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Christianity and Empire

The New Empire: Crisis and Reform in the Roman Empire in the Third Century

Bardaisan died in around A.D. 222. In the generations that followed his death, the world which he had surveyed in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* underwent profound changes. For both the Persian and the Roman empires, the third century was a time of dramatic reorganization. After 224, the Sasanian kings of Iran turned the loose-knit Parthian kingdom, whose rulers they had supplanted, into a formidable empire. The Roman empire, also, emerged from a period of crisis with the power of the emperors greatly strengthened.[1]

The Roman empire was forced to become a new empire. Renewed warfare along all its frontiers and the emergence, in the Middle East, of the Sasanian empire as a persistent military threat revealed the inadequacy of the previous structures of the Roman state. We must remember what a fragile institution the Roman empire had been, even at the height of its power, in the first and second centuries A.D. Its inhabitants thought of themselves less as subjects of an empire than as members of a uniquely privileged "commonwealth of cities." Around the Mediterranean, these cities were ancient and often gigantic by the standards of their time: Rome had a population of almost a million, Antioch and Alexandria of around 300,000,

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and many cities of the Greek East had populations of up to 100,000. These cities were the nerve-centers of Greco-Roman civilization. What happened in their streets and what was written by their inhabitants determined the cultural and religious tone of the Roman world.

Away from the Mediterranean, in the hinterland of western Europe, cities were less numerous and less densely populated. The towns of the Roman frontier provinces, such as London, Paris, and Cologne, were impressive in contrast to the underpopulated, rural landscapes in which they stood. They had populations of up to 20,000. They were small when compared with the large cities of the Mediterranean. Most towns in the Roman West had populations of around 5,000. They were mere "agrotowns" by modern standards. Yet these towns were seen as privileged oases of Roman civilization. The ruins of even the smallest of them (such as those discovered in Roman Britain) remain impressive. For each town had been consciously built up, by the elites of the region, to serve as an enduring "argument in stone." The towns were showcases. They made visible the power and beneficial effects of the Roman empire. Their monuments were set up by local grandees. They bore the names of those who had paid for them. Statues, baths, circuses, and forums, built by local notables, underscored the privileged position of those who collaborated with Roman rule.[2]

When it came to matters of government, however, the empire was still surprisingly distant in the first and second centuries. Apart from his formidable soldiers, the emperor had few servants. Compared with a modern state, the Roman empire remained profoundly undergoverned. Even in a fiercely controlled province such as Egypt, the proportion of imperial officials to the overall population was one in 10,000.

The empire was kept going not through intervention from on high by officials but, rather, as it were, "horizontally" – through collaboration with an empire-wide upper class, drawn from the elites of the cities. Each city had an *ordo*, a legally constituted town council. The town council was recruited from 30 to 100 or so of the richest families in the region. As members of the town council, representatives of these leading families were held responsible for running the city and for collecting the taxes of the territory assigned to it. In peaceful (or less provident) times, they exercised virtually unimpeded control over their locality, in exchange for maintaining peace in the cities and a regular supply of taxes for the armies.

Taxation, therefore, was not simply a recurrent event imposed from above: it was delegated in such a manner as to make the distribution of the burden of taxes and their collection a way of life for the leading members of every locality. In Egypt, in the fourth century A.D., one out of every three inhabitants of the large villages were involved, in some way or other, in the

administration of taxes and the maintenance of law and order. Even at its most oppressive, Roman government was not strong by modern standards. But, again by modern standards, it was remarkably pervasive. Throughout the Roman world, the upper classes of each city found themselves co-opted into the day-to-day business of running the empire.[3]

From the point of view of the emperors, who had to defend the empire in times of emergency, the disadvantage of this system of indirect rule was that it depended for its smooth functioning on a "cozy" relationship with the city-based elites of every region. The powers of local government were delegated to them, in return for the prompt delivery of taxes which touched little more than 5 percent of the agrarian surplus. These urban oligarchies formed a small and highly privileged group in every locality. The upper classes of the Roman empire never amounted to more than 3 percent of the overall population. Yet they owned a quarter of all the land of the empire and 40 percent of its liquid wealth.[4]

Modern readers have tended to follow the well-satisfied opinion of the urban aristocracies when they described the empire in which they lived, in the first and second centuries A.D. It is customary to speak of this period as "the Golden Age" of the Roman empire. The achievements of the age were, indeed, impressive. But they were fair-weather achievements, which presupposed prolonged peace and unchallenged military superiority on all frontiers. An easygoing system, based on a large measure of indirect rule, was not designed to sustain the strain of continuous hostile invasion and of murderous civil wars. In the course of the third century, all classes in the Roman world had to face up to the unpleasant, day-to-day realities of life in a beleaguered superpower. Between 238 and 270, bankruptcy, political fragmentation, and the recurrent defeats of large Roman armies laid bare the weaknesses of the old system of government.[5]

What was remarkable, however, was not so much this period of collapse, as the speed and determination with which a new system was put in place, after a generation of humiliating uncertainty. The Roman empire over which the emperor Diocletian reigned, from 284 to 305, was an empire in the true sense of the word. The Roman state was considerably more present to all its subjects than had been the case a century earlier.

Most important of all, Diocletian defeated the first and most deadly enemy of all empires – distance. He considered that the Roman empire was far too large a unit to be governed effectively by one ruler. So Diocletian ensured closer control over each major region of the Roman world by delegating his powers to a coalition of co-emperors, known as the "Tetrarchy." The Tetrarchy did not survive for long. But the device was a recognition of the realities of power. In the two centuries from the reign of Diocletian to

the end of the western empire in 476, the entire Roman world was ruled by a single ruler only for a period of 23 years in all. For most of the time, the Roman world was divided in two, with an emperor in the Latin West and another in the Greek East. They treated each other as colleagues. They collaborated in ruling the same vast state. By controlling only half of the empire, each was able, in the more manageable region which he controlled, to take over responsibilities which had been delegated, in previous centuries, to local interest groups.[6]

The restored Roman empire was a badly shaken society, anxious for the return of law and order. *Reparatio* and *renovatio* were the slogans of the day. It was not, however, an irreparably impoverished society. Despite an expansion of the army and of the imperial bureaucracy, the overall tax load was usually no more than 10 percent of the agrarian surplus. Such taxes were within the capacities of most peasant communities. In Anatolia, for instance, tax levels reached under Diocletian continued, largely unchanged, until the last days of the Ottoman empire.

What had changed was the presence of empire itself. The empire was no longer a "commonwealth of cities." The elites lost their unique advantages of wealth and local status. They now looked increasingly outside the horizons of their city to the imperial court. The court became the direct and ever-present source of honor. The cities did not collapse in this period (as many scholars once thought). But they now throve only if they remained closely connected with the central government. Constantinople, founded in 324 by the emperor Constantine, was nothing less than a "new Rome." It was spoken of as the "ruling city." For it made the power of Rome directly present to the entire eastern part of the empire. Because it was a center of government, Constantinople became a boom city: by the year 500, its population was almost half a million.

The same process of centralization took place in each province. A *metropolis*, a "mother city," emerged as the permanent capital of each region, leaving other cities in the shade. The provinces themselves became smaller, so that the power of the central government would be brought to bear more directly on less extensive units. All over the empire, the cities survived; but they were now incorporated into a far more exacting and uniform system of government. The cities lost their sense of being unique centers of local tradition. They were no longer thought of as part of an empire made up of a mosaic of vivid communities, each one different from the others. Now what was stressed was what all cities had in common with all others – loyalty to the emperor and his servants.[7]

Outside the cities, also, the extension of the Roman state brought the rulers and their demands closer to those whom they ruled. To take one

example, known to us from the papyri discovered in his house: Aurelius Isidore was a canny farmer of the Fayum, in Egypt. Between 297 and 318, he was constantly involved in the annual spasm of activity connected with the collection and distribution of the imperial taxes. Isidore was illiterate, yet he kept his tax documents carefully – lists of assessments, constant petitions to "Your Magnificence" (the local representative of the central government). Isidore even kept a copy of the edict of the emperor Diocletian, which spelled out, with high-flown rhetoric, the advantages of the new tax system. For he needed a copy of this edict to be sure of his rights and duties. Such documents survive only in the dry sands of Egypt. But they must have been everywhere, in the homes of relatively humble provincials throughout the empire. They show a political system forced to bypass the upper classes in order to mobilize the interest and the loyalty of all its subjects.[8]

Religiones: The Ancient Religion

Societies under strain are usually reassured if one aspect, at least, of their accustomed life remains unchanged. For all the dramatic reforms associated with the restoration of imperial power which took place at the end of the third century, most inhabitants of the Roman empire felt that they looked out on a long-familiar religious landscape. Diocletian's empire was still an overwhelmingly polytheist society.[9] It was assumed, as a matter of common sense, that there were many gods, and that these gods demanded worship through concrete, publicly visible gestures of reverence and gratitude. The gods were there. They were invisible and ageless neighbors of the human race. Knowledge of the gods and of what pleased and displeased them tended to be a matter of local social memory, kept alive by inherited rites and gestures.

Hence the cities were crucial to the notion of the worship of the gods. In the Greek world, in particular, the worship of specific divinities was intimately linked to the history of each city: Athena had always protected Athens; Artemis had always protected Ephesus. Coins issued by cities all over Asia Minor in the second and early third centuries showed with loving precision the exact forms of the temples and statues of their local gods. Polytheism and the notion of the empire as a happy "commonwealth of cities" went hand in hand.[10]

Great emphasis was placed, in traditional Roman circles, on *religio*, the apposite worship of each god. The notion of *religio* stressed (and even idealized) social cohesion. It assumed that correct traditions of worship would be passed on through families, through local communities, and

through the memories of proud cities and nations bathed in centuries of history. Each god had his or her own *religio*, just as each city and each locality had its own traditions. Hence *religiones*, very much in the plural – clearly differentiated ways of worship, each one appropriate to a specific god and a specific place – were the hallmark of polytheism in the Roman world. To be a polytheist was to glory in the fact that the gods did not want unity. Rather, they expressed themselves through the infinite diversity of human customs, inherited from the distant past. The words of one of the last great polytheists, Symmachus, Prefect of Rome in A.D. 384 (responding, by that time, to Christian claims), spelled out attitudes which had been taken for granted by polytheists in earlier centuries.

> Everyone has his own customs, his own religious practices; the Divine Mind has assigned to different cities different religions to be their guardians.... To this line of thought must be added the argument from "benefits conferred", for herein rests the most emphatic proof of the existence of the gods. Man's reason moves entirely in the dark; his knowledge of divine presences can be drawn from no better source than from the recollection and the evidence of good fortune already received from them. If the long passage of time lends validity to religious observances, we ought to keep faith with so many centuries, we ought to follow our forefathers who followed their forefathers and were blessed in so doing.[11]

The gods were not airy abstractions. They were vibrant beings, who hovered rank after rank above and around the human race. The lower orders of the gods shared the same physical space as human beings. They touched all aspects of the natural world and of human settlement. Not all gods were equal. Some gods were considerably higher and more distant from human beings than were others. The *religio* that these high gods received depended, to a large extent, on the self-image of their worshippers. Mystical philosophers yearned for the higher gods and, beyond them, for union with the One, the metaphysically necessary, intoxicating source of all being. Such high love for a distant god lifted the soul out of the body, in a manner which made all earthly cares fall silent. Philosophers yearned for union with the One High God.[12]

But, even for philosophers, the other gods were not abolished. They were demoted. They were not denied. Philosophers were superior souls, who did not share the coarse concerns of the multitude. They deserved superior gods. But average gods existed in abundance for average persons. Most gods hovered close to earth. They "stood close by" their worshippers. They were ready to maximize and to maintain, in return for due observance, the good things of life.

It was considered crucial to maintain these diverse *religiones*. For all the gods, high and low, local and imperial, played a role in maintaining civilized life. They protected the Roman empire. A papyrus from the small Egyptian town of Sinkepha shows how widespread this feeling was. The town council commanded a priestess to remember her duties: she must go down to the local temple

> to perform the usual sacrifices on behalf of our lords the emperors and their victories, and the rising of the Nile, and the increase of the crops, and the healthy balance of the climate.[13]

As a devout polytheist, the emperor Diocletian felt just the same. He celebrated the crowning mercy of twenty years of stable rule on a monument set up in the Roman Forum in A.D. 303. He showed himself at a smoking altar, flanked by the ever-present gods and surrounded by the animals deemed, from time immemorial, to be appropriate for a major sacrifice. Diocletian was a man who took *religio* seriously. The previous year he had declared:

> The ancient religion ought not to be censured by a new one. For it is the height of criminality to reverse that which the ancestors had defined, once and for all, things which hold and preserve their recognized place and course.[14]

New Religion in a New Empire: Christianity before Constantine

Yet, only nine years after Diocletian had erected his monument, the emperor Constantine entered Rome on October 29, 312, having defeated his rival, Maxentius, on the previous day, at a battle near the Milvian Bridge, outside the city. The altars of the gods stood ready, on the Capitol, to receive the sacrifice appropriate to the celebration of his victorious entry into the city. But Constantine, apparently, went straight to the imperial palace without performing any sacrifice. At the time, Constantine's oversight might not have been interpreted as a breach with the old religion. A ruthless politician, his first step was to eclipse the memory of Maxentius. He did this by filling the traditional center of the city with monuments which were totally intelligible to old-fashioned Romans (such as the triumphal arch, the Arch of Constantine, which still stands opposite the Colosseum on the road that led to the Forum). These monuments contained no reference to Christianity.[15]

At the same time, however, Constantine let it be known to Christians that he considered that he had owed his victory outside Rome to a specific and unique sign from the One God which they worshipped. Writing to Christians, he made plain, in subsequent years, that he owed his successes to the protection of that High God alone. Over a decade later (at some time after 324) he wrote to the young king of Persia, Shapur II: "Him I call upon with bended knee, shunning all abominable blood and hateful odors [of pagan sacrifice]."[16]

Constantine's "conversion" was a very "Roman" conversion. It consisted in the fact that he had come to regard the High God of the Christians, rather than the traditional gods, as the proper recipient of *religio*. Worship of the Christian God had brought prosperity upon himself and would bring prosperity upon the empire. He had risen to power in a series of murderous civil wars which destroyed the system of divided empire developed by Diocletian. He occupied Rome in 312. But this did not give him the total power he wanted. Only 12 years later, in 324, did he take over the eastern half of the empire in a series of bloody battles. And he did all this without attributing his success in any way to correct *religio* toward the ancient gods. It was in this pointed absence of piety toward the gods, as the traditional guardians of the empire, that his subjects came to realize that their emperor was a Christian.

Constantine was not a young convert. He was over 40 and an experienced politician when he finally declared himself a Christian. He had had time to take the measure of the new religion and the difficulties which emperors had experienced in suppressing it. He decided that Christianity was a religion fit for a new empire. And so, in A.D. 325, a year after he became sole ruler of the Roman world, Constantine gathered together the Christian bishops of his empire at Nicaea (modern Iznik, Turkey). Nicaea was a city set on a quiet lake equally close to the Sea of Marmara (on whose European shore Constantine founded the city of Constantinople) and to the imperial roads which led up from the East. The Council of Nicaea was supposed to be an "ecumenical" – that is, a "worldwide" – council. It included even a token party of bishops from distant Persia. And what Constantine wished from it was uniformity. Even the date of Easter was agreed upon, so that all Christian churches in all regions should celebrate the principal festival of the Church at exactly the same time. This concern for universal uniformity, devoted to the worship of one God only, was the opposite of the colorful variety of *religiones*, of religious festivals each happening in its own place at its own time, which had characterized the empire when it had been a polytheist "commonwealth of cities."[17]

Constantine died in 337. He had reigned a decade longer than Diocletian, and only nine years less than the emperor Augustus. His choice of a new god as protector of his empire, much less the impenitent success of his reign, could not have been predicted in A.D. 300. We must now look at the

Christian churches of the Roman empire to understand the meaning of Constantine's decision to worship their God.

In 312, Christianity had been in existence for over 250 years. The world of Jesus of Nazareth and of Saint Paul was as far distant from contemporaries of Constantine as is the age of Louis XIV from ourselves. Christians presented their Church as having been locked in unchanging and continual conflict with the pagan Roman empire. But this was a myth. In reality, the period after A.D. 250 represented a new situation. Both empire and Church had changed.

The empire had become more intrusive and more committed to an ideological stance. The emperors came to see Christianity, for the first time, as an empire-wide phenomenon. An empire in crisis needed the protection of the gods. It was the duty of the emperors to foster the old religion and to halt "impiety" on an empire-wide scale. The suppression of Christianity was no longer a matter for the "local government" of the cities. Sporadic local violence against Christians and condemnations by local governors, city by city, gave way to empire-wide edicts against the Church as a whole. The first of these was issued in 250, and again in 257. A final set of measures, known to Christians as the Great Persecution, was instituted by the emperor Diocletian in 303. The Great Persecution continued in parts of Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt for 11 years. It marked the coming of age both of the new empire and of the Christian Church.[18]

The Great Persecution showed that the Christian Church had changed as much as had the empire. It was no longer a low-profile constellation of tiny groups. It had become a universal Church, claiming the loyalty of all believers, at just the same time as the Roman empire had become a true empire, with ideological claims on all its subjects. In the course of the third century, the Church developed a recognizable hierarchy with prominent leaders. The emperors responded to this development. In 303, as in 250 and 257, the imperial authorities singled out these leaders for attack. Bishops and clergy – and not the Christian rank and file – were arrested and forced to sacrifice. Cyprian of Carthage, for instance, was executed in 258. He was declared to be "the standard-bearer of the Christian faction" in the city. Bishops of the caliber of Cyprian were a new phenomenon. He was a well-known local figure. His letters covered every aspect of the life of a large Christian community. They show how the Church had begun to function as a fiercely independent body – a veritable "city within the city."[19]

At a time when the laws of the emperors were regarded as the source of all order (and were carefully collected and preserved even by humble persons) the Church claimed to possess, in the Christian Scriptures, its own, universal code of law. This new "divine law" was attacked. Diocletian

ordered that the Christian Scriptures should be taken out of the churches and burned. Even the format of the Christian Scriptures spoke of the urgency of a new age. They were no longer the unwieldy scroll of the classical era. They were *codices*, books as we now know them. The *codex* (from which our word "code" is derived) had developed rapidly in this period of brisk organization. The *codex* was compact and easy to carry. It was bound in such a way as to make its contents final and easy to refer to. Bureaucrats and men in a hurry tended to use the *codex*. So did the Christians. The bound book, rather than the old-fashioned scroll, was an entirely appropriate vehicle for a new "Law." This law was as unambiguous and as universal in its application as was any law issued by a Roman emperor. And it came from a source higher than any emperor. It was the law of God. The Christian Scriptures could be consulted anywhere, and what they said was applicable everywhere. While the *religiones* of the gods were subject to the vagaries of local custom, and were seldom written down, it was only necessary to open a *codex* of the Scriptures and to read in them the law of God as to which *religio* was correct and which was not. The message was unambiguous: *He that sacrificeth to other gods shall be utterly destroyed*.[20]

Last, but not least, the officials of Diocletian destroyed Christian churches. Christian churches of the third century were relatively humble affairs, assembly rooms created within the existing structures of houses. The church at Dura Europos, on the Euphrates, had been constructed in this manner in the 230s, to house a congregation of barely more than 70. A hundred yards down the street, the Jewish synagogue of Dura was a large building, resplendent with frescoes which showed the deeds of Moses and of other heroes of Israel, and with seats for at least 120 worshippers. The later Christian basilica at Aquileia was 37.4 by 20.4 meters, and could house a congregation of 750. By contrast, the contemporary Jewish synagogue of Sardis was a magnificent building of 80 by 20 meters, with room, that is, for at least 1,500. What mattered, however, is that, in the Christian image of themselves, the Christian churches were "growth points." They welcomed converts, and expected them to remain loyal. To level these walls, therefore, was to halt an institution that was widely perceived to be capable of "runaway" growth.[21]

It is impossible to know how many Christians there were in the empire at this time: up to 10 percent of the population has been suggested, grouped more heavily in Syria, Asia Minor, and the major cities of the Roman Mediterranean than in any other region. But this is a guess. What mattered more is that, in the course of the third century, the Christian communities had expanded rapidly and unexpectedly.[22]

There is little room for the myth that Christians were a perpetually hounded minority, literally driven underground by unremitting persecution. Nor is there any truth in the more modern myth which presents the advance of Christianity as due to the spread of a religion of mercy and equality among the underprivileged. Christianity was by no means the religion only of slaves and of simple folk. Rather, the third century was an age of surprising Christians, of whom the emperor Constantine was only the last. Marcia, the influential concubine of the emperor Commodus, had been a Christian and a protector of the bishops of Rome. Bardaisan was both a courtier and a Christian. His king, Abgar VIII of Osrhoene, was believed to have been a "pious man," even a "believer." Julius Africanus, a Greek polymath from Palestine, was a Christian. He visited Bardaisan, wrote to the great Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, and then went to Rome to help the emperor to set up a library in the Pantheon. Newly discovered inscriptions show a more lasting phenomenon: a Christian gentry already established in Asia Minor. In the Upper Tembris valley (southwest of Ankara, Turkey) gentleman farmers, complete with plough-teams, and wives bearing the conventional woman's distaff, speak of themselves, on large gravestones, as "Christians for Christians." One city of the area even boasted a Christian wrestler, known as "the Creeper," who returned to an honorific seat on the town council, having won prizes from as far afield as Brindisi.[23] In around A.D. 300, in southern Spain, a council of bishops at Elvira made rulings on Christian town councillors whose honorific role as "priests" of the imperial cult caused them to be present at sacrifices offered out of loyalty to the emperors; on their wives, who donated robes for the local processions of the gods; on landowners who received consecrated first fruits from their peasants as part of the rent; and on women who had beaten servants to death.[24] It could not be said that Christians were totally innocent of wealth, of slave-owning or, even, of power.

What would have struck a contemporary was that the Christian Church was unlike the many trade associations and cultic brotherhoods which proliferated in the Roman cities. These tended to be class- or gender-specific. Fellow-craftsmen would gather with their equals to dine and worship. Women alone would form societies for the worship of their goddess. The Christian church, by contrast, was a variegated group.[25] In that respect, it was not unlike a miniature version of the new empire. High and low, men and women met as equals because equally subject, now, to the overruling law of one God. Those who entered such churches were encouraged to find in them an orderly assembly. Grown men, married women and children, widows and unattached women: each group was carefully separated, and seated in their appropriate place. Deacons watched the doors to scrutinize

incoming strangers: "and let the deacon also see that no one whispers, or falls asleep, or laughs, or makes signs." Social differences were not expunged in such gatherings. They were, rather, handled with an elaborate and pointed courtesy. If a "man of worldly honor" entered a crowded church, the bishop must on no account rise to receive him, lest he be thought to be a "respecter of persons." But the deacon should tell one of the young men to move over: "that they also may be trained and learn to give place to those more honourable than themselves." If a poor man or a destitute stranger should come in, however, it was an entirely different matter: "do thou, O bishop, with all thy heart provide a place for them, even if thou hadst to sit upon the ground."[26]

"All malice will be wiped out": Salvation, Martyrdom, and Penance in the Christian Church

The Christian churches of the third century A.D. were not, in any way, places where the world was turned upside down. What was striking about the Christian groups, rather, was their intense sense of order and of belonging to a network of similar communities which stretched from one end of the Roman world to the other. The message which was preached in these communities was severe: it was about salvation and about sin. It was through this preaching that Christianity emerged as an unusually democratic and potentially wide-reaching movement. It takes some leap of the modern imagination (which has come to be saturated for centuries by Christian language) to understand the novelty of seeing every human being as subject to the same universal law of God and as equally capable of salvation through the conquest of sin, brought about through baptism followed by permanent and exclusive membership of a unique religious group.[27]

Salvation meant, first and foremost, salvation from idolatry and from the power of the demons. "The unity of God and the refutation of the idols" were themes which any Christian lay man or woman was free to expound to outsiders.[28] All past tradition was reinterpreted by such teaching. In polytheist belief, the lower ranks of gods had been treated as ambivalent, moody creatures, capable of being spiteful and manipulable on some occasions and generous and powerful on others. Christians developed this division of the gods in a more radical direction. They ascribed to all gods without exception the unreliable qualities of the lowest gods.

These lower gods had usually been spoken of by polytheists as *daimones*, as invisible, intermediary beings.[29] To Christians, all gods were "demons," in the sense with which we still use the word "demon." They were not just touchy. They were evil. Christians never denied the existence of the gods.

Rather, they treated all gods, even the highest, as malevolent and unreliable. The demons were faceless invisible powers, past masters of the art of illusion. They merely used the traditional rites, myths, and images of polytheism as so many masks, so as to draw the human race ever further away from the worship of the One true God. Seen with Christian eyes in the age of Constantine, the immemorial worship of the gods throughout the Roman world was a grand illusion: the ancient rites to which the emperor Diocletian paid such heavy reverence were no more than a tawdry stage-set, set up by the demons so as to stand between mankind and its rightful God.[30]

Nor was this God a distant reality. Christian communities encountered the polytheist world along a front which crackled with demonstrations of divine power. Exorcism, for instance, was a well-known form of religious drama. Cures were effected by driving disruptive spirits from the human body, which they had entered and possessed. Christians used this common practice to teach nothing less than a condensed lesson in the direction of world history. Christ, they believed, had already broken the power of the demons in the invisible world. Now his servants could be seen to drive them from their last hiding places on earth. Exorcism rendered palpable the preordained retreat of the gods, as the demons, screaming the names of traditional divinities, withdrew violently from the bodies of the possessed, when challenged by the name of Christ.[31]

Exorcism was a common practice in the ancient world. Martyrdom, however, was not. In order to enter into the full shock of the phenomenon in the cities of the Roman empire, we have to think away later Christian teaching, which has made us take for granted the idea that men and women should die for their beliefs. At the time, the Christian idea of martyrdom was a dangerous novelty. It turned the religious life of the cities into a religious battlefield. For martyrdom came to be seen (by both sides) as a fully public clash of gods. Christian accounts of the martyrs never emphasized (as we might do) their purely human courage. Rather, the martyrs were presented as men and women possessed by the power of Christ. They had a mighty God in them, and, by their heroic deaths, they trumped the power of the ancient gods of the city.[32]

Even at the height of the Great Persecution, martyrdom was not an everyday occurrence for Christians. But martyrdom did not have to be frequent for its message to inspire horror and awe. Those few who died for Christ made the power of their God seem overwhelmingly present to the many. Even when in prison, the potential martyr was the special joy of the Christian community:

> Let him be esteemed by you a holy martyr, an angel of God or God upon earth … For through him you see the Lord our Savior.[33]

In a world where execution was a form of public spectacle, witnessed by the entire urban community, martyrdom was perceived by Christians as an unmistakable sign of the power of Christ. Through the heroism of the martyr, the power of God was displayed for all to see in the very center of every city.

> You could see a youth not twenty years of age, standing unbound and stretching out his hands in the form of a Cross … while bears and leopards almost touched his flesh. And yet their mouths were restrained, I know not how, by a divine and incomprehensible power.[34]

The ancient story of Daniel, who had been delivered by God in the lions' den, merged with the figure of Christ and with the victorious power of his Cross, in a setting vibrant with popular associations of contest and victory. The scene just described took place in 308, only four years, that is, before the armies of Constantine, a man already accustomed to looking to heaven for help from "a divine and incomprehensible power," converged on the Milvian Bridge. What Constantine picked up from Christianity was a grassroots certainty that the Christian God "stood close by" to grant "victory" to his worshippers in every emergency. It was a small step for him to apply this belief to the success of his own armies and to the security of his own empire.

Most Christians were denied the "triumph" of martyrdom. The one triumph that was always possible, however, was the triumph over sin and, eventually, the triumph over death. The Christian funeral was a victory parade. The carrying of the body to the grave took the form of a triumphal progress. The bier was escorted by believers in white robes, carrying radiant lamps. The grave was a place of rest, a *koimétérion* (the Greek word for "lying at rest" is the source of our word "cemetery"), where the dead, and those gathered around the tomb, enjoyed a foretaste of the *refrigerium*, of the joyous refreshment of God's paradise. The living would share in this "refreshment," as they gathered, at regular intervals, to eat and drink at the tomb of their loved ones.[35]

For the community of the living, however, triumph over sin was the principal concern. It was an urgent and difficult matter. We must remember that, in the Early Church, sin (despite the associations that have accumulated around the notion in later centuries) was a largely novel and helpful concept. Like the notion of universal "suffering," which had characterized Buddhism, the notion of "sin" which was current in Christian circles made sense of the world in terms of a single, universal human condition. All human beings sinned, and all could seek to make reparation for their sins. The idea was taken from Judaism. But it was developed in the Christian

communities in such a way as to give contemporaries a new language with which to talk about change within themselves and about the relations between their new religious community and the world outside it.

Elements of the new language of sin and conversion already lay to hand even in non-Jewish circles. Christians did no more than sharpen the assertion of ancient philosophers that philosophy was a skill of self-transformation. Philosophers had always attempted to change the minds and the habits of their disciples. Serious persons were expected to file away at themselves, removing their failings so as to produce, like the carvers of Greek statues, a self in which the excrescences of raw human nature were honed down to produce an exquisite, harmonious whole. It was a demanding ideal.[36] Christians merely claimed to do this better. Their "philosophy" was a God-given "philosophy." The Church was a "school of virtue" open to all. They claimed to be able to transform the human person entirely, through conversion and baptism, in a manner which shocked traditional pagans, as wildly optimistic and, even, as irresponsible – for it seemed to offer easy, "instant" forgiveness of crimes. But, in an age of heady change in all areas of society, Christians held out the prospect of total transformation of the person through conversion and baptism:

> The few commands of God so change the whole man and render him new when the old has been put off, that you do not recognize him to be the same … For with one washing, all malice will be wiped out … Here is that which all philosophers sought in their whole life … He who wishes to be wise and happy, let him hear the voice of God.[37]

Unlike the ferociously individual self-grooming of the philosopher, the handling of "sin" was a communal concern in Christian circles. Sin could be changed into righteousness through reparation to God. And reparation was not a purely personal matter. The small Christian community, gathered frequently within the narrow walls of its churches, was the arbiter of sin. Fellow-believers interceded, before God, for each individual with their prayers. A Christian gathering of around the year A.D. 200 was expected to include gripping scenes of moral "exorcism," through the penance of notable sinners. An adulterer might be

> led in to the midst of the brethren and prostrated all in sackcloth and ashes, a compound of disgrace and horror … suing for everyone's tears, licking their footprints, clasping their knees.[38]

Rare though such spectacles might be, they showed that, in the matter of sin, the Christian community meant business.

In the course of the third century, the handling of sin came to be taken over by the bishop. The bishop was presented as the searching mercy of God personified: "first of all judge strictly and, afterwards, receive … command the sinner to come in … examine him … and appoint him days of fasting." Judged by the bishop and supported by the prayers of fellow-believers, individual Christians were able to pace themselves in making due reparation to God for the many frailties that still tied them to "the world" – that is, to that potent presence, outside the Church, of a society which lay in the dark shadow of the demons. *Thy repentance shall be with thee and thou shalt have power over it.*[39]

The Church and Society: Almsgiving

Repentance invited concrete and fully visible reparatory actions. Christians had inherited from Judaism the practice of giving alms "for the remission of sins." This was a crucial inheritance. The notion of almsgiving fused with the notion of repentance in a manner which harnessed the use of wealth in Christian circles to a new system of religious explanation. Money and goods given "for the remission of sins" ensured that wealth gained in "the world" (through craftsmanship, trade, and landowning) flowed, without inhibition, into the Church. The "goods of this world" were "redeemed" by being spent on the religious community.

Even the most humble members of the Christian community were involved in this perpetual mobilization of wealth. The average adherents of Judaism and Christianity were industrious townsfolk. Their hard-won coins "gathered sweat in the palm of the hand," before they were given to deserving causes.[40] But every believer was obliged to give. As a rabbi said, the "breastplate of righteousness," associated with almsgiving, was made up, like the scale-mail armor of third-century cavalry, of innumerable small coins, given frequently by ordinary believers.[41] In the polytheist world of the cities, the proud temples depended on wealthy donors, who might, at any moment, go bankrupt – as happened to many pagan shrines in the course of the crisis of the third century. In a period of financial recession, the Christian communities, with their habits of regular giving by small persons, were better equipped to weather the storm of political insecurity and inflation than were the grandees who supported polytheist worship.[42]

Far from being a cold, cash transaction, almsgiving triggered, at the time, deep-laid imaginative structures that made it seem an entirely appropriate penitential gesture. Through giving to the destitute, at the furthest edge of the community, the act of almsgiving made present on earth a touch of the

boundless care of God for all mankind. The utter pointlessness of giving to those who, as beggars, could offer nothing in return highlighted the magnificent transcendence of God: "They who are useless to men are useful to God."[43] The gesture of reaching out the hand in mercy to the poor was held to echo (and so to provoke) the gesture that the sinner hoped, above all, from God himself – that his hand, also, would stretch out to offer the supreme gift of forgiveness.

Altogether, the act of giving was a central part of the day-to-day practice of the Christian community. As a result, the churches of the late third century emerged as remarkably cohesive and solvent bodies. Christians were known to look after their own. The churches had created systems for the care of unprotected and afflicted fellow-believers that grew like thick layers of bark around every Christian community. In A.D. 251, the Christian Church in Rome supported – from the gifts of the faithful – 154 members of the clergy (of whom 52 were exorcists) and took care of 1,500 widows, orphans, and destitute persons. The destitute alone were more numerous than the entire membership of all but the largest professional association in the city; and the clergy formed a body as large, and as self-conscious, as the *ordo*, the city council, of any small town.[44] When, at the time of the Great Persecution, commissioners entered the relatively small Christian church at Cirta (Constantine, Algeria), so as to confiscate its treasures, they found a storeroom with 16 shirts for men, 38 veils, 82 dresses, and 47 pairs of slippers for women, as well as 11 containers of oil and wine.[45]

From *religiones* to Religion

The subsequent success of the Christian Church makes it particularly difficult for the historian to assess the position of the Church around A.D. 300. We forget how new to the ancient world and how tentative, even in Christian circles, were some of the notions which we now take for granted. The most novel of all, at this time, was the notion of "religion" as we are now accustomed to think of it. Polytheists knew exactly what *religiones* were: they were precise ways of worshipping the gods, which one neglected at one's peril. But other activities which we, nowadays, instinctively associate with religion were little touched by the gods. Not all of these activities were considered suitable for everybody. Self-grooming and the search for truth tended to be what gentlemen did, under the guidance of well-educated philosophers. Philosophical speculation and moral self-improvement were regarded as upper-class pursuits, not open to the average person. Many philosophers and moralists were pious persons. But philosophy and morality

owed little to *religio* – to the cult of the gods. They were thought of as human activities, developed over the ages by human beings. They were learned from and enforced by human beings: by one's father, by one's teachers, and by the frankly man-made laws and customs of one's city. They had not been laid down once and for all in a holy book as the Law of God, as was the case in Judaism and Christianity.

What was surprising to contemporaries about the Christian Church was the extent to which activities, which had tended to be kept separate under the old system of *religio*, were fused into one. Morality, philosophy, and ritual were treated as intimately connected. All were part of "religion" in the wide sense of the term to which we have become accustomed. All were based on the Law of God. They were to be found in their true form only in the Church. In the Christian churches, philosophy was dependent upon revelation and morality was absorbed into *religio*. Furthermore, commitment to truth and moral improvement were held to be binding on all believers, irrespective of their class and level of culture. Hence the remarkable combination of stern moralizing and urgent theological speculation which absorbed the energy of serious Christians, from a wide variety of social backgrounds, in the third century as in all later ages.

In much the same manner, the circulation of wealth was harnessed to a carefully thought out system which linked sin with reparation through almsgiving. All classes within the Church were involved in a dogged mobilization of wealth to build up a single religious community. This wealth was distributed along the margins of the Church in such a way as to suggest that the Christian community had the will and the financial "muscle" to take care of the lowest reaches of Roman society.

Thus, when a continuous spate of laws and personal letters in favor of Christians issued from the palace of Constantine in the decades after A.D. 312, they were received and exploited to the full by a religious group which knew how to make the best of its good fortune. If, in the words of the English proverb, "God helps those who help themselves," the Christian Church, as it had developed in the course of the third century, more than deserved the apparent "miracle" of Constantine's conversion at the battle of the Milvian Bridge.