Asclepius, so important to Pagans, became the epiphanies of Saints at the shrines of martyrs, divination was carried out by Christians in the same old ways for all that the Bishops objected, and Saints took the place of protector gods, to intercede with higher powers on behalf of their clients. In the end even Pagan artistic and literary culture was preserved in the service of Christianity, the greater temples in the cities being preserved for their art and architecture and converted to tourist attractions, the *Aeneid* becoming

¹⁴⁹The provision of burial for the poor was a practice inherited from the Synagogues, but throughout the Roman world people formed societies to insure proper burial for their members. Usually such societies were associated with the worship of some god, and involved periodic supper meetings at members' houses. See Wilken (1984) Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁰So Fowden (1993) 44–45—in 391, when Bishop Theophilus destroyed the Serapeum, one of the greatest temples of the Roman world, and disbanded the cult of the God of the Nile, it was expected that the Nile would fail to rise, but instead it rose higher than usual that year, or so the story goes. But even if this is Christian propaganda, the failure of natural disasters to occur when the cults of the gods of nature were closed down must have gone far to destroy faith in the average Pagan.

a source of prophecies,¹⁵¹ and the philosophers a source of arguments for the Christian world view.

The crucial element in supplanting Paganism was Christian intolerance. After Constantine, Christian rulers sometimes reduced the privileges of the Christian hierarchy as abuses emerged, but they increased the penalties laid on Pagans with every generation. The Pagans had never quite convinced themselves that people should be persecuted because of their religion, and even the most severe persecutions met with resistance from Pagans, many in high places, who saw no reason to be so coercive. Before the 250's the initiative had been left in the hands of locals, and the central government, though it would not repeal the laws under which Christians could be arrested, seemed interested chiefly in moderating the application of those laws. After this, under Decius and Valerian, the Emperor himself intervened, with some support in the ruling classes in defense of the principle that everyone must observe the civic religion of Rome. Imperial troops, under the command of the provincial governors, rounded up Christian leaders. Thus the sporadic and ultimately ineffectual violence of local mobs, fearful of the gods' anger at the "atheists" after some natural disaster, was replaced by a much more consistent, but irksome exercise of the central government. Moreover, the new edicts attacked especially the leadership and functioning of the Church, arresting bishops and forbidding meetings, while attempting to avoid martyrdoms. Pagan citizens, with no immediate reason to suspect the gods were upset by anything, seem to have been disturbed at the sight of respectable older men being dragged off by the soldiers. One bishop in Egypt was rescued from the soldiers by a crowd of locals preparing a wedding feast who observed the detail marching by.¹⁵² Christians as a group may have been unpopular, but many of them were respected as individuals within their communities, and intrusive imperial troops were even more unpopular. In the end, when Valerian was removed from the picture in the fighting with Persia, his son and colleague Gallienus, who may well have opposed the persecution all along, put an end to it, restoring the property of the Christians and declaring toleration. In the last, "Great" persecution before the accession of Constantine, which was also imposed from above, especially on the advice of intellectuals and the Prophets of Apollo, the townspeople seem to have

¹⁵¹The *Aeneid* was first adopted as a Christian text, but decisive was the fourth *Eclogue* of Vergil, which prophesied a golden age in which a virgin would return and a divine being would descend from heaven. Although the *Oration of Constantine* claimed that there was prophecy here, but Vergil concealed his meaning in poetry to escape persecution, Jerome rejected the text entirely on the grounds that Vergil was *not* a Christian, and so could not have intended it this way, and Augustine seems to have granted that Vergil did not intend Christ in these words, but still took it that he prophesied without knowing what he was doing, A reference to the Cumaean Sybil, whose prophecies, containing many forged Christian and Jewish additions, were held to be of Christ and the Church, also occurs in the *Aeneid*.

¹⁵²Fox (1986) 551–2.

intervened so often on behalf of the Christians that executions sometimes had to be carried out in secret.¹⁵³ And it must be born in mind that persecutions always provided a great opportunity for local officials to collect bribes and then ignore the matter. Pagan persecutions of Christianity were half-hearted affairs.

The Christian persecution of Pagan religion after 313, backed by moral intolerance and the certainty of God's approval, was far more thorough and effective than any the Church had ever suffered. Still, one should not overrate the effectiveness of imperial edicts forbidding the worship of Pagan gods on pain of death, for both the frequency of such edicts and the provisions in them to punish provincial officials who would not enforce them, indicate that the persecution of the Pagans varied greatly in intensity from one locale to the next. Some officials had not the stomach for it, others were themselves Pagans, for Paganism persisted in the educated classes, especially the Senatorial class, as much as in the countryside, and it was for a long time impossible to staff the bureaucracy without drawing on those sympathetic to Pagan practices. Indeed, even at the end of the 5th century, the Pagan Zosimus could find an audience for his *New History*, attributing the calamities of the past two hundred years to Constantine's acceptance of Christianity, and insisting that every gesture to the Gods had resulted in benefit to the Empire.¹⁵⁴ But despite all this, the pressure was unremitting. There were few periods of toleration, the laws were not repealed, and such gentleness toward Paganism as Constantine had shown steadily declined in the policies of his successors. Had the Pagans been as intolerant as the Christians, Christianity would never have survived.

That it took generations of harsh laws and zealous persecution to root out Paganism, particularly in the countryside,¹⁵⁵ is revealed above all in the reported successes of the Christians. In 386 the Pagan Libanius appealed to Emperor Theodosius to protect the Pagan shrines against the vandalism of Christian Monks, and asserts

They are spreading out like torrents across the countryside, and in ruining the temples, they are also ruining the countryside itself at one and the same time, for to snatch from a region the temple which protects it is like tearing out its eye, killing it, annihilating it. The temples

¹⁵³Fox (1986) 592, 599–601.

¹⁵⁴Zosimus is a valuable corrective for to the idolization of Constantine and his successors in Christian sources, and many of his criticisms of Constantine's policies seem right on the mark, particularly in military affairs and foreign policy.

¹⁵⁵The Greek word for polytheists among Christians before the fourth century was "*ethnikos*," indicating a fellow practicing the local religion of his ancestors. After this time, Polytheists were referred to as "Hellenists," indicating the extent to which the cults had been absorbed into a Hellenistic syncretism now seen as opposed to Christianity, the old religion of the Empire. Finally, Christians referred to Polytheists as Pagans, meaning, literally, "country person," so that we can see from the etymology of the word where Pagans were to be found. Bowersock (1990) 10-11.

are the very life of the countryside; around them are built houses and villages, in their shadow a succession of generations have been born up until the present day. It is in those temples that farmers have placed their hopes for themselves and their wives and children, for their oxen and for the ground they have sown or planted. A country region whose temple has been destroyed in this manner is lost, because the despairing villagers no longer will have the will to work. It would be pointless to exert themselves, they think, because they have been deprived of the gods who made their labors prosper.¹⁵⁶

One might think this a clear indication of the effectiveness of the Christian persecution, until one looks at the date, a full thirty years since Constantine's sons first ordered the closing of the Temples. That there were temples, temples aplenty it seems, to destroy, and that the country people would be distressed at their destruction, indicates the persistence of Pagan practices. Theodosius soon went further than simply winking at the vandalism of the faithful, and closed the Temples once more, much more effectively than before, in 391.

The Pagan religion was evidenced everywhere when Constantine came to power. Cities themselves were sacred enclosures, and there were temples, sacred groves and caves everywhere, both in the cities and the countryside. Every river and significant natural feature had its associated deity. In destroying Paganism, the Christian Emperors proceeded stepwise, first abstaining from the rites, then forbidding sacrifices, and then other rites, while destroying, desecrating and closing the most important temples, and then less important sites. By about 450 the process had been largely completed, and the external evidences of Paganism removed, but, of course, Paganism persisted, especially in the countryside, in an illiterate, underground fashion, into the Middle Ages.

It was particularly important to transform the Pagan landscape and remove its associations with the old gods. Such figures as Caesarius of Arles, Bishop from 502 to 542, and Gregory, Bishop of Tours from 573 to 594, preached continually against residual Pagan practices, and with stories of saints and relics, they constructed a new sacred landscape. Their stories were reinforced by a steady building program. Churches arose everywhere, and each of them was generally possessed of a saint's relic.¹⁵⁷ The cults of martyrs endowed their dead bodies, their clothing, any artifact they handled, even their footprints, with sanctity. The martyr is a type of Christ, and the body of a martyr is thus possesses a holy power, as the body of Christ does. The places of

¹⁵⁶Libanius, *In Defense of the Temples* 30.8, quoted by H.D. Saffrey, "The piety and prayers of ordinary men and women in late Antiquity," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 200.

¹⁵⁷For this combat in the 6th and 7th centuries between bishops and the Pagan world view embodied in its sacred landscape, see Brown (1997) Ch. 6.

sacred history, particularly the places where Jesus had been, became holy as well, suitable for pilgrimage. The Pagans had viewed any dead or dying thing as sacrilegious, to be kept outside the sacred precincts, and they sometimes accused Christians of sneaking dead bodies (those of martyrs, no doubt) into temples to desecrate them. For a Christian the presence of a relic made a space holy, and counteracted the influence of any demons who might still lurk about.¹⁵⁸ With the end of persecution, saints, marked by their asceticism and holiness, stepped into the place of the martyrs, and by the early Middle Ages, shrines to saints and martyrs were to be found everywhere, imposing a Christian presence on the once Pagan land. Sacred trees were now found at saints' graves, the ford where one might pour a libation into the waters for the god of the river was now marked as holy because a saint had crossed the stream there. Moreover, the stories of the gods associated with natural phenomena were replaced by Christian allegories. The miracle stories, the saints' tales, and the allegorical interpretations of natural phenomena, all were deliberately multiplied and promulgated by the bishops from the 6th century on to combat the Pagan grip on the landscape and the imaginations of the people. They became an essential part of the medieval world view.

Public Paganism in the West was at an end by the middle of the 5th century, but Paganism survived much longer in the East, for two reasons. In the first place, in the East things were less unsettled and violence less established as an instrument of policy. Only a minority of Christians would have been fanatical enough to destroy Temples, though it is important that such fanatics were viewed with approval by Christians, at least officially, and fanatics always make themselves felt far more in the midst of chaos and anarchy than in a time of settled polity. In the second place, the East was not subject to invasions by Barbarian outsiders, settling in the countryside with no allegiance to local cults and customs, and a political commitment to one form or another of Christianity supplanting the earth-bound cults they left behind them in their wanderings. So we find John of Ephesus, a notable converter of Pagans, remarking the open practice of Paganism in the mountains of Asia Minor in 542, and the continued operation of a number of "famous" Temples in the region, with hundreds of subsidiary shrines under their governance. The historian Procopius notes temples to Artemis and Iphigenia at Comana around the same time, and the worship of sacred trees seems to have flourished in the region as well.¹⁵⁹ There is both literary and archaeological evidence of the late practice of Dionysian rites in Cyprus. And

¹⁵⁸See Beatrice Caseau, "Sacred Landscapes," in Bowersock et al. (1999) 21–45.

¹⁵⁹See Bowersock (1990) Ch. 1 for the details here and the survival of Paganism in the East in general. Also see Chuvin (1990).

it may be that more survived later in the West than we suspect from our evidence, for the Pagans generally had to be content to practice their religion, and eschew its imposition on others. The disappearance of public manifestations of Paganism under Theodosius would have distressed the upper class patrons of Paganism, who despaired of the Empire without its gods, but the Paganism that survived in the countryside and the provinces represented the more personal side of religion, mystery cults and the cults of local gods of agriculture, which could do quite well without a presence in the Senate chamber. If it is objected that Emperor Julian attempted to make the private and local side of Pagan religion a religion of the Empire, it might be observed that his conviction of the necessity that Paganism be the official religion of the state is rooted in his Christian upbringing, and perhaps in his understanding of the likely effects of Christian dominance over the long haul. However much his policy might have received support from upper class Pagans and philosophers, it remained essentially irrelevant to the local Paganism that seemed to survive so well under Christianity.¹⁶⁰

9. THE PERSECUTION OF HERESY AND FOREIGN CONQUEST

He [Constantine] took his seat, too, in the midst of them [the bishops], as an individual amongst many, dismissing his guards and soldiers, and all whose duty it was to defend his person; but protected by the fear of God, and surrounded by the guardianship of his faithful friends. Those whom he saw inclined to a sound judgment, and exhibiting a calm and conciliatory temper, received his high approbation, for he evidently delighted in a general harmony of sentiment; while he regarded the unyielding with aversion.

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*¹⁶¹

The simple narrative of the intestine divisions, which distracted the peace, and dishonored the triumph, of the church, will confirm the remark of a pagan historian, and justify the complaint of a venerable bishop. The experience of Ammianus had convinced him, that the enmity of the Christians towards each other, surpassed the fury of savage beasts against man; and Gregory Nazianzen most pathetically laments, that the kingdom of heaven was converted, by discord, into the image of chaos, of a nocturnal tempest, and of hell itself. The fierce and partial writers of the times, ascribing *all* virtues to themselves, and imputing *all* guilt to their adversaries,

¹⁶⁰Bowersock (1990) 6.

¹⁶¹Eusebius (1890), 495–495.

have painted the battle of the angels and the daemons. Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, . . . On either side, the error might be innocent, the faith sincere, the practice meritorious or corrupt. Their passions were excited by similar objects; and they might alternately abuse the favor of the court, or of the people. . . and they were alike actuated by the intolerant spirit, which has been extracted from the pure and simple maxims of the gospel.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ch. XXI, 823-824.

The gradual elimination of Paganism was but half of Constantine's religious policy. He also worked hard to preserve the unity of the Church, and showed his impatience right from the beginning with divisive heretics. Christian intolerance supported Constantine's policy of unity, indeed, Christians in general were harsher with heretics than he was, and one of the first uses the orthodox bishops made of their new influence with the government was to launch state persecution of heretical fellow religionists. But however intolerant Christian ecclesiastics might have been, the intolerance of Constantine himself demands explanation as state policy. It cannot reasonably be suggested that so strong-minded a ruler was simply led on by the clergy.

Constantine, after his defeat of Licinius in the East in 323, became the first Emperor to rule alone since 286. Constantine was well aware of the difficulties of his position. The only true policy if the Empire was to be held together required the elimination of as many sources of disunity as possible, and so religious unity seemed imperative. The various Pagan cults might easily enough throw their support to rebellious local generals. So Constantine imposed an Imperial religious unity on the pattern of the more natural religious unity of a city-state or league of city-states with a common ancestral cult. The same strategy was adopted by Sasanian Persia, which made Zoroastrianism the state religion, and the Persian suspicion of Christianity was confirmed when Constantine put the Christian Armenians under his protection. Religion had become an instrument of Empire.¹⁶² Indeed, the unity provided by religion held even after the Roman Empire collapsed, as "Christendom" would often unite, more or less, against "Islam" or other Eastern threats. Constantine gave up the long-standing strategy of holding the Empire together through a tolerant acceptance of local cults, and the imposition of an over-lying Imperial cult above them. Henceforth, whenever Constantine brought new people

¹⁶²Grant (1993) 74–78, 183.

into the Empire, he insisted on their conversion to Christianity.¹⁶³ Persia, naturally enough, came to regard any expansion of Christianity as a precursor to the expansion of Rome, and Christians within their dominions as a potential fifth column. Christianity was better suited to the job Constantine gave it than any other religion within his Empire, for not only was it associated with no nationality, it was also intolerant of every other form of worship and could be counted on to pursue actively the destruction of its rivals.

Constantine was easily enough influenced to persecute heretics, for his new policy could only succeed as long as Christianity itself remained unified and under control of the Bishops, who were in their turn kept under the firm control of the Emperor, who chose the new bishop himself whenever a vacancy arose. The heretics need not be tolerated even temporarily, it might seem, since they enjoyed no such influence in the upper levels of government and society at Rome as that the Pagans possessed. So Constantine, after efforts at mediation failed, increasingly persecuted the Donatist heresy in North Africa from 315 to 321, and only upon observing that he was but stiffening resistance and creating martyrs did he return to a policy of tolerance and even conciliation, to maintain peace as well as he could.¹⁶⁴ Upon gaining the Eastern empire in 323, Constantine was faced with the Arian heresy, and attempted, again, to force the theologians to agreement at the Council of Nicaea in 325. At his insistence they accepted a creed making the son consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, a formulation which, despite a certain ambiguity, Arius would not accept, and anathematized any who, as the Arians did, confessed that there was a time when the Son was not, or that he was subject to change, or of a different substance (*hypostasis*) from the Father. Following the decision of the council, Constantine imposed secular persecution, with the confiscation of the heretics' property and other severe measures. All this got him nowhere, and he soon fell back to tolerating all but the most radical of the heretics, and the Arian controversy continued to divide Christendom for centuries thereafter.¹⁶⁵ In the end, then, the new Imperial policy failed, and dissension within the Church led to terrible conflicts in the 4th and 5th centuries.¹⁶⁶ Christian zeal and intolerance, an excellent weapon for eliminating non-Christian religion, led Christians to turn on Christians with equal or greater zeal, and theological strife tore the Empire apart. How

¹⁶³Grant (1993) 183.

¹⁶⁴Grant (1993) 164–167.

¹⁶⁵Grant (1993) 167–177.

¹⁶⁶As observed by Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Grant (1993) 161–164.

was the problem of religious strife solved? In the East the approach was absolute control of the Church by the state, persecution pushing heresy to the margins. In the West, unity was attained within the Church through persecution of some, the toleration of others, and the maintenance of a formal governmental structure within which it behooved everyone to find a place. But the Middle Ages was continuously stalked by the specter of heresy and its persecution, and heresy associated itself with the disenfranchised, a kind of medieval Marxism looking to a millennial reversal of fortunes to end the oppression of God's saints. In the end, only the solution of modern democratic governments, the disestablishment of religion, seems to promise the end of violent religious division in the West.¹⁶⁷

The Constantine portrayed in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* pursued the expansion of Christianity and the Empire through conquest, trusting in God's power to bring him victory. Once he had united the Empire, and settled affairs on the northern borders, he planned an attack on the Sasanian Persians, who, unlike the Barbarians to the North, were a civilized opponent worthy of Roman arms. It seems that the Emperor was setting his campaign in motion at Nicomedia when he died, but the result of his ambition was not the conquest of Iran, but a series of military disasters for Rome. This fact led Eusebius to give an improbable account of Constantine's abandonment of the project just before his death, one contradicted by many another ancient account, and probably also led to a further revision of Eusebius's text by later editors, aware of the unfortunate outcome of the Emperor's aggressiveness.¹⁶⁸ The intolerance of Imperial Christianity had its consequences in foreign as well as domestic policy, and was equally disastrous in both.

10. WHY DID CHRISTIANITY TRIUMPH?

Whereas many submitted to the false doctrine under torture, our ancestors held out with the help of God and came through by a heroic effort; and this blessed city has never been sullied by the false doctrine of Nazareth. Paganism, which used to be the object of public celebration in this world, is our heritage, and we shall pass it on to our children. Lucky the man who endures hardship with a well-founded hope for the sake of paganism! Who was it that settled the inhabited world and propagated cities, if not the outstanding men and kings of paganism? Who applied engineering to the harbors and the rivers? Who revealed the arcane sciences? Who was

¹⁶⁷Constantine's many harsh, and ineffective, laws against various forms of sexual impurity seem to be inspired by Christianity as well, and represent another form of Christian intolerance henceforth characteristic of the West. Grant (1993) 185–186.

¹⁶⁸Fowden (1993) 93–97; Grant (1994) VI, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia."

vouchsafed the epiphany of that godhead who gives oracles and makes known future events, if not the most famous of the pagans? It is they who blazed all these trails. The dawn of the medical science was their achievement: they showed both how souls can be saved and how bodies can be healed. they filled the world with upright conduct and with wisdom, which is the chief part of virtue. Without the gifts of paganism, the earth would have been empty and impoverished, enveloped in a great shroud of destitution.

From a Sabian Pagan of Harran¹⁶⁹

It might be asked whether the triumph of Christianity was so entirely a matter of political accident as my remarks suggest. After all, one might argue, the Christian world view is very different from that of the Pagans, and did not an intrinsic superiority, or at least difference, in the Christian view convert people to the new faith?

By one account, the Roman world faced a developing catastrophe at the time of Constantine. Ever since Marcus Aurelius at the end of the 2nd century, there had been one disaster after another—civil wars, ever increasing pressure from the barbarians, epidemics that undermined the military strength of the Empire by destroying its recruiting grounds, hyperinflation and economic stagnation. The reforms of Diocletian, which set the Empire enough in order to extend its life by another century, involved a series of oppressive measures, sometimes amounting to outright confiscation of the resources of the rich, to assure Rome's military and fiscal strength, restore agriculture, and preserve the cities in working order. Romans felt very much at the mercy of events, and the Pagan view of things in late Antiquity seems to some scholars to emphasize the insecurity and insignificance of human beings. The earth was the center of the cosmos, but it was the lowest part, too, and the least pure, the only part subject to change and decay. The virtuous were translated to the heavens as stars upon their death, escaping from this cesspool of gross matter.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, the earthly sphere was not even quite real, according to the Platonists, and the reference to the world as a mere stage play is commonplace. The Stoics expected the eventual dissolution of the present world order, and Marcus Aurelius, standing at the beginning of all these troubles, sometimes seems to see the world dissolving before his eyes. A sense of the

¹⁶⁹Cited in Fowden (1993) 64–65, translation by Andrew Palmer. The passage is preserved by Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon syriacum* 168–169, as a sample of able writing in Syriac. The passage deliberately plays off Christian apologetic themes, reversing the usual condemnation of the state of the world before the coming of Christ, imitating the beatitudes (*lucky* is the one who...), and praising the pagan's ancestors for their faith under persecution.

¹⁷⁰See Cicero, "the Dream of Scipio" in his *De Re Publica* (51 B.C.E.) and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Concerning the World*.

meaninglessness of life pervades the Pagan view of things, according to these scholars, and the Stoic commitment to making the best of it and doing one's duty only underscores an underlying sense of futility. The Pagan hope of a salvation, too, is a weak thing, an impersonal survival of one's immaterial rationality merged in the world soul of the cosmos, not the personal, corporeal survival of the Christians. The Christian world view, on the other hand, makes this world a dramatic place full of meaning, where a truly personal salvation is worked out, and it affirms the reality and value of the world as God's creation, spoiled by sin, perhaps, but to be restored for his elect to its original state. Both schools of thought are dualistic, and betray a sense of alienation from the world. The Pagans pit God or Reason against unformed matter, providence against fate determined by the planets, and sometimes even a personal evil one, the Lord of this world. The Christians pit their Christ against this world of sin. But the Pagans hope only to escape, whereas the Christians see a real hope for redeeming the world.¹⁷¹

But all this is rather one-sided apologetic. For one thing, the political and economic situation was probably not as bad as has been represented. Communications were not so good in the Empire that the troubles of one region meant ruination for the whole, and Ancient cities show a great deal of resilience in the face of catastrophe. One need only witness the Greek cities at the time of their highest achievements in the 4th century BCE to see this. Moreover, there is some reason to think that Pagan piety was fostered by the troubles Rome faced, as people always seem to fall back on their gods, and paradoxically perceive the greatest proofs of their power and protection, when things are worst.¹⁷²

For another thing, a world view of any complexity is a desperately ambiguous guide to life and the right attitude to take toward the world. Different personalities read its symbolism in different ways, and those who argue from it generally draw one-sided conclusions, ignoring those aspects of it that lead others to other inferences. (This ambiguity, indeed, may be essential to any world view that hopes to be generally recognized in a culture, for it must appeal to the most disparate personalities.) A Pagan might well adopt a life-affirming approach, finding a real meaning in life and a way out of the sense of alienation from the world which so many seemed to suffer in the later centuries of the Empire. It could be pointed out that for a Pagan we are part of

¹⁷¹See Dodds (1965) 20–21.

¹⁷²Fox (1986) 573–586. Fox observes that our chief evidence for a decline in Pagan piety in the period is the decline in ostentatiously expensive cult acts, which he thinks reflects economic hard times rather than any decline in devotion to the gods. See also, for instance, Brown (1978) 4–6, who thinks the decline a matter of diversion of donated wealth from public expenditures to private display.

the natural world, and our reason is the reason that informs the world. If it is objected that matter is resistant to reason, so that our fall into matter condemns us to evil, it might be replied that, according to Plotinus, who repudiated this notion of a fall in his later writings, matter, insofar as it is anything at all, is Formed already. For a Neo-Platonist this world is the only world there is, and our life in it is the only good there is, and it is not only the best possible actual world, even if it cannot perfectly realize the Ideal, but it is very good indeed, if we step back from egocentric view and look at it from the standpoint of the whole, as reason requires. If we are rational, we will accept it with all its trials, and rejoice. A Christian's alienation, on the other hand, may remain perpetually unresolved precisely because of a failure to perceive that the good can only be realized in the world, and because of an insistence on an other-worldly heaven and supernatural aim for human beings. It may be easier to see ground for an alienated attitude in Pagan (or Christian) views than it is to see ground for a life-affirming attitude, but that is only because the latter attitude is much harder to achieve, at least if one does not ignore the fact of evil.

For many the essence of the Christian view is the denial that evil is permanent, and the expectation of a life free of evil and the struggle against it, whether this life is to take place in Heaven or in a New Earth. It could be objected that this is rather puerile, that the fight against evil is what gives meaning to life, or that evil is in some other way necessary for there to be a good life, and such suggestions have been made within the Christian tradition itself. It all hangs on what we take heaven and salvation to be. But, more to the point, there was plenty of room for a Pagan of lesser spiritual and intellectual maturity to seek a life after death in the realms of the blessed. The Mysteries could easily provide it. And if one felt life here to be meaningless and unreal, that sense of things could easily be accommodated within the Christian tradition. The shift of the Empire to Christianity was managed without a major shift in attitudes, even if a few more religious souls found a new consolation and a new self in Christ. The attitudes were explained and justified differently, but the same range of options persisted in Christianity that had existed all along in Paganism. If people were alienated from their world, searching for a meaning in it all, it is doubtful that cosmological and metaphysical theories had much to do with it, and it is doubtful that any intellectual or spiritual reason is to be found why Christianity provided intrinsically better satisfaction to the searcher than was available in Paganism. Most people would have shifted from Paganism to Christianity without any effect on their attitudes to life and the world in general. If they were alienated, they read their alienation into the Christian world view, and if they were life-affirming, they read that into it.

Perhaps we see events too much from the vantage of hindsight. Knowing, as we do, the eventual outcome of this time of troubles, with the dissolution of the Empire and a Dark Age to follow, we see Christian otherworldliness as a natural pre-adaptation to the coming catastrophe, the wave of the future, with great advantages over Paganism. But Christianity's survival of the collapse of the Empire was due less to its otherworldliness than to its ability to dissociate itself from the Empire's fate. It drew on its own past, when it was not yet Roman, to establish its independent identity, and on the Old Testament theme of God's punishment of the Jews through the destruction of their state to explain the fall of Rome. The sins of the Romans before Christianity were surely enough to bring on God's vengeance. Moreover, the ecclesiastical hierarchy had never been reduced to a department of the Roman state, and was able to continue its independent existence under any Christian ruler, however Barbarian. Its strategy was conversion, not conquest, a strategy Pagans never had available. Thus Christians had something to hold on to as the Empire collapsed around them as long as they could identify themselves first of all as Christians, not as Romans.¹⁷³ The worship of the Pagans was firmly attached to the success of the state, and even without Christianity to give it trouble, it would likely have been supplanted or subordinated by the religion of its conquerors, or those personal religions in the Empire that had no standing with the state.

But however Paganism would have fared with the collapse of Rome in the 5th century, it does not follow that Paganism met the needs of the Mediterranean peoples any the less effectively in the 4th century. Nor does it follow that polytheism could not meet the needs of a people in a beleaguered state.¹⁷⁴ At the point of Christian victory no one genuinely contemplated the fall of Rome, and whatever the level of anxiety and alienation, Paganism could have addressed it as well as Christianity.

So why didn't Paganism survive in the West into the period of Barbarian dominance? Except among the ruling classes of the Empire, it was already dead when Rome fell, and it was dead because of persecution by the government of Rome and the Christian bishops, not because it lacked intellectual or spiritual resources appropriate to its time. With the collapse of the state, Paganism's exiguous afterlife in the upper classes populating Roman administration came to an end as well, for however much the Empire needed this educated

¹⁷³See Fowden (1993) 49–50.

¹⁷⁴The beleaguered Sabians of Harran (Carrhae) preserved a rather fervent polytheistic religion perhaps as late as the 11th century. Carrhae was the scene of Crassus's and Galerius's defeats by the Persians, and maintained a precarious independence as a buffer state between the two monotheistic empires of Rome and Persia, and so did well to have its own religion unrelated to that of either empire. Fowden (1993) 62–65.

elite, the Barbarians, who had been thoroughly converted to the prestigious new religion, had no trouble doing without it. From the 5th through the 8th centuries, the upper class Paganism of Rome disappeared along with the upper class itself, as the administrative structures which provided its livelihood were broken up and taken over by successive waves of Barbarians. Meanwhile the Christian Church, holding on to its Bishops and its monasteries, and throwing its loyalty to whoever ruled, preserved itself intact and focused on the problem of eliminating every vestige of non-Christian religion in the countryside, gradually reducing Paganism to the crude, furtive superstition of peasants.

What enabled Christians to defeat Paganism was not their spirituality or otherworldliness, but their conviction that the Pagan gods were demons. This conviction made it impossible to tolerate any compromise, for it identified the pious Pagan finally as a witch, a worshiper of Satanic forces, with whom negotiation and mutual respect was an impossibility. It justified complete intolerance and the harshest measures of persecution. Against the Christian sense of righteous alliance with God in the struggle against the forces of Evil, the Pagans had no defense.