When Our World Became Christian

312-394

Paul Veyne

WHEN OUR WORLD BECAME CHRISTIAN

For Lucien Jerphagnon, and in memory of Claude Roy

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1

CONSTANTINE: THE SAVIOUR OF HUMANITY

One of the decisive events in western and even world history occurred in 312 AD, in the immense Roman Empire. The fourth century of the Common Era had started badly for the Christian Church: between 303 and 311, it had been subjected to one of the worst persecutions in its history, in which thousands had perished. In 311, one of the four emperors who shared the government of the Empire resigned himself to putting an end to the persecution, bitterly noting in his law decreeing tolerance that persecution was pointless, since the many Christians who, in order to save their lives, had abjured their faith had nevertheless not returned to paganism. As a result, there were gaps in the religious fabric of society (a fact that constituted a subject of anxiety for a leader at this time).

In the following year, 312, a most unprecedented event occurred: another of the co-emperors, Constantine, the hero of this great story, converted to Christianity, following a dream in which he was told: 'By this sign, you will conquer.' It is thought that at most 5–10 per cent of the population

of the Empire (possibly seventy million inhabitants in all) were at this time Christians.[1] As J. B. Bury commented,[2] 'It must never be forgotten that Constantine's revolution was perhaps the most audacious act ever committed by an autocrat in disregard and defiance of the vast majority of his subjects.'

THE BANALITY OF THE EXCEPTIONAL

As we shall see, eighty years on, on a different battlefield by a different river, paganism was to find itself banned and, although spared persecution, knew that it was vanquished. For, throughout the fourth century, the Church, itself no longer persecuted as it had been for the previous three centuries, had been supported in every way by most of the Empire's Caesars, all converts to Christianity. As a result, by the fourth century the Empire was almost wholly populated by Christians and there are one and a half billion Christians in the world today. It is, however, true that, after the 600s, half the Christian regions that had belonged to the Empire became Muslim without any apparent difficulty.

What kind of a man was this Constantine who played such a decisive role? I believe that, far from being a calculating cynic or a person steeped in superstition, as has even recently been claimed, he was a man of great vision. His conversion made it possible for him to take part in what he regarded as a supernatural epic, indeed to direct it himself and thus ensure the salvation of humanity. He felt that, thanks to this salvation, his reign was a religious turning point in which he himself had an enormously important role to play. He had hardly become master of the Roman West (probably at the age of no more than thirty-five), when in 314, he declared in a letter to his 'very dear brothers', the bishops, that 'the eternal and inconceivable holiness of our God will absolutely

not allow the human condition to wander in darkness any longer.'[3]

Constantine was certainly sincere, but that is to put it mildly. For this was an altogether exceptional man. Historians tend to be less accustomed to coping with the exceptional than with the safe method of 'setting things in ordered series'. Moreover, they have an acute sense of the banal, the 'everyday,' that is not possessed by the many intellectuals who either believe in political miracles or, on the contrary, as Flaubert put it, 'denigrate the age in which they live out of historical ignorance'. Constantine considered himself to have been chosen, destined by a divine decree to play a providential role in the thousand-year-old system of salvation. That is what he said and also what he wrote in an authentic text that we shall be considering later but that is so extravagant that most historians are too embarrassed to mention it.

There is nevertheless nothing unbelievable about Constantine's excessive claims. They too can be arranged in an orderly series, for cases do arise in which potentates, thinkers or religious or political leaders believe themselves called to save the human race and revolutionize the course of the world. To doubt their sincerity would be a grave mistake, for it is all the more credible given that, in Rome, the role of an emperor was sometimes interpreted far more liberally than that of our own kings. In those distant times, it was not students who were inspired to action by the power of their imagination, but the potentate himself. However, Constantine, an imaginative, even megalomaniac, potentate, was also a man of action, steeped in prudence as much as in energy.[4] So he achieved his aims: the Roman throne became Christian and the Church became a power to reckon with. Without Constantine, Christianity would have remained simply an avant-garde sect.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE FACTS

But let us start by getting a brief account of the events out of the way. Constantine's conversion was but one episode in the course of one of those monotonous struggles between generals bent solely on possession of the throne, struggles that take up a good half of Roman political history. At the beginning of the fourth century, the Roman Empire was divided between four co-emperors who were expected to reign in fraternal concord. Two of them shared the rich Roman East (Greece, Turkey, Syria, Egypt and so on), while the vast West (which included the Danube regions and the Maghreb desert) was divided between a certain Licinius (about whom there will be more to say) and our hero, Constantine, who, for his part, governed Gaul, England and Spain.

By rights he should also have governed Italy, but a fifth, thieving, player, by the name of Maxentius, had become involved. He had usurped the power in Rome and Italy as a whole. Later, the Christians there, with a view to praising Constantine, falsely claimed that Maxentius had remained a persecutor. It was in order to recapture Italy from Maxentius that Constantine declared war on him and it was during the campaign that ensued that he became a convert, placing his trust in the god of the Christians in order to emerge victorious. His conversion was sealed by a dream in which, during the night before the battle, the god of the Christians promised him victory, provided he would make his new religion public.

And the next day, the memorable 28 October 312, on the outskirts of Rome and on the banks of the river Tiber, God did indeed procure him the famous victory of the Milvian Bridge. Maxentius was crushed and killed by Constantine's troops, who promoted the personal religion of the leader whom they served[5]: their shields[6] displayed an entirely new

symbol[7] that had been revealed to the emperor as he slept,[8] a symbol that he himself then sported on his own helmet.[9] This was what was to become known as the 'Christogram', constructed from the first two letters of Christ's name, the Greek X and P, the one superimposed upon the other and the two interlocked.

On the following day, 29 October, Constantine, at the head of his troops, made his solemn entry to Rome by way of the Via Lata, the present-day Corso. The date, 29 October 312 (rather than that of the so-called 'edict of Milan' of 313) marks the switch from ancient paganism to the Christian era.[10] Let there be no mistake about this: the historic role of Constantine was not to put an end to persecutions (for those had ceased two years earlier, when Christianity obtained the freedom from persecution that paganism enjoyed). Rather, it was to make Christianity, now his own faith, the religion that was favoured in every way over paganism.

A SUMMARY OF CONSTANTINE'S ACTIONS

In the rest of the Empire, in the following year, 313, Licinius, who had remained a pagan but was not a persecutor, overcame the persecuting co-emperor who reigned over the East. Licinius, too, had had a dream. On the eve of the battle, an 'angel' had promised him victory provided he prayed to a certain 'supreme god' and got his army likewise to pray to this deity.[11] Sure enough, he was victorious and thus became the master of the East, where he issued an edict of tolerance, thereby delivering the eastern Christians from their persecutor. The two co-emperors, the pagan Licinius and the Christian Constantine, now reigned together over an indivisible empire. They had reached agreement, in Milan, to treat their pagan and Christian subjects on an equal footing. This was a compromise, a concession that ran contrary to all their

principles, but it was indispensable in an age that now set out to be at peace (*pro quiete temporis*).[12]

After the victory at the Milvian Bridge, the pagans may have assumed that Constantine's attitude to the god who had procured him victory would be similar to that of his predecessors. Augustus, following his victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, had, as we know, settled his debt to Apollo by consecrating a sanctuary and a local cult to the god. The Christogram that appeared on the shields of Constantine's army indicated that victory had been won thanks to the god of the Christians. However, what was not understood was that the relationship between this god and his creatures was a permanent, passionate and mutual one, whereas the relationship between the human race and the race of pagan gods, who were primarily concerned about themselves, was, so to speak, international,[13] contractual and spasmodic. Apollo had not instigated his relationship with Augustus and had never instructed the latter to sweep to victory under his divine sign.

Nothing could have been more different from, on the one hand, the relationship between the pagans and their gods and, on the other, that between the Christians and their God: a pagan was content with his gods if he had elicited their help by means of his prayers and vows; a Christian instead endeavoured to make his God content with him. Augustus did not serve Apollo; he simply turned to him for help; nor would his distant pagan successors be the servants of the Invincible Sun, their protector and celestial image. In contrast, throughout the twenty-five years that followed, Constantine repeatedly declared that he was simply the servant of Christ, who had admitted him to his service and would always procure him victory.

What Constantine had seen in his dream were the very initials of the name of Christ; Licinius, on the other hand,

had simply heeded the 'supreme god' of an anonymous and 'catch-all' monotheism upon whom all enlightened minds of the period could reach agreement. With that victory of 312, the religious 'discourse' of the authority in power had changed radically. Constantine nevertheless did not nor ever would try to impose his new faith upon his subjects. No more did his successors. Even less did he regard Christianity as an 'ideology' to be inculcated in his subjects for political purposes. (We shall be returning, in conclusion, to this seemingly profound explanation that leaps spontaneously to the minds of many historians.)

Ten years later, in 324, the Christian religion at one stroke took on a 'global' dimension and Constantine acquired the historical stature that he would thereafter retain. For in the East Constantine had recently crushed Licinius, who was claimed to be a persecutor, and had re-established the unity of the Roman Empire under his sole authority, bringing together its two halves under his own Christian sceptre. Christianity now took over this vast empire that constituted the centre of the world and considered itself to be synonymous with civilization itself. This was the beginning of what was for many long centuries to be known as the Christian Empire or even Christendom. Constantine hastened to reassure his new subjects by reversing the terms of 312 and promising them that the pagans in the East would be treated on the same footing as Christians: they were free stupidly to remain pagans and 'keep, if they wish, their sanctuaries of falsehood',[14] so the latter were not to be destroyed. Times had changed: in 312, the religion that was tolerated was Christianity; now, in 324, it was paganism.[15]

As early as the first year after his 312 victory, the religious policy of the emperor had been made clear and it was not to change; we shall be studying it in detail throughout this little book.

1 In the part of the Empire of which he had become the master and which he had liberated from persecution, all, 'literally all',[16] the major decisions that he took from the winter of 312–13 onward were designed to prepare a Christian future for the Roman world.

2 However, Constantine was too prudent and too pragmatic to venture further. He, personally, was a Christian, but he was to be the sovereign of an empire that had integrated the Church while remaining officially pagan. The emperor persecuted neither the pagan cults nor the large pagan majority of his subjects. He limited himself to repeatedly declaring, in his official documents, that paganism was a despicable superstition.

3 As Christianity was the sovereign's own personal faith, he set up the Church on a strong basis, as if by an imperial whim of a ruler known as 'the lion'. A Caesar was less bound by dynastic tradition and the 'fundamental laws of the realm' than our own, later kings (which is why so many 'mad Caesars' famously came to power). Nevertheless, he never imposed his own religion upon others.

4 Except, that is, on one point: since he himself was a Christian, he would not tolerate paganism in any domain that affected him in person, such as the cult of emperors. Likewise, in solidarity with his fellow Christians, he dispensed the latter from duties involving pagan rites associated with their public functions.

5 Despite his deep desire to see all his subjects become Christians, he never committed himself to the impossible task of converting them. He never persecuted the pagans or denied them the right to express themselves; nor did he disadvantage them in their careers: if superstitious people wished to damn themselves, they were free to do so. Neither did Constantine's successors exert any

pressure on them, but left the matter of their conversion to the Church, whose methods involved persuasion rather than persecution.

6 In Constantine's eyes, the most pressing need was not to convert the pagans, but to abolish the nefarious animal sacrifices to those demons, the false gods. He spoke of doing so at some point but did not himself have the nerve, and so left the task to the pious son who succeeded him.

7 Furthermore, faced with 'his brothers, the bishops', this lay-benefactor and champion of the Christian faith modestly, but without hesitation, assumed the unprecedented, unclassifiable and self-proclaimed function of a kind of president of the Church.[17] He involved himself in ecclesiastical affairs, concentrating on opposing, not pagans, but bad Christians, separatists and heretics.

A QUIETLY PERVASIVE TOLERANCE

Convert the pagans? That would have constituted a vast endeavour. Constantine realized that their resistance (*epanastasis*) was so strong that he gave up the idea of forcing the Truth upon them and, despite all his hopes, remained tolerant. Following his two great victories in 312 and 324, he was at pains to reassure the pagans living in the provinces that he had just acquired: 'Let those in error . . . gladly receive the benefit of peace and quiet . . . May none molest another; may each retain what his soul desires, and practise it.'[18] And he kept his promises: the pagan cults were not abolished until half a century after his death; and not until two centuries later did Justinian start trying to convert the last of the pagans, along with the Jews.

Such was 'Constantine's pragmatism'[19]; and there was one great advantage to it. By forbearing to convert the pagans

forcibly, Constantine avoided incurring hostility both against himself and against Christianity (the future of which was, in truth, far less assured than is generally believed, for – as we shall see – in 364 it was almost wiped out). Alongside the partisan elite constituted by the Christian sect, the pagan masses were left to live on in their ignorance, indifferent to the whims of their emperor. The only group to suffer was a small circle of educated pagans.

As we have seen, Constantine left the pagans and their cults in peace even after 324, when the reunification of the East and the West, under his sceptre, rendered him all-powerful. In that year, he issued proclamations first to his new eastern subjects, then to all the inhabitants of his Empire.[20] These proclamations, written in a personal rather than an official style, were penned by a convinced Christian who rated paganism lower than earth itself and declared that Christianity was the only good religion, as was proved by the prince's victories engineered by the one true God. However, he took no measures at all against paganism. Constantine himself was never a persecutor and under his rule the Empire lived in peace. Better still, he formally forbade anyone to turn against his neighbours for religious reasons: it was essential that public tranquillity should reign. No doubt his edicts were directed at overzealous Christians who were eager to attack the pagan ceremonies and temples.

The ambiguous nature of the role of a Roman emperor was enough to drive one mad (as, indeed, it had three centuries before Constantine, when Tiberius, the first successor of the founder of the imperial regime, sank into paranoia). A Caesar needed to master four languages: that of a leader whose civil power was of a military nature and who therefore issued orders; that of a superior being (albeit not a living god), who was the subject of a personality cult; that of a member of the Great Imperial Council, the Senate, in which he was simply

the first among his peers (who still, however, feared for their heads under his rule); and that of the Empire's first magistrate, who was in constant communication with his fellow citizens and was answerable to them. In his decrees and proclamations of 324, Constantine chose to use this fourth language, intermingling it with a fifth, that of a fervent Christian who acted as a propagandist for his faith and reckoned paganism to be a 'disadvantageous superstition', in contrast to Christianity, which constituted the divine and 'most holy Law'.[21]

Despite everything, he kept his promises of religious tolerance and civil peace, which was affected by no bloody movements of persecution. The only conflicts to assail him were the quarrels that erupted between different Christian groups. He did not force anyone to convert[22]; he appointed pagans to the very highest of state offices,[23] he never legislated against the pagan cults (even after his 324 triumphs, despite what is sometimes claimed)[24] and he allowed the Roman Senate to continue to fund the official priests and public cults of the Roman state; these continued as before and did so until almost the end of the century.

Is the word tolerance really the right one to use? At the risk of being pointlessly didactic, perhaps a number of distinctions need to be made. One might be tolerant through agnosticism or because one reckoned that a number of different paths might all lead to the almost inaccessible Truth.[25] One might become tolerant through a compromise, either being weary of religious wars or because persecution had proved unsuccessful. Or one might, as the French do, hold that the religions of the state's citizens are none of its business, for religion is a private matter for individuals, or, again, as the Americans hold, that states should neither recognize, prohibit nor favour any type of religious confession. Constantine, for his part, believed in a single Truth and felt that he had the right and the duty to impose it.[26] Nevertheless, he did not risk

taking action and left in peace those whom he considered to be mistaken, claiming that he did so in the interests of public tranquillity: in other words because he would have come up against strong opposition. In consequence, his empire remained at once Christian and pagan.

But Constantine also insisted that there should be one particular domain reserved in his favour. Given that Christianity was his own personal religion (and was, under his successors, to become for all practical purposes that of the throne), he could not allow his own person to be defiled by the pagan cult.[27] In 315, he went to Rome to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his rule. These anniversary celebrations were patriotic, marking ten years of the happiest of reigns. They involved performing sacrifices to honour the vows and prayers of ten years earlier for the prosperity of the Roman sovereign, followed by further sacrifices designed to renew the contract for a further ten happy years. Constantine allowed the people to rejoice amid great celebrations, but he banned all animal sacrifices,[28] thereby (as Alföldi put it) disinfecting the pagan rites.

To cut a long story short, let us consider just one particular famous document that testifies to this disinfected paganism and this same pious horror of blood sacrifices. The city of Spello, in Umbria, asked Constantine to authorize the establishment of a great annual festival, the pretext for which would be the cult of emperors. It even proposed to build a temple for the dead, deified emperors of the reigning dynasty (to which Constantine's own father belonged).[29] Like all festivals in honour of the cult of emperors, it would feature gladiator fights, the greatest of entertainments, seldom on offer, extremely costly and of a purely secular nature.

Constantine gave his permission for the festival, the gladiator fights (which he had always hesitated to ban, since they were so very popular), the dynastic temple and the imperial

priest; but he forbade the latter to inflict the defilement of sacrifices upon his dynasty. This was to be an imperial cult without the bloodshed of victims. Since an imperial priest, through his function, depended immediately upon the emperor himself, Constantine made the most of this personal link that justified his ban on this pagan rite. For it was only in the (admittedly extensive) sphere that surrounded his own person that he prohibited paganism and favoured Christianity. As we have noted above, it was in just the same manner that he had had the Christogram painted on the shields of his soldiers, for the army was the personal instrument of the emperor, its direct leader.

Out of solidarity with his co-believers, he took care to spare them, like himself, any impure contact with the blood of sacrificial victims. Christian magistrates were thus dispensed from performing the rites that went with their function as magistrates, such as the lustrations that led up to a sacrifice. The law prescribed a beating or a fine for anyone who forced Christian municipal councillors to comply with such 'superstition'.[30] Double or even treble advantages stemmed from this law: wealthy Christians lost their excuse for avoiding heavy municipal duties[31] and unscrupulous Christians were encouraged to behave more in conformity with their faith.

Constantine also spared Christians, even criminal ones, from a legal obligation to sin. Some offenders found to be guilty were customarily sentenced to fight as gladiators; and given that God's Law rules that 'thou shalt not kill', gladiators had always been banned from the Church. Constantine decided that the penalty of fighting as a gladiator would henceforth be replaced by that of forced labour in the mines or quarries, 'so that those condemned should pay for their crimes without shedding blood.' The great emperor's successors were to observe the same law.[32]

We should note that anyone condemned to death, to

forced labour or to the gladiators' arena automatically became the property of the imperial Exchequer[33] and therefore of the emperor himself. So, in this instance too, Constantine was observing his principle of imposing his own religion only within his own personal sphere. By virtue of that same principle, his son Constantius was to forbid high-ranking pagan magistrates who continued to lay on spectacles in the gladiators' arena to engage as gladiators either soldiers (since the army belonged to the prince in person) or officers of the imperial palace.[34]

All in all, Constantine did more or less respect his pragmatic principle of tolerance. However, in one instance at least, in 314, it did happen that he 'forgot' to celebrate the extremely solemn Centennial Games which, once every 110 years, occasioned several days and nights of pagan ceremonies and sacrifices designed to celebrate[35] the legendary date of the foundation of Rome. Furthermore, he introduced a number of very cunning measures, such as decreeing that Sunday be a day of rest (a matter to which we shall be returning). As we shall see, he also introduced a law totally abolishing all pagan sacrifices, but this was never applied. It was only under Constantine's successor that the pagan religion began to suffer.

Constantine's way of introducing an imbalance between the two religions was not so much to attack paganism but rather to favour the Christians. He made it clear to all his subjects that their sovereign was a Christian, in his official declarations he denigrated paganism as a base superstition and he bestowed traditional imperial favours upon the Christian religion (ordering the construction of many churches, but no temples). The fact was that, although paganism continued to be a *religio licita* and Constantine, like any emperor, was its Great Pontiff, in all domains he acted as the protector of the Christians alone.

It was thanks to him that the slow but total Christianization of the Empire began. The Church, formerly a prohibited 'sect', now became more than a licit one: it was part of the state and was eventually to supplant paganism as the standard religion. For its first three centuries, Christianity had remained a sect (in the by no means pejorative sense that German sociologists apply this term), that is to say a group that individuals choose to join and a collection of beliefs to which some become converted, as opposed to a 'church', a collection of beliefs into which one is born and that are held by all. In 197, Tertullian[36] wrote, 'Christians are made, not born.' This slow transition from sect to the customary religion was brought about by providing the population with a clerical framework, which became possible because the Church was protected and also because Christianity was the religion that the government itself, publicly expressing its scorn for paganism, adopted.

Thus, around 400, Christians could feel that they would soon triumph totally: 'The authority, which the Christian faith hath, is diffused all the world over.'[37] But what was the source of the new religion's power over people's minds? Its spiritual superiority over paganism was blindingly clear, as we shall see, but this could be appreciated only by a religious elite. Besides, why was it that the emperor himself had converted?

At the time of Constantine's birth, Christianity was 'the burning issue of the age'[38]: whoever possessed the slightest religious or philosophical sensitivity was concerned with it and many of the literate elite had already become converts. I must therefore, albeit with considerable trepidation, try to sketch in a picture of Christianity in the years between 200 and 300 in order to determine the diverse factors that made conversion a tempting option. Hélène Monsacré tells me that the motive for Constantine's conversion is clear: if he wanted

to be a great emperor, he needed a great God. A gigantic, caring God who passionately desired the wellbeing of the human race aroused far stronger sentiments than the crowd of pagan gods who lived for themselves. And this Christian God revealed a no less gigantic plan for the eternal salvation of humanity. He involved himself in the lives of the faithful, demanding that they observe a strict moral code.

2

CHRISTIANITY: A MASTERPIECE

Over the years, Christianity, while encountering nothing but hostility or indifference from the populous masses, had acquired the status of an avant-garde talking point among the elite. For the educated, it represented either the greatest religious problem of the age or its very worst mistake. In our own times, anyone at all enlightened is preoccupied by ethico-political questions relating to the evolution of the world. In the third century, what people worried about were the highest truths and the soul's destiny, hence the success of Neo-Platonism among the educated. What is interesting is not the fact that there were so few Christians but the major place that Christianity occupied in public opinion and debate by reason of its manifest superiority over paganism.

Let me try to list those relatively superior elements, for some of them must have been decisive in Constantine's choice of this religion, which he perceived as both true and worthy of his throne. Over the centuries, few religions – possibly none at all – have been as greatly enriched spiritually

and intellectually as Christianity. In Constantine's day, Christianity was still a somewhat summary religion, but even so it was greatly superior to paganism. Certain agnostic historians may think it less than scholarly to draw up a comparison between the merits of different religions. But, as I see it, to do so is not to violate the principle of axiological neutrality any more than one does when one recognizes the superiority of certain artistic or literary creations, a superiority to which Constantine's contemporaries were no more blind than we ourselves are. Why ever should the creative imagination of religions not produce masterpieces, likewise?

However, its very superiority disadvantaged this elite religion, for the demands that it made upon the faithful outweighed its promises of good harvests or cures. It had no more chance than great music or great literature of winning over a population whose religiosity was of a more short-sighted nature. It owed its victory, not so much to its own merits, but more to the authority of the Empire and the Church. Moreover, Christianity smacked of an originality that was not to everyone's taste. In the eyes of certain educated people,[1] Neo-Platonism was less melodramatic. In the history of Christianity, only an external authority had the power to supplant one custom by another. That is why Constantine's role was crucial.

A MUTUAL PASSION AND A LOFTY DESTINY

Let us start by noting Christianity's principal asset: early Christianity owed its initial rapid success among the Roman elite to its great originality, namely the fact that it was a religion of love. It also owed that success to the superhuman authority that emanated from its master, the Lord Jesus. For whoever accepted the Christian faith, life became more intense, more organized and was placed under greater

pressure. An individual had to conform to a rule that marked him or her out, as was the case in the philosophical sects of the period. But, in exchange, his or her life suddenly acquired an eternal significance within a cosmic plan, something that no philosophy or paganism could confer. Paganism left human life just as it was, an ephemeral amalgam of details. Thanks to the Christian god, that life received the unity of a magnetic field in which every action and every internal response took on a meaning, either good or bad. This meaning, which, unlike in the case of philosophers, was not conferred by the individual involved, steered the believer towards an absolute and eternal entity that was not a mere principle but a great living being. As Etienne Gilson put it, a Christian soul sought substance in being so as to escape the trauma of becoming. This inner security was accessible to all and sundry, the literate and the illiterate alike.

Extending the Jewish religion and the Psalms, Christianity found its basis in a mutual passion shared by the deity and humanity or, to be more precise, every single one of us. To give some idea of the chasm that separated Christianity from paganism, let me give a minor, trivial example that is perhaps unworthy of this important subject. An ordinary woman could go and tell the Madonna all her family or conjugal problems. If she had confided them to Hera or Aphrodite, the goddess would have wondered what crazy whim had passed through the mind of this silly woman who had come to tell her of things that were no concern of hers.

MONOTHEISM: A MISLEADING TERM

It was by this love, by the charisma of its Lord and by its sublime vision of the world and of man that the new religion took hold and not, I think, through the doubtful monotheism that represents such a laborious point of honour for theologians.

In itself, monotheism is not particularly exceptional. The term itself is a deceptive one that covers many different types of religion and is too vague to be one of the keys to its history. I would like to substantiate this claim, using the example of the 'monotheism' of the ancient Jewish religion but, for this, will refer the reader to the Appendix of the present work.[2] The philosophical monism of the pagan literate elite did not prevent them from believing in gods that were subordinate to the supreme God.[3] Furthermore, the 'three monotheisms' that are so much talked of today and to which so many evils are attributed are of three different kinds. (And, by the way, it is not monotheism itself that makes a religion fearsome, but the imperialism of its 'truth').

The originality of Christianity lies not in its so-called monotheism, but in the gigantic nature of its god, the creator of both heaven and earth: it is a gigantism that is alien to the pagan gods and is inherited from the god of the Bible. This biblical god was so huge that, despite his anthropomorphism (humankind was created in his image), it was possible for him to become a metaphysical god: even while retaining his human, passionate and protective character, the gigantic scale of the Judaic god allowed him eventually to take on the role of the founder and creator of the cosmic order and all that was Good: this was the very role attributed to the supreme god in the pale deism of the philosophers.

Given that it presents two or even three supernatural objects to be worshipped, namely God, Christ and – later – the Virgin, the Christian religion was, quite literally, polytheistic; but never mind. Those divine figures shared nothing in common with the ancient gods, even though they possessed personalities (and, up until Saint Augustine) bodies too. With the Christian deity, religious inventiveness, in the beat of a wing, tore away from the basis of a narrative imagination, that unquenchable and therefore polytheistic source of fables,

and raised itself to a transcendental level: the plural figures of Christianity came together in a cosmic order that, for its part, was a unity. Christianity was a monist polytheism.

It was this monism, that is to say the metaphysical nature of Christianity, which made it a superior religion. In the eyes of the Neo-Platonists, it was no more than a popular story; but this story was a philosophical one that rose far above a pantheon of disparate cults. Christianity considered itself to be the only true religion, the one that demanded universal recognition because it presented all human beings with a supernatural vocation and spiritual equality. This was a monism that was sanctioned by a single, united Church. And it was a religion that won over many educated people and was considered worthy of a great, pious emperor such as the young Constantine and also of his throne.

LOVE, THE CHARISMA OF THE LORD AND MORALISM

Another specific feature that set Christianity apart was the fact that it was a religion of love. Through the Jewish prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, that love represented a development (using Catholic terminology referring to the family of Catholicism, one might even go so far as to say a family relationship of Father, Mother, Brother and Son) of the equally novel relationship between Jehovah and his people described in the *Historical Books* of the Bible and even more so in the Psalms. Christianity owed its success as a sect to a collective invention of genius (for Saint Paul was not solely responsible for this): namely, the infinite mercy of a God passionate about the fate of the human race, indeed about the fate of each and every individual soul, including mine and yours, and not just those of the kingdoms, empires and the human race in general. This was a Father whose Law was strict and who set one on

a straight and righteous path, but who, like the god of Israel, was always ready to forgive.[4]

The human race and this God were joined together in a loving and sensitive relationship focused on the Lord Jesus, while the human race, for its part, acquired a celestial nature. Paganism had not been totally insensitive to love between a deity and a chosen individual (as we may be reminded by the love for Artemis of Euripides' Hippolytus). On the other hand (as is testified by Artemis' distant attitude to the dying Hippolytus), it made no room for a mutual and passionate relationship of love and authority, a relationship which, being essential both to God and to man, is a lasting one, not an occasional one as in paganism. When a Christian returned to God in his mind, he knew that he had never ceased to be watched and loved, whereas the pagan gods lived above all for themselves.

In contrast, Christ, the Man-God, sacrificed himself for his men. The other main reason for the success of the Christian sect was the image of the Lord in all his authority and charisma. And the accent was laid on authority rather than tenderness for – let us be clear – we are still quite a way away from the time of Saint Bernard or Saint Francis of Assisi. Nor was the Christ of the early centuries the humanitarian figure who led an exemplary life and who, ever since Renan, has become the Christ held dear even by unbelievers. For, lofty and universal though those attributes were, they were not the ones that drew believers to the Lord. What early Christianity exalted above all was 'not the attraction exerted by the humanity of Jesus, but rather his superhuman nature that was predicted by the Prophets and demonstrated by his miracles, the Resurrection and the Master's teaching.'[5]

Converts were drawn more to the supernatural nature of Christ than to the personality of this man-god, his life and all that is written in the Gospels. (In Saint Augustine's works,

still, the humanity of Christ remains in the background.) 'The early Apologists had little to say about the personality of Jesus or about the doctrine of atonement.' [6] The Cross was a symbol of not pain, but victory, *tropaeum Passionis*, *triumphalem crucem*.[7] One was not constantly confronted with the Passion and Christ's death;[8] it was not the expiatory victim and the sacrifice of the crucified Christ on Calvary that triggered conversions, but rather the triumph over death represented by the Resurrection.

The figure of Jesus was also imposing by virtue of his earthly life and his historical credentials, which were recently established and clearly dated.[9] Christ was no mythical being living in some fairytale time. Unlike the pagan gods, he 'seemed real', even human. This was an age that was very receptive to 'divine men' (*theioi andres*) and to miracle workers and prophets who lived among ordinary people and were revered by some as masters. On sarcophagi (whose sculptures illustrated the relation of the dead individual to the Lord), the Lord appeared as a shepherd caring for all his sheep, including the deceased, which he loved and which followed wherever he led them, or as a young teacher whose ethical commandments the deceased individual had heeded.

The conversion of the new faithful was also encouraged by the Christians' moralizing zeal, which was akin to the popular stoicism, and their taste for respectability, that humble form of pride. Many were moved by the passionate morality of the Christians and lent a keen ear to any moral preaching. The Christian God was worshipped not with offerings or with the sacrifice of victims, but with obedience to his Law. The cardinal role that morality played in Christianity was largely alien to paganism. It was yet another feature of Christianity that made it something different.

I was greatly surprised to find that Christian texts are far more prone to dwell on this morality than on love. Although

the *Epistle to Diognetes*, the work of an educated man, encouraged its readers to imitate God's love for human beings by loving and helping the weak and the poor, Bishop Cyprian prescribed avoiding sin and obeying God without presuming to imitate him, in the same way as an army forbears to imitate its general, but simply follows and obeys him.[10] Those in authority usually prefer subordinates who content themselves with not disobeying them, rather than those who take positive initiatives.

The success of Christianity may be compared to that of a 'best-seller' (and, in the eyes of an unbeliever like myself, as a worldwide masterpiece). It gripped its readers 'by the guts', not necessarily droves of them so long as the preceding, regular religion still reigned, but at least a spiritual or ethical elite drawn from every social class, rich and poor, uneducated, educated and semi-educated, including one particular emperor . . . I certainly do not claim that Christianity was immanent in the human soul or that society was positively waiting for it. There is another explanation for its success: a 'best-seller' (such as Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloise* or Goethe's *Werther*) reveals to some readers a thitherto unsuspected sensibility. And this new sensibility that it brings into being (in this case that of a religion that spoke of love) then sustains the success that it has itself produced.[11]

Christianity constituted a masterpiece so original that, in our western half of the world, it created a new fashion: it brought about a geological break in the two thousand-year long evolution of religions, ushering in a new era for the imagination that created them and serving as a model for the religions that would succeed it, such as Manicheism and Islam. Whatever their differences, not one of those three shared anything in common with the world's old paganisms. For each had a prophet, a historical version of the Truth and salvation, produced a holy book that it put to

liturgical use, and would have nothing to do with animal sacrifices.[12]

The fact is that history is innovative; it is not just a matter of 'responses' to 'the needs of the age' or 'of society'. At this point we have to come to a decision: either we say that Christianity became established because it fulfilled an expectation, stemmed from a new religiosity attested by the success of the eastern religions and that of (the very different) Neo-Platonism and also from the 'spirit of the age', a Zeitgeist or 'angst of the era'; or, alternatively, we can choose to believe that Christianity successfully imposed itself because it offered something different and new.

RELIGION IS AN IRREDUCIBLE QUALITY

Should the success of Christianity also be attributed to its promise of immortality for the soul and/or the resurrection of both soul and body? On this point, I feel bound to confess my scepticism and embark upon a four-page-long parenthesis in which, contrary to my own beliefs, I shall begin by playing the devil's advocate. What I shall suggest, without myself believing it, is that the above explanation would be correct if it is true that a sense of religion does not exist on its own, but has unconscious psychological roots. In this case religion might constitute a bulwark against the fear of death. This is the explanation that is supported by Antiquity: *primus in orbe deos fecit timor*.[13] It suggests that a sense of the divine is not 'an a priori category that cannot be derived from anything else' (which is what I, along with Simmel,[14] believe). Rather, it stems from the fear of death, the metaphysical enigma, the need for consolation and some kind of opium,[15] and so on.

Here is another reason for scepticism in the face of the psychological explanation so favoured by the devil: so long as death is distant, the fear of death and a desire for eternity may

produce sporadic bursts of angst and a desire to believe, but these seldom suffice to bring about a radical change of life. In the course of the Christian centuries, many conversions that had not taken place earlier in life occurred *in extremis*, in the face of death itself.[16] Inveterate smokers are aware that tobacco is a killer, but the future is still a long way off.[17] Besides, one can only half-believe[18] or hold an *unreal* belief (as Cardinal Newman put it) in a Beyond, the reality of which is borne out by no more than hearsay[19] and certainly not by experience; in such conditions, one is aware that the theory of a Beyond is enigmatic. To have faith in God's word on the Beyond, one needs to be already a convert, already to believe in Him and love Him.

On the other hand, at the time of the birth of Christianity, for a whole millennium already, a thousand or more doctrines and legends about the Beyond and immortality had been rife in the pagan world and people's minds had been affected by them.[20] Unlike ourselves, people at that time had not yet given up hope of gaining some understanding of the matter. In their age, the Beyond was a problem that was part of life and could consequently bring about conversion. Whether the answer was 'Paradise' or 'Hell', Christianity did provide answers to the questions 'Where have we come from?' and 'Where are we going?'

The point, though, is: are we bound for Paradise or for Hell? In some classifications, Christianity has been placed among the genera or species of 'religions of salvation'. But such a classification is more suited for eastern doctrines of transformation. Christianity, for its part, offered a test more likely to scare off a newcomer than convert him: would the outcome be salvation or the eternal torments of Hell?

Hell certainly posed problems for Christian believers, prompting Saint Augustine to say that God's justice is other than ours; for the god of love and justice is also the god who,

at the outcome of a test or lottery of his own devising, has prepared for an infinite multitude of human beings eternal imprisonment in a camp where they will suffer endless torments. Here is what a modern theologian has to say about this matter: 'The problem is why this eminently loving God ordained an order of things that includes sin and Hell, and the question is definitely insoluble.' [21]

If one is neither a theologian nor a believer, however, one may attempt to resolve it. That incomprehensible diktat, that patch of darkness adds something to the 'best-seller's' appeal. Besides, it is perfectly possible for a believer to love God even while knowing where He sends so many human beings, for Hell is no more than hearsay that relates to a distant future. It is only a representation, an idea that can in no way match the affective force of his love of God and belief in him. The confusion has great melodramatic effect but does not lead to revolt or disbelief: in people's minds, feelings and ideas do not operate at the same level.

Moreover, a religious doctrine is not a theory of justice, nor does it claim to be philosophically coherent: although very different from a work of art, a religion stems from the same creative faculty. And the Hell dogma is even advantageous rather than detracting to the Christian doctrine. For a 'best-seller', the combination of terror and love is an added attraction. The inventors of Hell and its two eternal tortures (its fire, in the literal sense of the word, and the damnation constituted by being deprived of God) thereby created a 'thriller' that has achieved a huge success: it has horrified a vast public, for people are always deeply affected by terrifying fictions. As for the authors of this 'thriller', they no doubt delighted, meanwhile, in imagining the enemies of the Truth being consumed by flames.

Those authors, with their invention of a god of love who creates Hell, might well be criticized for having created an

incoherent figure. But in the various domains of imaginary representation, incoherence is by no means a defect. On the contrary: 'When one asserts that an artist creates real characters, that is a fine illusion: what he produces are sketches of man that are as schematic as is our knowledge of man. One or two features brightly illuminated and plenty of shadows all around, with the addition of a few powerful effects, are quite sufficient for our needs' (Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*). What with a merciful yet pitiless father, a meretricious lottery of all or nothing, and the infernal terrors that added to the 'best-seller's' success by striking the human imagination with such force (as is testified by religious painting) plus the fact that all this is presented as holy: what more could anyone ask for?

However, the principal reason for this success lies elsewhere. The fear of damnation was not an obstacle to conversions, for Jesus' message was not so much 'Choose between repentance and damnation', but rather 'God loves you.' The motives for conversion overrode the fear of death. Now comes the point to which I have been working: to reduce religiosity to a collection of psychological explanations is to fall short of the target and shoot wide of the irreducible reality constituted by our sense of the religious. No, religion is not an unconscious psychic ruse; it is not the case that we unknowingly put together consoling makeshift beliefs.[22] The divine, the sacred is a primary quality that derives from nothing but itself. It shows itself when one refers to something and finds that in order to understand, one's interlocutor must have experienced the thing also. If he has not, one is reduced to tautology or paraphrasing, as when one speaks of colours to a blind person. And many individuals are indeed blind to the divine. In his *La représentation du monde chez l'enfant* (*The Child's Conception of the World*), Jean Piaget reckons that a sense of the religious 'derives from a child's relations with its

parents and, indeed, constitutes the filial sentiment itself'. But any such attempt to derive the divine from something other than itself, be it fear, love, angst, or a filial sentiment, can never explain how this leap towards a quality so different and so specific can come about. It seems easier to assume that a child discovers the divine in its parents. All the same, it does not follow that beings who possess this quality of the divine actually do exist. However much I might believe in God, no 'intellectual intuition' can allow me to see God in the same way as I intuit the objects that surround me and in the way that I know that I am thinking.

AN INNOVATIVE 'BEST-SELLER'

Conversions were due not to any hope of a Beyond, but to a consideration of greater magnitude: namely, the neophyte's discovery of a vast divine project designed for human beings and in which immortality and even the uncertainty of salvation were no more than implied. Thanks to the historico-metaphysical epic of Creation and Redemption, with all its effects of light and darkness, one now knew where one came from and for what one was destined. Without that exalting epic, the belief in immortality would have been no more than a superstition that lacked the power to change a person's life. As for that epic itself, it was too all-encompassing to be just a psychological device, a make-believe designed to ward off angst or anything else: the fable created by religion was by no means unknowingly utilitarian, it was an end in itself and was utterly self-sufficient.

Humanity had received a sublime vocation: 'We are not temporal beings dissolved by time,' the Greek *Acts of Andrew* declared, 'in some degree we can lay claim to greatness; above all, we belong to the One who takes pity on us.'[23] The world was no longer inhabited by two living species, the gods and

human beings, confronting one another: for God encompassed that world in its entirety within his immense love and had a sublime destiny prepared for it; a Christian believer felt in his heart that same love, that love itself and discovered God present within him.

So one abased oneself before this loving deity, one 'belonged' to his lofty project; faced with his grandeur, one acknowledged oneself to be a sinner and offered up to him the 'contrite heart' to which the Psalms, already, referred, thereby recognizing his sovereignty and praising and exalting it.[24] As can be seen, through the very responses that it provided, the new religion prompted questions and hopes far greater than those of paganism and far more loving and personal than those of the impersonal intellectualism of Neo-Platonism (which, nevertheless, was partly to provide the inspiration for the mysticism of the Sufis and that of the pseudo-Dionysus). Our existence on earth was no longer an absurdly brief transition from one nothingness to another; whereas philosophical sects such as Epicureanism and even Stoicism could progress no further than that idea.

The formidable originality of Christianity (which resembles nothing else, except perhaps Judaism) ought to deter people from ascribing its success to the 'ambience' and the 'expectations' of a whole society, or to a 'new' pervasive religiosity or the angst of the era, or to the famous 'eastern religions' whose diffusion in Europe is sometimes claimed to be a symptom of those expectations and to have prepared the way for Christianity. The truth is quite the reverse. Those oriental religions were simply banal paganisms, with a tinge of eastern promise. It was to its difference, its originality that Christianity owed its success. We must perforce resign ourselves to the fact that not everything in history can be explained by 'the state of society'.[25]

Many explanations can be found to account for why the

new religion found acceptance: its acute sense of fraternity and love for one's neighbour, which (according to the *Epistle to Diognetes*) was the human race's imitation of God's love for humanity; its charitable works which were quite unlike the 'euergetic' patronage of the wealthy pagans who funded edifices and spectacles; its community spirit, for (something quite unthinkable for pagans, who never communed in their beliefs) the Christians flocked together to celebrate their religion;[26] and the collective fervour of their dominical meetings at which the Eucharist regenerated the faithful.

DID CHRISTIANITY ALSO MAKE THE HEART BEAT FASTER?

Some kind of heartfelt spirituality must have been generated, but how are we, today, to be sure of how it happened? In such a context, a historian seeking documents is to be pitied. A prayer, the words of which spring from the heart,[27] is born and dies in a single instant; a sigh of devotion or a burst of praise leaves no more trace in history than the brief 'I love you' of two inarticulate lovers. Think of all things that have been lived through but never expressed! The very particular love that one feels for a deity, such as the 'ready-made' love that a convert discovers in his heart,[28] is hard to describe. Believing in God, fearing him and loving him becomes so customary and normal that one does not think to speak of it.[29] One withdraws into it more often than one reflects on it aloud.

Furthermore, as with many other convictions, it is possible for faith to be complete and effective without stirring the heart and making the heart beat faster. Similarly, it is not always the case, whatever Apollinaire may claim, that 'France palpitates within the heart of every soldier' (except, perhaps, implicitly).[30] That is why historians of World War I continue

to wonder whether the forces fought out of patriotism. The fighters themselves did not know why they stood firm. The prose texts of early Christians seldom flow with the milk of evangelical kindness and have nothing to say about the emotions: they have more pressing concerns (morality, orthodoxy, polemics . . .) than teaching people to express their feelings or cultivate inner spirituality as if it were some rare plant. All that would come a few centuries later.

Love did occupy the subconscious minds of believers and motivated their faith, but their primary preoccupation was morality and it was this that they needed to demonstrate.[31] Divine love remained their own, private business. For a convert, the great change was embarking upon a holy life, under the supervision of fellow Christians. *The Shepherd of Hermas* prepared its numerous readers for the obedience that the Church expected from the faithful. Once one had been admitted to the Church, the keyword was 'discipline', rather than 'love'.[32] You would seek in vain for love in the *Commentary* to Origen's *Canticle of Canticles*. Love is something that is mentioned only by protreptic, 'converting' texts such as the last pages of *The Epistle to Diognetes*, in which exaltation-prayers prevail over request-prayers and which speaks movingly of the mutual charity between God and his creatures. Poets too may speak of love: 'Like the liquor from ambrosia or the perfume of nectar, faith flows into me from the very breast of the Father.' The Syriac *Songs of Solomon* sing of the waters of the gushing spring that arises in the Lord, where all those who thirst may come to drink and 'become believers'.[33]

3

THE CHURCH: ANOTHER MASTERPIECE

On the subject of belief the Christian sect asked the pagans a new and aggressive question: 'Which is the *true* religion, yours or ours?' This question of truth may now seem natural, immediate and eternal in every domain, but for centuries it was not. I have in the past wondered whether the Greeks truly believed their myths but the answer was simple: the question of the truth arises less often than one might suppose. We do not always ask ourselves, on every subject, whether this or that is true (or we even avoid asking the question, out of prudence or respect), with the result that we ourselves do not know whether we believe it true or not. The fact that the question of the truth is not raised creates the illusion that there might be periods of faith in which everyone is a believer; but the fact is that if people did pose that question, a minority of them at least would discover that the object of their presumed belief aroused no response at all within them.

TRUTH EXPRESSLY CLAIMED AND FAITH PROFESSED

When a pagan learned that a distant people worshipped gods unknown to himself, he did not raise the question of whether those gods were true or false. He was content with that 'objective' information. For him, the gods of others were gods unknown to him whom it might be a good idea to import into his own society, in the same way as one acclimatizes to one's own environment exotic plants that may prove useful; or he might acknowledge that the gods were all the same, wherever they were, but could be known by different names. Just as an oak tree is an oak tree wherever it grows, the proper names of gods can, like common nouns, be translated from one language to another: Zeus is called Jupiter in Latin and Taranis in Celtic. According to Caesar, the Gauls worshipped above all Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva and pictured them more or less as other peoples did.

However, it sometimes happened that a city rejected or expelled certain deities, not because they were false but because their cults were immoral (they would be judged by their rites, for those crude religious organisms hardly possessed any other organs upon which to pass judgement). An unbelieving pagan seldom declared 'The gods do not exist, they are not true.' He would limit himself to saying, 'It is pointless to devote a cult to them, thinking thereby to curry their favour and acquire their protection.' [1] One only makes a point of declaring that a belief is false, instead of leaving it in peace, if it stands in opposition to the belief that oneself professes and that one explicitly holds to be the only truth. To parody Hegel, you might say that any sense of being right seeks the death of anything 'other'.

On this point, Christianity was distinguished by an even more striking feature: it was a religion that professed its faith.

To be a Christian was not enough; you had to declare yourself to be one, profess your faith, for a Christian had a personal relationship with God (as in Judaism and in the Psalms) that was unknown to paganism. One even endured martyrdom in order not to deny one's faith. A pagan, however, professed nothing, did not declare his belief in the gods: given that he addressed a cult to them, it went without saying that he believed in them! It was said that every people 'had' its own gods; and every individual could 'have' his (*theous nomizein*).[2] One would only worship the gods one wished to and when one wished to. *Se vuoi*, *come vuoi*, *con chi vuoi* (If you want, as you want and with whom you want). It was only with the advent of Christian exclusivity that the verb 'believe' came into use (what I really mean is 'expressly believe and say so'; I am not speaking here of *pistis*, that childlike trust, full of hope, in the aid of a god): the Christians did not 'believe' in the pagans' gods, and vice versa. The verb 'believe' is only used by unbelievers, by early Christians who no longer believed in Jupiter and by modern historians and ethnographers who describe the 'beliefs' of other times and other places.

AN ALTOGETHER COMPLETE ORGANISM: A PROSELYTIZING CHURCH

Christianity was, moreover, an altogether complete organism, which paganism was not. Like paganism, it involved rites, but also a mass of other things that paganism lacked: sacraments, holy books, liturgical meetings, oral propaganda in the form of homilies, an ethic and dogmas. And just as one had to profess one's faith and respect Divine Law, one had to believe in those dogmas and sacred stories about the Fall, Redemption and the Resurrection. A Christian undergoing a crisis of doubt with respect to such things[3] could not fall back upon the resource available to pagans, namely that of

dismissing whatever they found unbelievable in their myths as simply inventions by the poets. Christianity thus introduced yet further novelties: theological quarrels, heresies, schisms and the repression of the latter too.

Christianity also constituted a virtually complete countersociety that redistributed wealth via alms. It had engendered a whole canon of religious literature. Paganism, for its part, was simply a religion, whereas Christianity was a belief, a source of spirituality, an ethic and a metaphysics, with an ecclesiastical authority presiding over the whole manifold. It filled the whole of space. For pagans, an individual's or a group's relations with the gods certainly constituted an important domain, probably the most important and significant,[4] but it was not the only one. It had to be carefully and piously managed, but there were other domains to manage too, for the pagan religion did not cover everything. In contrast, Christ's religion dominated everything, since the whole of life was oriented towards God and subject to his Law. One respected the various virtues out of piety, so as to obey God; and sin offended God even more than it offended morality. That is why being a Christian became and remained the identity of the faithful who were one day to form 'Christendom'.

Finally, Christianity possessed one particular peculiarity that made it unique in the world: this was a religion that was also a Church, a belief that exercised authority over all those who shared it, supported by a hierarchy, a clergy by its very nature superior to the laity; and this Church was strengthened by a geographic framework. Alongside love, asceticism and a purity that rose above the lowly world, the psychology of the Christians incorporated a taste for authority. Paganism had never encountered anything comparable to this powerful, all-enveloping machine of conquest. Temples of Mercury and of Isis were to be found more or less everywhere and there were people who, out of all the existing deities, felt a special

piety toward Isis, but there was no Isis Church, nor any pope. There were priests of Isis, but no clergy. The 'religion' of Isis was no more than an aggregate of individual pieties and sanctuaries, all quite distinct from one another. The established regime was that of free enterprise. Any individual could set up a temple to his preferred god, just as he might open a shop.

By legalizing the Church, firmly establishing it, favouring it and adopting Christianity as his personal religion, Constantine was to fortify a complete organism, setting in motion a formidable machine that would gradually provide a framework for the masses, convert them to Christianity and even send missionaries out to convert foreign peoples. For Christianity was characterized by one further peculiarity: it was a proselytizing movement, whereas paganism and Judaism seldom tried to persuade others to adopt their deities.[5] Not content with being professed and taking the trouble to declare itself to be true, Christianity was a universalist religion.

Universalism was also a feature of paganism and the wisdoms of the ancient world: any stranger could worship Zeus, Stoicism was open to all – even women – and in Plato's *Meno*, geometry is rediscovered by a slave. However, those were not conquering wisdoms. Each expressly considered itself the only true one and entered into bitter polemics with its competitors, but was content to runs its own little shop of ideas and there 'wait for clients'. Such wisdoms were not at all monopolist, for they never imagined that they would conquer the world or even had a duty to conquer it.

If anyone had felt it his duty to predict to Chrysippus that the whole world would one day be Stoic, the latter would have been astonished. In consequence and in the absence of proselytism, those wisdoms remained the province of the literate. In contrast, the Church was to set out to win over all and sundry, both the humble and the great, and to impose a

religious monopoly. Chrysippus thus left the way clear for Saint Paul to become the first universalist . . .

What was the origin of this unique peculiarity constituted by the existence of a Church? This is one of the great problems in the history of Christianity. Presumably Christianity, which began as a Jewish sect, forever retained the principle of authority over its faithful, as did most sects: a strongly structured group tends to close its ranks and strengthen conformity among its members.[6] The 'Church' (*ecclesia*), that is to say the assembly of its future people that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet, wished to build upon the shoulders of his disciple Peter, was an extension of the assembly (*qahal*)[7] of the chosen people: one could not be a Christian without joining that assembly. This raises another great problem: the national exclusivity of the chosen people was replaced by the exclusivity of an international 'party': the party of Christ. Thanks to Constantine, it began to be possible for this to establish itself as 'the only party'.

The Church was the compact tower to which *The Shepherd of Hermas* refers. Every one of the faithful found himself or herself constrained to become a similar, smooth stone that could be incorporated in this fortress, so as to raise it ever higher.[8] But in order to build it up, one had to build oneself up as a sanctuary of purity (a project glimpsed by the pagan philosophers but not by the over-praised 'Mystery religions', in which initiates were simply beneficiaries).[9] Christian texts were to dwell more on the matter of obedience and charity than on the Gospels and the humanity of Christ.

The two religions thus differed radically by reason of both their 'discourse' and their deeper but less visible differences. For each, the words 'god'[10] and even 'religion'[11] had quite different meanings. This is why Christianity was suspect and hated among ordinary people. In its 'discourse', it resembled nothing known, so it had to be distrusted; and Christianity

was a religion that surely was not really one (it did not even have sacrifices! What horrors could be taking their place?). What caused the populace to persecute Christians was a phobia: they were different, not really foreigners, yet you did not know where you were with them. We shall discover a similar situation when we come to consider Christian anti-Judaism.

CHRISTIANITY WAS A RELIGION THAT TOUCHED EVERY LEVEL OF SOCIETY

It was a distrust that the Christians did not deserve. They were not part of the legendary 'religion of the poor and the slaves', but constituted a proportion of the population in which all classes were represented. They included educated, prominent citizens (many of whom were their bishops) who were powers within their cities, and also 'middle-ranking plebeians' who owned a house,[12] ran a household and knew how to read.[13] As early as the 200s, the social profile of a Christian community was more or less comparable to that of the society that surrounded it.[14] Available to it was not only a whole body of pious literature, the work of clerics, but romantic works too (described by Renan as 'voluptuously chaste'). I cannot deprive my readers (any more than Saint Jerome deprived his) of the torture of a martyr who was delivered up, bound hand and foot, not to the lions but into the clutches of a beautiful courtesan.[15]

This was an urban ambience in which Christianity was handed down from father to son and it is sympathetically described by Clement of Alexandria. It was, indeed, a very good ambience, one that a Marxist might credit with the production of 'class literature'.[16] The Christian virtues were barely distinguishable from the general prescriptions for a good lifestyle and seemly behaviour. At table, when the time

came to drink, you had to emulate the Lord who, at the Last Supper, said 'This is my blood' and then drank the wine with dignity, seemliness and good manners.[17] Clement aimed his work at the ruling class of rich 'notables' who were in need of advice regarding good taste, modesty and discretion in their style of fashion and their domestic behaviour. Their level of spirituality was quite low[18]; while attending pious assemblies, they paraded a modest and benevolent air, but as soon as the assembly was over their manner reverted to that of their 'classy' brethren.[19]

Far from constituting yet another sect given to prophecy,[20] illuminism and 'speaking in tongues', in expectation of the imminent reign of Christ on this earth, Christians lived in communities of families under the wing of their bishops, unaffected by intellectual or extremist heresies and respectful vis-à-vis the Empire and the established authorities. In many cases, the conversion of the father of the household entailed that of the entire family, slaves included.[21] As was prescribed by the First Epistle to Timothy and the Apostolic Constitutions, they lived 'a calm and peaceful life, in piety and gravity' that meant more to them than the sublimities of the Epistle to the Romans or devotion to Christ in person. Being a Christian meant, first and foremost, being virtuous and, in contrast, paganism seemed riddled with vice: for, if one is to believe the Epistle to the Romans or Hermas, the pagan world was nothing but vice. Christians, for their part, were normal, even praiseworthy people, a far cry from the apocalyptic sects that hoped for the destruction of Rome, that Great Prostitute, that Babylon. Christians regarded themselves as members of the Empire and subjects of the emperors for whose preservation (*pro incolumitate imperatorum*) they beseeched the Lord at length[22] every week.

Over and above its evangelical spirit, its culture of spirituality and the future exaltation of the suffering Christ and

his Virgin Mother (Byzantium and Saint Bernard were yet to come), Christianity held out other attractions that were unknown in paganism and were powerful enough to prompt most conversions: the warm piety that inspired this religion of love, the collective fervour of the long, weekly gatherings of a church community cult, the joyful hope[23] of a supernatural destination, a peace of mind that was very different from the Stoic *ataraxia*, and above all, the 'bourgeois' moralism to which certain German historians refer.[24] It would seem that a streak of Puritanism existed among the respectable lower middle classes (*plebs media*). All this can only have reassured the public authorities if ever they deigned to enquire into the matter.

Christianity practised all the virtues famous among the pagans, so it is unclear whether Constantine's savage legislation against sexual waywardness, after his conversion, was or was not of Christian inspiration.[25] It was certainly legislation concerning virtue, but Christian virtue was indistinguishable from the pagan variety. Public morality had been written into legislation ever since Augustus, Domitian and the Severus emperors. Among pagans, Puritanism was an aspect of higher morality, so there was no need for the Christians to invent it. On occasion, public order won out over Christianity. Around 222, the bishop of Rome, Callistus, had authorized women of the high nobility to enter into concubinage even with a slave, provided the latter was a Christian. Constantine, in reaction, reverted to healthier doctrines: if a noblewoman did such a thing, she would be reduced to slavery, as would any children born from such a union.[26]

A SECT FOR 'VIRTUOSI' OR A RELIGION FOR ALL?

Any weakness of Christianity lay in truth in its very superiority, the originality of which was appreciated only by an elite

composed of 'virtuosi', to borrow the expression used by Max Weber and Jean-Marie Salamito.[27] Without Constantine's despotic decision, it could never have become the regular religion of the whole population. In fact, it only did so at the price of degradation: what the Huguenots called Papist paganism, modern historians call popular Christianity or Christian polytheism (on account of the cult of saints), while theologians call it the 'implicit faith' of the uneducated.

Paulo minora canamus: there was a superstition which also contributed to the sect's success. The general conviction was that this world was a prey to deceiving demoniacal powers from which the Truth brought salvation. People believed in such demons much as we believe in the existence of microbes and viruses. The convulsions of babies were as much the work of demons as was rioting by the urban *plebs*, and one could be possessed by a demon or even by a whole legion of such creatures. The New Testament is full of stories about miracles in which the Lord ejects demons (it is a favourite theme of the Gospel of Saint Mark). Among the pagans, Christians were reputed to be skilful exorcists 'and exorcism was a very important means of missionary work and propaganda.'[28]

So long as the imperial regime was not officially Christian, the new religion had to remain a sect. Despite the persecutions,[29] it attracted from all classes a spiritual elite that included intellectuals of renowned talent, such as Tertullian and Origen. 'At the time of Plotinus, there were many Christians' among the educated.[30] Right from the start, Christianity boasted among its founders an educated man, in the person of the evangelist Saint Luke. In the second century already, Justin, Tatian and the hero of the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* had been drawn to Christianity only after investigating a wide range of philosophies. The meeting between Christianity and Greek philosophy was a decisive event, for this doctrinaire religion laid claim to a dignity

equal to that of the philosophical sects of the day[31]: sects that were philosophical in the ancient sense of the word 'philosophy', that is to say they involved not just a theory but also a rule for life, a doctrine that was to be put into practice.

In the second century, people mocked the Christians or shrugged their shoulders in irritation and dismissed them. In the third century, they either fulminated against them or discussed them seriously. Celsus and Porphyry only ventured to argue against this philosophical religion once they had made a close study of the Scriptures. Its adversaries criticized it in the way that one criticizes avant-garde thinking: it was a new invention, a fad with no past, no national roots (whereas even the bizarre religion of the Jews possessed those); it consisted of puerile sophisms based on anachronistic texts. Worse still, this religion implied a metaphysics and a lifestyle and so considered itself a philosophy. The point was that a religion was open to all and sundry, both the great and the humble, whereas only a literate social elite was expected to accede to a philosophy. Christianity thus offered the poor something that should have remained a privilege of the elite. From the point of view of this sense of caste,[32] Christianity was an upstart religion for the poor and for slaves. One very high-born lord, Symmachus, declared that he would not become a Christian as he did not wish to resemble his door-keeper (*ostiaria*).[33] He was forgetting that he would also have resembled his contemporary, Saint Jerome, whose wit and prolific *oeuvre* was the talk of the town in literary circles both pagan and Christian, where his snide remarks about his fellows were much appreciated. Symmachus would likewise have resembled his other extremely aristocratic contemporary, Saint Ambrose, who knew his Plotinus rather better than Symmachus did.

The Christianity question was all the more crucial given that, for six or seven centuries already, paganism had been in crisis. It was crammed with too many fables and naiveties; a

pious and educated pagan no longer knew what he should or could believe. How should he picture the gods? How did an acceptably philosophical deity relate to the 'city gods' of the established religion? Paganism was so uncertain of itself that by now it existed as little more than a set of questions. Among the simple masses, paganism was generally accepted and was therefore solidly rooted; it could have endured indefinitely. Meanwhile, among the educated, although it was respected as a national tradition, the burning question was: 'What exactly is true in it?' Attempts at apology or reappraisal were limited to an overall respect for a past that guaranteed stability in all domains. They produced sophisticated allegories and magico-mystical theurgies, or sought sublimation in high-flown philosophical technicalities.

Except, possibly, among 'virtuosi' religious pagans such as Aelius Aristides, paganism had nothing to offer that was remotely comparable to Christianity,[34] nor did the famous 'eastern religions within the Roman Empire'. The sole exception was Judaism, which was then enjoying great success across the Empire from Rome to Asia. Christianity owed part of its own success to that of Judaism, like itself an original religion with a sense of the sublime and the pathetic in relations between the deity and human beings. In short, Christianity was an innovation, an invention, a creation – all things that are the very stuff of history, even if certain historians cannot bring themselves to admit it, no doubt on account of a false concept of historical determinism and the role played by anterior conditions.[35]

Certainly, among educated pagans between 200 and 300, Christianity, by virtue of its originality, its pathos, its dynamism and its sense of organization, left no one indifferent. It aroused either keen interest or a violent rejection. Not that its triumph was inevitable: on the contrary, only Constantine's conversion was to bring this about.[36] This keen interest is the

explanation for Constantine's conversion and for every other conversion also. For Constantine, as for all converts, it was a matter of personal faith, a sincere and disinterested conviction. This was no ideological calculation: only a prejudiced sociologist could hope to persuade anyone that what the emperor was seeking in the new religion were 'metaphysical bases for the unity and internal stability of the Empire'.[37]

4

THE DREAM OF THE MILVIAN BRIDGE: CONSTANTINE'S FAITH AND HIS CONVERSION

What kind of a man was Constantine? A brutal and efficient soldier and politician who became a Christian out of calculation? Between about 1850 and 1930, ever since the great Burckhardt, this was what was frequently affirmed, either out of a party spirit or through a distaste for hagiography. But it is hard to see how his conversion could have benefited him politically. His was a political mind in no need of approbation and support from a Christian minority without influence and widely detested. He cannot have been unaware of the fact that worshipping a deity other than that of the majority of his subjects, including the powerful ruling class, was not the best way of winning over hearts.

CONSTANTINE'S SUBLIME MISSION

It has also been suggested that Constantine was a confused syncretist, 'a poor man feeling his way' (as André Piganiol put it), who confused Christ with the Invincible Sun, the imperial

god. In reality, the idea of that confusion and 'syncretism' stems from an erroneous interpretation of the imperial coinage[1] and also, as we shall see, ignores the abyss that separated pagan piety from Christian piety. Constantine wrote copiously and the texts that he produced, his laws, sermons and decrees and the letters containing his personal declarations, are Caesarian documents on a par only with those of Marcus Aurelius and Julian. As Dörries states, they reflect his convinced belief in his mission[2] and in every line testify to his highly orthodox Christian beliefs: in God, Christ, the Logos and the Incarnation.[3] His theology was sometimes naive but never confused. He was certainly not a great theologian and regarded Christological quarrels as altogether 'Byzantine' *avant la lettre* for, as he saw it, they did nothing but split the Christian people apart to no purpose.[4] But only someone who had never read his works could regard him as a 'syncretist' who confused Christ with Apollo or the Sun, the name of which he never pronounces except to declare that the sun, moon, stars and elements are all governed by the all-powerful God.[5]

Today, historians, whether confessional or unbelievers, are in agreement regarding Constantine as a sincere believer. Is it really necessary, after Lucien Febvre, to repeat that religion, in which temporal interests are almost always involved, is nevertheless a specific passion that may, on its own, become the target of political conflicts? In what respect is Constantine's conversion any more suspect than that of the Indian emperor Asoka, who openly declared himself to be a Buddhist? We should shun arguments that are purely political just as much as those that are purely social.[6]

But first, to indicate the stature of this extraordinary Christian, let us set up a deliberately bizarre comparison far from Rome and the year of 312 AD.

The scene is St Petersburg, on the evening of 25 October

1917. Under the direction of Lenin and Trotsky, the Bolshevik Communist Party had just seized what, nine months before, had still been the Tsarist Empire. On that evening, for the first time in the history of the world, a social revolution, the only one worthy of the term 'revolution', had just put an end to the old society. The Bolshevik Central Committee had installed itself in the Smolny Institute. Night had fallen. In an isolated room, on two mattresses set side by side on the floor, Lenin and Trotsky, instead of sleeping, spent the night talking in low voices. We do not know what they said but we can guess what Trotsky was thinking: that the day that had just ended was the most important in history since the origin of the human race. The fact was that up until then the evolution of humanity, which is what we call history, had been nothing but an interminable, unjust and absurd pre-history. It was only on that 25th October, with premonitions of a classless society and a coherent organization of humanity, that history worthy of its name had begun. The Bolshevik proletariat had just become the redeemer of the human race.

What followed was to be a less radiant affair, but that does not concern me here. As we know, it can sometimes happen that a man believes himself called to change the face of the world. Lenin and Trotsky may have believed themselves to be the instruments of decisive change in world history. And indeed, guided by the Party, the proletariat, that 'universal class', had, in a concrete fashion, begun to liberate itself from oppression, dialectically condemned in advance, and thereby also to free the whole of humanity from its weighty past. What remained to be done was establish Communism on an effective footing. At the time of Constantine, the Christians thought that the Incarnation divided the history of humanity into two parts. Following the Resurrection, the omnipotence of those demons, the pagan gods, had already been mystically shattered[7] and now all that was needed was to establish

Christ's earthly reign and make the Christian faith available to all. Constantine reckoned that he had done precisely that.

Any comparison will ring false on at least one point, if not on all. Constantine's 'revolution', the 'Constantinian turning-point' or *Wende*, of which German historians write, was religious, exclusively religious. Constantine established the Church within the Empire and bestowed upon central government a new function, that of assisting the true religion. By doing so, he made it possible for Christianity one day to become one of the major world religions. He neither changed society nor Christianized the law and it would be over-optimistic to hope that Christianization improved mores generally. But in his own eyes and those of his Christian contemporaries, Constantine did infinitely more than that. Thanks to God's compassion towards humankind, he was able to open for the human race, still wandering in the shadows, a way of salvation (*iter salutare*), illuminated by the incomparable radiance of God.[8]

The comparison with Lenin therefore seems to me justifiable in one decisive respect: the Bolshevik revolution and the Constantinian 'turning-point' both rest upon a 'rationalization' of the meaning of history, a rationalization that was materialist in the case of the former, divine in the case of the latter. No, Constantine did not turn to the Christian God out of superstition, but because – we do not know why – he imagined that the god of the Christians was more likely than other gods to bring him victory. No, the Christogram painted on his soldiers' shields was not, as is sometimes claimed, a magic sign, but rather a profession of faith: Constantine's victory would be victory for the true God. And no, nor did he believe that if he promised to serve God, he would, in exchange, obtain victory. He did not appeal to Christ as a pagan would make a vow and thereby enter into a contract with some god, or as imperial priests, in the name of the State, would make a

vow that would benefit the emperor. Constantine converted because he believed in God and the Redemption: that was his starting point and he believed that Providence was preparing the human race for entering upon the path of salvation (as he himself was soon to put it), and in consequence God would hand victory to his champion or rather, as he was to write more humbly, to the servant whom he had chosen.

That is why Constantine's importance in the course of human history turns out to be so enormous, as he himself declared and publicized in an authentic text that nobody ever cites, although it is certainly worth doing so in full and can be found in a work by Gelasius.[9] It proclaims that Constantine was the human being who played the greatest role since Adam and Eve or since the creation of the world and its human souls, and that his victories in 312 and 324 were part of God's eternal divine Decree. At the launch of the Council of Nicaea, the emperor at first paused modestly before the closed door of the church in which the council was to meet; then he asked the bishops to be so kind as to admit him to their Christological debates. He explained his personal reasons for requesting this:

> From the moment when those two beings, created at the very beginning, failed to observe the holy and divine Decree (*prostagma*) as scrupulously as they should have, the weed [of ignorance of God] to which I have just referred was born. And it has thrived and multiplied ever since that couple was expelled by God's order. This [bad] matter has gone so far, what with the perversity of human beings, that from the East where the sun rises to the West where it sets, the foundations [of humanity] have been damned. The domination of an Enemy power seized upon the thoughts of men and stifled them. But the [divine] Decree also reflects the holy, immortal, indefatigable commiseration of the all-powerful

> God. So as, in the course of all the years and all the days that have passed, countless masses of peoples have been reduced to slavery, God has liberated them from that burden through me, his servant, and will lead them into the total brilliance of eternal light. That is why, my dear brethren, I believe [*pepoitha*], with the purest confidence [*pistis*] in God, that I am henceforth particularly distinguished [*episemoteros*, in the comparative form] by a special decision [*oikeiotera*, also in the comparative form] of Providence and by the brilliant benevolence of our eternal God. (Translated from the French by Janet Lloyd)

With false humility, he repeatedly calls himself simply God's servant, *famulus Dei* or *tou Theou therapon*, taking over the title by which Moses was known.[10] He speaks of 'my duty and my service' (*he eme hyperesia*).[11] In the eyes of his historian and panegyrist, Eusebius, he really was the new Moses of the new Israel.[12] He does not, as any Byzantine emperor would, claim to be on earth what God is in heaven; rather, he says he is personally inspired and aided by God. When, as early as 314, he writes to the governor of Africa telling him that 'God's will has conferred upon him [Constantine] the government of the whole universe'[13] (which in truth did not fall into his hands until ten years later), he does not remind him that, according to the Apostle, all power stems from God, but intimates that he himself has already been given a personal mission by God. He was later to repeat this claim in even stronger terms.[14] Leaving to Eusebius the task of legitimating the Christian monarchy in general, he himself believes and declares that he is an exceptional case because, as we have read, an 'altogether personal' (*oikeiotera*, in the comparative form) grace from Providence has allowed him to reunify the Empire and rid it of its persecutors.

Political and religious history was thus returned to its

correct path: Licinius, Constantine's eastern rival, had just been crushed and an ecumenical council in Nicaea was soon, in 325, to re-establish the unity and authority of the true faith. It was at the opening of this council that Constantine made the speech cited above. The emperor was at the peak of his glory: he had just reunified the Empire in the name of Christ and was about to reunify the Christian faith by setting up the council which, he wrote, would lead to the renewal (*ananeosis*) of the world.[15] By putting an end to the persecutions and establishing the Church throughout the Empire that incorporated the major part of the human race, he had offered all human beings the material possibility of salvation and opened up the path leading to knowledge of the true God and the true Faith. The speech cited by Gelasius shows that, in 325, Constantine considered himself to have changed the fate of humanity.

All the texts penned by the emperor testify to a Constantine convinced that he had personally been chosen by God.[16] At this same time, he wrote to his new Palestinian subjects as follows: 'The most obvious and manifest demonstrations have revealed that, by the goodness of Almighty God and by the frequent acts both of encouragement and assistance which he has seen fit to perform on my behalf, the harsh regime [of the persecutors] which formerly gripped all humanity has been driven away from every place under the sun'.[17] Two years before his death he again told his bishops gathered in Tyre that his victories had been so shattering that peace now reigned everywhere; Providence's intervention in his favour was so manifest that Barbarians too were now converting to the fear of God.[18] Having thus burnished his own halo, Constantine promised the Synod that he would not fail through weakness to implement the theological decisions made by the assembly.

Having established himself as the foremost preacher in his

empire, he gathered his courtiers together in his palace each week and 'would systematically expound Providence both in general and in particular cases',[19] particularly in his own case. We still possess one of his sermons, the *Oratio ad Sanctos* or the *Good Friday Sermon*, in which he declared that God himself had been his guide in all things.[20]

In 1917, the Bolsheviks were victorious because they were moving along with the flow of history; in 312 and 324, Constantine was victorious because he was moving in the direction in which God was guiding him. The role played by Constantine was all the more impressive given that it took place in a universal history that was to be of short duration: the world and mankind had been created only four or five millennia earlier and the end of the world would not be long in coming. In those days, a metaphysical event could be recent news. Heracles had truly existed, but that was a long time ago. Christ, on the other hand, was a historical figure whose life and death were part of imperial history. The Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection were recent events that were related as marvels (of which there were many in those days), not as myths recognized, without naivety, to be just that: myths.[21]

AN UNEXCEPTIONAL DREAM AND A SEEMINGLY PARADOXICAL CONVERT

To judge by their consequences, the conversion of Constantine was a providential event, as was his victory at the Milvian Bridge. Of that, Christians were convinced. Likewise, the famous dream which, the night before the battle, had ordered Constantine to display a Christian symbol, had undoubtedly been sent by God, as Constantine himself was the first to believe. Now that the time has come for us to embark upon a study of his conversion, which will engage us for some time,

let us begin with the most trivial and most intriguing factor: that famous dream.

Readers will remember that, on the eve of the battle of the Milvian Bridge, a dream had revealed to Constantine the Christogram, a sign and promise of victory. At that time, certainly, nothing could be more commonplace than reaching a decision in the aftermath of a dream that was considered to be a message sent from Heaven. It is only we moderns who consider this dream to be a strange historical event typical of the age, on which historians never cease to express their views.

Dare I suggest that this Christogram, glimpsed in a dream, can be reduced to the simplest of psychological phenomena? As may happen in our own experience more than once in a lifetime, what Constantine saw in his dream expressed, in an allegorical and graphic form that is part of the language of dreams, his own decision to convert to the God of the Christians in order to win the battle: a sudden decision reached in the course of his nocturnal thinking. Or possibly, if his conversion had already taken place (we cannot be sure when),[22] what he saw in his dream, in the thoughts of his slumber, was his own conviction that God would give him a victory that would in truth be the victory of Christ, the true leader of his armies. The couple of anecdotes presented in note 23 may help to convince sceptic readers.[23] The Christogram, a product of oneiric symbolization, and the words, 'By this sign you will conquer' were images in which that decision and conviction were conveyed on the dream-screen. The credulous dreamer interpreted that oneiric imagery literally and so displayed it on his helmet,[24] on his soldiers' shields and on his own standard, signalling his faith by the initials of the name of the true Lord of his armies. In similar fashion, six centuries earlier, a Greek king of Egypt had, in a dream, invented an Egyptian god destined to enjoy a great future and also the name of this god, 'Serapis', a word

that had no meaning in the Egyptian language but, to Greek ears, had an Egyptian ring.[25]

Constantine was a lucid decision maker. We should not be misled by prodigies that, in his age, were unexceptional. True, in 310 Constantine 'saw' Apollo, who predicted a very long reign for him. True, in 312, in a dream or a vision, a Christian 'sign' that would procure him victory was revealed to him. True, that victory seemed miraculous. But in those days it was normal for anyone, whether Christian or pagan, to receive an order from a god, in a dream[26] that was then believed to be a true vision.[27] Nor was it uncommon for a victory to be considered due to the intervention of a deity.[28] Reduced to its latent content, the dream of 312 clearly did not determine Constantine's conversion but, on the contrary, showed that he had either just decided to convert or, if he had already converted several months previously, that he had now decided to display the signs of his conversion publicly.

So one fine day in 312, Constantine decided to be a Christian. One can hardly imagine a man such as he asking the Church to decide for him. It is far more likely that, at the moment of his conversion a vision of the future, imprecise and virtual, but nevertheless overwhelming, seized hold of him: for such a man as Constantine, what would be the point of converting if not to achieve great things?

Nevertheless, after his conversion, he did not have himself baptized. (At the time, such a delay was usual, for baptism constituted a further step in commitment rather than the very threshold to the Christian faith.[29]) Instead, like many others,[30] he delayed doing this until the approach of death, twenty-five years after the victory at the Milvian Bridge, for, as his panegyrist put it, 'he trusted that whatever sins it had been his lot as mortal to commit, he could wash them from his soul.'[31] He had, however, become a Christian: after all, he was a brother to the bishops, since both they and he loved

God and they were all God's servants.[32] All the same, to our eyes the consequences seem surprising: this champion of Christianity had never in his whole life been able to become part of a congregation, assist at a Mass, receive the Eucharist, take communion. Only on his deathbed, at last baptized, could he declare, 'I am hereafter numbered among the people of God and . . . can join myself with Him in its prayer.'[33]

Given that baptism wiped out all previous sins, it has been supposed that Constantine delayed because he had on his conscience the murders of his wife, Fausta, and his talented bastard son, Crispus – that is, if those murders, the reasons for which escape us, really were sins in his eyes, which is by no means a foregone conclusion. After all, for at least two centuries it had been accepted ('just as the postulates of geometricians are', as Plutarch put it)[34] that, in a ruling family, the murder of close relatives was licit, in order to ensure the interest of the throne. Worse was to come at Constantine's own death.[35]

The real reasons for the delay must have been political. The military and juridical functions of an emperor constantly obliged to draw his sword were hardly compatible with Christian charity which, at that time, consisted of a doctrine of non-violence.[36] (To the great indignation of the pagan Licinius, certain provincial governors, being Christians, did not dare to sentence highway brigands to death).[37] 'The sins that his mortal condition had caused him to commit' – to cite the words of his biographer – were, I presume, sins that a sovereign could not avoid committing.

Constantine's son, his successor, the extremely pious Constantius II, brought up as a Christian by his father, was to follow in his father's footsteps and receive baptism only on his deathbed. Baptism had a constraining effect.[38] I am told by Hervé Inglebert that, in 380, soon after his succession,[39] Theodosius, who came from a Christian family, was baptized

at the age of thirty-three because he was gravely ill. In consequence, in the course of the fifteen years that remained of his reign, he fell into the clutches of the redoubtable bishop assigned to the imperial residence, Saint Ambrose of Milan, who was in a position to refuse him communion and could thereby bend Theodosius to his will.

It was not Constantine's late baptism, but his conversion that pagans falsely ascribed to his supposed remorse for the murders of Fausta and Crispus, both killed in 326. They claimed that Bishop Hosius persuaded the emperor that 'infidels who converted were immediately exonerated from every crime.'[40] But that is a chronologically impossible explanation.

5

THE MOTIVES, BOTH MAJOR AND MINOR, FOR CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION

This conversion, the date of which is known to within two years, was later than 310, the year in which we find Constantine pausing on his way to worship in a temple dedicated to Apollo.[1] The young prince had never been a persecutor (tolerance had, in fact, been established ever since 306, in the West at least). Was he already a convert when he had that fateful dream in the October of 312? Did he convert as he departed on the campaign against Maxentius[2] or did he convert that very night in the course of one of those sudden revelations like the blinding ecstasy that felled the future Saint Paul, on the road to Damascus? It must surely have been following a long period of unconscious maturation. One day, in the course of a public address, Constantine did, in fact, let slip a story about an old memory from over twenty years earlier that seems to have left its mark upon him[3]: in 303, he had heard it said that Apollo had recently let it be known, in Delphi, that he could no longer deliver truthful oracles because the presence of the 'Righteous Ones' on earth

prevented him from doing so. When Emperor Diocletian asked his companions who these 'Righteous Ones' might be, an officer in his Guard replied, 'The Christians, I suppose.' That was the point at which Diocletian decided to launch what Constantine called the Great (and cruel) Persecution of 303.

THE 'BLACK BOX' OF CONVERSION

But we shall never know what the deep, underlying reason for his conversion really was. It would be pointless to speculate upon the attitude of his father, himself a co-emperor, who avoided creating martyrs, or upon its maternal origins (one of Constantine's sisters had been given a Christian name). The ultimate motives of any conversion are impenetrable, locked away in an unopenable 'black box', as psychologists put it (or, if one is a believer, in what is known as a state of actual grace). The experience of religious sentiments is an affect; belief in the raw fact of the existence of a being such as a god is a representation that remains inexplicable. Far from those feelings explaining it, the representation is what causes those sentiments, of which an unbeliever may possess some inkling even without activating belief.

So let us not speculate about Constantine's conversion, for belief is a factual state the causality of which eludes us. It cannot be the object of a decision, nor can it appeal to any proof, nor does this bother it. One intelligent and sensitive individual possesses faith, another equally intelligent and sensitive does not (and must refrain from voicing objections to the former: as René Char observed, 'One does not interrogate a man who is in an emotional state'). It is not possible to explain that difference, which is why we resort to the word 'belief'. Faith and reason may be related in some way, but only partially and insufficiently. Without gratuitous

faith or a Revelation, there can be no true belief. For all that we may chant along with Saint Thomas Aquinas, '*Praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui* [let faith supply what our senses cannot]', empirical knowledge does not itself lead to belief. Faith convinces those who are already convinced; God is sensed in the hearts of believers. To paraphrase Alain Besançon, Abraham, Saint John and Mohammed did not know, they believed; while Lenin believed that he knew.

THE DIMINISHING END OF A SPYGLASS

The new religion also offered the imperial convert a number of 'secondary advantages' that I shall enumerate in no particular order. Its fascination lay in its superiority over paganism and its avant-garde dynamism; on that account it seemed the only religion worthy of the throne; and the throne could choose it, by virtue of every Caesar's right to indulge in a whim. It presented a political and military opportunity that was not to be missed, namely the chance to become the protégé and hero of Providence and to play a major role in the history of salvation (plenty of Caesars harboured huge ambitions of this kind). But was it a matter of political interest or of pious and disinterested zeal? A pure soul or a pure intelligence might make that distinction, but for a man of action such as Constantine, the dynamism of a doctrine and the supernatural opportunity that it offered him in the political domain were indistinguishable from that doctrine's truth.

Let us start with the least important conditions. The dignity of a sovereign could not be confined within paltry limits: the kings of France never refrained from parading their mistresses. Similarly, a Roman emperor was allowed his imperial whims and could propose that his subjects participate in a cult devoted to his favourite, Antinous; or he could, on his

own initiative, choose a favourite god and build him a temple. Constantine's conversion was a personal whim.

Secondly, the dignity of the imperial throne was certainly worth a Mass. As sovereign, Constantine did not consider it enough to be a tacit Christian (as Philip the Arab was reputed to have been, seventy years earlier). The glory of his throne was such that it deserved to be associated with the true religion, which alone was worthy to maximize its splendour and demonstrate the lofty inspiration of the sovereign. Bruno Dumézil has shown that, following what are known as the Great Invasions, the Germanic sovereigns paraded their Christianity as a mark of their high degree of civilization. The same thing was to happen in Russia and Central Asia around the year 1000: princes would convert to Christianity for the sake of their own religious prestige and so as to appear modern. Modernity could be crucial to a potentate's pomp.

The idea of monarchic pomp and the throne's high dignity was extremely important then. Our own democratic or dictatorial age has forgotten that, in the old monarchies, politics and warfare were not all that mattered. In the eyes of many of today's historians, that pomp constituted 'propaganda', but that word is anachronistic; it rings false just as, in our own day and age, the expressions 'fear', 'love' and 'respect' for one's master and 'wishing him a long life' would have a false ring. Nowadays one disseminates propaganda in order to become or remain master, to win over citizens who are not persuaded in advance, whereas in the past one made a display of pomp simply because one was the legitimate master, as all loyal subjects of the king were presumed to recognize. Pomp was a means of dilating the royal ego and of demonstrating that it was worthy of such devotion.

The dignity of a sovereign dictated that his throne be surrounded and adorned by all that was most beautiful and noble. In the eyes of Constantine, Christianity was the only

religion which, thanks to its truth and superior nature, was worthy of a sovereign. Let me draw an example from more humble beings to illustrate the kind of religion of culture with which present-day states raise their profiles. For a modern government and its minister of culture, the brilliant and classy thing to do is to support avant-garde art rather than the old-fashioned academicism that most of the population really prefers. Now, paganism was the choice of the majority, but it was old-fashioned, whereas Christianity, even in the eyes of its critics, was avant-garde. It was therefore likely to improve the image of the throne at a time of high culture, when modernity mattered. This reason connected with pomp (which seems lightweight only to us moderns, for whom the sole type of great history is either economic, social or ideological) is one of the major explanations for a fact that may well surprise us: despite three dynastic changes in a single century, all Constantine's successors were either Christians, as he was, or else declared enemies of the Christian religion (Julian and possibly Arbogast); none were neutral or indifferent.

As can be seen, I am not claiming that Constantine was a purely spiritual man, but historians who regard him simply as a calculating politician are selling him short. According to them, he sought the Christian party's support against his enemies, Maxentius and Licinius. This is to do him a psychological injustice. To be sure, some of his motivation was self-interest, but it was more subtle than they allow. As Lucien Jerphagnon has pointed out to me, Constantine 'must have said to himself that, to implant itself so thoroughly despite such strong opposition, Christianity must have had something going for it that the old cults lacked'.

As the above remarks suggest, Constantine did not adopt Christianity on the basis of a realistic calculation, but rather, without overestimating his chances, he sensed in the new religion that nine-tenths of his subjects rejected a dynamism akin

to his own powerful personality. This is not a vain quibble, as experience demonstrates: it often happens that if an ambitious man has a wider view than ordinary opportunists, he does not so much calculate the relation of the forces involved and the chances of success of a particular party but is attracted by the dynamism of the avant-garde and by its powerful machinery and organization.[4] Constantine did not say to himself that the future belonged to the Christians, but he did sense in Catholicism an energy and an understanding of power and organization akin to his own. To take an example: the episcopal correspondence of Saint Cyprian presents a picture of the strict and meticulous government of the Church that is not very attractive, except, that is, to a reader with faith and who himself possesses the same sense of authority and unity as that clearly possessed by Cyprian and that constantly demonstrated by Constantine in his manoeuvres for or against Arius and against the Donatists.

DID CONSTANTINE ACT IN GOOD FAITH?

But let us now tackle the essential point: did or did not Constantine act in good faith when he converted? As we have seen, Constantine's epic crusade was temporal as much as spiritual; it succeeded, in two stages, in establishing tolerance and extending the power of the Church throughout the Empire, and also in reuniting the Empire under the sceptre of Constantine alone, who declared himself to be, thanks to his victories, the spiritual leader of the world.[5] All the same, as Konrad Kraft points out, we all know that religious sincerity and the most worldly of interests can often make good bedfellows.[6] What can be more common than killing two birds with one stone? In some circumstances, it would indeed be hard not to do so. After all, what am I doing in writing this little book? I believe I am promoting historical truth and I

also hope to serve my own interests. But we should not go so far as to speak of bad faith: Constantine's faith was crude but true, as is proved by one fact in particular: to bring about his conquests, he had no need at all of the Church, and he could perfectly well have reunited the Empire without becoming a Christian. So, although not entirely disinterested, given that his interests were in need of very little promotion, Constantine may be considered an idealist. He was lucky in that he never found himself in a position in which he had to choose between his faith and his power.

Did he, though, seek to connect the throne and the altar? No, politics and religion were separate and politics consisted in the art of achieving what one desired, an authentically religious goal for instance. Constantine did not force the altar into serving the throne, but put his throne at the service of the altar. He considered part of the State's essential mission to be to promote the affairs and progress of the Church.[7] This was entirely new: the great, systematized introduction of the sacred into politics and power dates from Christianity, for in earlier mindsets such a union could only be sanctioned by a dusting of superstitions.

WAS SUPERSTITIOUS CALCULATION INVOLVED OR WAS THIS A NORMAL RELIGIOUS SITUATION?

It has sometimes been thought that Constantine was simply continuing the religious policy of his pagan predecessors: he felt himself in duty bound to maintain good relations between the Empire and the deity (*pax deorum*, peace between earth and Heaven).[8] The motive behind his relations with the Church was to set up a cult of the true God 'in order to deflect his anger from the human race and the emperor himself, to whom God has entrusted the government of earthly

things' (translated from the French), as Constantine put it in a letter addressed to a governor of Africa, as early as 314.[9] No doubt, but we need to be more explicit. In the first place, the idea that the wrath of God or that of the gods spares pious societies necessarily signified normality: a healthy society is one that has a religion. The pagans persecuted the Christians not as rebels against the emperor and his gods, but because they seemed religiously abnormal; and Constantine was later to consider the duty of a prince to be not narrowly political, but to watch over the wellbeing of his people or even the whole human race. Furthermore, a pagan emperor's relationship with the gods differed greatly from Constantine's relationship with his God: the pagan religion was only one part of life, possibly the most important, but not covering everything, whereas the religion of Christ dominated every aspect of life.

Every pagan emperor or top magistrate of the Republic was also the Minister for Religious Affairs (*pontifex maximus*) and was the manager of all public cults, which were quite simply the particular cults of the Roman Republic (its own private cults, you might say). They never imposed upon ordinary individuals, who all observed their own private cults within their own households. Whether public or private, religion was very undemanding and never exceeded its accepted limited role. The ancient gods were more concerned about themselves than about providing a transcendent basis for the ruling power or establishing a human Law or guiding kingdoms or empires. In the eyes of their fellow citizens, the pagan emperors were credited with no sacred transcendence; their legitimacy was not sanctioned by the grace of the gods. Those supreme magistrates of the Republic were considered to govern by virtue of the public will, or rather the supposed consensus of all the citizens.[10] Certain gods protected them if that supreme magistrate had entreated them to do so or

because the State priests regularly, through a kind of renewable agreement, each year repeated their public prayers for the Republic's wellbeing. Every ordinary individual could do likewise on his own behalf. When Christianity established its own fundamental relationship, it replaced these pacts concluded either on a one-off basis or by a regular renewable agreement: power now came from God and the sovereign reigned by the grace of God; far from contenting himself with the role of a Minister for Cults, the sovereign had to place himself at the service of religion.

It did sometimes happen that the pagan gods unexpectedly had a pretender of their own choosing accede to power, but they always operated on a 'one-off', irregular basis, which is precisely why the lucky success of such a pretender would seem a providential event: for his sake the gods had taken the trouble to come forth from their Olympus. Christian Providence, in contrast, was permanently in operation, ensuring the order of the world for the glory of God. We should, however (along with Thomas Aquinas) distinguish between, on the one hand a 'natural' Providence that watches over the good order of all things, including the institution of monarchy, and, on the other, an 'extraordinary' Providence that targets 'particular ends'. It was this latter kind of Providence that brought Constantine to power, on personal rather than institutional grounds, in order to have the true religion triumph. This became the conviction of Lactantius,[11] according to whom God, for his own designs, selected Constantine in preference to all others; and it must also have been the opinion of Constantine himself, who doubtless never considered himself to be an ordinary 'king by the grace of God', like all the rest.

The fact remains that Constantine constantly repeated that his piety had ensured him the protection of Providence and victory over his enemies. He, Constantine, had been

victorious, whereas God always crushed princes who were persecutors. His own Christian faith, which he owed to heavenly inspiration, had ensured 'his personal safety and the happy state of public affairs'.[12] The Empire could only prosper if the true God was worshipped. The unity of all, in orthodoxy, was equally essential. 'I knew that if I were to establish a general concord among the servants of God in accordance with my prayers, the course of public affairs would also enjoy the change consonant with the pious desires of all.'[13] He likewise explained, in 314, to the vicar of Africa, that it was for the sake of the prosperity of the Empire that, as soon as he was set on the throne, he took measures against the Donatist schism.[14]

He never departed from that doctrine. As early as the winter of 313–14, he wrote to the proconsul of Africa which, along with Rome, had just fallen into his hands, telling him, 'the setting at naught of divine worship, by which the highest reverence for the most holy and heavenly [Power] is preserved, has brought great dangers upon public affairs.'[15] That belief, held by pagans and Christians alike, persisted right down to the eighteenth century. It was not so much a hope or a fear, rather a rationalization of a need for normality: a society without religion would be monstrous and therefore not viable. People would not be sure quite what to fear, so they would fear everything; on the other hand, in a pious society, their hopes were boundless, if uncertain.[16] What was paramount was neither hope nor fear, but the imperative need for normality.

It has sometimes been concluded that the underlying motive for Constantine's conversion had been narrow-minded, superstitious and self-interested. At the end of his life, Constantine himself declared, 'God has always protected me and watched over me.'[17] It has been said that this conqueror's God was first and foremost an all-powerful protector. To be sure; but

this was not so much a superstitious belief, rather an aspect of Constantine's megalomania. Like Napoleon, he believed in his star; and Christianity was not so much an amulet as his own personal epic. Not that that makes him any less Christian. He placed his hopes in Providence purely because he believed in God. I learn from Henri Bremond that theocentric piety, in which one loves and worships God for his own sake, has always coexisted with a more anthropocentric piety, in which the faithful at the same time place their own personal hopes in God.

That being said, the temporal hopes that Constantine placed in God were both pious and touching. In times of doubt and distress, plenty of simple Christians have, like him, placed their trust in Providence. Immediately following his victorious campaign over his eastern rival in 324, Constantine wrote to the governor of Palestine, declaring that those who fear God are less anxious about the reversals that they suffer and more inclined to continue to hope. They know that their eventual glory will be all the greater.[18] This surely strikes a personal note: Constantine is evoking his own anxieties at the time of the wars of 324 and 312.

That declaration was one of those autobiographical confidences that were considered to be in no way demeaning, in those days of intense internal life, even for men such as Saint Augustine or Julian. On other occasions, Constantine humbly confessed to bishops gathered at a synod that he had not always known this Truth and, in his youth, had even doubted it. In one of the sermons that he preached each week to his courtiers, he confessed that he wished he had possessed the virtue and knowledge of God from his earliest childhood; he then went on to declare that God also welcomes those who only acquire their faith in later life.[19] 'When I was younger,' he confessed to the Synod of Arles, 'I sometimes underestimated divine justice and failed to see that God penetrates

all my heart's secrets.'[20] Those words of Constantine's seem to prefigure Saint Augustine's *Sero te cognovi* ('late have I known thee'). Constantine, a Christian among Christians, also wrote to Arius, a future heretic, begging him no longer to divide the community of the faithful and so to restore to his emperor days of serenity and peaceful nights, in place of his tears and present discouragement.[21] In his edicts, his style is more authoritarian, threatening or even bragging and far less tearful.

But we should not be viewing Constantine through the diminishing end of a spyglass. He was a prince of exceptional stature who conceived of a vast project that involved at once piety and power. His ambition was to bring into being a vast, entirely Christian entity that would therefore be united both politically and religiously. That age-old ideal of a Christian Empire was still an inspirational dream in the time of Dante. It was a dream that Constantine realized deliberately and out of piety, not out of self-interest and not just by chance. In a communication addressed in 325 to his new eastern subjects, the preamble to which constitutes a long personal prayer, Constantine tells his God: 'I strive, . . . putting my shoulders to the task, to restore again your most holy house,'[22] that is to say the universal Church. Now let us return to my parallel in dubious taste involving Lenin and Trotsky: they too wanted power and seized it, and unfortunately their disinterest is beyond doubt: like Constantine, they wished to bring about the salvation of humanity.

Proof of Constantine's messianism lies in the fact that his dream extended beyond the Empire: it was universal, 'internationalist'. The conversion of the rest of humanity had already begun. For 'beginning from the shores of the ocean, I have raised up the whole world, step by step, with sure hopes of salvation.' That was what he dared to write in an extravagant diplomatic message,[23] as from one man with a

conscience to another, to his rival, the Shah of Persia. He told him of his horror of blood sacrifices and begged him, in the name of his God 'who loves the humble and the forgiving', not to persecute the Christians who were already to be found in the Persian Empire. He backed up this message with the usual argument: Providence punishes princes who are persecutors. Christianity was acquiring a diplomatic dimension.

SECONDARY ADVANTAGES

The task that Constantine, with his visionary piety, had set himself was to establish everywhere the religion that he loved and believed to be true. All the same, as Harnack points out,[24] it was to the full advantage of the State to win over that solid organization, the Church. Yes; but let me remind that great historian that, in doing so, Constantine rallied at the most one-tenth of the population, while alienating the remaining nine-tenths. Besides, would the Church be a support to the Empire, or its rival? Had Constantine attempted to impose his own authority on the Church, he would have made a bad choice, for the corporation that he favoured considered itself the ultimate adjudicator and was more concerned for itself than for the imperial power. Christianity brought with it the age-old problem of relations between Church and State, a problem that paganism had not faced, just as it had not faced the problem of Christianity as a Church.

This Church would sometimes manifest a charitable and prophetic imagination that could be called truly Christian. However, like any corporation, institute or syndicate, its principal concern has been to preserve itself in a meticulous and prudent manner, even at the time of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, and to display pomp befitting its power. As early as the fourth century, the opulence of a bishop of Rome, the haughty Damasus, was scandalizing pagans[25]

and humble Christians alike.[26] Power conflicts arise in any organization; when the election of that same Damasus was contested, his supporters attacked his opponents, causing 137 deaths. At that time, this was standard behaviour for all those with power.

Cold calculator that he could sometimes be, Constantine may well have had the following thoughts during the course of the year in which his subconscious desire to convert was developing:

1 It was necessary, in one way or another, to have done with the Christian problem, for it was getting nowhere. For three-quarters of a century, the public authorities had been dithering: should they persecute or let well alone? In the decade leading up to 312, the persecutions had turned out to be ineffective and had done nothing but disturb the public peace.
2 There could be no disadvantage in authorizing a religion which, given its earnestness and its morality, had encouraged the heads of families to practise all the virtues, including respect for the authorities and obedience to emperors, even those who were persecutors.
3 Should he encourage paganism and Christianity to coexist peacefully, while keeping himself out of the whole controversy? Given the exclusive, demanding and intolerant nature of Christianity, it would be hard to remain neutral, as the Christian Constantine was aware, since he himself felt similarly exclusive and insistent when it came to his religion . . . .
4 If he did favour the Christians, he would win the favour of a small, organized and committed group, which would be no great advantage and would saddle him with a sect which, as was common knowledge,[27] was constantly divided by internal quarrels: schisms and heresies would

become so many State affairs. But, in truth, was that likely to displease a man such as Constantine? This Christian so obsessed by authority and unity would enjoy resolving problems of discipline and dogma, issuing orders and introducing measures of repression. As well as governing the Empire, he would acquire the 'presidency' of a second organization, the Church, in which he took a passionate interest and it would be he who would determine the State's relations with this rival. Barely one year after his victory of October 312, he intervened in one of the Church's internal conflicts, the Donatist quarrel. A character such as Constantine could not become a Christian without also becoming the leader of the Christians, as is quite clear since he did indeed become both.

6

CONSTANTINE, THE CHURCH'S 'PRESIDENT'

On 29 October, immediately after his victory at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine made his entry to Rome at the head of troops who bore on their shields a thitherto unknown symbol, the Christogram. The significance of this was not that all these men had themselves become Christians,[1] but that this army was the instrument of a leader who, for his part, had; and also that his victory belonged to Christ. The Christogram was Constantine's means of professing his faith. I wish we knew whether this Christian leader then conformed with the ancestral custom of victorious generals and, when he mounted the Capitol with his soldiers, he there celebrated the traditional sacrifice to Jupiter. However, we do not.[2]

EQUIVOCAL BEGINNINGS

In any case, the Christogram and no doubt also the rumours circulating would have been enough to reveal to the Romans that their new master had joined the camp of the Christians,

'atheists' who were enemies of the gods and the whole Roman order. However, the general reaction remained limited to an indignant stupefaction, for in the following year, at a meeting in Milan, Constantine and Licinius solemnly proclaimed that the pagan and the Christian cults were both free and equal.

So Christianity was apparently no more than the private religion of the ruler and it was, as yet, impossible to tell whether Constantine would follow up this declaration with steps of a more public nature. The Empire remained pagan, public cults continued and Constantine continued as the High Pontiff. In other respects, however, Constantine immediately behaved as was to be expected if the famous account of his conversion and his dream were true.[3] By the winter that followed his victory, he was restoring to Christians the possessions that had been confiscated from them during the persecutions, and no compensation was offered to those who had appropriated them. He also began to extend favours to the clergy: he sent money to the Church of Africa (but not, he specified, to the Donatists, for he was already aware of its internal conflicts) and he dispensed the Christian clergy from all public duties and obligations, so that they could devote themselves solely to serving God, for the greater wellbeing of the Empire and all human beings.[4]

Tradition has it[5] that in that same winter of 312–13, Constantine had a great church with the official basilica design built for the bishop of Rome (it is now the church of Saint John Lateran). It was clear for all to see that the emperor himself was a Christian, that he was ordering churches to be built and that he favoured the Christian clergy. But so what? Building was a normal activity for any emperor, particularly normal on the part of a sovereign who revered one particular god (Elagabal had established a temple, a cult and a clergy for the Syrian Sun; and Aurelian had built a temple for the Imperial Sun). Besides, it was even more normal on the part

of a conqueror in duty bound to thank the god to whom he owed his success: Augustus had founded temples and even a festival of Apollo in thanks for his victory at Actium.

Augustus, precisely, was a case in point. As a conquering and grateful general, he had declared his thanks to Apollo, but he had made no attempt to foist that god upon his subjects. Constantine, following his victory, did neither more nor less. He had a statue of himself set up in the Roman forum, depicting him as a warrior grasping, as a trophy, his own standard (the famous *labarum* that was marked with a Christogram, that is to say the initials of the name of his god). The inscription ran as follows: 'By this salutary sign, the true proof of valour, Constantine liberated the Senate and the Roman people from a tyrant and restored their ancient splendour.' [6] All the same, it was not customary for generals to act as standard-bearers.[7] But then this particular conqueror was brandishing his very own, Christian, banner. The most generous interpretation was that the pagan population had nothing to fear from what was simply the glorification of a victory. Nonetheless, those who were ambitious now knew which religion was personally pleasing to their master.

Not only was Constantine a military and political leader both efficient and brave, he was also a prudent and cunning politician. In the aftermath of his victory, it was important not to worry his pagan majority and to allow it to believe that his Christian faith was a purely personal matter. And it was important that no one should suspect the messianic plans in favour of Christ that Constantine was harbouring.

So successful was he in making his moderation credible that he won over, as his dupe (or his accomplice) a Christian writer who was close to the Court, namely Lactantius, who published a pamphlet on the terrible punishments that God inflicted upon princes who were persecutors (one of the most recent of which was Maxentius). Here was a Christian writer,

writing for a Christian friend without even mentioning what a divine surprise it was to have a Christian as an emperor. He paid equal honour to the two legitimate co-emperors, Constantine and Licinius, who, he claimed, were both God's instruments for promoting peace in the Church and each of whom had been the recipient of a heavenly dream. Better still, Lactantius briefly related Constantine's dream about the initials of Christ to be inscribed on his soldiers' shields, without actually saying that Constantine was, himself, a Christian.[8] In conclusion, Lactantius only goes so far as to express his hope that the Church will forever live on in peace.

Other willing dupes of the emperor's moderation were pagan aristocrats and educated people, who thus managed to remain for as long as possible unaware of their sovereign's true religion.[9] On the famous triumphal arch alongside the Colosseum which the Senate, that refuge of pagans, erected in 315 in honour of Constantine and to celebrate his victory[10] and his ten-year reign, we can still make out the gigantic letters that record that this liberator of Rome acted 'spurred on by the deity', *instinctu divinitatis*, a catch-all deity that each and every one could interpret in his or her own way, doggedly refusing to understand it as Constantine did. Two years previously, a panegyrist had come to thank Constantine in person for having liberated Rome from the tyranny of Maxentius; he had declared that so chivalrous and perilous an action had surely been inspired by the 'divine power'. Eight further years passed and another admirer appeared, declaring that the victory of the Milvian Bridge had assuredly been due 'to that deity who supports all the undertakings' of the sovereign.[11]

That vague deity accurately reflects the nature of late paganism. Since no one really knew what the gods were, how they were made, or how many of them there were, people prudently resorted to a vague expression such as 'the deity',

'the divine (*to theion*)' or even 'the god', which could pass either as a monotheistic singular or as a polytheistic collective noun, just as we sometimes say 'man' when what we mean is 'men, in general'. At this point, some historians speak of 'syncretism'. I myself am doubtful as to whether syncretism was at all prevalent and do not think that Constantine's contemporaries mixed up different gods as much as the word implies, and I am quite sure that Constantine himself never took Apollo and Jesus to be the same god. Why not, instead, detect quite simply, as the late lamented Charles Pietri put it, 'a neutral kind of monotheism'[12] that used an adroitly vague deist expression: a prudent expression that made it possible not to offend the religious opinions of anyone, including those of the pagan speaker himself, who was intending to be neither aggressive nor apologetic?

AN EQUIVOCAL MASTER

Neutral tact such as this was *de rigueur* when addressing the emperor. Constantine's conversion was his own personal business and, even if one knew him to be a Christian, there was no need to state it openly. In any case, one had no right to do so. Constantine himself acknowledged his Christianity openly when addressing another Christian, bishops or a provincial governor who was a convert,[13] but the reverse did not apply: a Christian who needed to speak to the prince took care not to appeal to their common faith.[14]

But the major reason for such reserve was, I think, that even if Constantine did openly declare himself to be a Christian, he had become Christian through his own initiative. He had not been received as a fellow Christian by those close to him. Unlike Saint Augustine (who was thirty-two years of age at the time: almost as old as Constantine) and others (*competentes*) aspiring to be admitted to the Church, he had not

spent long days being 'catechized, exorcized and examined'.[15] It is hard to imagine a sovereign who had just presented the Church with the most unexpected of triumphs to revert to being a simple catechumen, a novice or apprentice.

Around 311 or 312, he must have engaged in long conversations with certain bishops (Hosius being one of the few whose names are known), conversations in which the imperial pupil, infused with knowledge, knew just as much as his masters. Chapter IX of his *Oratio ad Sanctos*, a sermon that he pronounced before his Court, begins as follows: 'As for ourself, we have never been aided by any lesson given by men; it is true [he adds with compunction] that all things which, in the eyes of the sages, are praiseworthy in life and men's actions, are so many gifts, favours dispensed by God.'[16] Unless I am very much mistaken, he means that he owed his conversion to nobody else; his only master was God.

Since he had not been baptized (and was to be only a quarter of a century after his conversion), he had not had to make a public confession. He stood alongside the Church, rather than belonging to it and, as Alföldi remarks, 'The church has no right to prescribe to him, and can only look up to him with heartfelt gratitude.'[17] So what had he done, around 312, that made him Christian? Well, he simply decided that he was: he no longer believed in false gods and no longer offered them sacrifices, and that was enough.[18] He became a Christian all on his own. However, this did not make him any less Christian, Saint Cyprian would have said, since he had renounced error in order to benefit from the Truth and the Christian faith.[19]

So what was there to show that he was Christian? Well, all his public actions, his wars, his laws! Besides, Christ's name was constantly on his lips, he often made the sign of the cross on his brow,[20] he addressed a prayer to God in the preambles to his decrees,[21] and he had placed an image of

the Christogram at the entrance to his palace. Eusebius, his biographer, could imagine no better proofs. Did he ever even attend a Christian assembly, a community meeting? Given that he had not been baptized, he would have been obliged to assume a lowly rank there. Instead, he himself gathered his courtiers around him in his palace, to listen to his sermons and so that he could teach them Christianity. He held an unheard of position, the only one suitable for a sovereign and he was soon to be behaving as a kind of 'president' of the Church, maintaining relations with it on an equal footing. He was happy enough to call the bishops 'my dear brethren',[22] but he was certainly not their son.

ESTABLISHING THE CHURCH

This President of the Church soon gave up any idea of converting retarded minds and eradicating paganism, and instead devoted himself to the task that was the most urgent: achieving his dream of having the true God worshipped throughout the territory of the Empire and, to this end, encouraging the Church by allowing it to establish itself freely and widely, by enriching it and himself steering it with good sense and setting a good example by his own faith, and by constructing many churches. No doubt, over the years the number of conversions prompted by self-interest increased and emperors were able to employ a fair number of Christians as high officials, provincial governors and even military leaders.[23]

Alongside Constantine, the Church now stood firmly within the Empire. Whatever is sometimes claimed, it was not Christianity that taught us to separate God and Caesar, for they had been distinct from the start and it was a Caesar who held out a helping hand to the Church, in order to guide it. Constantine regarded the Church not as a power to support his own authority, but as a body over which to exercise

that authority. He could not countenance the idea that within his Empire any force at all should elude his control. It did not follow that this *serva* would never become a *padrona*, however. As Constantine saw it, true religion was necessary to the wellbeing of the Empire, for it was the supreme purpose of all things; and who better than Constantine to guide it towards that end? However, his Roman and subsequently his Byzantine successors were not to embrace that Caesaro-Papist ambition.

Constantine, personally, distributed huge sums to the Church (for the emperor, like any aristocrat, had both a right and a duty to act as an *euergetes*, a benefactor). But for the rest, by virtue of the principle of equality between the two religions, he simply granted Christianity the same privileges as were already enjoyed by paganism. He did dispense the clergy from fiscal and military obligations[24] but, after all, the pagan priests were already granted such dispensations[25] and he also granted them to the Jewish clergy.[26] He gave churches the right to receive bequests, but there again, the major temples likewise possessed that right.[27] On the other hand, it is not clear to what extent he granted the bishops the right to be chosen by Christians to be the judges or arbiters in civil lawsuits,[28] which would, of course, have paved the way for a future competition between civil and ecclesiastical courts of law. The Church of the persecutions was transformed into a wealthy, privileged and prestigious Church which, in the cult of its martyrs, exalted what had now become its past.[29]

One move of Constantine's was to prove laden with heavy consequences. He had immediately internalized the exclusivity of the Church: unity, that is to say one sole exclusive truth, was an end in itself, and any divergent opinion and any rejection of the Church's authority were to be repressed by the sovereign as heresies or schisms. This anticipated the medieval 'secular arm', of sinister memory. As early as 314,

Constantine had his bishops settle the problem of Donatism. He gave executive powers to the theological decisions reached by the ecclesiastical councils, exiled insubordinate bishops, and passed a fulminating decree against heresies in general. He reprimanded Arius in a personal letter in which he dictated, in his own hand, the true doctrine, and he justified himself before his bishops for his less than deferent behaviour towards Athanasius, explaining that he himself had been in the saddle, with other things on his mind and that was how it was that he had failed to recognize this venerable, if insupportable, patriarch.[30]

BOTH CHRISTIAN LEADER AND ROMAN EMPEROR

He respected the abyss that separated the clergy from the laity. He set up synods and great councils and to them he delegated the task of defining Christology, much as a Roman magistrate would 'appoint judges' in a civil lawsuit. At Nicaea, he presided over the debates concerning the relations between the Father and the Son, but abstained from voting on the matter. Nevertheless, in the corridors surrounding the council chamber, he had no doubt suggested the solution, one probably put to him by Hosius, namely the dogma that is still today the one accepted by Catholics.

By what authority did he do all of this? At a banquet offered to his bishops, he had declared, by way of a jest,[31] that he was himself a 'bishop from outside', *episcopos ton ectos*. What precisely he meant by this is a matter of debate.[32] Given that he was not a member of the clergy, was he 'as it were, a bishop'? Was he some kind of bishop for outsiders, for pagans? Was he, so to speak, a lay bishop who watched over (*episcopei*) external matters such as the Empire's temporal interests? In my own humble opinion, his jest reflected first and foremost

an affectation of modesty: by declaring that he was himself 'just a kind of bishop', Constantine was implicitly acknowledging that he was not superior to the other bishops.

But what kind of a bishop was he? No particular kind so, you could say, any kind he wished to be. The President of the Church perhaps, or its guardian or high protector. This non-baptized layman was laying claim to indefinite, informal but extensive rights over the Church. As for the Church itself, it remained submissive to this benevolent prince who was sympathetic to it and both protected and propagated the Christian faith, while affecting a certain personal modesty. In 314, it was to him that Christians rebelling against the Church turned, begging him to judge their case: 'They are asking for judgement from me, who am myself awaiting the judgement of Christ!'[33] But he did then indeed himself either act as judge or himself appoint the judges to hear the case, which in effect came to the same thing. As Bruno Dumézil notes,[34] up until the end of the century all decisions concerning orthodoxy or discipline made by Constantine or his Christian successors came from the ruling sovereign. The clergy played, at most, an intermittent, consultative role. It was not always to be so.

Constantine had 'placed' the Church in the Empire, adding it to all that the Empire comprehended. Nevertheless, with the matter of faiths set aside, he remained an essentially Roman head of State. As we have seen, his ferocious legislation on sexual matters did no more than conform with the 'repressive' tradition of earlier Caesars. He certainly took good care not to abolish spectacular entertainments and, following his example, his successors, passing express laws,[35] secured the continuing tradition of circus races, theatres, striptease acts,[36] hunts in the arena and even gladiators.[37] All these were things that, over the three preceding centuries, the bishops had condemned, rejected in horror and forbidden to their religious flocks, but they were things that, for

the masses, represented prosperity, consensus, civilization, the 'welfare state'. As can be imagined, it is hardly the case that mores in general became Christian. It is, however, worth noting one detail: in 566, divorce by mutual consent was re-established.

7

AN AMBIVALENT CENTURY, WITH AN EMPIRE AT ONCE PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN

Up until the late 380s, under Constantine's successors it continued to be possible to distinguish between the personal faith of the emperors and their actions as sovereigns who reigned over both pagans and Christians.[1] The Empire was bipolar, with two religions.[2] The religion of the emperors was not that of the majority of their subjects or even, to all appearances, that of the imperial institutions: these for a long time remained pagan, at least in Rome itself.

One can speak of a Christian Empire only from the extreme end of the century onward, and even then it took what has been called the first of the wars of religion to bring that bipolarity to an end once and for all.

A VERY ROMAN, EVEN PAGAN CENTURY

As has been said above, Constantine was a very Roman emperor. The erection of many buildings was, *par excellence*, an imperial action. Constantine covered Rome, Jerusalem,

indeed the entire Empire with churches. In Algeria, the old capital, Cirta, received one or even two churches and took the opportunity to change its name to Constantina. With the construction of St Peter's in the Vatican, the Christian masses for the first time acquired a church in which they could come together around their bishop. Nevertheless, in the name of bipolarity, Constantine also presented Rome with two great thermal baths that bore his name and he completed the building of the huge civil basilica begun by Maxentius. He is not known to have built any charitable constructions or any that provided hospitality for travellers.

The foundation of a city was an equally imperial action. As is well known, one of the great acts of his reign was the founding of Constantinople in 330, that is to say the transformation of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium into a large town and an imperial residence. Was the emperor's intention thereby to create a second Rome and set this Christian Rome in opposition to the old pagan capital? Gilbert Dagron has shown that that was definitely not the case: Constantine simply wished to treat himself to a residence to his taste and to found a city. At the time, the Empire was dotted with towns that had become more or less lasting residences for a sequence of emperors: Nicomedia, Thessalonika, Serdica (Sofia), Sermium (to the west of Belgrade), Trier (where Constantine himself had resided), Milan and so on. It is however true enough that within two or three generations Constantinople was to become the Christian Rome and the capital of the Eastern Empire.

Moreover, since the great majority of Constantine's subjects remained pagan, Constantine, who desired not to lose a single iota of his power over anything or anyone, continued to be the High Pontiff of the pagan cults, both public and private, as would his Christian successors right down to the last quarter of the century.[3] Hence the maintenance of the

Empire's pagan facade. It is hard to believe, but at his death in 337, Constantine would, in accordance with the ancestral rule, be placed among the ranks of the gods (*divus*) by decree of the Senate of Rome, that bastion of paganism.[4] However, the body of this megalomaniac was buried in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, surrounded by monuments to the twelve apostles (according to Gilbert Dagron, his funeral ceremony 'was a Christian imperial apotheosis'). The last Christian emperor who was to be decreed a god at his death, at the same time as being given a Christian burial, was Valentinian[5] in 375.

Proof that Constantine wished to maintain a pagan facade is provided by his coinage[6] where everything seemed at first to continue as before. Up until 322, the reverse sides of Constantinian coins intermingled pagan deities, including the Sun, with allegorical or military figures that had appeared on the imperial coinage for the past three centuries. After 322, all the gods disappeared, but the reverse sides of the coins still did not set about spreading Christian propaganda. They remained mute on the subject of both camps and Christian symbols appeared on the coinage only as personal attributes of the prince. As was fitting, it was often the emperor in person, the head of the Roman armies, who was depicted on the reverse side of coins, where he sometimes displayed the symbols of his personal faith: the Christogram that was painted on his helmet and his victory standard, also bearing the Christogram and brandished aloft. In short, any Christian symbols were either displayed on the person of the emperor or were carried by him. They were not imprinted directly on to the coins themselves.

The reason for this was the bipolarity of the Empire. Its currency was a public institution and the Empire was bent on keeping up pagan appearances. On the coins minted by pagan emperors, what did the images of the gods that sometimes

figured on the reverse sides actually signify? Not that the sovereign imposed the worship of this god upon his subjects, nor that he proclaimed himself emperor by the grace of that god, nor even that he addressed a cult to him. The images on the coins simply conveyed an unemphatic pagan pride. Their message was that this god was the 'travelling companion' (*comes*) of the emperor. In short, the representation of a deity on the reverse side of a coin was not so much a pious image as a symbolization, through the personality of that deity, of a political value that the emperor, the first magistrate of his empire, held dear. On the coins of the Severan dynasty, the image of Serapis did not indicate that the Severan emperors were fervent worshippers of this benevolent Egyptian god; it simply suggested that their government was equally benevolent. Plenty of other coins bore on their reverse sides allegorical figures that played the same role: Liberty, Abundance, Felicity. If the Invincible Sun was the 'companion' of an emperor, that emperor was likewise invincible. That was how these relationships worked; the one was a reflection of the other or, rather, they reflected each other.

In these circumstances, what could Constantine display on his coinage? He could not use the image of Christ as a mere allegory, for that image was too venerable. Nor could he propose that his subjects revere it, for the currency was a public institution, whereas Christianity was only his own private religion. His only option was to have his coins depict himself, bearing the symbol of Christ on his own person, on his helmet just as, indeed, he bore it whenever he appeared in public.

Constantine's Christian successors were to preserve at least the semblance of a pagan facade, so as not to provoke the nobility. His son, the extremely pious Constantius II, 'in no way diminished the privileges of the Vestals; he filled the public [pagan] priesthood posts with nobles and never

prevented the Senate from allotting funds to [pagan] Roman ceremonies'.[7] And those funds continued to be forthcoming up until 382. Did he also authorize them to offer up sacrifices? We do not know. Similarly, the municipal and provincial cult of emperors persisted up until the time of Saint Augustine, particularly in Africa, but only on condition of not including sacrifices. This made it possible for many Christians greedy for honours to assume positions in the pagan priesthood without blatantly disowning their private beliefs.[8]

An elegant form of paganism thus lived on, as is testified by the distinguished and talented Ausonius. He does not hesitate to describe the Christian emperor Gratian in his capacity of High Pontiff (of paganism), 'participating in the deity' (which one?) along with the (pagan) priests.[9] Such touches of paganism rendered the Christianity of the High Pontiff acceptable to a highly cultured society[10] such as the pagan senatorial aristocracy ensconced in their palaces on the Caelian Hill.

This official and cultivated paganism, which was characteristic of the Roman Senate, was concentrated in Rome itself which had always been the seat of the great public cults. Sincere faith and the Christian religious calendar coexisted peacefully, untouched by 'syncretism', alongside the pagan cult that was still the official religion and all its festivals.[11] The last gladiator contests, the pagan events *par excellence*, took place in Rome, in the Colosseum.[12] As Peter Brown remarks, in the fourth century Rome was the Vatican of paganism, paganism that even embraced fundamentalism: the Prefect of Rome, a pagan, wanted to bury alive a Vestal who had broken her vow of chastity. Even three centuries earlier, such a punishment had been considered barbaric. It was Rome itself that was to be the seat, in 394, of that 'first of the wars of religion' which has been mentioned above (p. 84) and which was to sound the knell of paganism.

NO TOTALITARIANISM

Constantine headed a pagan-cum-Christian empire. But his great plan was still to bring about the mystic triumph of Christ and, in concrete fashion, end the reign of false gods. Why? Out of piety and for the salvation of his subjects or even of the whole human race, not on account of any doctrine of political docility.

As we have noted, historians are wary of general ideas. But neither Constantine nor the Church ever attempted to homogenize the Empire's subjects around the emperor's religion as, twelve centuries later, the monarchies of the Ancien Régime were to do because, by reason of some political doctrine or fantasy of purification, they could tolerate only one religion within the kingdom. Neither the pagans nor Constantine ever subscribed to such a doctrine. At the time of the persecutions, the Christians were never required to sacrifice to the deified emperors, only to the gods of normal people,[13] the gods of the inhabitants of the Empire. Religious conformity was a matter not of political loyalty but of civic, human normality.

Up until the 390s, the rule was to be tolerant of paganism and, in particular, of pagans themselves. Had the latter constituted no more than a minority, the emperors of the fourth century could have had them follow a few years or weeks of religious instruction, then assumed them won over and baptized them, either voluntarily or by force; which is exactly what Justinian and several Germanic kings were to do with their Jewish minorities two or three centuries later. However, such temperate violence could not be applied to nine-tenths of the Empire's population. The time was not yet ripe for that, so the only course to take was to profess repeatedly and virtuously that true conversion had to be free and sincere and that the pagans were simply stupid fools.

'It is one thing to take on willingly the contest for immortality, quite another to impose it with sanctions,' [14] Constantine declared. Throughout the fourth century, it was repeated that it was not possible to compel consciences or to force people to believe.[15] Constantine's strategy consisted in a tolerance prompted by impotence and an indifference accompanied by a show of disdain. As Barnes points out, Constantine practised a deliberate tolerance accompanied by principled reprobation.[16] 'Pagans must not be forced,' he wrote dismissively, citing his own faith as an example, 'May each retain what his soul desires and practise it. Let them keep their sanctuaries of falsehood.' [17] A page had been turned, even if the myopic masses did not notice. As a law passed in 321 put it, paganism was an 'old-fashioned practice', *praeterita usurpato*.[18] When speaking of paganism, even to authorize it, Constantine referred to it, in the text of his law, as a *superstitio*.[19]

What Constantine wished above all was to see the true God worshipped; it was not his aim to seek, charitably but in vain, to convert pagans so as to spare them damnation and hell. His was not an age of 'fishers of souls'; the primary task was to establish the Church on a firm footing, setting this stone upon the shifting sand of the pagan multitudes. In default of daring to abolish it, it was necessary to compete with this pagan cult that voiced its own claims to have assured the victories and salvation of the Empire. (Such claims were made by Symmachus and the last of the pagans.) The temporal sphere was in need of a spiritual element, because if one did not devote a suitable cult to the deity, the political future of the Empire might founder.[20] That was how Constantine, rather naively, expressed a deeper malaise that was hard to articulate, namely unease at the idea of a society without any religion.

SUNDAYS FOR EVER

Before tackling the major and most difficult reform, namely the ban on sacrifices to demons, a less painful but cunning blow, struck in 321, made the day of Sunday rest a legal institution. Manifesting a crafty turn of mind, the emperor introduced a temporal rhythm for the week (the rhythm that we still observe today), replacing the old calendar of the ancient world. He thereby managed to slip at least a few aspects of the Christian religious calendar into the course of the civil year, doing so without encroaching upon the freedom of individuals.

We should offer admiration where it is due.

1 As may or may not be known, our week owes as much to popular pagan astrology as it does to Judeo-Christianity, a fact that enabled Constantine to please the Christians without offending the pagans. In a purely coincidental similarity with the Jewish week, astrological doctrine[21] taught that each day was placed under the sign of a planet, after which it was named, and since there were seven planets (one of which was the Sun, which in those days moved round the earth), one arrived at a rhythm of seven days, one of which (Sunday, *Sonntag*) was placed under the astrological sign of the sun. This doctrine enjoyed such success among pagans that, though not necessarily adopting the weekly rhythm, they were aware of the astrological names of the seven days and so also knew whether a day was auspicious or inauspicious.[22]
2 There was an ancient Roman institution known as the *justitium*[23] according to which if some momentous event occurred in a particular year (a declaration of war, the death of a member of the imperial family, the funeral of a municipal official of distinction), the public powers

decreed a *justitium*, a day during which, in that particular year, all State and judicial activity would, exceptionally, be suspended: the Senate would not meet, the law courts would be idle and even the town shops would remain closed. A somewhat similar custom existed in the Greek world.[24]

3 Constantine decided that thenceforth, in perpetuity, there would be a *justitium* (he used that very word in his law) every seven days, on the day of the sun (*dies solis*, as he called it), the name of which was familiar to all, pagans and Christians alike. His law[25] said nothing else. It is worth noting, in passing, that this was the only time that this potentate ever mentioned this sun whose worshipper some historians (for example, Geffken and Henri Grégoire) claim him to have been, even though the context in which he mentions it belies that hypothesis.

4 Christ rose from the dead on the seventh day of the Jewish week and Christians congregated together on the last day of every week, to commemorate the Resurrection in the sacrament of the Eucharist. For Christians, the day of the sun thus became the day of the Lord (*dimanche*, *domenico*, *domingo*), the day to attend Mass.

5 Constantine went on to pass a second law in which he granted free time, every Sunday, to the army or at least to his personal guard[26]: Christian soldiers would go to church and pagan soldiers could go out of town to offer up a prayer in Latin (the language of the Roman armies, even in Greek lands), to thank the deity, the ruler of heaven, and beg him for victory and for good health for the emperor and his sons. We have already come across this nameless god, this catch-all god: it is the one to whom pagans referred when they were unwilling to determine precisely who Constantine's god was. In this instance Constantine was repaying them in their own coin.

6 Towards the end of the century, a day would come when the boredom of pious Sundays would set in. To encourage the masses to go to church to listen to the sermon, chariot races and theatrical entertainments were banned on Sunday by a whole succession of laws, laws that needed to be repeated[27] because they tended to be disregarded. Both Saint John Chrysostom, who preached in Constantinople, and Saint Augustine, in his Africa, lamented the success of the competition that such spectacles presented.

CONVERT THE PAGANS OR ABOLISH THEIR CULT?

However, Constantine and the Christians were less concerned about respecting Sundays and proselytizing than they were about eradicating the cult demons and the principal rite of their cult, namely the sacrifice of animals, or blood sacrifice, a pollution[28] that aroused physical repugnance[29] in Christians, making them shudder in holy horror. For them, the 'blood sacrifices' of the pagan religion were something altogether alien. What shocked them was not encountering pagans (for they were more or less surrounded by them) but coming upon the remains of a sacrifice. That is understandable: of the two great forms of any piety, worship through sacrifice and worship through song (or worship from the depths of the heart), it was sacrifice that, until the advent of Christianity, was the religious act *par excellence*.

It was also the most costly. In the Graeco-Roman world, it was more frequent in public cults than in domestic or village ones, where it would be celebrated only on the occasion of a banquet or a festival: a reception offered to his guests by a rich host or a folkloric festival in which peasants clubbed together to purchase an ox, the cost of which was equivalent to the

present-day price of a car. It is true that the sacrifice would be followed by a banquet in which the participants joyfully consumed the flesh of the victim,[30] leaving the gods nothing but the smoke, the bones and the pluck. Following the prohibition of sacrifices in 342 and 392, peasants continued to eat meat once a year at their folkloric banquets, but were careful not to sacrifice the animal in a ritual fashion.[31]

The fact remained that only sacrifice effectively penetrated the barrier separating humanity and the supernatural.[32] One could not love or worship without sacrificing something precious. As John Scheid tells me, the offer of blood, a life, to the gods made sacrifice effective and thus reached down to the fundamental root of things (just as do the genetic modifications or atomic fission that today make us shudder in horror). Every magic or divinatory operation thus involved a sacrifice, celebrated during the night, to increase its effect. As we shall see, Constantine never managed to prohibit blood sacrifices. His son did, but Constantine himself had to limit himself to a few partial or hypocritical measures.

When a public edifice or an imperial palace was struck by lightning, religion prescribed a consultation with the official specialists known as *haruspices*. In the intestines of an animal sacrificed to the gods, these would discern what it was that this sign from heaven foretold. In 320, the Christian emperor decreed that this practice should continue, with the *haruspices* reporting to him on their findings. What an unexpected mark of respect for paganism! Or rather, what a professional political move! For more than religion was at stake here: lightning striking public edifices constituted a politico-cosmic threat. Constantine acted as a Head of State with a keen sense of his responsibilities.

Furthermore, Constantine added that ordinary private victims of lighting strikes on their own homes were likewise authorized to consult *haruspices* (private ones, I think), on

condition that the indispensable sacrifice took place outside their homes.[33] The emperor thus never prohibited sacrificing to the gods of paganism, but he did stipulate one condition: it had to take place on a street altar or before a temple, and this would be quite difficult to organize without being seen or in the dark. The official reason for this restriction was the following: private individuals should not be laid open to the suspicion of using the pretext of a lightning strike in order to perform in their homes some nocturnal, black-magic sacrifice designed, for instance, to bring about the death of a rival or a crime far more grave: making a nocturnal sacrifice connected with divinatory magic, in order to learn whether the emperor was about to die or whether a *coup d'état* that they were meditating would be successful.[34]

Pagan emperors had already passed death sentences for those very crimes.[35] But Constantine's purpose was also to start casting suspicion on all pagan sacrifices. Here is one example of the effects of this measure: under Constantine's son and successor, the pious Constantius II, an educated man with a strong personality had continued the practice of offering up sacrifices to the gods in his own home; he was accused of divination and it was, of course, up to him to prove his innocence. As he was fortunate enough not to die under torture or confess to anything, he was eventually released.[36]

Had Constantine finally resolved to go right to the wire? Had he at last decided to prohibit sacrifices by law? It would appear not, even though Eusebius, in somewhat vague terms,[37] asserts the contrary and Constantine's son Constant [the future Constantius II] claimed in one of his laws that he was simply renewing a paternal prohibition.[38] Without delving deeply into the details,[39] it seems fair to suggest that Constantine had, in all probability, done no more than state a principle and openly proclaim his horror of sacrifices in a legal preamble of an ethical rather than a juridical nature (as was

customary at the time). The law itself no doubt contained no sanctions or precisions for its application, or else concerned a domain of application more limited than the principle itself. The upshot was that the *Theodosian Code* did not even record this rather pointless law. In yet another law, Constantine proclaimed his horror of gladiators and banned their contests, which nevertheless continued for a whole century.

The limited domain of application of the above-mentioned law on sacrifices might, for example, have affected a very real ban on sacrifices that was introduced in 323 and was directed at high-ranking officials: it ruled that they were no longer to offer up public sacrifices within the framework of their functions.[40] In actual fact, this ban affected no more than a hundred or so provincial governors, a dozen of their superiors known as vicars, and a handful of prefects of the *praetorium* (court of law). It was Constantine's successors who eventually granted the bishops a general ban. Here is the story of a pious pagan at the end of the reign of Constantius II, probably between 356 and 360: 'He went to what was left of our sanctuaries, bringing with him no incense, victim, fire or libation, for all that was forbidden. He brought only a grieving soul, a sad and tearful voice and tears brimming from his eyelids, keeping his eyes cast down, for it was dangerous to raise them to the heavens.'[41]

Despite the 'ecological' prohibition, which only affected sacrifices, Constantine's successors affected respect for a balance between Christianity and paganism. Thirty years after Constantine's death, Emperor Valentinian, at the beginning of his reign, solemnly granted 'that each person should practise the cult that inspires him or her'.[42] One could continue to be pagan, to say so, to speak of one's gods, on condition that one did not practise, did not sacrifice (or only did so at one's own risk and peril). The educated Symmachus, Libanius and Themistius were allowed to speak out and evoke their

gods, even when addressing the emperor and vainly taking up the defence of paganism and tolerance. The emperors did not systematically disadvantage pagan officials and military men in their careers, but they did prefer Christian officials.[43] Not until 416 were pagans banned from assuming public functions.[44]

8

CHRISTIANITY WAVERS, THEN TRIUMPHS

As a result of all this, two separate groups formed within the administration and the army, the one pagan, which tended to 'sit on the fence', the other Christian: these were groups with other interests, aspirations and motives that mattered more to them than religion. As I see it, in 363–4, after the death of Julian, this predictable and unsurprising result produced a consequence that would be long-lasting, namely the perpetuation of Christianity, which had by no means been a foregone conclusion. For after all, there is one particular question that needs addressing: given that the Christianization of the Empire had been a personal diktat on the part of Constantine, did it go without saying that after his death this diktat would be perpetuated by his successors? Should we not be amazed that it was?

WAS THE CHRISTIAN PARENTHESIS ABOUT TO CLOSE?

The fact was that, in that fateful year of 363, which saw a change of dynasty, nothing was yet decided for certain.[1] It is only a retrospective illusion that causes us to believe that Christianity needed only to appear on the scene in order to sweep all opponents aside. In 361, Julian the Apostate seized power from his pious sovereign Constantius II and endeavoured to restore the advantage to paganism, reformed by himself. Julian was no starry-eyed dreamer. At this point Christianity might have constituted no more than a historical parenthesis, opened by Constantine in 312, which would now close for ever. However, it did not do so because, at the death of Julian, in 363, those above-mentioned groups, which held the power to decide the choice of an emperor,[2] in the end, after a few hesitations (on the part of the Christians, not the pagans), elected as emperor first Jovian, soon to die, and then Valentinian.[3] It had been a very close thing (rather like the length of Cleopatra's nose): at first the cliques with power had settled on the pagan Sallustius, an eminent supporter of Julian, who, however, had refused the throne.

That choice was to set the course of centuries to come. The preceding thirty years had witnessed the emergence of two opposed policies, both of which, however, were possible. Constantine had been succeeded, in 337, by his son, the pious Constantius II, who had banned sacrifices, and then by his nephew, Julian, who, encountering no opposition at all, had reverted to paganism, with no attempt being made to usurp his throne. Who would be the next emperor, a Christian or a pagan? Without anticipating the historical consequences of their decision, both military groups in 364 agreed on the Christian Valentinian, for a thousand and one reasons that had virtually nothing to do with religion[4] but rather concerned

opportunities, urgency, personal or corporative interests, and the talent or malleability of the imperial candidates.

Valentinian was succeeded by another Christian, his son Gratian, who co-opted the pious Theodosius, who was succeeded by his own Christian sons; and so it went on. Time had done its work and Christianity had become the traditional religion of the throne: thanks partly to dynastic tradition and religious conviction, for sure, but also because the two religions never were symmetrical. Paganism was self-sufficient, while Christianity was proselytizing, exclusive and became demanding as soon as it possessed a modicum of power. If you wanted to live in peace, it was better to be on the side of the bishops, rather than that of the pagans. That may have been the reasoning of the cold Valentinian, 'who remained neutral in religious differences,[5] but also remained a Christian.

Nevertheless, that Christian parenthesis almost did close in 364 and in that year a phenomenon less rare than might be believed occurred: a great event that passed unnoticed because it never happened. There is one particular kind of question that we must all have asked ourselves. For my part, I am a Frenchman, born in 1930. What kind of a person would I have become and what opinions might I have held if the Nazis had won the war? All the same, you might object, is it even possible to imagine the present world without Christianity? How could it possibly have disappeared, given that it still exists? This cannot have been by mere chance; there must have been some necessity, some particular dynamism to explain it! However, I am not about to try to support this by means of a series of 'what ifs?', nor am I claiming that anti-Christian desires that are not my own were a reality that, for one instant, might have been fulfilled. All I have done is follow the sequence of events that occurred between 363 and 364 and try to gauge how much can be ascribed to

historical contingency. The future of Christianity at that point hung upon the decision of a court clique with other preoccupations.

In any case, a pagan emperor would not have thrown Christians to the lions (that was no longer fashionable). The masses were either pagan or indifferent and, given that Christianity had not yet become the customary religion of the Empire, such an emperor would have had no need to imitate the excessive zeal of one such as Julian. All he would have needed to do was abstain from action, no longer prohibit sacrifices and no longer provide financial support for the Church, and then watch while ambitious men stopped converting to Christianity. Christianity would then have degenerated to the level of a mere non-illicit sect. Was such a fate really so unthinkable? Was it true that this mighty vessel was unsinkable? After all, within three or four centuries, the provinces of Asia and Africa, which had been the first in the Empire to be widely Christianized, were to be swallowed up by another religion: Islam.[6]

AFTER THE MILVIAN BRIDGE, COLD RIVER

Let us now concentrate upon what, at the extreme end of Constantine's century, was to constitute the total and definitive triumph of Christianity over paganism, thanks to a military victory, on 6 September 394, that matched Constantine's victory of 28 October 312. In this connection, certain historians have written of 'the first of the wars of religion', but in reality what we have here is a sample of the cloth from which imperial history is woven, in which religious zeal represents but one thread among others.

As readers may have noticed more than once, pronouncements and usurpations of the throne were something of a national Roman sport. In 391, the reigning emperor

was Theodosius, who was established in the East, having entrusted the government of the West to a co-emperor, his brother-in-law. To assist this young man, Theodosius had placed at his side a foreigner, a Germanic leader by the name of Arbogast. The fact was that, to make up for the mediocrity of the troops provided by local recruitment, the Empire was already resorting to an expedient that was one day to prove fatal to it: it was engaging in its service minor Germanic kings with their troops of loyal and valiant warriors.

Arbogast was both pagan and ambitious. He began by promoting himself General-in-Chief of the Roman West, then, once rid (by murder or suicide) of his young sovereign, he set about becoming the master of this half of the Empire. However, his status as a Barbarian excluded him from taking possession of the throne in person. He therefore chose a puppet ruler, an educated, high-ranking official by the name of Eugene, whom he intended to make co-emperor of the West and the legitimate successor to the young prince who had disappeared, so that he, Arbogast, could wield the real power, standing in his shadow. In doing this, he inaugurated a whole tradition. Throughout the century that followed, Italy's real masters were to be Germanic chieftains operating in the shadow of puppet emperors.

This was very much in the interest of Italy's pagan aristocracy, which was spurred on by the memory of Julian the Apostate and continued to compete with the zeal of the Christians: it should not be forgotten that Rome at this time has been described as 'the Vatican of paganism'. Theodosius, for his part, was very much a Christian, while the Roman Senate, with a pagan majority led by a number of strong personalities, had just seen the abolition of certain anti-pagan measures introduced by the previous emperor. In these circumstances, the machinations of Arbogast and his puppet, Eugene, were seen by the senators as a chance to rid the West

of Christian atheism. Unfortunately, when Arbogast made Eugene co-emperor of the West and asked Theodosius to approve this colleague, he was met by a refusal. From that point on, both sides proceeded to prepare for war and this clash over legitimacy was to turn into a duel to the death between paganism and Christianity.

Was Arbogast moved by pagan zeal or simply by personal ambition? We do not know. As for Eugene, he was a Christian, but not a very zealous one, for he accepted the implementation of all the measures designed to re-establish paganism. During the preparations for war in 392 and 393, one could have believed oneself in Rome back in the days of Julian. Pagan cults, rites and ceremonies once again flourished, the temples recovered the riches that had been stripped from them and handed over to the churches, and Arbogast promised that after his victory he would turn Saint Ambrose's famous cathedral in Milan into a stable. He was all the more sure of victory as it had been predicted by the leader of the pagan party, who was extremely well versed in the ancient science of augury.

Meanwhile Theodosius, for his part, was not idle. He despatched from Constantinople one of his eunuchs (such men could be trusted as there was no risk of them being trapped in a net of perfidious feminine wiles) who travelled to the depths of Egypt in order to consult a famous hermit, John of Lycopolis, who had lived in a cave as a recluse for forty-eight years, without ever setting eyes on the face of a woman and who promised victory for Theodosius. It was above all the westerners' usurpation that prompted Theodosius to take the crucial step. On 8 November 392, he made a radical and definitive decision: once and for all, he forbade all pagan sacrifices and cults, even the humble, daily cult in which, in even the poorest of homes, incense was burnt and a little wine sprinkled before the domestic statuettes of the Lares and

Penates. It was even forbidden to hang up garlands of flowers in their honour.[7]

It was thus a conflict for the throne that set off this religious revolution. The prohibition of paganism can only be understood within this political context. But what put an end to paganism was not so much that ban of 392, but the imminent defeat of the pagan party in battle, soon after, in 394. The ambition of a Germanic chieftain (ambition which, from Stilicon to Ricimir and Odoacre, was to become the rule), an attempt at usurpation similar to so many in the past, and a religious revolt by the Roman Senate all combined to set the scene for this event of worldwide significance: namely the final end of paganism.

The ban on pagan ceremonies still had to be confirmed by a military victory. Battle was joined on 6 September 394, not far from the present-day frontier between Italy and Slovenia, in the neighbourhood of Gorizia on the banks of the Cold (or Frigidus) River (now the Vipacco, a tributary of the Isonzo). The western army was annihilated, Eugene was beheaded by the victors and Arbogast killed himself.

Providence seemed to have taken a hand to cheat him of his victory: the violent wind of the Balkan peninsula, the Bora, arose during the battle, returning to the pagans the javelins that they had launched against the Christians.[8] We are told by Saint Augustine that, not far from the battlefield, the pagans, in opposition to Theodosius, had consecrated statues of Jupiter grasping a golden thunderbolt, 'which had been consecrated by some kind of ritual, to accomplish his defeat'.[9] The victorious Christians toppled these statues. Given that a campaigning army would hardly have had the time to erect even a single statue and gild it, I imagine that, in truth, the effigy had stood there already for some time. On the other hand, one detail does seem plausible. On Constantine's triumphal arch in Rome, the six portraits of the emperor, and

those alone, had been deliberately mutilated. Years ago, I read somewhere, possibly in a work by Monsignor Wilpert, that they were mutilated by pagans, no doubt with magical intentions, just before their departure for the Cold River. Later, Albert de Musset falsely attributed those mutilations to Lorenzo de Medici, his Lorenzaccio.

The defeat of Cold River dealt the pagan party its mortal blow. So discouraged was it that it never recovered, indeed never made any further claims at all. Constantine's twofold pagan-cum-Christian system had had its day and Christianity had become the State religion. Around the year 400, by which time it was forbidden to worship the pagan gods, some poor fellow who had thoughtlessly exclaimed 'By Hercules!' (an equivalent of 'Good heavens!' or 'Good God!') was terrified when he noticed, at the end of the street, the cloak of a hovering policeman (*stationaris birratus*).[10] Some people preserved their beliefs and even passed them on, discreetly, but others decided to convert. Among the upper classes, it had already long been known that the Christians had the ear of the authorities, that nothing was more efficacious than a bishop's intercession with the emperor and that representatives of the Church tended to be called upon to fill positions of power. Ambition speeded up the end of polytheism even more effectively than the imperial legislation and the closing of the temples. As one contemporary wrote,[11] 'Jealous of the honour in which emperors held Christians, some people found it expedient to follow the imperial example.'

But let us make no mistake about this matter or be taken in by any triumphalist ruse: in the East, at least, where the old pagan culture survived (whereas in the West, the only culture was that of the Church), many educated people, families of prominent citizens and even entire small towns remained faithful to paganism for another two or three centuries after the conversion of Constantine.[12] What may obscure this

fact is that the Christians practised a policy of silence. They considered that in principle, given that the power lay in the hands of the Christians, one could consider paganism to be crushed.[13] They closed their eyes and ears to survivals of it and reduced the last remaining pagans to insignificance by studiously ignoring them.[14]

9

A PARTIAL AND MIXED STATE RELIGION: THE FATE OF THE JEWS

Even far from the literate classes, the Christianization of the whole population was under way. The network of bishoprics grew increasingly dense[1] and new churches and episcopal palaces were being built everywhere. It would nevertheless be two centuries or more before the country regions were more or less Christianized, not so much as a result of an infinite number of individual conversions, but rather through the progressive impregnation of whole populations encompassed by a strong framework.[2] It took over a century to complete the transformation of the Christian sect into the established religion. Around 530, at Monte Cassino, there was still a temple dedicated to Apollo and used by the rural community[3]; around 580 there were still pagans to be evangelized in the Bekaa of Syria that surrounded the great Baalbek sanctuary, and also in certain mountainous regions of Asia Minor,[4] and around 600 pockets of paganism still survived in Sardinia, thanks to the negligence of the large-scale rural landowners who should have been giving strict orders to their tenants.

DIFFUSION OR RECEPTION? THE NEW FAITH OF HUMBLE FOLK

By two or three centuries after Constantine, the religion of ten per cent of the population had thus nominally become the faith of one and all. One was now born Christian just as one used to be born pagan. Popularized by miraculous relics, the charisma of certain Christian figures, and the authority wielded by the bishops, this customary Christianity became as automatic and sincere as other customs do, and just as asymmetrical, respected for reasons unknown and arousing indignation when not respected. This conversion of the peasant masses was to be a long, drawn-out process, but on one point in particular it concerns the present book's readers. What changes were undergone by this sect that turned it into the customary religion, an elite religion that became the religion of everyone? And why was it so highly valued? How was it that 'virtuosi' of true religiosity came to be more common than ears sensitive to great music?

Let us leave to more knowledgeable scholars the case of those whom Saint Augustine called semi-Christians, the survival of pagan rites and the problem of popular religion and folkloric culture.[5] The immediate question that concerns us here is that raised by Jean-Claude Passeron: 'Mass diffusions that spread like a homogeneous flood are historically exceptional; most are invariably affected by reinterpretations.'[6] It seems clear that the Christianization of the masses was due neither to persecution nor, in the main, to evangelization, but rather to a conformism dictated by a now recognized authority, that of the bishops: pressure from a moral authority and a sense of a virtuous duty to 'behave like everyone else'. What was important was not so much the diffusion of Christianity, but rather its reception: what did people do with the religion that they were given? They turned it into

a somewhat paganized religion in which they were drawn in droves to charismatic saintly figures, went on pilgrimages to the tombs of martyrs, and believed that the touch of a relic had healing powers. The number of popular saints multiplied, certain images were revered, processions took place in times of drought, Rogations – a version of sacrifices but without lustrations – were celebrated, and people prayed to Heaven for success or for cures.

Faced with popular taste in the domains of music, literature and art, the attitude of the educated is often one of Pharisaic and ironic disdain,[7] just as it is when faced with popular religion. At the sight of the crowds that he saw flocking to the churches, Joseph de Maistre wondered: 'How many of them really go there to pray?' Once Christianity became the religion of the whole of society, among the masses it lost its elitist fervour and reverted to the erstwhile rhythm of paganism: that of a tranquil belief that had its pious moments, as the ritual calendar prescribed, rather than that of a fervent piety the ardour of which burns constantly in one's heart. Conjugal attachment followed hard upon amorous passion.

Did such attachment still amount to faith? Yes, in the eyes of theologians, for whom the question was rapidly resolved: a poor ignoramus, when questioned as to his faith, had only to reply: 'That is a question too difficult for me, but I give my word that I believe whatever the Mother Church professes on this subject,' and he would forthwith be declared to possess 'an implicit faith'. That all-encompassing and ignorant faith might have been regarded as superficial by any elitist believer, but he would have been mistaken. The prayers of humble folk no longer amounted to great music, but their piety had nonetheless derived from Christianity a popular form of music of touching sincerity. One has only to set in opposition to Joseph de Maistre what is possibly the most moving image of this kind of naive piety: Caravaggio's *The Madonna of the*

Pilgrims or *Horse-grooms*, and look at the faces of these poor, dirty-footed peasants kneeling before the Virgin and Child.

A SENSE OF RELIGION WAS SHARED BY THE GREAT MAJORITY

However customary Christianity had become, custom simply systematized a spontaneous religious sensibility that was not within the reach of all, but was at least present in most of the population. It is an undeniable fact that, in any age, any group with a religious presentiment, whatever the degree of its intensity, will be the majority party. This can be the only explanation for the considerable place occupied by religions in almost all societies. In the West, religious sympathy remains strong,[8] even today and even where religious practice is diminishing. If indifference is challenged, it often turns out to favour religion, which inspires respect, benevolence and affection, a principle of greater sympathy and more curiosity than that felt for many other subjects. When the Pope makes an appearance in the suburbs of Paris, huge crowds gather to see and hear him, crowds composed partly of unbelievers who, in the course of the entire year, will not have a single thought to spare for religion.

That partiality of the majority has to do with a fact from which it is not only religions that benefit: most of us are not insensitive to values (religious, artistic, ethical . . .) that we may perceive only dimly, from a distance. To cite Bergson, when those values speak, 'there is, deep inside most individuals, something that imperceptibly echoes them.' (So we should not be overly ironical about picture-gallery guided tours for relatively uneducated tourists; even if the latter are not destined, one day, to arrive at a complete understanding, they will have sensed something and whatever it is does not necessarily involve knuckling under to the authority of the culture which, according to Bourdieu, is dominant).

The basic fact is that, when a religious sensibility or presentiment develops, it settles in whatever is closest to it, for example the customary religion of the community or of the family. It takes over whatever the society, wherever it happens to be located, makes available to it. And since a custom has no need of a reason to exist apart from its very existence, the customary local religion may well endure for many centuries. In the more unusual cases where people thoroughly reject the corner of the world where they happen to be and discover a possible alternative, they may well convert to, for example, Islam.

This presentiment constitutes the very principle of customary piety. Custom implies respect and a sense of duty, and these constitute the bases of that piety, as they do the bases of patriotism in a good soldier, of whom – whatever Apollinaire claimed – it is not demanded that 'France palpitate within his heart'. In answer to the over-insistent Catholic of St Petersburg (Joseph de Maistre), few simple people 'really pray': they do not meditate upon a religion about which they know very little, nor do they command an internal vocabulary capable of prayer. However, just being in church and knowing that something that is not utilitarian is going on gives them a moment in the week that seems like none other, even if they do become rather bored. Most – if not all of them[9] – will have gone to mass docilely and respectfully. They are good soldiers of the faith.

However, in keeping with the principle of day-to-day mediocrity, that is as far as their faith goes. For most people, religion, however important legally, occupies only a tiny fraction of their time and preoccupations. How many pages are devoted to it in the pages of Ausonius or Sidonius Apollinarius? Or – come to that – in those of Ronsard who, nevertheless, was a good enough Christian? One was loyal to one's faith and to one's king, and that was all there was to it.

In the theatre of values, the daily balance plays a major role. In the Middle Ages, pilgrimages such as that of the *Canterbury Tales* were joyful journeys, not always of a particularly edifying nature. However, once in the presence of the saint's relics, one had a few hours to take stock. (Similarly, today, tourism, that costly change of place and habits, is often ascribed a cultural purpose to which, upon arrival, one sacrifices by joining a few guided tours to local museums and monuments.)

HOWEVER, RELIGION IS NOT HOMOGENEOUS

Just now, I mentioned the current retreat of religious practice. I hope I may, at this point, be allowed a parenthesis. Nowadays, much is said about the transformation of religion, its recoil, secularization, and the 'world's disenchantment' that is attributed to Max Weber (although, in reality, *Entzauberung* means a 'demagication' in which modern technology takes the place of the old magic). Possibly though, rather than the emotive word 'disenchantment', 'specialization' would be a better description of the present evolution of western religiosity.

The solemn notion of religiosity in truth covers a heterogeneous multitude of different elements. In any religion, one may find gods, rites, festivals, a sense of the divine, solemnizations (rites of passage, church marriages), morality, dietary prohibitions, hopes for a good harvest, predictions of the future, cures for sickness, the hope or fear of imminent justice, asceticism, ecstatic experiences, trance, an ethos or style of life, a wish to make the meaning of life conform with our own desires, thoughts about the Beyond, utopias, political legitimation, national identity, a feeling for nature . . . and so forth.

The 'demagication' of the world has done away with some of those elements (oracles) and replaced them by

technology (medicine), rendering them autonomous (political legitimation, social utopias). What remain are generally the most mediocre elements: solemnization and rites of passage. 'Religion' has been shattered and diminished (there are now even spiritual sects that have no gods at all). Religion tends to specialize, to limit itself to specific issues, where it is irreplaceable. The new religion is simply that: religious. Hence the present diminishing scale of religious practice and standard beliefs, for it was partly the extra-religious elements that used to attach communities to their religion.

CHRISTIANITY IS ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE

But let us return to our theme. It is pointless to regard the Christianization of the Roman Empire as the inculcation of an ideology, which is how it is sometimes described.[10] Constantine publicized and favoured his own personal sect and increased the dignity of his throne by turning the only religion that he considered to be worthy of it into its finest ornament. He never intended to set up a new collective norm in order to further particular political and social ends, for in the fourth century, the subjects of the Empire had no need for a new norm, having one already: it was monarchical and patriotic.

Misleading ideas of the fourth century are sometimes put forward, to wit that it was 'a Christian century (or epoch)' (*christiana tempora*),[11] 'a century of spirituality'. Yet . . . in the first place, there has never been such a thing as a century of spirituality: there have simply been variable proportions of fervent believers, habitual Christians, conformist ones, nostalgic ones, indifferent ones, unbelievers and adversaries. And G. Dagron, C. Lepelley, R. R. R. Smith and H. Inglebert have all shown that those assumed *christiana tempora* never constituted the arena for a titanic clash between Jupiter or the

Sun and Christ, or for two opposed groups or parties. All that was involved was a clash between two doctrines: 'the opposition between pagans and Christians was never anything but religious'[12]; it was never political or national.

In the countless cities that constituted the cells of the great body of the Empire, civic life was at pains to remain neutral. Peaceful coexistence meant keeping silent on matters that were patently inflammatory: prominent citizens from both camps avoided raising the religious question as they administered public affairs. As Claude Lepelley has shown, to read the public inscriptions produced by municipal councils, you would never suspect that a religious revolution took place in the fourth century.[13] A broad pacific zone stretched between pagans and Christians. An *esprit de corps* or class solidarity avoided all conflict and it could even happen that the leader of paganism in Rome would offer his recommendation in the appointment of a bishop.[14]

Pagans were as loyal to the Christian sovereigns as Christians were and breathed in the same imperial patriotism. The historian Eutropius evinced the same equanimity towards the two religions as did a very patriotic high-ranking officer, the pagan Ammianus Marcellinus (who was not an opponent, just indifferent, as untouched by Christianity as he was by Julian's neo-paganism). When the pagan orator Themistius sang the praises of his prince, his loyalist and universalist language was indistinguishable from that of another panegyrist, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea.[15] Pagan and Christian polemicists all invoked the interests of Rome in favour of their respective religions.

Tocqueville once declared, 'Only patriotism or religion can get a whole body of citizens to march for a long time toward a single goal,'[16] but sometimes religion and patriotism are indistinguishable. This was to be the case in Byzantium, so far as I can tell, but it was not so at the time of Constantine

and his successors, who were not concerned to impose a single, unifying belief upon a population that was already united in its patriotism and its loyalty to its princes. They saw no need to bestow a very minority ideology upon an empire that already possessed one of its own.

In all fairness to Constantine, it has to be said that he was not a religious fanatic. He was a moderate; and in this sense the over-modern term 'tolerance' is not inappropriate. Yet, according to him, his God, as governor of the world, shared Constantine's own ideal of a leader: they both detested lack of discipline, whether in religion or in politics. Good order and a general unity were necessary in both the temporal and the spiritual spheres. In his childhood, however, Constantine had himself witnessed the persecution of the Christians, in which his father, the monarch at the time, had taken part, and the memory had left its mark on him.[17] For the mysterious action of time had played its part. The era of persecutions was past; their pointlessness and cruelty were recognized; besides, a persecution is something that 'creates disorder', as is commonly said, and no leader likes that.

Another ideal that Constantine cherished was a reign of peace; he was proud of the tranquillity of his epoch (*quies temporis nostri*).[18] Religious peace determined civic peace just as surely as persecution led to internal strife.[19] The reason why he, on principle, manifested such hostility against gladiator contests was that 'bloody spectacles cannot be allowed in a tranquil society and a peaceful country'.[20]

The relative 'tolerance' of Constantine and subsequently of almost all his Roman, Byzantine and Germanic successors throughout several centuries was due to that ideal of public order, the recognized inefficacy of persecutions and a pragmatism that sensed that to undertake an enterprise such as the imposition of Christianity would be both difficult and absurd: for a religion that lives in the soul rather than through its

rites, forcing people to believe, was contradictory.[21] Besides, fashion is all-powerful and persecution was now out of fashion. This is why Constantine allowed both pagans and Jews to live in peace.

HERETICS AND JEWS: THE BIRTH OF ANTI-SEMITISM

His desire to Christianize was nevertheless strong and in his edicts, if he mentioned unbelievers, it was only to insult them: pagans were fools and Constantine despised them as he despised all that was Other; as for the Jews, theirs was a 'pernicious sect'.[22] The line that Constantine adopted became a model for many. One century later, one of Constantine's successors stigmatized 'the folly of Jewish impiety and the unhealthy errors of stupid paganism',[23] which all goes to show that in that year of 425 pagans still existed, but also that, within the Empire, there were three religions that remained licit: Christianity, paganism and Judaism.

Unfortunately, tolerance was not the only ruling principle: the Christians, and they alone, were in duty bound to worship the true God and obey the Church, so that God would protect the Empire and its emperor (or rather, would do so by virtue of the unspoken imperative of normality that had in the past prompted the persecution of the Christians). As a result, Christian emperors would take to persecuting heretical or schismatic Christians, while Jews and pagans were left to think whatever they pleased about their respective beliefs. Oh, but those schismatics the Donatists and the heretics were not thrown to the lions nor were they, as yet, burnt alive (the flames of the stake were at that time reserved for homosexuals and for those who abducted maidens, whether consenting or against their will). At first, Constantine spoke reasonably and gently to them; then he exiled them and stripped them

of their possessions; then, judging that the Donatists were flouting imperial laws that ordered them to submit and that this amounted to sedition, he dispatched the army to deal with them, with the consequences that were to be expected; at this point, he, in his turn, discovered that persecution led to nothing but disorder, so he now passed an edict decreeing tolerance.

In contrast, Constantine took no action against those murderers of Christ, the Jews,[24] and introduced no changes to the legislation on paganism, according to which Judaism was a licit religion. All he did, as was his custom, was offer protection to his fellow Christians: any Jews who molested a compatriot of theirs who converted to Christianity incurred heavy penalties (however, the law offered no protection to any Jew who converted to a third religion).

It was nevertheless Constantine's era that saw the start of the anti-Judaism that was to lead, sixteen centuries later, to the monstrosities now known to us all. The cause of it can be traced to the fact of Christianization, rather than to the attitude of Christians themselves. Or rather, it was due, as it still is today, to a mental category that stems from what might be called a primitive mindset, or plain stupidity: a widespread horror of that which is neither flesh nor fish. Perhaps a little more needs to be said about this.

It would take too long to show that there was no continuity between the unpopularity of Jews in the pagan empire and the Christian anti-Judaism that stemmed from the same mental cause as modern anti-Semitism. In the pagan world of Greece and Rome, the Jews were sometimes rejected because of the jealousy of their exclusive God and the barrier constituted by their dietary prohibitions, but sometimes they were regarded as a people apart whose piety and pure family customs were much praised. They were strangers who were now antipathetic, now virtuous. They attracted the same descriptions as

the Christians and for the same reasons: they were 'atheists' (they rejected the gods of others) and they observed dietary prohibitions (against meat offered to idols and bloody meat), but they were virtuous.

One might have hoped that, with the Christianization of the Empire, anti-Judaism would come to an end, since the exclusive God of the Jews and their holy book was equally holy to the Christians, who at this time also rejected red meats. It was nevertheless that close relationship that, paradoxically, brought about the above-mentioned discontinuity that was the cause of anti-Judaism: the Jews were brothers, but only half-brothers, since they did not recognize Christ. They were therefore even worse than those 'Others' that the pagans clearly were. They were not heretics, however: they were false brothers which was the most repugnant thing that they could be. The pagans, for their part, were simply strangers who were very stupid. Far from continuing to reproach the Jews for keeping themselves apart, as in the past, Christians now rejected them with repugnance.

I repeat, repugnance. Nothing could be more striking than the difference in tone between racism and anti-Semitism, or between disdain and repulsion. It is repulsion that sets anti-Semitism in a category of its own and makes it such an enigmatic oddity. Blacks, the yellow-skinned and pagans are people that may be despised and of whom one may expect the worst, but at least one knows who they are: quite clearly, they are Others. However, with the Jews, things are not so cut and dried. In Christian Antiquity, the Jew was an enigmatic figure: he was not pagan, yet not Christian either. Many centuries later, despite their frequent patriotism, the Jews of France would be French but not recognized as such; the Jews of Germany would be responsible for half of all German scientific discoveries, but without ever being real Germans.

Game theorists tell us that, in the 'social game', one

feels the need to understand the partner with whom one is engaged. If one cannot get a clear idea of him, if that partner is bizarre, unclassifiable, one feels repulsion and prefers to quit the game.[25] The repulsion is due not to whatever the partner is, but to the fact that one cannot clearly make out what he is. The famous ethnologist, Mary Douglas, has analysed examples of the repulsion felt for all that is not clear, all that is hybrid, impure, shady, all that is 'neither flesh nor fish' and that therefore must not pass one's lips.

The true cause of Christian anti-Judaism is to be found in the 'primitive' repugnance evoked by Jews, for they were neither Christian nor pagan. The accusation of deicide is just an extra specification. This anti-Judaism, a thoroughly religious phenomenon, was to be prolonged without a break into the present-day anti-Semitism, a thoroughly 'lay' phenomenon, for this too stems from that repugnance. Is evil so common, then? No, but stupidity is. And the explanation for the move from such stupidity into the massacres and the widespread passivity is to be found more in the primacy of the group and respect for authority, not so much in an 'egoistic' indifference to the fate of others, but rather in a weak capacity to take a *personal interest* in anything that lies beyond one's tiny personal circle. (That word 'interest' may make it possible to elude the insoluble opposition between egoism and altruism. La Rochefoucauld declared that a fool does not have the *energy* to be good: for, through a lack of energy, he takes no interest in anything.)

Correlatively, with the advent of Christianization, the Jews closed ranks and their religion reverted to solipsism. Jewish proselytism had proved very successful in the pagan Empire, with converts and 'God-fearers' flocking to the numerous synagogues, attracted there by Jewish piety, the greatness of the Jewish God and the regularity of the weekly cult. As Marie Malingrey has shown,[26] at the end of the fourth century, in

Antioch, the attraction of Judaism was still so strong that Saint John Chrysostom deployed all his eloquence in order to dissuade Christians from taking part in the Jewish festivals. But once Christianity became the State religion, Judaism reverted to being the national religion solely of the Jewish people; and so it has remained down to the present day, thanks partly to all those pogroms and ghettoes. It is still virtually impossible for a non-Jew to convert to the religion of Israel.

THE REVOLUTIONARY AND ROUTINIZATION

But let us return to our hero and complete his story. Constantine was a politician with providential views, a revolutionary, a troublemaker (*novator et turbator rerum*), according to the pagan Ammianus Marcellinus. It is fair to say, along with Baynes, that 'he belonged to the race of visionaries and prophets.' [27] He was a prophet armed with an ideal, a Christian Empire. What distinguishes him from his successors is that he was the inventor of that ideal and believed deeply in it. Immediately following his victory over the so-called persecutor, Licinius, he wrote that he had set himself a twofold mission: to unite all his peoples in a true conception of God and to deliver them from persecutions.[28] Two years before his death, Constantine, who had just won a victory over the Barbarians on the Danubian front, wrote as follows to the bishops who were meeting in council, in Tyre:

> You cannot deny that I am God's authentic servant since, through my piety, all live in peace. Even the Barbarians who, until now, were ignorant of the Truth, now know God, thanks to me, his servant, and praise his name as is fitting and fear him, for the facts have made them realize that God has everywhere been my shield and my providence; they now fear us because they fear God.[29]

Admittedly, nothing could be more banal than the content of this discourse, content that has since been heard time and again. The language is conventional, mere 'verbal words', except, that is, on the lips of Constantine, who believed in what he was doing: namely, preparing for the Christianization of the world. Under his successors, his prophetical language underwent a routinization, in the sense in which Max Weber speaks of a routinization of charisma. Let me return to my earlier theme: in the course of the last two-thirds of the twentieth century we heard talk of the Soviet paradise and 'tomorrows full of song'. It was all propaganda, just 'wooden words', except, that is, on the lips and in the heads of the initial prophets, Lenin and Trotsky, who believed in them so deeply that they shook the world.

But perhaps a better example to cite might be that of the Indian emperor, Asoka, who, together with his whole family, converted to Buddhism, favoured Buddhist missionaries, issued edicts recommending the observation of compassion and confessing his remorse for having waged wars and who, five centuries before the councils of Nicaea and Tyre, gathered together a great Buddhist council at Pataliputra.

All in all, the Christianization of the ancient world constituted a revolution set in motion by a single individual, Constantine, with motives that were exclusively religious. There was nothing necessary, inevitable or irreversible about it. Christianity began to win over all and sundry because Constantine, a sincere convert, favoured and supported it and because this religion was efficiently organized into a Church. Constantine converted for unfathomable personal reasons and decided that Christianity was worthy to be the religion of the throne because, in his eyes, its religious superiority was evident and, despite being a very minority religion, Christianity had become the major religious issue of the age.

It was through Constantine alone that world history swung

around, and that was because Constantine was a revolutionary inspired by a great Utopia and convinced that he had a huge role to play in the timeless economy of salvation. But it was also and above all because this was a revolutionary who was also a great emperor,[30] a realist with a sense of what was possible, what impossible.

10

WAS THERE AN IDEOLOGY?

'Well,' you may say, 'there was the sincere faith of Constantine and almost all his successors, along with the dignity and duties of the throne, and the pressure of the bishops. . . . But surely the real reason must be more profound. Was it not really a matter of ideology? Was not a monarchist and universalist religion the best cover that an imperial and so-called universal monarchy could possibly desire?' When one speaks of Constantine with certain educated people, this tends to be the objection that they raise. As they see it, religion is not something serious enough to be of interest to a man in power, except perhaps in that it might fulfil an ideological function. In the modern French *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, alongside 'body' and 'spirit', maybe 'power' and 'ideology' ought to figure, suggesting that political reality is composed of these two interlocking gears and that authorities in power win the obedience of people by persuading them to believe in ideologies, whether or not of a religious nature. If that is so, they argue, Constantine simply set Christ in the place of the Invincible Sun of his predecessors.

But that won't do: a Power, Leninist or not, is the first to believe what it says, and that is all it needs. Constantine was convinced that God cast his blessing upon those who, like him, believed in God. Justinian, Heraclius and his contemporary Mohammed were similarly convinced. So let us try to shed some light upon this obscure notion of ideology. The Christians respected the emperor out of patriotism and loyalty, as did the pagans and as had always been the case. They did not respect him because their religion had them worship a single God.[1] For three centuries, Caesars had been content with polytheism and this had done their monarchy no harm.

No, what Constantine sought in Christianity was not, as some historians have thought, metaphysical bases for the unity and stability of his empire. The idea that a monarch, as sole ruler, would gain more respect if he forced belief in a single god upon his people is nothing but a twisted version of old-hat sociology, which corresponds to no mental reality. What was closer to reality, at least in intention, was not Christianization but persecution. Diocletian, in the grip of excessive zeal, had been convinced that the wellbeing of the Empire demanded that Christians be brought back to healthy Roman traditions.[2]

IT IS NOT IDEOLOGY THAT LIES AT THE ROOT OF OBEDIENCE

Besides, was there really any need for an ideology? What would have been the point of such superfluous efforts? Even if Constantine had succeeded in imposing the Christian 'ideology' upon his subjects, he would have secured neither more nor less obedience. Nothing could be more common than the obedience of entire peoples than their respect for the established order, whatever justification they are offered for it. Were this not the case, the history of the world would

be quite different. Saint Paul declared, 'God is the source of all power' and Vegetius was to say that the Christian emperor reigned by the authority of God, and people repeated their words.[3] But the pagan, Christian and Muslim masses revered their emperor, *basileus* or sultan quite spontaneously (even while silently cursing him on account of the taxes imposed upon them). They did not need the monarchy to be reproduced in a monotheism or justified by an ideology, for every loyal subject spontaneously respected his sovereign and was in reverential fear of him (here or there, such sentiments still exist: with my own ears, I have heard Hassan II described as 'such a good king'!)

Love for a king, patriotism and likewise the respect felt for privileged people are not a part of religion nor are they prompted by it. Nor are they inculcated by an ideology, for, logically speaking, they precede ideology; they are induced by obedience to the established order and, far from giving birth to that obedience, they stem from it. In infancy, they are breathed in, along with the air of the times and the spectacle of everyone around. History can be explained by all that is silently lived rather than by the fine words that are added; once dependency is rejected, ideological words carry no weight. As the acute Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out, in our own times school teaching is unable to take the place of apprenticeship to social and political rules within the family and social framework of life; hence the dramatic inefficacy of school education on civic matters.[4]

No more than other peoples did the Jews wait for the Ten Commandments before they stopped killing and stealing, but those Ten Commandments made it praiseworthy for them to believe that they were desisting from such behaviour in obedience to God's Law. In short, it is inarticulate social life that gives rise to and accepts ideological verbalizations, rather than it being the other way around. An ideology only

convinces those who are already won over, as those of us who are fifty or more years old have seen with our own eyes. The discovery of the contraceptive pill set the scene for a comical sociological experiment, in real conditions. Before the pill, girls breathed in the air of the times, following the example of their companions, along with the useful virtues of purity, chastity, virginity and sexual abstention. And what enlightened mind could have failed to condemn the repressive code of virtue in that capitalist society? But as soon as the pill appeared, in smart apartments and cottages alike all those virtues vanished like dew in the sunshine, evaporating along with the perils of the past. Their disappearance seemed to us so natural that we hardly noticed it at the time and did not see that it was not the case that the cult of virtue had inculcated sexual abstention; rather it was that abstention, in the absence of contraception, had been set up as a virtue.

A SOMEWHAT DEFECTIVE UTILITARIANISM

The notion of ideology is misleading in another respect too: it is too rational. As Jean-Claude Passeron has pointed out to me, Marxism is a utilitarianism according to which a political idea is either true or is a politically useful lie that is known as ideology[5]: if an emperor converts to Christianity, it is because this serves his power. But what the Marxist forgets is that, often enough, the idea in question is a pointlessly ambitious elucubration in which, I repeat, the authorities are the first to believe: for instance, the religious purification of the kingdom, the universal domination of Islam, Hitlerian anti-Semitism, Marxist internationalism. In fact, those ruling authorities may be alone in believing the slogans; the launching of the Invincible Armada against heresy was Philip II's own personal decision.

CHILDREN AND GROWN-UPS

Let us move on from ideology and return to real life in the ancient monarchies. There can be no doubt that neither the high and mighty, who viewed their master from close range, nor humble folk, who knew perfectly well that their king was an ordinary mortal, harboured any illusions regarding the humanity of the sovereign, whom they nonetheless revered. The ancients did not take their king or emperor for a supernatural being, a living god, except in a manner of speaking. Even the Egyptians told many funny stories about their pharoahs.[6] Archaeologists have unearthed many thousands of Greek and Latin *ex voto* documents addressed to pagan deities (soliciting a cure, a safe journey and so forth), but not one was addressed to a deified emperor.

There is, on the other hand, more truth in the idea that, at the time, the monarch's subjects stood before him with the humility of children. Right down to the eighteenth century, in the western world the pompous social chasm that separated the great from the humble was as marked as that which separated children from adults. Those days are over. The President of France enjoys no divine rights and we can kick him out without fear of being sentenced to the galleys. Since it no longer comes from on high, authority no longer claims to be transcendent. The secularization of power is but one of many consequences that stem from this. History is no longer divided between, on the one hand, an ancient era in which political power was upheld by religion and, on the other, our own era in which political power is desanctified or 'disenchanted'. Rather, the divide falls between an ancient era, in which kings were considered by nature superior to their subjects, and our own, in which kings and presidents appear just as ordinary as anyone else (even the dictators of the twentieth century merely claimed to possess a certain 'genius',

an individual and 'rational' superiority). The dissymmetry between governor and governed is a fact the depth and longevity of which have to be accepted by contemporaries and which eludes human action. It is not something that could be produced by dint of making people believe in it. The same goes for the pomp that used to surround a monarch, pomp that we nowadays dismiss as 'propaganda'. That splendour, with all its ceremonies and palaces, was as natural as the great mane that marks out the king of the beasts. The splendour stemmed from the grandeur rather than producing it, but it did need to be expressed: what would fervour that never passed one's lips amount to? In the very first lines of their wills and testaments, the subjects of a French king would, as Villon did, express homage to the Holy Trinity 'and to Loÿs, the good king of France'.

Given that the religious legitimization of the sovereign was not the cause of that pre-existing dissymmetry but constituted its consequence and expression, it did not much increase the level of obedience to the master, nor did it render his throne much more solid. For, at one level, the governed were not dupes, and one fine day their respect might disappear. That day did indeed arrive when the people set about rejecting and spewing out the bad reigning prince, his impious Jezabel and the weight of the taxation that he levied. The very God who, the king claimed, supported him was now invoked against him and the Revolution began. Showing respect for the authorities in power is a law as sacred as loving God, up until the day when it turns out that the king is unworthy of God or that another might be more worthy. The rebels did not, on that account, cease to consider themselves good Christians; on the contrary. The sacralization of power had proved not to be a foolproof way of eliciting belief of a kind that would weld together governors and the governed.

PRAGMATICS, NOT IDEOLOGY

All the same, something would be lacking in the established order if, regardless of the lofty phrases that hardly anyone ever heeds, the authority in power were not speaking from a superior position. It is not through propaganda or other means of communication that its spokesman imposes his authority, but through a linguistic pragmatism that stems not from any 'ideological' content in his message (be it a Christian, a Marxist or a democratic one . . .), but from the dissymmetrical and superior positions that the speaker assumes before his audience.[7] Actually, in Antiquity such a spokesman did not, strictly speaking, assume such a position, nor did he seek to impress his listeners (for they were assumed to be impressed in advance). He simply occupied the position to which he was entitled. When Emperor Gratian proclaimed that God himself had inspired him to appoint Ausonius as consul,[8] so as to honour this educated man, he resorted to a sublime style that came to him quite naturally. Besides, authorities in power need to respond to any attack from those whom they govern, be ready to counter their perpetual capacity for revolt and to ward off the liberty at which they grasp despite their innate submission: when one is related to other human beings through the power that one holds over them, one needs to speak, one has to say something. To allow a glacial silence to prevail would be the pragmatic option most likely to provoke revolt.

As for the concept of ideology, it fails to take pragmatism into account. Furthermore, it rests upon an intellectualist illusion that goes back to the Greek Sophists and according to which the attitudes that we adopt are determined by the actual content of the message directed to us and the ideas that we hold or that are suggested to us, for it is believed that our behaviour is dictated by our imaginary representations:

we deliberate and then we come to a decision and act. The concept of ideology is mistaken in another respect too, for it suggests that religion, education, preaching and, in general, the means of inculcating beliefs are projected upon virgin wax, upon which they can imprint obedience to the master and to the commands and prohibitions of the group. But in reality, individuals, the group and the authorities in power are, to change the metaphor, always already interwoven; an individual is one of many and preaching only makes those who are already convinced slightly more so. Obedience and monarchical sympathy are not engendered by attempts at persuasion or by propaganda; they are inculcated tacitly by socialization, the ambience or – you could say – the *habitus* in which one lives.[9] Hence, in our present-day society, the inefficacy of civic education in schools.[10] The only effective means of education is a silent impregnation emanating from the general environment. Intellectualism and individualism prevent us from perceiving this deep, dark aspect of socialization.[11]

But is there, in fact, any real concern to socialize the governed masses? The true aim of an ideology or phraseology is not to win people over and get them to obey but, rather, to please them by giving them a good opinion of themselves: those who dominate can feel assured that their superiority is justified and those who are dominated tell one another that they are quite right to obey. Their pleasure in legitimization is acute; being wealthy and powerful or not being so is not the only thing that counts; in either case one likes there to be a good reason for it. Being in the right is a pleasure and a pleasure is neither true nor false; that is why legitimating formulae are so easily accepted and create so few profound effects. What is known as ideology is just a little oil in the machinery; it is not a message that imposes obedience, but simply a source of pragmatic pleasure that mollifies peoples who, in other respects, are suffering subjection.[12]

Rather than speak of ideology, let us say that the Christian emperors from Constantine onwards derived from Christianity a new phraseology that was at once pragmatic and legitimating: they reigned by the grace of God and had a new function to fulfil, namely to serve religion. As a result of the limiting interpretation that the Church produced of the example left by Constantine, his successors did not possess the right to govern the Church in a 'Caesaropapism',[13] but they were in duty bound to support the true faith. Caesar had to render to God the duty that was God's due.

Supporting the Church thus became one of the functions incumbent upon the imperial authorities (the list of the functions of any state is inevitably unnatural and always historical in inspiration). On the other hand, religion provided an emperor with a transcendent basis of power, that is to say a phraseology destined to cut through any silence: God himself commanded that all render to Caesar whatever was his due.

As we have seen, Constantine's successors, with one exception, never sought to readjust the position adopted by the great revolutionary, not even when a new dynasty took over at the death of Julian. What, for Constantine, had been a passionate and authoritarian conviction that encompassed his own lofty mission and the special protection that he received from Heaven as well as his duty to establish good order within the Church, that conviction turned, after him, into a traditional state function and a phraseology that incorporated a few overtones of Caesaropapism[14] inherited from Constantine's 'presidency'. Christianity, from being the personal religion of the reigning emperor, had turned into the religion of the throne.

It was not the case that the emperor politicized religion and made use of it; rather, religion made use of the emperor, whom it needed. When Eusebius of Caesarea, in his eulogy of Constantine produced in 336 exclaimed (in Greek) *ein Gott*,

ein Reich, *ein Kaiser*, that fine symmetry served to ensure the established order of the Church's loyalty and, in exchange, to rule that the emperor should operate as an auxiliary to the Church. Eusebius praised Constantine for being a Christian prince so as to make him feel it was his duty to be precisely that. He was setting out a government programme for the emperor,[15] at the same time taking care not to acknowledge that he possessed any power over the Church, which had no intention of serving the emperor but instead proposed to treat with him as one power would another. The altar was supported by the throne, rather than the reverse. In Italy, under Theodoric, Pope Gelasius I, sensing his authority threatened by the eastern emperor, was to formulate the theory of the two powers and the independence of the spiritual from the temporal.[16]

A PRECONCEPTION: GOD AND CAESAR

My readers will have guessed why the ideological explanation remains so tempting: every political regime needs some kind of legitimization and this is frequently provided by religion. It has thus been claimed that paganism served to legitimate the imperial rule and Christianity then succeeded it in that role. What is misleading is the apparent continuity of the imperial coinage, on the reverse sides of which a number of Christian religious images took over from its former pagan ones. It is assumed that a continuity with an ideological function ran between the pagan gods or the Invincible Sun and the Christ of Constantine and the Byzantine emperors, and that religion fulfilled this function, with Christ succeeding the pagan gods and the Sun in the role of a divine power conferring legitimacy. It is not hard to detect the source of that illusion. In all societies prior to our western civilization, religion and politics coexisted in a more or less close union; not because

they were by nature inseparable, but simply because it was impossible for them not to overlap, given that, in those days, religion (or all that passed for it) fulfilled so many diverse functions and presented so many different aspects. As a result, religion was everywhere and there was always some reason, of either an elevated or a superficial nature, for entering into a relationship with it, if only to solemnize a marriage or an imperial coronation. Only the western laity would eventually be able to prevent or limit such unions, by prohibiting them. The links that bound Church and state together took many different forms from one society to another (for instance, entering into contracts involving promises to deities in order to have them fulfil one's desires, or serving a god whose Truth one professed, and so forth), but they certainly occurred all over the place. So it is assumed that such unions fulfilled a function, one vague enough to be always the same: that of providing ideological cover. It is thought that, in Rome, Christianity took over from paganism in this role.

However, that continuity is misleading, for the two religions were very different, as were their respective relations with the political authorities. It is, in truth, not the case that the image of the Invincible Sun on the reverse side of Aurelian's pagan coins played the same ideological role as the angels and the Cross (or, later, the bust of Christ) to be found on the reverse sides of some Byzantine coins. In Rome, in the Piazza San Silvestro, Aurelian had raised a temple to this, his favourite deity, without, however, forcing anyone to worship it or having in mind any politico-religious revolution. The Invincible Sun was more of a symbol than a god. Its birth had not been spontaneous; rather, it had emerged from various intellectual speculations. The object that was so clearly visible in the sky was not invisible enough to be a true god.

Whether it was an exotic or a speculative deity, the Sun was not one of the usual gods of the peoples of the Roman

Empire. In fact, it was hardly more than a political slogan that the government used in an attempt to foster a national and monarchical 'mystique'. This great natural force that no one could fail to see was used to support the Empire and its leader, establishing them too as cosmic forces. The Invincible Sun is our companion (*Sol invictus comes*), as the words on the coins declared), the Sun accompanies our emperor as we proceed on our way.[17] Whenever one purchased something or sold something, on the reverse side of the coin, out of the corner of one's eye one would notice the image of the accompanying Sun, the prestigious reflection of an emperor who declared himself, likewise, to be invincible and fiery. It was a slogan that was not particularly credible around 260.

It was, I repeat, a slogan, or little more. The fact is that when we speak of pagan Antiquity, we are all too prone to maximize its religious element or to intensify its religiosity, systematically ascribing the highest degree of passion to its beliefs, cults, rites and mysteries. Perhaps we do so for fear of failing to recognize the difference between that primitive mindset and our own 'disenchanted' world. However, even in Antiquity, not everything to do with religion was intense: religiosity operated at different levels, playing a more or less intense role in a variety of different functions (solemnization, for instance, or simply forceful rhetoric).

The Byzantine Empire was to be a Christian Empire; the Roman Empire had never really managed to believe itself to be an empire of the Sun. As Régis Debray more or less put it in his drama about Julian the Apostate, Roman religion made very few demands, 'least of all in the domain of belief; for a Christian, in contrast, outside the Church there simply was no salvation'. A pagan emperor's relationship with the imperial god known as the Invincible Sun in no way resembled that of a Christian emperor with his God. And every city, every empire and every individual, whether a free man or a slave,

needed, in its or his interest, to cultivate a good relationship with Heaven. As we have seen, the pagan empire's sole religious task was to see that those relations were assured where it was concerned and regularly to renew the votive contract to maintain good 'international' relations between the imperial republic and Heaven. This was one of the many tasks that fell to the political authorities. The pagan empire used religion in the same way as individuals did, and had no other religious duties. There is no continuity at all between the nature, functions and obligations of Christianity and those of the old paganism, which was such a lightweight religion as to constitute a very model of secularity. From Constantine onwards, in contrast, the Empire had duties towards religion; it did not make use of it, but was committed to serving it.

The pagan emperors had had no need of a religion to support their regime. From time to time it did happen that one or another of them would set up a particular cult of a god who had procured them victory (Augustus was a case in point; he credited his victory at Actium to Apollo). At the beginning of Constantine's reign, it was possible for the emperor's Christianity to pass as a private kind of devotion of that type. It also sometimes happened that an emperor, like any individual, might develop a personal devotion to a particular deity (as Domitian did to Minerva), just as, in the Middle Ages, a Christian might develop a devotion to a particular saint. For a while Augustus in person assiduously visited the temple of Jupiter of the Thunderbolt.[18] The emperor made the most of his lofty position to endow a sanctuary for this his favourite deity and to fund the salaries of its priests. But it never occurred to him to impose the cult of his god upon his subjects. The reverse sides of a few coins were devoted to honouring his favourite deity. However, such reverence never extended to the entire regime, from top to bottom, constituting an 'ideological cover'.

Contrary to what is frequently claimed, Christianity was further from drawing a distinction between God and Caesar than any other religion: everyone had to be Christian, Caesar first and foremost, for he had duties towards this all-enveloping religion. It had dogmas and an orthodoxy over which battles were fought, whereas paganism, lacking both dogma and orthodoxy, had disintegrated into a confused crowd of deities and cults that hardly merited the name of religion (people resorted to the paraphrase, *dei et sacra*, 'the gods and all sacred things'), which could neither manoeuvre nor be manoeuvred as an entity and which had produced no doctrine that could be turned into a political ideology.

We should therefore have done with the common notion that it was owing to Christianity that Europe came to separate politics and religion, Christ having ruled that one should render to Caesar that which was Caesar's and to God that which was God's due. That was a fine discovery, but it stemmed from Caesarism, not from Christianity. For the truth is quite the opposite of that common belief. The Christian Constantine had no need to separate God and Caesar, for they had been separate from birth. Constantine was a Caesar, not a leader at once spiritual and temporal, such as Mohammed or a caliph, and the Church was already a complete, powerful and independent organization when one particular Caesar entered into a relationship with it. It treated Constantine's successors as one power treats any other power.

It had not been necessary to wait until Christ came upon the scene to discover that God and Caesar were two separate entities. We should not entertain too simplistic an idea of primitive times or believe that power and religion were then intermingled or that a mindset of such antiquity was still confused. The pagans did not have to be taught to separate their gods from Caesar; they never had confused them. For

them, religion was everywhere, covering everything with a light, uncomplicated dusting, imbuing everything with a certain solemnity, but making no major demands. The relations between the race of men and the powerful race of the gods were those of two unequal nations. The one repaid worship from the other with certain services.

In contrast, it was with the triumph of Christianity that the relations between religion and political power ceased to constitute a light, superficial layer and were instead theorized and systematized. God and Caesar ceased to operate independently. God began to weigh heavily upon Caesar and Caesar was now obliged to render to God whatever was his due. Christianity would now expect from princes something that paganism had never demanded: namely, that they 'make their power a servant to the divine majesty, to spread the worship of God far and wide'.[19]

11

DOES EUROPE HAVE CHRISTIAN ROOTS?

This is perhaps the moment to introduce a question that is at present quite acute, even in the European Parliament. Can it be said that Europe's bases are Christian and its roots plunge deep into Christianity? Should such a declaration figure in the European Constitution?

DO HISTORICAL ROOTS REALLY EXIST?

One might, to be sure, dismiss the question as a false problem. Where has it ever been clear that a civilization or society, a heterogeneous, contradictory, polymorphous and polychrome entity, with all its various domains, different social levels, and diverse activities and thinking, somewhere possesses 'bases' or 'roots'? Or that such roots lie in one of its components in particular, namely, its religion: roots to which it has remained attached throughout the maelstrom of material and moral upsets throughout twenty whole centuries? Religion constitutes but one of the physiognomic

features of a society, a feature which, in the past, was selected as a major characteristic. In our own – desacralized – era, we select, rather, the manner in which a society relates to a state of law.

A religion is but one of the components of a civilization, not its matrix, even if it has for a while served as a conventional label, its family name – for example, the 'Christian civilization'. The West is supposed to have cultivated and recommended humanitarianism and gentleness more than other civilizations and to owe that gentleness to the influence of Christianity, which softened its mores. Readers will no doubt be relieved if I spare them the Inquisition and the Crusades and, in order to remain down to earth, limit myself to citing a few lines from Marc Bloch: the law of Christ 'may be understood as a teaching of gentleness and compassion although, during the feudal age, the most ardent faith in the mysteries of Christianity became associated, apparently without difficulty, with a taste for violence'.[1]

INDIVIDUALISM AND UNIVERSALISM?

Quite apart from such over-simple views, we should also reject grand words that are too vague, such as individualism and universalism, even if Paul Valéry did suggest that both are virtues of Christianity. Is individualism a Christian characteristic because each soul is of infinite worth and the Lord watches over each and every one (to check that they are humble and bow to his Law)? What does individualism mean, anyway? The attention that an individual pays to his or her own person, as an example of the human condition as a whole? Some ontological priority or even ethical superiority possessed by the individual over the community as a whole or the state? A non-conformism or disdain for the common norms? A wish to fulfil oneself rather than remain in line?

Catholicism has nothing to do with any of the above although from time to time Christians have favoured such exemplification, primacy or rejection, just as anyone may do. If freedom constitutes the kernel of individualism, does that mean that individualism is Christian because there is no merit in obeying the Christian Law unless one does so freely? Possibly, but then one is not free not to obey it, so that so-called freedom only amounts to autonomy if one does obey the Church and its dogmas.

The word universalism is no less misleading. It would be more accurate to speak of an exclusive and proselytizing religion: Christianity is open to all and claims to be the only true religion. Pagan thinkers were universalist in that they expressed themselves as philosophers: Greeks and Barbarians, the free and the enslaved, men and women all enjoyed equal access to truth and wisdom; human capacities were virtually the same in all human beings. Saint Paul, however, was a recruiting officer: he encouraged all to enter a Church that was open to all and closed its doors behind them. Gentiles and Jews, the free and the enslaved, men and women, all alike would become as one in Christ provided they kept hold of their faith. Paganism, for its part, was open to all too, but it was less exclusive: any stranger could worship a Greek god but was not damned if he or she did not do so.

RELIGION AND POLITICAL PROGRAMMES ARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS

Ever since Saint Paul, Christianity has opened up the Chosen People, that is to say the Church, to non-Jews. All souls can be saved, whether the bodies they inhabit be white, yellow or black. That is how Saint Paul extended the privileges of the Chosen People to the Gentiles. But was that really universalism on his part? Did he thereby affirm the unity of the human

race? He neither affirmed it nor denied it. He never even thought about it, never looked that far ahead. We must be wary of being duped by such general terms, the all too capacious clothing in which thought is draped.

The above is not what we, today, understand by universalism, for universalism rightly affirms that all races, all peoples – and both sexes – possess virtually the same human capacities and that any differences that persist are due purely and simply to society. The intelligences of Kofi Annan, Condoleezza Rice and the Nobel prize-winner Muhammad Yunus are (certainly) equal to that of President George W. Bush. Future Nobel prizewinners may well be born among the natives of New Caledonia or Borneo: it is all just a matter of education, ambience, society. But this idea, which we take to be self-evident, is hardly more than one hundred years old and would have surprised civilized people in the nineteenth century. Its triumph, so inevitable as to have passed unnoticed as it came about, is possibly one of the greatest events in human history, even though its conception was unperceived and it gained acceptance without our realizing it. No striking event, no doctrine and no book lies at the origin of its tacit triumph. It is not due to Christianity any more than to the science of sociology, but rather to decolonization and what might be called a sociological state of mind, an implicit 'discourse' on the role of society that quietly became established in the twentieth century.

As for quests for founders and spiritual ancestors, those are frequently illusory. In 1848, in France, it was believed in some circles that Christ had been the first socialist and that socialism simply drew the consequences from Christian charity and love for one's neighbour. This was also the period when it was claimed that Christianity had brought slavery to an end: slavery, which no pagan or Christian individual (except possibly Gregory of Nyssa) had ever thought to abolish. But why would they have abolished it? Christianity is a religion, not a

social or political programme. It was not its business to change society; nor is there any reason to hold that against it, any more than Marxism should be blamed for not bothering about the salvation of souls in the Beyond. Given that we have all been delivered by Christ and all become eligible for salvation and we all share the same metaphysical condition, we are all brothers, but brothers 'in Christ' and with regard to our immortal souls.

This religious unanimity does not imply that master and slave are equal in this world, here on earth (slaves could not be ordained as priests). Given that salvation could be bought at the price of respect for morality in this life, Saint Paul prescribed that slaves should obey their masters. And as for the consequences to be drawn from loving one's neighbour, Lactantius had already drawn those in about 314. Among the pagans, he wrote,[2] there are the rich and the poor, masters and slaves, and 'wherever all are not equal, there is no equality, and inequality is enough to rule out justice, which rests upon the fact that all men are born equal.'

'You could retort', Lactantius continued, with disarming good faith, 'that there are also rich and poor and masters and slaves among us, the Christians. To be sure, but we consider them as equals and brothers, for what matters is the soul, not the body. Our slaves are only enslaved as to their bodies; in spirit they are our brothers'. Far from serving as a matrix for the universalism of human rights, Saint Paul applied oil to the working parts of inegalitarian societies: in the pews of a church, the humble are equal to the high and mighty (except, of course, if social modesty and Christian humility have them sit in the back row).

ARE WE STILL CHRISTIAN, THEN?

In any case, which Europe are we talking about, that of the past or the Europe of today? In 2005, Elie Barnavi spoke

of our Christian roots, reminding us how we used to be at the time of the cathedrals. True enough, Christianity hired architects, painters and sculptors, and it served as a text for medieval philosophy, that 'scholasticism' for so many years denigrated, which in truth is an equal rival to both Greek and German philosophies. Its spirituality and internalized morality have enriched our inner lives. To be sure, we were Christians then; but now? Do we relate at all to Saint Bernard of Clervaux, divine love, penitence, the contemplative life, mysticism, Revelation under threat from philosophy, the primacy of spirituality imposed upon rulers, or the preaching of the Second Crusade?

Today's Europe is democratic, secular, a partisan supporter of religious liberty, human rights, freedom of thought, sexual freedom and socialism – or at least a reduction of inequalities. Those are all things that are alien to or, in some cases, opposed to Catholicism, both that of the past and that of today. Christian morality, for its part, preached asceticism – something that now finds no place in our minds, loving one's neighbour (a vast programme, always left vague) and taught us that it was wrong to kill and to steal (which everyone already knew). Let us speak plainly: Christianity's contribution to the Europe of today, which still contains a high proportion of Christians, amounts to little more than their presence among us. If we were absolutely pushed to find ourselves spiritual fathers, we would, in this day and age, probably name Kant and/or Spinoza. When Spinoza declared, in his *Ethics*, that 'offering assistance to those who need it is a task that is vastly beyond the forces and interests of individuals; so care of the needy devolves upon society as a whole and concerns the common interest', he is closer to us than the Gospels are, except in so far as the Papacy takes a social stand, as did Leo XIII in 1891, in his *Rerum novarum* encyclical, and John Paul II later did.

Michael Winock tells us that around 1950 Catholics on the Left, in a new version of their religion, reckoned that theological virtues implied a condemnation of capitalism. In short, either Europe, as such, no longer has anything to do with Christian morality, which now affects solely Christians (if, that is, the latter still respect it and it has not itself changed); or alternatively, one may cite today's liberal Catholicism, but that is embraced by no more than a minority that draws inspiration from the contemporary world. (The extremely complex case of Protestantism is quite another matter.)

It is not the case that Christianity lies at the root of Europe; rather, modern Europe itself provides the inspiration for Christianity, or at least for some of its versions. If roots there be, they are very strange ones that are absorbed by the growing stem of Europe and take on new forms as Europe itself does, or even ones that have to make an effort not to be left behind. Thus, the morality practised today by most Christians is indistinguishable from the general social morality of our age (a fact that, in his day, made Anatole France smile) with its dependence on contraception (which made Baudelaire snigger).

Then came the day when Europe and the West came to possess an identity other than a Christian one, a day when people were no longer classified according to their religion. As from the sixteenth century, with better understanding of the East, peoples began to be distinguished one from another by their mores, of which religion was but one component. In the eighteenth century, nations either were or were not 'policed'. At that time England and India had the same standard of living. However, in the nineteenth century, a great rupture occurred. States based on Law, the technological revolution, wealth and gunboats now all spelled 'civilization'; and the different peoples of the world were classified either as 'civilized' or as 'not civilized'. Eventually, in the course of

the twentieth century, we took to speaking in terms of Third World development and States of Law.

A PARTIAL TRUTH: PREPARING THE GROUND

What I have written above seems to me to be the truth, but not the whole truth. For a couple of qualifications are called for – qualifications that give rise to the illusion of roots, but are nevertheless partly true.

In the first place, if the presence of roots is indeed an illusion, how is it that when polls are taken, the majority of Europeans, whether or not they practise their religion, reply that they are Christian? (Or say they are if the question is expressly put to them; for they would not offer that information spontaneously.) This is because, as has been suggested above, most members of any society have at least some religious feeling. The members of this majority temper their nostalgia a little and feel they attain a higher, richer degree of humanity when they claim to have a religion – and of course the religion with which they identify is the one that is before their eyes, the religion of their country, which seems national, normal and healthy, even if they do not know much about it and take scant notice of its imperatives and prohibitions. In this way, for many, the word 'Christian' conveys, not an identity,[3] but a hereditary kind of patronym similar to the name of some family from the old nobility whose descendants have long since abandoned its ancient armour and helmet and donned the ties required for administrative committees, but nevertheless still remember their ancient name with a certain pride.

The point is, though, that such an old family has traditions and a way of life of its own; it preserves or thinks it preserves some hereditary virtue that it takes for its motto . . . Meanwhile, far from the West, Buddhist families have

preserved the tradition of non-violence which, I am told, has stamped its memory and reality upon history; Islam has borrowed the practice of alms-giving from Judaism and has preserved it. That Jewish duty of alms-giving also passed into ancient Christianity, which set up charitable institutions, hospitals, hospices and poor-houses, all of which are now secularized state institutions, but which Judaism invented.[4] The patronage and euergetism of wealthy pagans had been devoted to hardly anything other than setting up brilliant architectural frameworks for their cities, in which they themselves took delight. Of course, they did bestow the odd coin upon the poor and would leave them the remains of sacrifices on the temple altars; but the practice never became a matter of doctrine.

A noble Christian family flattered itself on being unfailingly distinguished for its gentleness, compassion and brotherliness, although it no doubt spoke of those virtues more than it practised them; for it was repressive and, like most mortals, it enjoyed money and power. Humanitarianism was not its prime concern nor, to be fair, its particular destiny. Nevertheless, one fine day those words with which it honoured a gentleness that it did not itself always practise were at least to have some educative efficacy.

It was the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment, which saw the emergence of a humanitarianism that would put an end to physical torture. Then, in the wake of the American and French revolutions, the American right to happiness and human rights were invented. These were later to develop into a political, then social, egalitarianism, all of which would eventually lead to democracy and the welfare state. Was not all this progress facilitated by its apparent similarity to the Christian ideal of charity and fraternity? When one has heard praise lavished upon even a little-practised virtue,[5] is one not to some extent predisposed to accept it?

The initiative and most of the work in this domain must incontestably be credited to the Enlightenment, one of history's geological 'folds'.[6] The distinction between kings and subjects and between nobles and common folk had never been based on reason; and now, when faced with a 'nobleman', common folk no longer resembled children arraigned before a 'grown-up' (children who might well receive a beating). The sovereign had been so superior that, where tortures were concerned, he came down with all his might upon any nobody who dared to defy him. Now, however, torture was abolished, for the sovereign was simply one of the people and every citizen had a right to at least a modicum of respect.[7] Political universalism now became a social matter, in response to the claims being made by humble folk who had bowed before nobles but had no respect for the bourgeoisie.

All the same, the Christian tradition did play a role alongside the Enlightenment. But, you might object, how could an ideal of fraternity and equality in which a slave was mystically a brother, but an extremely obedient one, impinge upon the social, temporal terrain? The answer is, in two ways that not so much affected the terrain directly but had prepared it: through illusory genealogies and false analogies. When words long familiar mesh with the ideas of a particular epoch, we imagine that we recognize them; we think, 'this is how we have always thought.' Chateaubriand and Lammenais persisted in believing that Christianity had abolished slavery and prepared the way for modern liberty.

Analogy also played its part. By reason of the confusion of spiritual equality with temporal equality, for the Enlightenment, despite the fact that the old Christianized soil did not constitute a terrain particularly destined to nurture its seeds, such soil nevertheless proved more suitable for germinating them than certain others. Schumpeter used to say that if a holy war had been preached to the humble

fishermen of the Lake of Galilee, or the Sermon on the Mount had been preached to proud Bedouin horsemen, the respective preachers would not have enjoyed much success.[8] Christian charity has helped to assimilate the observations of Spinoza cited above, despite their being based on secular 'discourse', that of man helping man, which is not a part of the Christian religion.

Christianity ceased a very long time ago to constitute the roots of Europe, always supposing that those 'roots' ever amounted to more than just a word. However, in respect of certain values, it did help to prepare the 'ground', as doctors or agriculturists might say. Ever since Troeltsch and Max Weber, it has been impossible to ignore the influence of the Protestant Reformation upon the mindset of western nations or American freedom. The differences between northern Europe, which is Protestant, and the Latin countries, which are Catholic, remain proverbial.

ROOTS OR EPIGENESIS?

But the point is that all the above factors are no more than nuances. To claim loyalty to a particular Holy Book (or to the meaning that a particular era ascribes to it) is no more than one historical factor among others. No society, no culture, with all its myriad activities and contradictions, is founded upon a single doctrine. Out of the confused tangle of factors of every kind that makes up a civilization, the part that seems to stand out is its religion, or at any rate the major great principles that it publicizes, because this is the audible, readable, expressed part of a civilization, the part that springs to eyes and ears and in accordance with which one tends to characterize and name it. So it is that we speak of the Christian civilization of the West and we attribute its humanitarianism to Christianity. We represent a society as a great Individual who thinks before acting.

Maybe so, but religion is but one factor among many others, and it only becomes effective when its language becomes reality and is embodied in the institutions, teaching and habitual training of a population for which this religion then becomes the ideal, the superego. But at this point, the religion encounters new realities, institutions, powers, traditions, mores and a new secular culture. The superego – 'the teaching of gentleness and compassion', as Marc Bloch put it, as I have mentioned above – does not always win out over interests, appetites, impulses gregarious or otherwise, including a 'taste for violence', which Bloch also mentions. Within this welter, the desire to privilege one factor or another is bound to be a partisan or confessional choice. Besides, in our own age, the influence of churches is considerably reduced in secularized societies. Christianity may be rooted there, but that does not mean that is *the* root of those societies. Even less is it representative of those societies, which have become different from it, except in cases where Christianity derives its inspiration from them.

Europe has no roots, Christian or otherwise. It has created itself through unpredictable stages; none of its components are more original than any others. It did not emerge from some kind of pre-formation in Christianity, nor is it a development from any particular seed; rather, it results from an epigenesis.[9] And so, for that matter, does Christianity.

APPENDIX: POLYTHEISMS AND MONOLATRY IN ANCIENT JUDAISM

'Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord's, thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only he had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day' (Deuter. X, 14–15). The Biblical God, known as Jehovah or Elohim ('god' *par excellence*)* appears in two different aspects. In the story running from Adam to Noah, he appears as the sole creator of heaven, the earth and the flood; thereafter he appears above all as the national god of Israel, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or at least of Moses.

The first aspect is that of a cosmic god, who is the object of speculations. His actions explain how it is that the world exists: he 'made' (*bârâ'*) – not 'created', an idea as yet too scholarly[1] – both heaven and earth and he drew woman from one side (*sêla'*) – or one half [2] – of Adam. This author of everything would one day become the universal Judge of the Book of Job. The second aspect, the object of a vibrant faith, is that of the god of his own people: 'I will set my tabernacle

among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God' (Levit., XXVI, 11–12). For this author of the vast world is also a local, national god who declares: 'I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their god' (Exodus, XXIX, 45).

This is a Jealous (*qanâ'*) God. (I myself do not know Hebrew but I can make it out with the aid of grammar books and dictionaries; and I would like my readers to be aware of my linguistic obsession.) This is a god jealous of his people ('jealous' is how he constantly describes himself). The people that he has chosen must not worship any gods other than himself (Exodus, XX, 5; XXXIV, 14; Numbers, XXV, 11; Deuter., IV, 24; and passim). I do not know whether any of the gods of other Middle Eastern peoples were as jealous as he or so exclusive. But in many religions, the gods have a life of their own, they live for themselves, are interested primarily in themselves and, except for once in a while, they nurture no passion regarding their relations with human beings.

Jehovah's jealousy, at once the foundation and the cornerstone of the religion of ancient Israel, is thus his first great invention (or, to a believer, one of his great truths) that is loaded with consequences. For belief that the god upon which a people depends is exclusive implies that his people must, on pain of punishment, be totally devoted to him; and this total devotion on the part of the chosen people presupposes, as a reverse mirror-image in a dream, a total providence on the part of that god. Deuteronomy, the prophets and the Psalms all repeat that no nation in the world possesses a god who takes such care of it as Jehovah does of his people. Given that God is jealous, his people are faithful to him, and in this way place him under an obligation, for whoever attaches himself to a being thereby attaches that being to himself. To a being, one single being, I said, for it is not possible to serve two masters, since they would be jealous of each other: one can

only give oneself entirely to – and thereby gain full protection from – one single god. In that divine jealousy lay the seed of monotheism. One also senses that a god who is such a good protector of his people will become a god even more national than the gods of neighbouring people: his cult will be patriotic, identificatory.

The theologian and historian, Friedrich Heiler, has shown in a great book of his[3] that the relationship between men and god is always imagined on the model of a relationship between human beings, often as that between a potentate and his subjects. In this case, one imagines something more like the relationship between a sheikh and his tribe, or between a 'Godfather' and his 'family'. In the real world, relations with such a *padrone* are not always ideal; but society and religion are not the same thing: a god is irreproachable and the world of the imagination (or of faith, for a believer) is reversible, symmetrical, just as one would wish. If you decree that a god is jealous (or know this through revelation or tradition), you can see him as a great protector.

In comparison to that jealousy, the other two aspects of a god, either as a cosmic deity or as a local one, are more commonplace. Many religions throughout the world have recognized those two possible aspects, admittedly ascribing them to separate deities: on the one hand, a great, heavenly god, seldom invoked or worshipped (Allah was the name of this lofty, distant god, in pre-Islamic religions); on the other hand, a whole pantheon. That *Deus otiosus*, or All-Father, has been described by ethnologists in many primitive pantheons. He is to be found among all the polytheistic peoples of the ancient Middle East.[4]

Meanwhile elsewhere, in the Near East, around 1100 BC, local, national gods were the rule: 'For all people will walk, every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of our Lord, our God for ever and ever' (Micah, IV, 5), the

prophet Micah declares in about 730. And what one of Israel's leaders, Jephthah, a 'Judge', in substance says to the king of the Sons of Ammon is: 'We possess the territory that Jehovah, our god, has given us just as legitimately as you possess the land that Chemosh, your god, gave you' (Judges, XI, 24).

So why did the evolution that was to end in monotheism take place only in Israel? Because, in Israel, a measure of religious inventiveness was at work, as had been the case in Akhnaton's Egypt. In Israel, those two aspects of a deity, the universal and the national, became those of one and the same god. All the same, it took several centuries and a minor stroke of genius to draw the consequences from that identity and end up with monotheism and universalism. Surprisingly, this religious revolution with a great future ahead of it took place within a territory smaller than two French departments, a mere nothing. In about 950, the first Temple, built in Jerusalem by King Solomon, who was long to be remembered by his people, was, at the most, twenty-seven metres long and nine metres wide (I Kings, VI, 2). Religious inventiveness (or Revelation) bloweth where it listeth.

First, let us examine the second of those two aspects, that of the national god of the people of Israel. Was this the sole God of a monotheistic religion? Monotheism is not a word to use without adding a degree of explanation. There are so many ways of being monotheistic that we need to scrutinize the underside of the idea, seeking out the tacit presuppositions that underlie it, what Foucault would call the 'discourse'; in other words, we should simply allow the texts to say what they say and not attribute our own discourse to them. It is a matter of finding out, not whether or not Judaism can claim the honour of always having been monotheistic, but rather in the course of what stages it became so and what might have been understood by 'monotheism' twenty or thirty centuries ago, using tools of thought other than our own.

We shall find that an affirmed monotheism was attested in unchallengeable texts when, in about 730, in a stroke of genius, the two aspects that we have distinguished above, the cosmic god and the Jealous God, explicitly came together. The nature and degree of that monotheism varied along with international vicissitudes, once the Jealous God and his Law had come to represent a patriotic commitment, an identity. One major problem is that the notion of truth as opposed to error cannot be taken for granted. Its emergence may be late and fraught with difficulties. Throughout history it did no more than flicker, as did the monotheism of theologians. It is far easier to scoff at foreign gods, calling them idols made from wood or stone, than it is to recognize that they do not exist, or to get timid souls to understand this.

Let us begin at the beginning. It is not known at what point Jehovah became the god of Israel, or rather at what date a 'Jehovah party' was formed in Israel, only to be constantly repelled by the cult of idols. The Bible traces the revelation and covenant of Jehovah now to Abraham himself, 'whose father served other gods' (Joshua, XXIV, 2), now only to Moses.[5] Some modern historians, including Max Weber, favour the second version and reckon that Jehovah was not accepted until the time when Israel was undergoing a miserable nomadic life in the Sinai peninsula. Every mountain claimed a god of its own and Jehovah was the god of Mount Sinai, otherwise known as Horeb, which was forever to remain 'the Mount of God'.[6] Therein lay one of the seeds of monotheism, for every mountain had its own god. The unique god of a particular place was identified with the great craftsman, also unique, who had been the Author of all things, for every work has an author and it is natural to think of a single one.

This is the first question: why did the pantheon of Israel, or at least that of the Jehovahists, consist of but one god?

And here is another question that will arrest our attention for some time: apart from the sole god to whom Israel pledged itself, was it believed that other gods also existed, the ones that it was forbidden to worship, the gods of other peoples? The answer has to be both Yes and No: certain distinctions need to be made.

On the one hand, there were many Jehovahists who thought, in all simplicity, that the gods whom their Jealous God forbade them to worship nevertheless did exist. After all, a jealous husband who forbids his wife to think of other men does not deny the existence of those men; on the contrary. Meanwhile, on the other hand, a few minds that were either more advanced or more zealous and aggressive did deny the very existence of those gods; but how were they to get simple, gentle souls to believe such an incredible idea? It was far easier to denigrate those false gods, constantly repeating that they were nothing but idols of wood or stone, utterly worthless and powerless.

A great expert on these problems tells me that, rather than speak immediately of monotheism, we should recognize that Israel started off with monolatry. An example is provided by Joshua XXIII, 16 and XXIV, 14–24, where it is clear that it was a matter of loyalty to one particular god, not of the latter being the one and only god. Shortly before his death, Joshua presented his people with a choice: did they still wish to serve Jehovah or would they prefer other gods, those of their ancestors in the days before Abraham, or perhaps those of the country where they now dwelt? The people chose Jehovah, not because the other gods might be false ones, but because it was Jehovah that had led them out of Egypt. Joshua then said to them: 'Put away the strange gods from among you.'[7] Psalm 97 goes a step further, for it is, so to speak, both monotheistic, with its 'Lord, the most high God' and polytheistic, with other gods: 'For thou, Lord, art high above all the earth:[8] thou art exalted above all gods [*élohim*].'

Sometimes, though, the words 'primitive polytheism' also seem in order, since the other gods that the Jealous God forbids his people to worship do apparently exist. God himself says as much when he inflicts upon Egypt the last of the seven plagues: 'Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgement: I am the Lord' (Exodus, XII, 12); and Jehovah does indeed do just that (Numbers, XXXIII, 4). One has only to read lines such as the following with an open mind, unaffected by any preconceived 'discourse': 'If ye forget the Lord, your *élohim*, and follow other *élohim* . . .' (VIII, 19); or 'Ye shall not go after other gods, gods of the people which are round about ye, for the Lord thy god is a jealous god among ye' (Deuteronomy, VI, 14–15). When these other gods are mentioned, not a word of doubt is expressed.

The explanation for this belief in other gods is twofold. As Saint Augustine was one day to remark, to believe is to believe the words of others. For my own part, on the word of the geographers who have taught me, I believe in the existence of China, where I have never been. And the fact is that many men – even in Israel, in every age – spoke of gods other than Jehovah or heard them mentioned and learnt of their existence; so those gods were believed to exist.

People were all the more likely to have heard of them given that although Jehovahism was a religious party that regarded the Bible as its manifesto, it was not always the religion that reigned supreme in Israel. The return of the people or of a king to idols such as Baal is a recurrent event in the ancient history of Israel. It happens after the deaths of Joshua (Judges, II, 12), Solomon, Ezechias and Joas and even at the time of Moses and the episode of the Golden Calf (Exodus, XXXII, 1). In the two kingdoms of Israel and Juda, in the course of four centuries or more, idolatrous kings outnumbered sovereigns faithful to Jehovah alone. Jehovahism was always partial and intermittent, with some of the Children of Israel

worshipping idols rather than Jehovah or – more frequently, no doubt – worshipping idols as well as Jehovah. According to Ezekiel (XXIII, 36–39), the inhabitants of the two capitals, Jerusalem and Samaria, 'prostituted themselves' with their idols and then went to the Temple of Jehovah and defiled it with their presence. Excavating the remains of dwellings on the slopes of the City of David, archaeologists have unearthed statuettes of Astarte, the goddess of Sidon, to whom even Solomon eventually erected an altar (I Kings, XI, 5 and 33). When it was noticed that a deity of one's neighbours had on one occasion turned out to be more efficacious than the god one worshipped oneself, one was tempted likewise to appeal to it.[9] Some people sacrificed their first-born children to the god Moloch, by having them 'pass through fire'.[10]

In practice, up until the time of the Second Temple at least, exclusive Jehovahism was no more than an intermittent choice, rather than the customary religion of Israel. Furthermore, Jehovah was not always the major concern of the society. The Just Man Mocked, in the Psalms (to be distinguished from the Just Sufferer who was oppressed by the powerful ones who surrounded the king) lived in a Jerusalem that was more given to enjoying itself than to piety, in which the pious constituted a mocked minority whose zeal was considered somewhat irritating (Proverbs, II, 12–16).

Jehovahism was a monolatry that resulted from a mutual choice: Jehovah had chosen his people and his people had chosen Jehovah (Deuter.,VII, 7 and XIV, 2), 'The Lord alone did lead him and there was no strange god with him' (Deuter., XXXII, 2, in the Song of Moses).[11] Jehovah is always seen as a cosmic god who reigns in heaven and over the whole earth (Exodus, XIX, 5; Deuter., X, 14) and, when he is so minded, unleashes upon it thunder, hail (Exodus, IX, 29) and all the scourges of Egypt, yet he is the particular god of only Israel (Deuter., X, 15). So Jehovah has to fight and conquer

foreign peoples, in international wars. Meanwhile there are also 'gods' (Judges, II, 12) among neighbouring peoples, and Jehovah tells his own people not to fear them in times of war (Judges, VI, 10); but he does not say that they do not exist.[12]

In truth, quite apart from the gods of neighbouring nations, the world is full of gods, *élohim*. Jehovah is surrounded by a whole court composed of such *élohim* (Psalm 138, 1). So numerous are the gods that their names are not known. When someone has a vision and does not know what being it was that appeared to him, it is not 'God' but 'a god' whom he knows only as 'the god that helped me in my distress (Genesis, XXXV, 3). 'If God will be with me . . . then shall the Lord be my God' (XVIII, 3). In the confused account of the heavenly pact made by Abraham beneath the oak trees of Membrae (Genesis, XVIII), at some points, in accordance with an old legend, three divine beings are mentioned, at others only Jehovah, for the writer was unwilling to sacrifice either his own Jehovahism or the legendary story. To save monotheism, those *élohim* would later be considered to be angels of the Lord. Man, created by the supreme god, or Jehovah, was barely inferior to these *élohim* or future angels, we are told by Psalm 8, 6.

This accounts for a linguistic factor that may be misleading: in referring to these *élohim*, sometimes a singular is employed, sometimes a plural. There are so many gods that it is sometimes said, as an approximation, that 'some *élohim* revealed themselves' (Genesis XXXV, 7, with the verb in the plural). But we should not read too much into this text, for although that plural may designate a single god, it may refer, in the widest sense, to the whole race of gods, the divine species. When travelling in foreign lands, Abraham tells the pagan king of the country: 'The *élohim* caused me to wander from my father's house' (Genesis, XX, 13), but he is not pretending to be polytheistic, nor is he adapting his language to

suit his interlocutor, for he might just as well have said that *a* god had made him leave. What he is using is a, so to speak, generic plural,[13] which is just a figure of speech. Nevertheless, even if his intentions are pure and he is not betraying his God, that choice of words does seem to fossilize a line of polytheistic thinking.

One cleaves solely to Jehovah, out of loyalty, but he is the god only of Israel so that, when travelling abroad, it is very tempting to forget him and worship the local gods. There are gods everywhere, each people has its own whom, naturally enough, they worship. To leave one's own country is to abandon Jehovah and fall under the sway of other gods. When Saul threatens David with death and the latter is forced into exile, he laments: 'They have driven me out, this day, from abiding in the inheritance of the Lord, saying, Go, serve other gods' (I Samuel, XXVI, 19). The Israelites were not the only people to think along these lines. In 721, when the Assyrian Sargon had conquered the Northern Kingdom, he repopulated it by deporting to it pagan tribes of many origins. These tribes brought their own gods with them and continued to worship them, but they also took to worshipping the god of their new country, namely Jehovah (II Kings, XVII, 33). The custom generally was to worship the gods of wherever one found oneself (Deuter., XII, 30). But this the people of Israel were not supposed to do (Deuter., IV, 14–15; Joshua, XXIII, 7; XXIV, 2). The texts say, not that they must not be worshipped because they are false gods, but that they must not be, simply out of loyalty to Jehovah (Deuter., XXVIII, 36; Joshua, XXIV, 15; Judges, II, 12; III, 6; X, 6; II Kings, XVII, 32–33, etc.).

It is hard to say in exactly what way Israel believed or did not believe in the foreign gods. The biblical texts constantly repeat that they are abominations, filth. However, the impatient reader may exclaim, 'If they are false gods, why not state

that in writing?' It is as though the question of truth does not come into it; it is eclipsed by prohibition and repulsion. What we have here is not some intellectual regime of assertion and negation, but an attitude of devaluation and rejection. And that is probably the correct interpretation: rejection and disgust dispense with the need to deny or to pass any assertoric judgement upon their reality. It was enough simply to despise them. So Jeremiah feels able to declare both that they are all daft and stupid and, at the same time, that they are carved out of a mere block of wood and are powerless to do either good or evil. 'Only the Lord (Jehovah) is the true god', Jeremiah adds (X, 5–10). He is the only god worthy of the name; the rest are all false gods (poor quality gods, paste-gods), and what is more, they are false (gods who do not exist).

For a good Jehovahist, for all practical purposes those gods do not exist. However, we should not confuse mere rejection with clear ideas. The gods of other peoples are gods of wood or stone whose worshippers are themselves ashamed of them; but they do exist, if only to be humiliated themselves before the sole non-false god. 'Confounded be all they that serve graven images (*pesel*), that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods (*élohim*)' (Psalm 97, 7). Jehovah is the king of all gods (Psalms, 95, 3 and 96, 4).[14] But those repugnant wooden idols do nonetheless have a supernatural life barely distinguishable from that of God. When the Philistines, sword in hand, took possession of Jehovah's ark, they made the mistake of placing it, as a trophy, in the sanctuary of their own god, Dagon. The next day, 'Dagon lay, face down on the ground before the Ark of the Lord', lacking both his head and his hands (I Samuel, V, 1–4). Deuter., IV, 28 does make an effort to explain the notion of non-existence: such gods neither see nor feel nor eat. That was one way of denying them life, in default of denying that they were true.

For a mindset not yet accustomed to abstract thought,

the idea of non-existence is hardly accessible. The beliefs of others are a reality that one may spew out but that cannot be gainsaid without acceding to the difficult idea of truth pure and simple, which alone is capable of utterly sweeping a belief away. When the categories of truth and error are not clear, any gods that one rejects become poor-quality gods. The Greeks did not succeed in completely evacuating their myths, either: surely there must be something real in those fables, but what? They did at least retain an allegorical veracity. For the early Christians, the gods of paganism certainly existed, but they were regarded as demons that had passed themselves off as gods. So long as a foreign belief lay close at hand, its presence was sufficiently imposing for it to be impossible to consign it to nothingness.

Rather than deny the gods of others, people took to not wishing to know about them. They were 'gods not assigned to us', in accordance with the universally accepted idea that each country had been assigned local gods of its own (Deuter., XXIX, 25 and the enigmatic text XXXI, 45), and Jehovah was no exception: 'I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their god' (Exodus, XXIX, 45). The people of Jehovah would thus say to themselves: (1) I do not wish to worship those gods, nor should I. (2) Those gods are not as strong as mine. (3) Besides, they are false gods (false in the sense that we apply to pearls or to banknotes that are not genuine). (4) Wherever do these gods come from? I don't know them; nobody knows them or has even heard of them (Deuter., XI, 28; XIII, 7–8; XXXII, 17, etc.). *Ma chi lo conosce?*, as they say in Italy when faced with a newcomer who is not considered acceptable.

However to devalue is not to deny; hence King David's great prayer, in which a number of the above nuances may be detected, nevertheless ends up on two polytheistic notes: 'What one nation in the earth is like thy people, even like

Israel whom God went to redeem for a people for himself' (II Samuel, VII, 23; some versions have the plural 'gods' in place of 'God'). Jehovah redeemed us 'from Egypt, from the nations and from their gods'. This text was corrected by scribes, in order to avoid polytheisms or, in some cases, anthropomorphism.

Faced with such polytheism, however innocent, certain individuals with aggressive temperaments took it upon themselves to put these gods to the test before the eyes of the people and to prove empirically that they did not exist or at least, if they did, that they were not gods. Gideon made the most of an uprising against the oppression of the Midianites, and toppled the altar of their Baal. When his fearful companions protested against this sacrilege, he retorted: 'If he be a god (*im élohim*), let him plead for himself!' (Judges, VI, 31). The legendary prophet Elijah challenged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, saying, 'If he be a god (*kî élohim*) let him light the fire on the sacrificial altar, himself!' But it was in vain that the prophets did all they could, slashing themselves with knives and even executing a clumsy dance, for Baal lit no fire at all, whereas Jehovah, at Elijah's request, immediately caused the fire for the sacrifice to flame up (I Kings, XVIII, 19–40). According to legend, Elijah then had all the false prophets put to death.

Jehovah is thus unique, or at least without equal. But is he also, fully, a cosmic god, as his second image suggests? Around 700, in the most ancient of the Bible's long texts that is contemporary with the period that it relates, according to the prophet Amos Jehovah is not a universal god, for he tells the children of Israel: 'You only have I known, of all the families of the earth' (Amos, III, 2). It is true that, in a long prayer, King Solomon is reported to have proclaimed, in about 950, that Elohim is too great to live in his temple, on earth, for neither the heavens nor the earth can contain him;

so it is in the heavens that he resides and it is from the highest of the heavens, where he dwells, that he listens to human prayers, those of Israel, his people (I Kings, VIII, 27–49) and to the prayers of all men (VIII, 38). Solomon also declares that if any foreigner who does not belong to Israel makes his way there because the fame of Jehovah has reached his ears, then he too will be heard in the highest heavens, if he comes to Jerusalem to pray to Jehovah in his own temple (VIII, 41). This long piece of discourse was certainly not taken from the Royal Chronicle produced by the scribes of Solomon's palace (I Kings, XI, 4), as was the custom for eastern potentates. It was invented four or five centuries later by the pious author of Kings, who wrote for the edification and pride of his readers and listeners, and also for their enjoyment or sometimes to satisfy their malice.

However, the conclusion to this false discourse is no less clear on that account. King Solomon proclaims: 'Let all the peoples of the earth know that the Lord is God and that there is none other.' But he also says, somewhat less clearly: 'There is no god like thee in heaven above or on earth beneath, who keepest the covenant and mercy with thy servants' (I Kings, VIII, 60 and 23). Is Jehovah the only god in the world or is he the best god for Israel? The answer is simple. No distinction was made between the two. Nor did Psalm 96, 4–5, make any distinction: 'The Lord is great and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols; but the Lord made the heavens.' So the god of Israel is also seen as the god of the heavens; and from there it was soon but a short step to becoming simply God, in the sense in which Jews, Christians and Muslims all use the word.

This may be a local god, but he is also a universal one, as is confirmed by what King Aram's general, Naaman, is said to have done around 860. Having contracted leprosy and learning that the prophet Elisha might have the power to cure him,

he sought him out, was indeed cured and apparently declared: 'Now I know there is no god in all the earth but in Israel' (II Kings, V, 15).

It was in this way that thinking began to swing towards monotheism: when the figure of the true god was placed above all else, Jehovah became incomparable and, in that sense, unique. The other gods could not equal Jehovah, who was 'the greatest of all', as Moses' father-in-law was said to have declared (Exodus, XVIII, 11). 'Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord' (Exodus XV, 11; Psalm 86, 8). 'For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is?' (Deuter., IV, 7). As Valentin Nikiprowetsky has remarked: 'We pass on from the incomparability of Jehovah to his uniqueness.'

This pious promotion of Jehovah went hand in hand with a patriotic exaltation of the nation's valour. As is well known, Jehovahism prided itself on being the religious party that, in bloody battle, conquered Canaa (if the books of Joshua and Judges are to be wholly believed and this conquest was a historical reality, which certain archaeologists today doubt).[15] Jehovahism was also the religion that inspired uprisings against the yoke of foreigners and their rival gods, in the same way as other peoples were to rise up to the cry of 'Our country!' or 'Liberty!' The prophets interpreted all national catastrophes as divine retribution for some infidelity to God or the Law; but he who punishes also loves, and Jehovah knew how to forgive; he was a god as loving as he was jealous and his love held out the promise of forgiveness, improvements to come, revenge, or triumph.

Monolatry and patriotism had always been tightly interlinked. In the most ancient of the authentic documents, the Song of Deborah, written around the year 1000, Jehovah promises his people victory once it has renounced 'the new gods that it has chosen'.[16] 'The Lord is my rock and my

fortress and my deliverer', sings David, freed from his enemies. 'The Lord liveth and blessed be my rock; and exalted be the God of the rock of my salvation' (II Samuel, XXII, 2–51).

Even on religious grounds (the local god was also the Creator of the world), monotheism was thus motivated politically. So what? The origins of things are seldom beautiful. So what, again? Origins do not predetermine what follows. The gigantic stature of the One and Only God was one day to ignite Jewish, Christian and Muslim mysticism.

In this way, Israel acceded to monotheism and a universalism that was, at the same time, patriotism. Let us consider one particular sublime episode, the vision of Isaiah, round about 730. The prophet announced that, in the course of time, the day would come when 'many peoples' would flock to Jerusalem saying, 'The Lord will teach us of his ways and we will walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem' (Isaiah, II, 2–4).[17] Jehovah now becomes not so much the god of all peoples, but a prestigious moral superpower. Shortly before 583, an equally highly regarded prophet, the great poet known as the Deutero-Isaiah, predicted that there would one day appear in Israel a mysterious servant of the Lord,[18] chosen by God to make the truth known to the whole earth and to be 'a light for the Gentiles' (XLII. 1–7; XLIX, 6).

We should bear in mind that the ancient parts of the Book of Isaiah, written in about 730, constitute one of the earliest long biblical texts that are contemporary with the events that they describe, namely the reigns of Sargon, Ezechias, Sennacherib, and so on. The books of the Bible, collected together at the time of the Second Temple, constitute a partisan text that recounts earlier events that tend to be stuffed with edifying legends and a retrospective Jehovahism. Thanks to the Book of Isaiah, interpolated as it is, we can be certain of

one great event: around 730, creative religious imagination, in a stroke of genius, produced an invention that was at once religious and patriotic and that was to have consequences for centuries to come: it turned the god of Israel into the true God of the whole world.

It was also around the time of Isaiah, but in a different spirit, that the Book of Job was written. In this, God, whatever name he goes by, is, as in Isaiah, a universal god. He is given a number of different names (El, Eloah, or Elohim, meaning 'God', or Shaddai, the name of the god recognized by the Patriarchs)[19]; but, for very good reason, he is never called Jehovah. The criticisms that Job levels at the theodicy are practically blasphemous; and the replies forthcoming from the deity are by no means comforting and do little more than render the enigma of an unjust world increasingly obscure. No wonder it was considered wise to make Job not one of the Children of Israel, but instead a foreigner of eastern origin, and to refrain from giving the deity the sacred name of Israel's just protector. Like Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job is an individual speculation that stems from wisdom of a profane nature. As befits a deity in an investigation that is close to a philosophical speculation, the God that is its subject is certainly a universal Judge, given that Job, the individual judged, is a foreigner.

In contrast to this universal God who is not Israel's god, the universalism of the great prophets remains patriotic. The god of Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah is universal, but his triumph represents the triumph of both Jehovah and his people. Other nations rally to the god of Israel and this redounds to the greater glory of Israel. As Isaiah declares (II, 3): 'Out of Zion shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord.' The revelation of this universality constitutes a mission that is reserved for Israel, or at least for Jehovah's servant whom God selects in Israel. For Deutero-Isaiah, around 540, the great Persian

conqueror of the Middle East, Cyrus, pagan though he is, is Jehovah's anointed royal servant, even if he does not know Him, for his conquests show the vanquished nations that their gods were nobodies and that the only true god is the Lord, Jehovah. To avenge and liberate Israel, Jehovah uses a pagan king,[20] the implication being that the god of Israel rules the whole world.

So let those nations, or at least their survivors, 'turn to Jehovah' for their salvation and come and bow down to the only true god: 'In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory' (XLV, 20–25). Is this an instance of conversion? No, what is involved here is, rather, Jehovah's victory over the idols of Babylon (LVI, 1) and the subjected Israel's revenge on its subjectors[21] and on those who had meanly rejoiced over its misfortunes: Jehovah announces that the day will come when the Gentiles will be at Israel's bidding and when 'They shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth and lick up the dust of thy feet' (XLIX, 22–23).

One of Isaiah's disciples would go so far as to declare that foreigners, fascinated by Jehovah's eminence, would adopt his Law and convert: yes, Gentiles would even convert, accept the Lord's Covenant and keep the Sabbath. Jehovah proclaims: 'Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people' (LVI, 6–7). No other Old Testament text goes so far[22] and nowadays those last words are inscribed above the doors of every synagogue.

All these prophecies console Israel in its misfortunes. They constitute a religious message that is part of its national identity. Nowadays, certain nations, France included, like to believe that they too bear a message: one that is not religious but political and civilizing, to which they attribute a universal value. But no message can equal the one entrusted to Israel: 'I am God and

there is none else. I am God and there is none like me!' (Isaiah, XL, 18; XLVI, 5); and Deutero-Isaiah has Jehovah declare: 'Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me' (XLIII, 10). Jehovah is the only god and his splendour, described in magnificent verse, fills the whole of space. Such is the superiority of the only true values, the national values of Israel, which ought to set an example to all peoples.

Jehovah's superiority was indeed known to all peoples (Joshua, IV, 24; I Kings, VIII, 60, etc.), so that 'In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (Genesis, XVIII, 18; XXII, 18; XXVI, 4). With Jehovah as its god, Israel can consider itself the most fortunate people in the world. The day will come when foreign peoples, recognizing its superiority, will turn to it for arbitration and judgement (Isaiah, II, 4 and XI, 10), the Nubians will pay homage to it (XVIII, 7), and the whole of humanity will turn away from its gods and look solely to Jehovah, its creator (XVII, 7–8).

This monotheism may not be exactly seductive, but by reason of its superiority it conquers and subjugates others. Jehovah is victorious over all Israel's enemies (XLIII–XLIV); the survivors of the conquered nations will kneel before Him and acknowledge that he is and ever was the strongest and the only god worthy of that name (XLV), the rest being no more than images (*pesel*), helpless before the strength of Jehovah.[23]

It was, precisely, at the time of the first Isaiah, in 701, that the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, threatened to take Jerusalem. At this, King Hezechiah appealed to the prophet Isaiah and addressed a prayer to Jehovah, saying: 'Thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth, thou hast made heaven and earth' (II Kings XIX, 15–19). The two aspects of the god of Israel were at last incorporated: he was God both of his own people and of the whole universe.

Let us illustrate these points by reading the prophecies of Jeremiah, written around 600, or rather those that are

ascribed to him. They show how laborious it was to construct the idea of one universal god. At first, Jeremiah, through muddled thinking, simply goes along with what may be called the old apparent polytheism. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, is the conqueror of Egypt, 'its gods and its kings' (XLVI, 25). He forces Chemosh, the king of the Moabites, 'to go forth into captivity with his priests and his princes together' (XLVIII, 7); the Ammonites' god, Moloch, likewise 'went forth into captivity, and his priests and princes together' (XLIX, 3). Gods who flee in this way are clearly not as strong as Jehovah. And their flight, mentioned in a single word, seems so unremarkable that one is tempted to assume that the prophet is speaking metaphorically, simply to indicate that the cults of such gods were eradicated along with their worshippers. But that temptation should be resisted: such local gods amounted to hardly more than the upper crust of the local inhabitants, and they shared the fate of the latter. Their flight was no metaphysical event: faced with their conquerors, they react in the same way as the other local inhabitants[24] and are as real as they are. But it is pointless to pay any more attention to all these fugitives.

The same old turns of phrase were used by a prophet who, in the 550s, spoke under the name Jeremiah, announcing the imminent fall of Babylon (Jeremiah, L, 2): the accursed town is under threat, its deity Merodach is 'broken in pieces, her idols are confounded, her images are broken in pieces'. The monotheism of this prophet seems doubtful. For him, a god is hardly distinguishable from its images and is as real as they are. If he really believed that Merodach did not exist, he would not exult at the idea of that false deity's terror.

However, the true Jeremiah does not always stick to the old turns of phrase and in other passages one detects the formation of a more clearly conceived monotheism. He relates that when the Jehovah of the armies unleashes his anger,

> every man is brutish by his knowledge; every founder is confounded by the graven image, for his molten image is falsehood and there is no breath in it . . . The portion of Jacob is not like them, for he is the former of all things; and Israel is the rod of his inheritance: the Lord of hosts is his name.' Here, Jeremiah makes the connection between the two aspects of Israel's god. (LI, 17–19)

I fear that at least some readers will be thinking that I am complicating matters and have only succeeded in accumulating a number of useless subtleties. In my defence, let me say that, throughout history, it has taken a long time to think an idea right through (I will present an example of what I mean, *in fine*). The notion of creation *ex nihilo* is unknown in Genesis, but it is through this that the human mind eventually succeeds in doing better than imagining divine power purely as the skill of a craftsman. However, this does not come about until II Maccabees, VII, 28, two centuries before the Common Era.

It was in reaction to the shock of the conquests achieved by the great empires of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Hellenistic Greeks and eventually the Romans that the foreign gods lost their credibility. In the throes of its suffering, patriotism spewed them out so thoroughly that Jehovah no longer had any reason to be a jealous god. He had become 'the god of both heaven and earth' (Esdras, V, II; VII, 12, etc.). Or rather, the temptation to be unfaithful to him would probably never die out (it was to give rise to a civil war combined with a foreign one, even at the time of the Maccabees, in the distant future); but the powerful Jehovahist party, at once national and 'historical', came to represent the true Israel and maintained Jehovah as the sole god of Israel – and indeed of the Bible, as it has come down to us.

The Babylon Captivity and the Return of 538 were to

bring about this great change. Once back in Jerusalem, the former exiles came to power there. These were convinced Jehovahists, for it was their scrupulous respect for the god and his Law that had enabled them to preserve their identity whilst in exile. By about 500, at the time of the Second Temple, Jehovah was the god of the universe – yet he still remained the god of his own chosen people. As the great proclamation produced by Esdras following the Return declares (Nehemiah, IX, 6): 'Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou has made heaven . . . and earth and all things that are therein.' Jehovah and his Law had become part of Israel's own ancestral customs and constituted the components of its national identity. When fighting against the Greeks of Syria, in the name of Jehovah, Judas Maccabee was at the same time defending 'our people and our customs', 'our nation and our Holy Place' (I Macc., III, 21 and 59). In the texts, it is no longer the name of Jehovah that recurs most frequently, but the word for the Law. During the persecutions organized by Antiochus IV, around 165, impious individuals abandoned the Law, but the *hassidim*, or pious ones preserved it (Macc., I, 52; II, 27, etc.).

That Jealous God, with his imperious Law, conferred upon Israel a more clearly defined identity than the identities of other ancient peoples, but only to the extent that the population was Jehovahist. That identity now fell under threat, not only from foreign gods but also through an acculturation to the Greek civilization in general, which enjoyed such great prestige: this was the 'world' civilization of the day. Some of the Greek kings of Syria tried to Hellenize Israel, where their efforts were crowned with success among at least some of its population. For the cultural exclusion of ancient Israel was as intermittent and partial as was its Jehovahist faith. The monolithic image of a monotheistic Israel is an edifying – or anti-Semitic – trap. All the same, for the *hassidim* and the

Maccabees, the Law that symbolized the national identity stood in opposition to what was not just a pantheon but an entire civilization.

And, with the rejection of all that was foreign, monotheism became an idea more clearly defined than ever. One of the seven martyrs horribly tortured by Antiochus IV predicted to the Greek king that misfortunes would soon force him to acknowledge that 'only the god of the Jews is God' (II Macc., VII. 37). One no longer even bothered to repeat that the gods of the Gentiles were nothing but wooden idols, for they were simply not worth considering. Jehovah was God: that was all there was to it; and Gentiles who behaved as enemies to his Law and his Temple were not idolaters, but simply 'impious' towards the King of the universe. And now these impious people were no longer disbelieving Jews, as in the Psalms, but were Gentiles whose error was not to believe in the one and only God.

A slightly earlier text, dating from the 150s, the Book of Daniel, suggests that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, enlightened by his misfortunes, did come to believe in 'the most High' (IV, 31–34). Next, Darius, the king of the Persians, seeing that the lions spared the prophet Daniel whom he had cast into their den, issued an edict that ran as follows: 'I decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men should tremble and fear before the god of Daniel, for he is the living god' (VI, 27). These stories dating from the Hellenistic period imply that the god of Israel is the god of all men, yet remains the particular glory of Israel. The teaching of Isaiah and Deuteronomy (IV, 32–34 and X, 14), half a millennium or more earlier, was still true: Israel was a nation that was privileged more than any other. I repeat: such monotheism is the kind of universal message that national identities are still prone to purvey: according to Victor Hugo, it was France that brought liberty to the world.

However, compared to first the Greeks, then the Romans, Israel was too small a power to convey such a message to the world. Thus monotheism allied to national pride was succeeded by a monotheism allied to an indifference that no longer asserted that Jehovah was the only true god but went so far as to ignore whatever the Gentiles might believe. Israel contented itself with its own privilege, which lay in its possession of the Truth. According to Ecclesiasticus, wisdom travelled throughout the world, 'growing richer among all peoples and all nations', but found repose and definitive asylum only in Israel (Ecclesiasticus, XXIV, 5–8).

It was a matter no longer of exclusivism, but rather of solipsism, which is not peculiar solely to Israel, but is a feature of all peoples with a faith. All the same, as we have seen above, under the Roman Empire, Judaism, while remaining a national religion, nevertheless proselytized with some success. Then, with the advent of Christianization, it was forced to withdraw into itself. But, after all, each religion has faith only in itself and (even when it speaks of entering into 'dialogue') considers other religions with indifference, hardly troubled at all by their diversity.

The key to this new type of monotheism thus lies not so much in affirmation, negation or assertion, but in an attitude towards others, whose beliefs are ignored with indifference. It is important to distinguish here between doctrine and attitude, just as in linguistics one distinguishes between semantics (what one says) and pragmatics (the attitude that one adopts towards one's interlocutor).

The fact nevertheless remains that pragmatics and patriotism simply reinforced a monotheism initially motivated by politics, but with religious roots: it had always been known that the cosmic god and the Jealous God were one and the same. But centuries passed before it was discovered, in a stroke of genius, just what that identity implied and it became

possible to conceptualize this. The god of Israel truly became the only god once it was recognized that 'he is the maker of the universe' (Jeremiah, X, 16); and Isaiah prophesied (XVII, 7–8) that the day would come when mankind would abandon its idols because it would have 'looked to its maker'.

It was in order to magnify Israel's own god that it had become customary to reiterate that he was also the maker of everything, but this led to thinking this god's identity right through and to concluding that Jehovah was the only god that there was in the world and that the other gods purely and simply did not exist. At this point we may indeed speak of Jewish monotheism in the modern sense of the word. Idols were no longer poor quality gods or beings whose existence or inexistence was not clear: they were gods who simply did not exist: and the only god that did exist was the God of the Bible.

So it was that, over the four or five centuries preceding the Common Era, there existed, side by side, Jews who were attracted by the Greek civilization and its pantheon or by the Egyptian pantheon, and other Jews who were faithful to Jehovah and considered him to be the only true God. They did not, as their ancestors had, rule out the worship of gods other than him, for they simply did not believe any other gods existed. This was truly monotheism, not monolatry. When one now called foreign gods mere idols, it was not so as to denigrate them but simply to deny them. Although the declamations against idols remained unchanged, the thinking behind them was no longer the same.

So why continue to declaim so much against them? Why so many long pages of 'Wisdom' devoted to attacking idols? Perhaps for the following two reasons: (1) Writers were intellectually frustrated at not knowing how to prove the inexistence of those gods or how to explain the belief that so many placed in them; (2) Because many Jews in Alexandria

and even in Jerusalem either did worship those false gods or were tempted to do so. One Deutero-canonic text, the so-called *Letter of Jeremiah*, was written in the Hellenistic period with the purpose of persuading such Jews to remain faithful to their ancestral god and to dissuade them from worshipping the Greek gods of Seleucid Syria or Lagid Egypt. The author repeats at length that those gods are fakes, nothing but idols made of wood or metal; and he then feels the need to assert, at equal length (33–65) that they are powerless, utterly incapable of establishing or toppling a king or of helping any of their worshippers.

But, one feels tempted to object, was it really necessary to state specifically that a piece of wood is impotent? There can be no doubt that the pseudo-Jeremiah does not believe in those gods; so why not say so? Because the truth is always difficult to explain. The pseudo-Jeremiah limits himself to waiting for false beliefs to be refuted by the facts, and then die away. All he says (50) is that they will be recognized to be nothing but lies. That word 'lies' is significant: just as belief starts off as belief in what we are told, similarly one's first experience of the truth is not that of the opposite of error, even less that of the opposite of what stories (myths) tell us. Rather, it stems from the relations between human beings. Initially, truth was simply the opposite of lies.

So, for want of a better ploy,[25] writers continued to reiterate that idols were mere images, just as they had been doing for the past six centuries. As luck would have it, it was forbidden to make images of Jehovah; and this made it possible to assert that the false gods were nothing but images made from stone, clay or wood. Rather than ascribe them to a capacity for inventing stories, they were attributed to the skill of craftsmen. Given the circumstances, this really was the best that could be done. It is not possible to prove a non-existence (no one has ever been able to prove that Jupiter never existed).

Not until the advent of modern thinkers such as Spinoza and Hume did it become possible to see that false beliefs stem from a capacity of the mind, namely imagination, or from a warping of it, superstition, or even from deceit practised by priests. At this point, one could take in the immense capacity of human beings to create myths, and begin to talk about the function of storytelling. This was something that the Greeks had never managed to do (they never were able to regard their myths with clarity). It would, moreover, have been dangerous to do so (for no religion in the world and no 'fables of the Scriptures' would have been spared).

Allow me now, as promised, to wind up these thoughts with one more, quite different, example of laborious conceptualization and of misunderstanding regarding the implication of what one thinks without realizing it. As early as the second century AD, some – but not all – Christian authors began to represent God as pure spirit, and Saint Augustine was to argue that the soul was purely spiritual, so did not extend three-dimensionally. Those of us who have been taught in catechism classes that God and the soul are 'pure spirit', or who have heard such words pronounced around us, take them in without difficulty, believing that we understand them and that they are quite simple. But that is far from being the case. They remained incomprehensible and absurd to Saint Jerome, to whom Saint Augustine (who, as we know, was the source of Descartes's *Cogito*) never managed to make them acceptable, despite a lively exchange of letters. And we ourselves, to whom the notion of incorporeal spirit may seem quite simple, do not necessarily know what thoughts underlie those words. If we did know, we ought to be able to answer the extremely relevant question that medieval professors used to put to students, by way of testing them: how many millions of angels can stand on a pinhead? And how can any angel remain distinct from another if he has no body?

Notes

**Translator's note*: In the English translation produced by the Bible of King James, from which I shall be citing, Iahve, the French version of Jehovah, is generally translated simply as 'the Lord'.

Chapter 1 Constantine: The Saviour of Humanity

1 That figure is double in some largely Christian regions, mostly in Africa and the Greek East, where diffusion could well have taken place, spreading from one neighbourhood to another, in a process of imitation. See Klaus M. Girardet's excellent *Die konstantinische Wende: Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen*, 2006, Darmstadt, pp. 82–3.

2 *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, 2nd edn, 1958, New York, Dover Books, vol. I, p. 360. Cited by Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 1982, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, p. 97.

3 Eusebius, in Optat de Milev, *Adversus Parmenianum* I, 26; or see Migne, vol. XI of *Patrologia Latina*.

4 'A very great man who did everything to bring about what he intended' (*vir ingens et omnia efficere nitens quae animo simul praeparasset*), according to Eutropius (X, 5), a patriot who was religiously neutral with regard to Constantine and Julian (X, 16).

5 For the Christogram displayed on a shield in no way implied that the soldier holding it had himself converted to Christianity. On the contrary, the army long remained a haven for paganism: Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, AD 100–400*, 1984, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, pp. 44–7.

6 *In scutis*, as Lactantius put it, soon after 312, in his *De mortibus persecutorum*, XLIV, 5. Constantine, in his letter to the Shah of Persia, was himself to write that 'his soldiers bore on their shoulders the sign consecrated to God' (Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 9).

7 On this sign invented by Constantine, see C. Pietri, in *Histoire du christianisme*, 1995, J.-M. Mayeur, C. and L. Pietri, A. Vauchez and M. Venard (eds), Paris, Desclée, vol. II, *Naissance d'une chrétienté (250–430)*, pp. 194–7; the Christogram eventually became an emblem that was more military than Christian: see R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., p. 48 and n. 23.

8 See Supplementary Notes, p. 236.

9 *Eusebius, The Life of Constantine*, I, 31, 4, trans. A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (eds), Oxford, Clarendon Press.

10 See Supplementary Notes, p. 237.

11 Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum (The Death of Persecutors)*, XLVI, 3. With this 'supreme god' who remained indeterminate, Licinius avoided setting himself in opposition to the Christian god and Lactantius avoided lying by suggesting that Licinius was a Christian. Both

pagans and Christians agreed upon the existence of a supreme god whom each individual could identify as his own preferred god.

12 Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XLVIII, 6 (the 'edict' of Milan).

13 I refer the reader to my *Empire gréco-romain*, 2005, Paris, Seuil, pp. 421–8. Here are two examples: at the death of a much loved prince, Germanicus, the Roman plebs stoned the temples and toppled their altars, just as today's demonstrators might attack a foreign embassy; in Late Antiquity, Emperor Julian, a man who harked back to the past, indignant at having suffered a military defeat, refused to sacrifice to Mars ever again.

14 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 56.

15 A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 1948, English trans. H. Mattingly, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 88.

16 I rally to the thesis of Klaus M. Girardet, *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., p. 48.

17 See, for example, Constantine's letter to the Council of Arles in 314, in H. von Soden, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Donatismus*, 1913, Kleine Texte, CXXII, Bonn, no. 18; and Volkmar Keil, *Quellensammlung zur Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen, übersetzt und herausgegeben*, 1989, Darmstadt, p. 78.

18 In Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 56, 1 and 60, 1. Indeed, H. A. Drake goes so far as to suggest that Constantine's intention was to create 'a durable consensus between pagans and Christians, within a public space that was religiously neutral' (*Constantine and the Bishops: the Politics of Intolerance*, 2000, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. xv and 401–9). Maybe so; but the emperor's official and overt scorn for the stupidity of paganism is at odds with this overgenerous view.

19 According to the expression of Pierre Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens: la disparition du paganisme dans l'Empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien*, 1990, Paris, Les Belles Lettres/Fayard, pp. 37–40.
20 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 24–42 and 48–60.
21 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 2, 5: *aliena superstitio, sanctissima lex* (in 323).
22 R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., pp. 86–101.
23 See the list of names provided by A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 119.
24 Between 324 and his death in 337, Constantine passed no anti-pagan laws (K. M. Girardet, *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., p. 124).
25 As the pagan Symmachus maintained in argument with Christians at the end of the century, saying, 'It is not possible that one path only should lead to such a great mystery' (*Relatio*, III, 10).
26 Since the Lord Jesus entrusted his disciples with the mission of converting the whole earth.
27 We should bear in mind the extremely controversial text of Zosimus, II, 29, 5, which refers to similar twofold tactics: allowing pagans to perform their ceremonies, but without defiling oneself by participating in them. At a much disputed date, Constantine 'took part in the festival (*heorte*), but 'distanced himself from the holy sacrifice (*hiera hagisteia*)'. See the scholarly note by F. Paschoud in his edition, vol. I, pp. 220–4, and K. M. Girardet's discussion in *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., p. 61, n. 77 (and all this scholar's work on the subject).
28 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, I, 48, the twisted language of which is (surely, deliberately) unclear. Should we assume that Constantine had his ten-year reign celebrated by a Christian Eucharist, as Cameron and Hall

suggest in their commentary on *The Life of Constantine*? But surely, Eusebius would have referred to such a celebration in more direct terms. I myself am more inclined to believe that Constantine did authorize pagan rites, but reduced them to garlands of flowers, libations and incense, ruling out the sacrifice of animals ('without fire or smoke', as Eusebius puts it). It is clear that what Christians regarded as an abomination of desolation was the bloodshed involved in sacrifices. As for the celebrations held to mark first twenty, then thirty, years of Constantine's reign, those took place, respectively, in Nicaea and Jerusalem itself (where Constantine happened to be at the time) and they clearly involved no pagan rites at all. On the other hand, the festival that marked the tenth year of Constantine's reign was a trickier matter, since it took place in Rome itself, which was then 'the Vatican of paganism'.

29 Constantius Chlorus bears the title '*divus*' on certain posthumous coins.

30 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 2, 5, at 323.

31 C. Pietri, 'Constantin en 324', in *Crises et redressements dans les provinces européennes de l'Empire*, 1983, Proceedings of the Strasbourg colloquium, edited by E. Frézouls, Strasbourg, AECR, p. 75.

32 The laws of the *Theodosian Code*, IX, 40, 8 and 11 (in 365 and 367).

33 The Exchequer belonged to the emperor. Mines and quarries also belonged to him and were administered by the Exchequer; those condemned to work in them were slaves of the Exchequer, which controlled a kind of Gulag of labour camps and was not solely concerned with the administration of taxes.

34 *Theodosian Code*, XV, 12, 2.

35 Zosimus, II, 7.

36 Tertullian, *Apology*, XVIII, 4 (Loeb Classical Library, 1966, trans. G. H. Rendall).
37 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, XI, 19 (Loeb Classical Library, 1912, trans. W. Watts).
38 As V. Schultze noted in 1887 (cited by A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 10).

Chapter 2 Christianity: A Masterpiece

1 The idea of a link of gratitude to the Father for all his blessings and to the Son, for his sacrifice, must have seemed altogether too human to Neo-Platonists, in whose eyes the great cosmic process had nothing to do with this story of filial piety. Similarly, the role of the Redeemer may be considered by some to be more complicated and melodramatic than the simple and touching devotion of a Bodhisattva.
2 See the Appendix, pp. 150–76.
3 For Greek thinkers, monism, the ultimate form of rationalism, insisted only on one supreme god or principle, an impersonal, impassive and passively unifying One-Good. Beneath this principle, there could be a whole host of gods. Plato, the Stoics and Plotinus are polytheists and monists. Monotheism, the importance of which tends to be exaggerated by historians of religion, is a confused and misleading word, a minor problem or, at best, a popular idea, as Constantine himself naively shows in his *Discourse for Good Friday* (III, 34): if one is in the presence of a whole crowd of gods, he says, one is embarrassed, uncertain whom to address, so monotheism is more convenient. As Spinoza points out, it is just as naive and superstitious to believe, with no reason, that there is only one god, as it is to believe that there are several. Monotheism is sometimes said to have developed from Greek philosophy. But can that be certain? Writing against the 'Gnostics', that is

to say the Christians, Plotinus declares: 'One must praise the intelligible gods and, above them all, the great sovereign over intelligible beings, whose greatness is revealed by the very plurality of the gods' (II, 9, 9, Loeb Classical Library 1966, trans. A. H. Armstrong). The mutually impassioned relationship between God and humanity is, far more than monotheism, certainly the most original invention of Christianity, but this original idea has no need of monotheism: in polytheism, it is perfectly possible to have one specially chosen god and to think solely of him, loving him alone (as Aelius Aristides with his beloved Asclepius), just as, for a lover, the woman he loves is, to him, all women.

4 For example, Exodus, XXXIV, 6; Psalms 86, 15 and 103, 8–10; I Kings, VIII, 30–50 (Solomon's Prayer). This was clearly a common enough belief and there were some who abused it, regarding divine mercy as 'a right to take a holiday in sin' (*commeatum delinquendi*, as Tertullian puts it).

5 A. D. Nock, *Conversion*, *Conversion, the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander to Augustine* (1933[1963]), Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 210.

6 Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 1965, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

7 Prudentius, *Cathemerinon*, IX, 83: 'the triumphal cross, that trophy of the Passion'. On the cross on which he was raised for his victory, Christ had his arms stretched out to right and to left. This victorious gesture had been prefigured by Moses, at the victory over the Amalekites: so long as Moses stretched out his arms to left and to right, Israel was the stronger (Exodus, XVII, 11–13). Thus, in the very earliest representation of the Crucifixion that we possess, on the doors of Saint Sabine-on-the-Aventine (circa 420–30), the wooden cross is not represented, only suggested allusively.

8 However, on Christ's suffering on the cross, see Pseudo-Clement, *Second Epistle*, I, 2; *Epistle of Barnaby*, V, 5–8; Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smerniots*, II, 1. But many of these texts refer to martyrs or are written by future martyrs who are willing to shed their blood just as the Lord himself shed his. One 'imitates' Jesus by suffering as he did, which is what the martyrs did: Saint Cyprian, VI, 2 (see *Epistle to the Romans*, VIII, 16–17), XXXI, 3, LVIII, 2, 2; *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarpus*, 17: 'Martyrs are disciples and imitators of the Lord,' who suffered for our redemption.

9 At the beginning of his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Philostratus, in order to praise his hero, emphasizes that he was a Sage of the present day, not one who belonged to the fabled Antiquity of the Seven Sages. A Christian mythology, in which people both believed and did not believe, later developed. It comprised the *Golden Legend*, the *Gospels of Childhood*, the apocryphal *Acts of the Martyrs* and other stories designed to please, *ad delectandum*.

10 Saint Cyprian, *Correspondance*, XIII, 4, 2; XV, 1, 1.

11 For example, Buddhism discovered, invented, revealed and inculcated the idea that the human condition involved universal suffering; that very idea then ensured the success of the Buddhist notion of salvation (Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, 1983, Oxford, cited by Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 1989, New York). In a more vulgar domain, as is generally accepted, a firm employs carefully targeted publicity to create new 'false' needs, and these then ensure the sale of products designed to satisfy them.

12 Guy G. Stroumsa, *La Fin du sacrifice: les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive*, 2005, Paris, Odile Jacob,

p. 162, citing J. Wansborough, *Context and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, 1978.

13 'It was originally terror that invented the gods' (the fear of lightning, for example): Statius, *Thebaid*, III, 661; Petronius, fragment 27. The fact that a sense of the divine is a specific sensibility, irreducible to fear or any other emotion, is borne out when that sense assumes an emotive and specific form, such as the Greek *thambos*; or by the general confusion that Callimachus describes at the moment when a crowd gathered for a ceremony senses the approach of the deity.

14 Georg Simmel, *Die Religion*, 1912, Frankfurt, p. 96. (*La Religion*, 1998, French trans. P. Ivernwel, Belfort, Circé).

15 When Marx declares that religion is the opium of the people, he means, not that it is an ideology that deceives the 'oppressed' (*unterdrückte*) proletariat, but rather that it is the least costly and most popular form of consolation available to any 'creatures thus oppressed' (*bedrückt*).

16 Belief in the terrors of the Beyond becomes ever more anguished as death approaches, as Plato was already noting at the beginning of the *Republic*.

17 See the banal (because all too obvious) proverb: 'Long Live Paradise, but as late as possible.'

18 As is shown by one simple believer who, in the reign of Louis XIII, with the most pious sentiments of love and hope, nevertheless had his mind fixed on, not his 'unreal' belief in Paradise, but the practical reality of his imminent death. There, on his deathbed, he did not speak of Paradise or Hell. Instead, he told his confessor: 'The place where I must stay in death, whose shadows are already covering my eyes, fills me with the greatest horror.' Clearly, two modalities of belief, of different and unequal strengths, coexisted here.

19 See the scepticism evinced by Clement's letter to James, which is positioned at the head of the *Homilies*, 10, 6: 'God has decided that there will be a Day of Judgement at the end of time . . . It would perhaps be reasonable to doubt this, were it not for the fact that the Prophet of Truth has confirmed, under oath, that this will happen' (trans. Janet Lloyd). No more than monotheism do worries about the Beyond (about which many religions are not concerned) seem to constitute a cardinal axis in the history of religions. A cult of the dead, for example, often forms a quite separate domain. It probably does stem from some 'belief', but why should that belief be confused with religious belief?

20 To cite but one sample from a huge body of information, the struggle against the false terrors of the Beyond that Lucretius, Lucian and even Seneca all record seems to prove that such terrors affect their readers in every age.

21 M. Richard in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, s. v. *Enfer*, vol. V, col. 117–18.

22 Hume commented that, in the first place, Christianity, with its immortality either in Hell or in Paradise, is more likely to terrify than to console. (Or rather, perhaps, it would do so were not the Christian attitude to the Beyond alien to such calculations and considerably more subtle. Christianity cannot be reduced to a consoling remedy; for it constitutes a great story that involves a whole variety of subtle sentiments, ones that are far richer than the pedestrian explanations that involve an illusion of consolation.) Secondly, most other religions hold out no promise of a Beyond; they are simply not concerned about it. Up until round about the beginning of the Common Era, Judaism consigned the shades of the dead to the *sheol*, as lugubrious a place as the Homeric Underworld. On his deathbed, the extremely well-deserving King David,

beloved by Jehovah, blessed his god, but then sighed: 'For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners . . . our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding' (I Chron., XXIX, 15). In most societies, beliefs about the Beyond constitute a domain separate from religion, a domain that we only consider to be religious on the basis of the misleading analogy of Christianity. Likewise, a cult of the gods is quite different from a cult of the dead.

23 *The Acts of Andrew*, 33, 3, trans. into French by J. Prieur in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens*, vol. I, 1997, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, p. 904.

24 Clement of Rome, *To the Corinthians*, 52.

25 Any denial of innovation that attributes it all to the Ambience or Society rests upon a confusion. Those two words both acquired double, different meanings. Like the Greek *Physis*, Society or the Ambience is a matrix which, for example, brought forth the success of the eastern religions. But like *Physis*, it is also a receptacle that encompasses all that exists, including Christianity. However original it may be, Christianity nevertheless ended up as part of the reality of the Roman Empire. Even if it was not its product, it eventually became part of it . . . Once, when I was publicly drawing attention to the role of 'creation' in history, providing the Impressionist innovation as an example, someone objected that even innovation implied a connection with Society, to the extent that Society was precisely what one was distancing oneself from. Despite Leibnitz, that objection was confusing on the one hand an internal, real connection, such as 'docilely, going along with . . .' (for one cannot be a disciple or a son without there being somewhere a master or a father) and, on the other, an external and formal connection, such as 'being different from' (a guitar is different from a soup tureen, but for a guitar to be what it is, it is not necessary for

any tureen to exist). So whether one did whatever others were docilely doing or one did the opposite, it made no difference. The second holistic sophism consists in treating as a necessary and universal proposition ('all that is in Society comes from Society') what should be only a numerically collective statement that does not hold good overall, but needs to be examined, case by case, in order to discover how far its assertion is true for each member of the group: Mithras, Christ, Isis . . . etc. Finally, there is the sophism that does not give the same meaning to the term Society (or Ambience, or Nature, or *Physis*) in both the major premise (matrix) and the minor one (collection). To behave in this way is to confuse a chick that emerges from an egg with a rabbit that is pulled from a conjuror's hat.

26 There is no pagan equivalent to Mass. Only in exceptional circumstances did a sacrifice gather together all the citizens of a given city. All Christians come together 'in Christ'; but not all Athenians came together under Athena.

27 Tertullian, *Apology* XXX, 4: 'we pray without . . . the form of words, for we pray from the heart (*de pecore*)' (Loeb Classical Library, 1966, trans. G. H. Rendall).

28 Unlike human love, divine love is a sentiment in which a believer discovers in his/her heart a ready-made love, created in advance (one does not 'fall in love' with God). This is a love that appears to have come from God himself, for it imposes itself as self-evident, rather than as a choice: one cannot know a god without loving him. Like a king, God, already in advance, possessed the right to be loved, was potentially loved; to begin to love him was simply to pass on from potentiality to action: it involved shifting from habitual grace to actual grace, rather than any human initiative.

29 Provided it is not cultivated, not sought for its own sake and has not yet developed a vocabulary or even a set of *topoi* (argumentative resources), spiritual delectation, even if conscious, sensed, experienced, is not seized upon by any reflexive consciousness and cannot be thematized, so it is neither spoken of nor written about. One's reflexive consciousness is preoccupied with charitable duties and obedience to God's commandments. Ascetics were more noticeable than contemplatives. That was no doubt also true of paganism: what was important, above all, was ritual, executed respectfully but often without emotion.

30 Like many other convictions, faith may be solid and active without being affective and without words to express it. Imagine a soldier who has truly fought out of patriotism (and not for fear of being shot as a deserter or out of fellow feeling with his comrades, etc.): if he had asked himself if he was acting out of patriotism and had looked deep into his heart, he may have discovered nothing there and not even known, himself, whether he was patriotic or not. For a religious analogy, see Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, 2006, 2nd edn, F. Trémolières, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, vol. I, pp. 1152–4; vol. II, pp. 170–1. Besides, even if it is verbalized or thematized or even cultivated, emotion is hardly ever present on a day-to-day basis. As orthodox theologians were one day to point out to the Jansenists, the celebration of Holy Mass would all too often be sacrilegious if it were the case that it could only be performed without sin if one experienced a sense of delectation.

31 Two examples of the priority extended to discipline, which is one condition of eternal salvation, may be found in the homily constituted by the *Second Epistle* of the pseudo-Clement and the *Epistle from Clement to James*, at the head of the *Clementine Homilies* or *Recognitions*, in

which the bishop's role is to ensure that his flock remains virtuous (the most common sins being heresy, which is a form of disobedience, and adultery).

32 In 1952, having finally converted to Communism, hardly had I obtained my Party card (for the noblest of reasons, of course) than the secretary of my cell, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, remarked, 'Now you are only good for being told off.' To be sure, a bishop might be expected to proceed with more unction in his relations with a neophyte, but basically the change of attitude after joining a sect was no doubt analogous.

33 Prudentius, *Cathemerinon*, III, 23–5. *Odes de Salomon*, 6 and passim, trans. by Pierre, in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens*, vol. I, p. 687, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. This is the source of the hymn that Saint John of the Cross would one day sing in a famous poem of his, and that Jean Racine would adapt in a fine *Cantique spirituel*.

Chapter 3 The Church: Another Masterpiece

1 I refer the reader to my *Empire gréco-romain*, 2006, Paris, Seuil, p. 480. To put this another way, had we questioned a pagan whom we considered to be an 'unbeliever', he would not have replied, 'I do not believe in the gods; the gods do not exist'. Rather, he would have said, 'I am not interested in all that stuff; I have no use for the gods, I ignore them; there is no point in worshipping them.'

2 The verb *nomizein* was used to declare that one 'had' such-or-such a god and also, in treaties of international alliance, to state that the two cities 'would have the same friends and enemies'.

3 I am told that such crises of doubt have, in every period (and not just nowadays), constituted the worst of the temptations that awaited a believer. In the Middle Ages, some people dared to speak of 'the fables of the Bible',

as if they were no different from the fables of pagan mythology. In the seventeenth century, the temptation to doubt the reality of God's presence or that of the body's resurrection, or even worse, was more pressing than any physical temptation and, as is testified by a number of confessors, it was a temptation that they frequently encountered, yet seldom spoke of.

4 When Odysseus is shipwrecked and lands on unknown shores, he wonders among what kind of mortals he has arrived: 'What people are there here? Hostile and uncivilized savages or kindly and god-fearing people?'(*Odyssey*, VI, 120–1 and IX, 175–6). Respect for the gods showed that one knew how to respect all that was respectable; it constituted a reliable guarantee of virtue in general, since it was offered disinterestedly, in an altogether ideal domain.

5 M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, 1995, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

6 J. Mordillat and J. Prieur, *Jésus après Jésus: l'origine du christianisme*, 2005, Paris, Seuil, p. 121.

7 See Deuter., IV, 10 and XXXI, 30; Joshua, VIII, 35; Esdras, VIII, 1–2 ('the whole people gathered together . . . and Esdras, the priest, standing before the assembly, read out the law of Moses); Nehemiah, XIII, 1 ('The law of Moses was read aloud in the presence of the people; . . . God's assembly . . .' from which immigrants from other nations, such as 'Ammonites and Moabites', were excluded; see Deuter., XXIII, 4), where the Hebrew has *qahal* and the Septuagint has *ecclesia*. This certainly refers to the entire people. On the other hand, *qahal* is rendered as *synagogue*, with same meaning, in Levit., IV, 13 and VIII, 3.

8 Each of the faithful was in duty bound to remonstrate charitably with his sinful brethren, correcting them in

a fraternal fashion, as prescribed in the *Epistula apostolorum*, 47–8 (*Ecrits apocyphes chrétiens*, I, p. 390) or Hermas' *Pastor*, Vision III, 9.

9 Initiations to pagan Mysteries guaranteed an agreeable immortality, without fear of the Underworld, involving no commitment to the community and no subsequent ethic, provided one devoted a few days to becoming initiated . . . and paid quite a large fee. The day is long gone when it was thought possible to classify religions as one classifies plants or animals or as one classifies literary creations into various 'literary genres'. But at that time, Christianity was classified among the 'Mystery religions', and likened to the pagan Mysteries of Eleusis and elsewhere or else to 'salvation religions'. In truth, those salvation Mysteries seemed comparable to Christianity only because historians represented them on the model of Christianity. A creative religious imagination is no less inventive than an artistic imagination and cannot be imprisoned within a framework of 'genres'. It gives rise to religious revolutions, just as there are 'literary revolutions'.

10 Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. I. *Die Entstehung des kirchlichen Dogmas*, 1931, Tubingen, Siebeck, p. 138.

11 Guy G. Stroumsa, *La Fin du sacrifice: les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité Tardive*, p. 156 ff. and passim.

12 Roughly half the figures mentioned in the epistles of Saint Paul belonged to the middle class; they owned their houses and they travelled. See W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 1983, Yale; G. Theissen, 'Soziale Schichtung in der korinthischer Gemeinde: ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des hellenistischen Urchhristentums', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, LXV, 1974, pp. 232–72.

13 This is a huge problem. However, see, at least, the *Digest*, L, 5, 2, 8: 'Those who teach children to read . . ., the masters who teach reading either in cities or in towns [*vici*]'. It seems that girls, too, went to school (Martial, IX, 69, 2). All the same, studies of ancient burial sites and skeletons prove that very young children were put to work, as happens in the present-day Third World.

14 G. Schöllgen, '*Ecclesia sordida*: zur Frage der sozialen Schichtung frühchristlicher Gemeinden am Beispeil Karthagos zur Zeit Tertullians', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband XII, 1984. That was already true in the case of Saint Paul's disciples in Corinth: W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, op. cit.

15 *The Shepherd of Hermas* and many 'apocryphal' Christian texts such as *Acts of the Apostles*, *Apocryphal Gospels*, and *Apocryphal Acts of the Martyrs* are part of this literature of which scarcely any pagan examples remain (one that does is the *Life of Apollonius, King of Tyre*). Like all best-sellers, some edifying books contain touches of sex, sadism and snobbery: for example, *The Greek Acts of Andrew*, 17–24, the legends of Saint Thecla and, above all, of Nereus and Achilleus and, at a later date, the beginning of Saint Jerome's *Life of the Ascetic Paul of Thebes*, which tells the story of the martyr delivered into the hands of a courtesan. *The Shepherd of Hermas* opens, on its first page, with a fleeting mention of naked women on a beach, which no doubt whet the reader's appetite for more and encouraged him to read on to more edifying pages. See Renan, *Origines du christianisme*, 1995, ed. L. Rétat, Paris, Laffont, coll. Bouquins, vol. II, pp. 889–90. In Migne's *Patrologia Greca* (PG), 1857– , vol. CXVI, col. 93–108, I came by chance upon an amazing little story of love, chastity and martyrdom, clearly inspired

by Achilles Tatius' *Leucippus and Clitophon*, as the names borne by its heroes are Clitophon and Gleucippus (*sic*).

16 Saint Francis de Sales's *Introduction à la vie dévote* was well received by an educated audience. Despite Marrou's best efforts in favour of his author, the above book's spirituality by far exceeds that of Clement of Alexandria.

17 *The Pedagogue*, II, 32, 2, for those who find this hard to believe.

18 The Introduction by H.-I. Marrou and M. Harl to *The Pedagogue*, vol. I, 1960, pp. 62–3, 66–7 (coll. Sources chrétiennes, vol. 70, Paris, Le Cerf.

19 *The Pedagogue*, III, 80, 1–3.

20 A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den drei ersten Jahrhunderten*, 1906, Leipzig, Hinrichs, further editions in 1924 and 1966, p. 513 (*Mission et expansion du christianisme aux trois premiers siècles*, 2004, French trans. J. Hoffman, Paris, Le Cerf), pp. 322–3.

21 Saint Cyprian, *Letters*, LV, 13, 2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 21. Other references are provided by Adolf von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung*, op. cit., p. 193, nn. 1 and 3, *ad finem*. Once converted, Constantine dedicated his entire household – including his wife, his children and his house-slaves – to the one true Lord (Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, I, 17, 3).

22 See the long prayer in which they beseech the Lord to be true to his name and also to their 'sovereigns and superiors' (*First Epistle of Clement of Rome*, 60, 3–61). The words *pro incolumitate imperatorum* appear in the *Acts of the Arvales* and also in Saint Cyprian, who requires that a Christian should remember the empire of which he is a citizen (see Lactantius, *De opificio Dei*, I, 9). On prayers for the emperor and the Empire, which are widely testified,

see Hans U. Instinsky, *Die alte Kirche und das Heil des Staates*, 1963, Munich, Kössel. The Apostolic Fathers, the Apologists and the New Testament Apocrypha all convey the same impression: with the exception of the Apocalyptic fanatics, Christians regarded themselves as Romans, like others, and without even thinking about it, as it went without saying Commodian speaks of 'obeying the orders of Caesar' (*De duobus populis*, 81) and even declares that a soldier of Christ obeys the Lord just as soldiers obey Caesar (*Instructiones*, II, 7, 4): not all Christians condemned the army as Tertullian did . . .

23 'Rejoice in hope' (Paul, Epistle to the Romans, XII, 12; XV 13 etc.).

24 The '*christliche Bürgerlichkeit*'; see the *Introduction au Nouveau Testament*, ed. Daniel Marguerat, 2000, Geneva, Labor et Fides, p. 324, n. 12. The Christians constituted a sample of 'middle-class' society, with all its daily preoccupations, its virtues, its weaknesses, in a word, its 'normality'. In times of persecution, there were more *lapsi* than martyrs (A. von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, p. 509). Despite the ban on all spectacular entertainment imposed by their bishops, some still wanted to go to the theatre and to circus races, pointing out that, after all, David had danced before the Ark and the prophet Elijah had driven a chariot (Novatian, *De spectaculis*, 1–2).

25 Yann Rivière, 'Constantin, le crime et le christianisme, contribution à l'étude des lois et des moeurs de l'Antiquité tardive', in *Antiquité tardive*, 10, 2002.

26 *Theodosian Code*, IV, 12, 3; C. Pietri in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 217 and n. 174.

27 Jean-Marie Salamito, *Les Virtuoses et la multitude. Aspects sociaux de la controverse entre Augustin et les Pélagiens*, 2005, Grenoble, Millon.

28 A. von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, op. cit., p. 156;

R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., p. 108.

29 When Tertullian writes that 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of (new) Christians', that is his rhetorical way of saying that Christians continue to multiply despite – not because of – persecutions. Such horrible and persistent spectacles would only attract particular kinds of people. However, when Lactantius writes that the major persecution under Diocletian prompted sympathy and made people think (*Inst. Divines*, V, 23), he was telling the truth. A whole century had passed and the pointless violence of systematic persecution tyrannically troubled the public peace, even in the eyes of pagan opinion.

30 Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 16.

31 See the general account by K. Rosen in *Rom und das himmlische Jerusalem: die frühen Christen zwischen Anpassung und Ablehnung*, 2000, ed. R. von Haehling, Darmstadt, Wiss. Buchges, pp. 124–51.

32 Plotinus, III, 2, 11 and II, 9, 9: a well-organized city is inegalitarian, where those with nothing make it possible for those with wealth and for sages to live a life of leisure. It is by no means the case that Christians had no sense of caste; but the Christians could draw upon a reference that pagans lacked: namely their membership of the true religion, and the solidarity and equality of all through Christ, regardless of social standing, which was in no way affected (Saint Paul wrote that slaves should continue to obey their masters). For a religion was concerned with Heaven; it was not a socio-political plan that, for its part, concerned itself with neither Heaven nor the Beyond.

33 As is noted by Saint Augustine in his Dolbeau sermon, XXVI, 28, as Claude Lepelley has kindly informed me.

34 Of course, fervour is to be found in pagan Antiquity, but not in religion. It was aroused by philosophical sects,

headed by Platonism and Stoicism, with all their rules for life and spiritual exercises that Pierre Hadot has studied so rewardingly. Christianity was subsequently able to supplant those sects because it was a religion that was also a philosophy.

35 See Supplementary Notes, p. 239.

36 Since I have already mentioned Trotsky, let me continue: in his *Histoire de la Révolution russe* (trans. into French by M. Parijanine, 1950, Paris, Seuil, vol. I, p. 300), Trotsky explains at length that, without Lenin and his 'April theses' written in 1917, the Bolsheviks could never have seized power; and Trotsky, the Marxist, concludes: 'The role played by one individual is, in this instance, manifest to us all, and in all its gigantic proportions.'

37 Which is what is assumed by, among many others, F. Vittinghoff, 'Staat, Kirche und Dynastie beim Tode Konstantins', in *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique* (Fondation Hardt), XXXIV, 1989, p. 19. The author goes on to say that Constantine had made a false calculation: Christian values, asceticism, the rejection of this lower world and the egocentricity of the Church were hardly a recipe likely to ensure stability and unity. The thinking of Gibbon is detectable here: the fall of the Roman Empire was due to the influence of Christianity.

Chapter 4 The Dream of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine's Faith and his Conversion

1 See Supplementary Notes, p. 240.

2 Hermann Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins*, 1954, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philol.-hist. Klasse. Dritte Folge, no. 34.

3 In the long chapter XI of his *Oratio ad Sanctos*.

4 R. MacMullen, *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*, 2006, Yale University Press, p. 28.

5 Constantine cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 28, 2 and 58, 1.

6 When one claims to identify a cause, one needs to know what kind of a cause it is: is it a unilateral one (society is the cause of everything, including religion), holistic (everything is social, even religion in the last analysis), plural (society is important, but so is religion), naturalist (man is a religious animal), or historical (at a particular period, religion was extremely important)?

7 Peter Brown, in the *New Cambridge Ancient History*, 1998, vol. XIII, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 644.

8 Letter to the Council of Arles, cited ch. I, n. 17.

9 Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 7, 38 (Migne, *PG*, vol. LXXXV, col. 1239). The arguments of C. T. H. R. Eberhardt against its authenticity ('Constantinian documents in Gelasius of Cyzicus', in *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 23, 1980, p. 48) do not convince me. A forger would need a great deal of imagination to forge such a strange text; and it is hard to see who would find such a forgery useful: not pagans, not panegyrists, not Constantine's enemies (who could easily find less subtle and less personal grievances), nor the orthodox, nor Arians. None of the comments constitute epigrammatical attacks upon anything, whereas a forger would seldom resist the temptation to use epigrams at the expense of his victim. Furthermore, the vocabulary statistics fail to indicate that the text is only a translation yet do show that the vocabulary is that of a translator, not that of the emperor himself (Eusebius tells us that Constantine, either because of a faulty education or else simply as a good Roman emperor, only ever used Latin in official circumstances, Latin that was then translated into Greek). This Caesarian Latin, the kind used for

the preambles to laws, was very bombastic (an earlier edict from Nerva, cited by Pliny the Younger, is barely comprehensible). The translator, in difficulty, rendered this bombastic Latin into very clumsy Greek – a fact that testifies to its authenticity: any forger would have written better Greek. Heinz Kraft, *Kaiser Konstantins religiöse Entwicklung* (Beiträge zur historischen Forschung, no. 20), 1955, Tübingen, p. 268, thinks the text is authentic, as do V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 182, and Hans Lietzmann, *Histoire de l'Eglise ancienne*, trans. into French by A. Jundt, 1962, Paris, Payot, vol. III, p. 155.

10 See the references provided by C. Pietri in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 206, n. 90.

11 In the letter to the Synod of Arles, cited in ch. I, n. 17, in Athanasius, II, 98, cited ch. IX, n. 29, in Gelasius, II, 7, 38, cited n. 9 of the present chapter, and in Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 28, 2.

12 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 9, 5; C. Pietri in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 206.

13 H. von Soden, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Donatismus*, numbers 8, 9, 14.

14 For example, in his 'Speech for Good Friday', XXV, 5 (p. 161, 28, Heikel) and in the text cited by Gelasius, the whole of which is presented above.

15 Letter from Constantine to the Church of Nicomedia, cited by Athanasius, in H.-G. Opitz (ed.), *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites*, 1934–1940, Berlin, Gruyter, in Athanasius, *Werke*, III, 1, 27; and in V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 112. See H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, op. cit., p. 258: 'Constantine at Nicaea was at the top of his form.'

16 H. Kraft, *Kaiser Konstantins*, op. cit., p. 22.

17 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 42.

18 'Thanks to my worship in the service of God, peace now

reigns everywhere and the name of God is revered as it should be, even by Barbarians, who until now have not known the truth . . . Yes, today, even Barbarians have come to know God, thanks to me, God's true servant. They have learned to fear him, for they have seen for themselves that God has been my shield everywhere; and it is above all thus that they know God and fear him: it is because they fear us' (Athanasius, *Apol.*, II, 86, 97, cited by V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 144). Constantine is here alluding to his recent successes on the Danube, successes that were indeed to ensure thirty years of peace along that river. His remarks about the Christianization of Barbarians no doubt allude to events the memory of which has not come down to us, unless – that is – he is referring to the Iberians of Georgia. The list of the bishops attending the Council of Nicaea certainly includes a certain Theophilus, Bishop of 'Gothia' (the Crimea?). As soon as a territory had been touched by a Christian mission, it was thought to know of the Gospels. On the date of the conversion of the Goths, see A. Chauvot in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 863.

19 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 29, 3.

20 At the beginning of chapter XXVI of the *Oratio ad Sanctos* (Migne, *PG*, vol. XX, col. 1260 AB; *Eusebius Werke*, ed. Heikel, vol. I, p. 166, in *Griechische christliche Schriftsteller*, 7, Leipzig, 1902, 2nd edn. 1990), he declares: 'When people praise me for serving (*hyperesian*) God – which was prompted by inspiration (*epipnoias*) from the God of heaven – they simply confirm that God is the reason for my worth (*andragathia*). Yes, because it is natural for God to be the author of all that is good, and it is the duty of men to obey him.'

21 See Marrou's note in his edition of Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, vol. I (coll. Sources chrétiennes, no. 70),

p. 27, n. 3; see also n. 9, ch. 2 of the present work, with its allusion to Apollonius of Tyana.

22 We possess only the testimony of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, XI, 9, 2, at which point he knows nothing about the Christogram and simply states that, as he *set off* to campaign against Maxentius, he asked the army to support God and his *Logos*, Jesus Christ.

23 Someone dreams that he/she is at the summit of a mountain, faced with an icy ravine that will have to be crossed in a single leap, and does not dare to jump. Someone or something persuades him/her to do so; he/she does leap and lands safely on the other side. He/she wakes up and, applying the resolution that he/she mustered in the dream, proceeds to demand a divorce. – I go to bed without finding the right words to round off an article on Roman history. I dream that I am wandering, lost, through the streets of Rome (an insipid Rome that is nothing like the real one), without finding the way out (what way out?). I am confused but not particularly worried. Suddenly I find myself at the foot of the steps leading up to the Capitol and there I see the Trophies of Marius, which take the form of two fine, tall symmetrical palm trees. Suddenly I wake up and find in my mind the two carefully composed sentences that I needed for my article. Such dreams of being lost and confused but not particularly worried amid the streets of a city frequently recur. This is clearly the way that subconscious thoughts project themselves on to the screen of dreams, when seeking to resolve a difficulty. Dreams such as these occur just before I wake up, which is why I remember them. It is a moment when the still slumbering mind has resumed its activity of the previous evening.

24 A medallion dating from 317 suggests that Constantine displayed the Christogram right from the start.

25 That, at least, is the interpretation that I venture to suggest for the origin of the god: Ptolemy I wanted an Egyptian god that the Greeks of Egypt could use and thereby feel that they had their own, local, indigenous protector, and his mind was full of the sounds of the names of Egyptian deities such as Osiris, Apis, Anubis, Isis, Satis. And Sesostris! By mixing up the syllables he produced a false Egyptian word and in his dream gave the name to a god with a human aspect that suited the Greeks, who did not take easily to the zoomorphic gods of Egypt.

26 See, for example, Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion, the Old and the New* op. cit., index s. v. *dreams*; A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 125, n. 6; E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, op. cit.; P. Veyne in *Poikilia, Etudes offertes à J.-P. Vernant*, 1987, Paris, EHESS, pp. 384–8.

27 After all, if we see Mickey Mouse on the television, we know this is just a fiction; if we see the President of the Republic or some minister, we know that this is reality, the reality of the news, and no vain dream. Similarly, if the gods really exist, if one sees one in a dream, one is on the 'dream channel' that conveys true information (*Poikilia*, p. 388).

28 A fine example is provided by the miracle of Marcus Aurelius' army, saved from thirst by the rain sent by Jupiter Pluvius. The death throes of paganism were to come to an end with a dream and a miracle: in this first 'religious war', declared in 394 by the pagan Eugene, Theodosius was to emerge the victor, following a dream and thanks to a miraculous storm (Saint Augustine, *City of God*, V, 26).

29 In 392, Emperor Valentinian II, aged seventeen, was assassinated. Saint Ambrose was kind enough to assure

his sisters that, although unbaptized, he could still go to Paradise. At this time, the baptism of newborn infants existed alongside that of adults; parents would commit themselves for the sake of their child (Hippolytus, *Trad. Apostol.*, 46). Educated men would be baptized if they decided to renounce a career and instead become an ascetic or a bishop. Two such cases of thirty year-olds were Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory Nazianzus.

30 See the references to the texts provided by A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, 1964, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 980–1 and nn. 91–2.

31 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 61, 2.

32 Letter from Constantine to the Church of Nicomedia, 6, cited by Athanasius (Opitz, *Urk*, 27; V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 112).

33 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 62, 3.

34 Plutarch, *Demetrios Poliorcetes*, III, 5; the murders of Agrippa Postumus by Tiberius; Tiberius Gemellus by Caligula; Silanus, Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla (all three related to the *gens Iulia* and hence potential usurpers) by Nero. Claudius was left with nobody to kill: he was the last of the Claudians and in the family of his deceased brother Germanicus, only three women survived (one of whom was Agrippina).

35 The army, in its prudence, in order to prevent civil wars, launched a 'promiscuous massacre' (Gibbon), killing, among others, Constantine's brothers and nearly all his nephews. One of the few surviving nephews was an inoffensive child who was interested only in his books and who was . . . the future Julian the Apostate.

36 A. Cameron and S. G. Hall, edition with commentary of *Eusebius, The Life of Constantine*, 1999, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 342. As late as 390, the 'pope' Siricus barred from the episcopate all officials who had had to 'apply fatally

severe laws' by means of the sword or torture (A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, p. 1386, n. 135).

37 Libanius, Oration XXX, *Oratio pro templis*, 20. The pagan poet Claudian composed an epigram in which he ironically expressed to a Christian general his hope that the latter's sword would never be tainted with the blood of a Barbarian.

38 Bruno Dumézil comments: 'As a result of his baptism, a Christian prince was no longer free to act in defiance of Christian principles', *Les Racines chrétiennes de l'Europe: conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares, Ve–VIIIe siècle*, 2005, Paris, Fayard, p. 70.

39 On the date, see A. Piganiol, *L'Empire chrétien* (coll. Histoire générale Glotz), 1947, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, p. 212, n. 80.

40 Zosimus, *Histoire nouvelle*, 1971, French trans. and commentary by F. Paschoud, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, vol. I, pp. 102 and 220.

Chapter 5 The Motives, Both Major and Minor, for Constantine's Conversion

1 The Panegyrist of 310 in *Latin Panegyrists*, VII, 21, 3–7. It is sometimes said that this Apollo was none other than the *Sol invictus*, but that is an a priori statement, based on the assumption that this god played the same role 'legitimating' the imperial regime as was to be played later by the Christian God (we shall be returning to this subject). In reality, the Apollo mentioned by the Panegyrist displays no solar features. On the contrary, he is the handsome youth and healer-god that the Apollo of paganism had always been. Eusebius, who is both Constantine's panegyrist and hagiographer, extends an artistic imprecision over the date of the conversion, which was probably unflatteringly late (*The Life of Constantine*, I, 17, 2).

2 As Eusebius claims in the first of the two versions that he gives of this conversion (*Ecclesiastical History*, IX, IX, 2).

3 Constantine's message to his eastern subjects in 325, recorded by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 50–2. See A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (eds), *Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, op. cit., pp. 112 and 245–6.

4 Here are two little facts, by way of examples: (1) In France, at the Liberation in 1945, a number of very intelligent, ambitious men (I was not one of them) joined the Communist Party. This was no bet on the future, on their parts, for they did not really anticipate a triumph for the Revolution: it hardly crossed their minds or did so only in a theoretical fashion and out of loyalty; but they were sensitive to the dynamism, prestige and influence that Bolshevism and its powerful machine then enjoyed. They later left the Party, not so much because their hopes were dashed, but rather because their imagination was disappointed, the inflated Communist doctrine having revealed its mediocrity and the lies that they had given up believing; the whole organization had become impotent both in Russia and in France. (2) Nietzsche writes somewhere that students in school always enthuse about living philosophers, those of their own time, because this is the time of their own dynamism and ambitions.

5 Letter from Constantine to Arius, in 324, in Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 65, 2: '[My concern was] that I might restore and heal the body of the republic which lay severely wounded . . . and I tried to rectify [this] by the power of the military arm.'

6 H. Kraft, 'Das Silbermedaillon Constantins des Grossen mit dem Christusmonogramm auf dem Helm' in *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte*, 5/6, 1954–1955, in particular p. 169.

7 I am here paraphrasing the late, lamented Charles Pietri, in his *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 222.

8 A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, p. 934, see I, p. 82.

9 Letter from Constantine to Aelafius, the vicar of Africa, on the subject of the Donatist schism, in Optat de Milev, *Contra Parmenianum*, append. 3; text and trans. in C. M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 2004, New York, Routledge, p. 135 and p. 331, n. 30. Similarly, another letter to another governor of Africa states that if the cult of Heaven is neglected, this places public affairs in danger, whereas if it is practised, it brings prosperity to all things known as Roman and to all human affairs; and on account of this, Constantine dispenses Christian priests from all public responsibilities (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, VII, 1–2).

10 On this fact of capital importance, see the fundamental study by Egon Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern*, 1992, Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, pp. 196–201 and 559–60. I myself summarize it in my *Empire gréco-romain*, pp. 22–5.

11 In his *Divine Institutions*, VII, 26, 10, Lactantius tells Constantine: 'The providence of the most high godhead has promoted you to supreme power . . . . It was right therefore that . . . the godhead should make use of you (*te potissimum elegit*) as his advocate and minister' etc. (trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey, 2003, Liverpool University Press, p. 440). This passage, so different in tone from the discretion of *On the Death of Persecutors*, seems to be a late addition to the first edition of the *Institutions* (see the references in C. M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 2004, New York, Routledge, p. 328, n. 10) or else may perhaps be explained by the personal relations that Lactantius established with Constantine at Trier in 314.

12 In one of the sermons that he delivered to his courtiers (as was his custom), in which he also claims that paganism leads to the downfall and death of princes who are persecutors (whom he himself has vanquished) (*Oratio ad Sanctos*, also known as the *Good Friday Sermon*, 22–5, which forms the Appendix to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, 1902, Werke (ed.) Heikel, coll. Die griech. Christ. Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, vol. 7, Leipzig).
13 Letter cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 65, 2.
14 See Supplementary Notes, p. 240.
15 Letter to Anullius, cited by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 7, 1 (trans. J. E. L. Oulton, 1964, Loeb Classical Library).
16 Galerius justified terminating the Great Persecution on the grounds that Christians who had revoked their faith nevertheless did not return to paganism. In the Age of Enlightenment, thinkers would wonder whether a society of atheists would ever be possible.
17 Letter to the Council of Tyre in 335 (when Constantine had only two more years to live). This is one of the many authentic documents collected by Athanasius in the file constituted by his *Apology against the Arians*. I learned of it through V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 144.
18 Cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 26, 1.
19 The passage in question is to be found at the beginning of chapter 11 of this *Oratio ad Sanctos* or *Good Friday Sermon* (to which we shall be returning).
20 Text by Constantine in Optat de Milev, cited by H. von Soden, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Donstismus*, op. cit., no. 18; and in V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 78.
21 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 72, 1.
22 Ibid., II, 55, 2.

23 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 8–13.
24 *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, pp. 512–13.
25 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVII, 3, 15.
26 One might believe oneself already in the age of Saint Francis of Assisi and the heresies then developed by the poor, when one reads these lines in which humble priests, in 383, attack the haughty Pope Damasus: 'Let them keep their basilicas glinting with gold, lined with precious marbles that stand atop magnificent columns. And let them keep their vast estates. For our part, we request only a manger like the one in which Christ was born' (*Libellus precum*, in Migne, *Patrologia latina* [*PL*], vol. XIII, col. 83).
27 According to the pagan Celsus in *Origen*, *Against Celsus*, V, 61 ff.

Chapter 6 Constantine, the Church's 'President'

1 R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., p. 45. In any case, did Constantine, on that day, go up to the Capitol and sacrifice to Jupiter, who had always protected the Empire and its emperors, or did he refuse to do so? Scholars continue to disagree on the matter. Such a refusal is noted, quite late on, by the pagan Zosimus, *Nouvelle Histoire*, XXIX, 5 , ed. F. Paschoud, les Belles Lettres, vol. 1, 1971; however, the date of that refusal is by no means clear (see the note in the scholarly Paschoud edition, pp. 223–4).
2 K. M. Girardet skilfully discusses this question, which he himself thought to raise in *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., pp. 60–70; his reasonable conclusion is that Constantine refused to participate in a sacrifice. F. Paschoud comes to quite different conclusions in his edition of Zosimus, Belles Lettres, 1971, vol. I, p. 224.
3 N. H. Baynes in the early *Cambridge Ancient History*,1939,

vol. XII, p. 685. It is many years since H. Grégoire saw fit (in an extremely arbitrary fashion) to challenge this account and this dream (maybe through his hostility to hagiography or for fear of being misled by it). The historiography of ancient Christianity clearly indicates a hypercritical period (this was a time when some people even challenged the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth) and also one of 'anti-clerical' hostility towards religion and towards the Christian that Constantine was; at the very least, many hoped that he was not a sincere Christian.

4 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, pp. 6 and 7.

5 R. Krautheimer, S. Corbett, A. K. Frazer, 1980, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, vol. V, Roma, Istituto di archeologia Cristiana (ed. New York Institute of Fine Arts), p. 70.

6 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, I, 40; *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 9, 10–11 and X, 4, 16.

7 A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 42: this was a completely new kind of statue. J. Vogt, article on 'Constantinus der Grosse' in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. III, p. 326.

8 Lactantius, *On the Death of Persecutors*, XXIV, 9; A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., pp. 24 and 43–5.

9 A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 69.

10 The reliefs on this triumphal arch represent the campaign against Maxentius being waged under the protection of the *Sol invictus*. It was erected not by Constantine, but by the Senate and consequently reflects a pagan view of the miracle witnessed in 312.

11 *Latin Panegyrics*, IX, 2, 4 (*quisnam deus*); IX, 2, 5 *(ille mente divina*); 4, 1 and X, 13, 5.

12 In *L'Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 201.

13 For example, Constantine's letter to the bishops gathered

in Arles (see above, ch. I, n. 18); the letter to Ablabius or Aelafius, Vicar of Africa, 'you, whom I know also to be a worshipper of the great God' (see above, ch. V, n. 9). This Aelafius, who became one of Constantine's confidants, was one of the very few men of high standing who were already Christian in 314. Constantine is far more reserved and impersonal with the pro-consul of Africa, Anullius (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 7).

14 F. Stähelin, cited by A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 24, n.1, notes that when Christians who were Donatists appealed to the equity of Constantine, they call upon his ancestral virtues, not his Christian faith.

15 Saint Augustine, *De fide et operibus*, VI, 9.

16 *Oratio ad Sanctos*, XI, 2 (Migne, *PG*, vol. XX, col. 1260 AB).

17 A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 28.

18 Lactantius, *De ira dei*, II, 2, cited by K. M. Girardet, *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., p. 59: 'The first step in becoming Christian is to understand the falsity of paganism and to reject all impious cults.'

19 Compare the language of Saint Cyprian, *Correspondence*, LXXV, 21, 1.

20 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, III, 2, 2. In those days one made the sign of the cross on one's brow.

21 In his message of tolerance to his eastern subjects, in 325, Constantine, 'in love and fear', addresses himself to 'the Master of the Universe, Holy God, for by your guidance I have undertaken deeds of salvation and achieved them; making your seal [the Christogram] my protection everywhere, I have led a conquering army . . . and you, through your Son, . . . held up a pure light and put all men in mind of yourself' (cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 55–9).

22 See above, ch. I, n. 17.
23 See the references provided by R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., p. 55 and nn. 25 and 26.
24 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 2, 1; 8, 2, 4.
25 G. Wissowa, 1912, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Munich, C. H. Beck, p. 500, n. 3.
26 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 8, 2; 8, 4, etc.
27 G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, p. 407, n. 1.
28 Max Kaser, *Das römische Ziviloprozessrecht*, 1956, Munich, C. H. Beck, pp. 527–9.
29 R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 1990, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, p. 24.
30 V. Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 142, reproducing Athanasius, *Apology*, II, 86, 95.
31 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 1981, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, p. 270.
32 G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre, étude sur le 'césaropapisme' byzantin*, 1996, Paris, Gallimard, ch. IV, on Constantine; p. 147, Dagron ingeniously includes this daring expression in his etymology: this *episcopos* watches (*episkopei*) over the Empire.
33 Letter from Constantine to the synod of Arles, 32A (see ch. I, n. 17).
34 *Les Racines chrétiennes de l'Europe: conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares, Ve–VIIIe siècle*, 2005, Paris, Fayard, pp. 43 and 48, n. 109.
35 Constantius II, for example, who had, however, just prohibited 'the madness of sacrifices' (*Theodosian Code*, XVI, 10, 2 and 3, in 341 and 342).
36 As is well known, the future empress, Theodora, who was to reign from 527 to 548, had originally been an actress who interpreted the carnal union between Leda and the swan, on stage, with all the requisite realism.

37 The last known gladiator contests took place around 418 in Rome itself, which, it is true, was the fortress of paganism. When revising the work of her husband, Mme Arnöldi identified the figures depicted on one medallion not as hunters but as gladiators. See A. and E. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniat-Medallions*, 2, Text, pp. 215–16, latest edn., 1990, Deutsches Archölogisches Institut.

Chapter 7 An Ambivalent Century, with an Empire at Once Pagan and Christian

1 N. H. Baynes in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 25, 1935, p. 86.

2 Or even three, counting Judaism which was unfortunate in being considered as not so much another religion or another paganism, but rather a rejection of Christianity. It was not prohibited by any particular law (*Theodosian Code*, XVI, 8, 8, in 393), but Christian anti-Judaism was fierce and brutal.

3 Possibly up until 383 (A. Cameron in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 58, 1968, p. 96). But they no doubt left the actual exercise of this magistracy to other pontiffs.

4 Eutropus, X, 8, 2; A. Alföldi, op. cit., p. 117 and nn. 2–4.

5 Ausonius, *Gratiarum actio*, IX.

6 The coinage of Constantine is very discreet where religion is concerned. This indicates an absence of any concerted policy of religious propaganda through the medium of coins. It displayed fewer Christian symbols than pagan ones. See the numismatic calculations of H. Lietzmann, *Histoire de l'Eglise ancienne*, op. cit., vol. III, pp. 152–4. Such coins as did, as early as 315, display discreet Christian symbols (a cross, a monogram on Constantine's helmet or, in one instance only, a *labarum*) signify no more than the avowed, personal religion of the

emperor himself, as Alföldi points out (*The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 27). But Constantine did not make use of series of minted coins to publicize or promote his religion and does not appear to have engaged in numismatic propaganda, as Alföldi claims. Aurelian, in contrast, minted many coins celebrating the *Sol dominus imperi Romani* (and also, if we are to believe Strack, commemorated the event of the founding of the temple and the cult of this god). If we resist the temptation to 'over-interrogate' the documentation, Constantine's activities in this domain are mainly negative. The Ticinum medallion of 315, bearing the *labarum* was, as has been noted, a kind of *ex voto* for the Milvian Bridge victory. After 321, images of the pagan gods disappear from Constantinian coins and, after 322, so does the *Sol invictus* inscription. In my opinion, the rare instances of Christian symbols were due to the excessive zeal of officials who were probably Christian. Claude Lepelley has drawn my attention to an epigraphical example. In one particular year, a number of recently discovered African *milliarii* displayed a Christogram above the customary dedication to Constantine. But this Christian sign then disappears from the *milliarii*. Its momentary appearance must have been due to the personal initiative of some high-ranking Christian official.

7 Symmachus, *Relatio*, 7.

8 As is well known to have been the case of Christian *sacerdoces provinciae* and municipal *flamines*. See C. Lepelley, *Aspects de l'Afrique romaine: les cités, la vie rurale, le christianisme*, 2001, Bari, Edipuglia, pp. 94 and 339.

9 Ausonius, *Gratiarum actio*, XIV. However, in the very same official speech, he compares the closely knit three co-emperors, Valentinian, Valens and Gratian, to the Trinity.

10 Bruno Dumézil, *Les Racines chrétiennes de l'Europe*, p. 104.
11 Henri Stern, *Le Calendrier de 354, étude sur son texte et ses illustrations*, 1953, Paris, Geuthner, p. 115.
12 It was in the Colosseum, in 388, that the famous scene described by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* took place. His friend, the refined Alypius, had unwillingly been dragged along to the Colosseum. At first he kept his eyes shut, but opened them in surprise when the fall of a gladiator prompted a cry from the public; alas, 'So soon as he saw the blood, he at the very instant drank down a kind of savageness; nor did he turn away his head, but fixed his eye upon it, . . . drunk with a bloodthirsty joy' (*Confessions*, VI, 8, 1968, Loeb Classical Library, trans. William Watts).
13 Fergus Millar in *Entretiens de la Fondation Hardt*, XIX, *Le Culte des souverains*.
14 The letter from Constantine to his new eastern subjects, following his 324 victory, promising them tolerance, is cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 60, 1. This is one of the texts by Constantine that Charles Petri has proved to be authentic.
15 As did Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, VI, 10, 5. Pagans thus benefited from the liberal principle that Tertullian had vainly urged upon one persecuting governor in 212 (*Ad Scapulum*, II, 2), telling him *religionis non est cogere religionem*, 'to impose religion is alien to religion'.
16 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, op. cit., pp. 211–12. The 'examples' made by Constantine included the destruction of a large sanctuary of Asclepius in Cilicia that had become the centre of religious unrest, the destruction, in Phoenicia, of two sanctuaries of Aphrodite that harboured sacred courtesans, and the suppression of

groups of homosexual priests in Egypt (Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, III, 55, 56 and 58).

17 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 60, 1: 'However, let no one [Christian] use what he has received by inner conviction as a means to harm his neighbour.' See the *Theodosian Code*, IX, 16, 1 and 2: 'Go to the public altars and sanctuaries and perform the customary rites' (in 319). On this primitive form of tolerance taught by Lactantius, see E. Depalma Digeser, 'Lactantius, Porphyry and the Debate over Religious Toleration' in *JRS*, 88, 1998, in particular p. 146.

18 *Theodosian Code*, IX, 16, 2, from the translation by H. Lietzmann, H. Dörries, J. Vogt, and V. Keil. However, A. Alföldi translates these words as 'the earlier usurpation', a reference to the usurper Maxentius (*The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 77).

19 See *Theodosian Code*, II, 60, 1: 'Those who wish to obey their superstition may practise their rite, but only in public (*publice*).'

20 As Constantine declared in these very terms to the governor of Africa (letter to Anullinus, as early as 313, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 7, 1–2).

21 F. Boll, 1912, article *Hebdomas*, in A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Neue Bearbeitung, A. Druckenmüller Verlag, Stuttgart, 1958–1968; M. Nilsson, 1961, *Geschichte der griech. Religion*, 2nd edn, vol. II, Munich, C. H. Beck, p. 487.

22 Tibullus, I, 3, 18: the poet puts off his departure because it is the day of Saturn, a cruel god (this has nothing at all to do with the Sabbath, as is sometimes claimed).

23 T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (1871–1888), 1963, vol. I, Basel/Stuttgart, Benno Schwabe, p. 263.

24 This was the *ekecheiria*, which marked the solemnity of a festival day. It was arranged on such days that 'children

should not go to school and slaves, of both sexes, should not work' (O. Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Mäander*, 1900[1967], Berlin, W. Speman, p. 86, no. 100, line 30). However, in his law, Constantine took care to specify that peasants could work on Sundays, for good weather heeds nobody.

25 *Justinian Code*, III, 12, 3; see *Theodosian Code*., II, 8, 1, and Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 14, 18, 2.

26 Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 14, 18, 3 and IV, 14, 19–20. See the edition and commentary by A. Cameron and S. M. Hall (eds), *Eusebius*, *Life of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 318.

27 From 392 to 425 (*Theodosian Code*, II, 8, 20 and 23), C. Lepelley, Les Cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire, *Etudes augustiniennes*, 1981, vol. II, p. 46; G. Dagron, 'Jamais le dimanche', in *Eupyschia*, *Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler*, 1988, Paris, Sorbonne, p. 167. In 425, spectacular entertainments were forbidden on Sundays and festival days.

28 In the *New Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XIII, pp. 644–5, Peter Brown writes of pollution and contagion stemming from such sacrifices. In connection with the re-script of Hispellum, Andreas Alföldi writes of an imperial cult that was preserved but was 'disinfected' by the suppression of the sacrifice to the gods that it formerly entailed (*The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p.106).

29 The blood shed by animals sacrificed to idols caused a physical revulsion that is expressed by, for example, Martianus Capella, who had become a Christian, Constantine himself, in his letter to the king of Persia (Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, IV, 10, 1), and Prudentius in his description of the sacrifice of bulls (*Peristephanon*, X, 1006–1050). Innocent animals did not deserve to be killed (Arnobius, VII, 17). In 391, 'the

slaughter of innocent animals' was definitively banned by law (*Theodosian Code*, XVI, 10, 10). I myself do not subscribe to the idea of a historical continuity between this Christian horror of sacrifices, which were supposed to be effective against demons, and the condemnation of those same sacrifices by educated pagans ranging from Theophrastus to Porphyry. The latter's condemnation was based on the pointlessness of an over-material religious act, for true religion was a matter for the soul. Christianity was so original that it could not have been prepared within paganism, even eastern paganism.

30 According to Constantine, sacrifices simply provided a pretext for debauchery (*Oratio ad Sanctos*, XXV).

31 Libanius, Oration XXX, *On Temples*, 17.

32 According to Lactantius, *Inst. Divines*, IV, 27, this is how it was that 'the presence of a man bearing the sign of the Cross upon his brow was enough to deprive a sacrifice of its supernatural power and to obtain good predictions (*litare*) from the gods.'

33 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 10, 1. I think a distinction should be drawn between honourable *haruspices* (see T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 367) and the charlatans that private *haruspices* were. On a different problem relating to the *haruspices*, see A. Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., pp. 76–9 and p. 133, n. 26 *ad finem*. Pagans were allowed to continue to make sacrifices, but not in their homes (*Theodosian Code*, IX, 16, 2).

34 Zosimus, II, 29, 4, provides a good explanation. Constantine, increasing the severity of his own legislation, then decreed that any (private) *haruspex* who entered a private dwelling, claiming to do so simply as a friend, should be burnt alive (*Theodosian Code*, IX, 16, 1).

35 T. Mommsen, *Römisches Strafecht* (1961), Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, pp. 639–43.

36 Ammianus Marcellinus, XIX, 12, 12. Divination (suspected of seeking information on the emperor's future) was a crime of high treason (*majestas*), the only one, in this caste-bound society, for which a member of the *honestiores* group could be subjected to torture.

37 *The Life of Constantine*, II, 45, 1: 'Two laws were simultaneously issued . . ., no one should presume to set up cult-objects or practise divination or other occult arts, or even to sacrifice at all' (*Mēte mēn thuein katholou mēdena*). Eusebius repeats this at IV, 25, this time adding the ban on gladiator contests.

38 *Theodosian Code.*, XVI, 10, 2 (after the death of Constantine in 341).

39 See A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (eds), *Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 243. A. Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 109 and pp. 135–6 (n. 34 and 35). K. M. Girardet, *Die konstantinische Wende*, op. cit., pp. 128–9. Libanius, XXX, 6–7, formally declares that the ban on sacrifices was not introduced by Constantine himself, but by his sons, who were wrongly advised. Zosimus is equally informative: he writes of the suppression of divinatory rites but never mentions any general ban (II, 29, 4). Julian's silence is even more telling: nowhere does he blame Constantine for banning sacrifices. In support of the truth of such a ban, see the references given by C. M. Odahl, *Constantine*, op. cit., p. 345, n. 38.

40 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 2, 5.

41 Libanius, Oration XIV, 41. The fact was that to raise one's eyes to heaven or, for example, to the statue of a deity set on a plinth, was to worship it (*suspicare*, in Latin). In 356, Constantius II had recently banned the worship of idols (*colere simulacrum*), in accordance with the *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 10, 6. This particular pagan, a

leading member of society, was no doubt aware that he was being followed by a police spy, so he controlled his behaviour carefully.

42 *Theodosian Code*, IX, 16, 9. Valentinian, although officially a Christian, seems personally, to have been religiously frigid.

43 That is what is suggested by the sometimes divergent conclusions of R. von Haehling, *Die Religionszugehörigkeit der hohen Amsträger des röm. Reiches seit Constantin bis zum Ende der Theododianischen Dynastie*, 1978, Bonn, R. Habelt; those of T. D. Barnes, 'Statistics on the Conversion of Roman Aristocracy', in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 85, 1995, p. 135; and, in the same year, of J.-M. Salamito in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 678–80.

44 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 5, 57 s.; 10, 21.

Chapter 8 Christianity Wavers, Then Triumphs

1 On this point, I agree with the great historian, Peter Brown, who writes that Julian's power to favour paganism and turn back the clock of history was as great as Constantine's when he lent his support to Christianity (*Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, op. cit., p. 99)

2 That the army had the power to create emperors went without saying. Indeed, Saint Jerome goes so far as to compare the process to the ordination of a bishop by deacons (Letters, 146, 1, cited by Angela Pabst, *Comitia imperii, ideelle Grundlagen des röm. Kaisertums*, 1997, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, p. 17). Jerome's comment prompted some major discussions on canon law (V. Saxer in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 47–8).

3 According to Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV, 5 and XXVI, 1. When Jovian was elected, the officers of Constantius's army wanted the new emperor to enter their ranks, while those of

Julian's Gallic army wanted him to enter theirs. Constantius had been Christian, Julian pagan, but in this affair team spirit no doubt counted for more than religion; at any rate, according to Theodoret's account, Julian's soldiers eventually rallied to the Christian Jovian. See R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., pp. 44–7.

4 R. Laqueur in R. Laqueur, H. Koch and W. Weber, *Probleme der Spätantike*, 1930, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, p. 27.

5 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXX, 9, 5(1964, Loeb Classical Library, trans. John C. Rolfe).

6 I agree with Ernst Stein: 'There are plenty of arguments against the current opinion that there was little chance of any pagan reaction. We should not forget that three centuries later Christianity gave way, almost without resistance, to the domination of Islam, in the very countries in which the roots of Christianity were the most ancient and the most solid' (*Geschichte des spätrömischen Reiches*, vol. I, 1928, Vienna, Seidel & Sohn; *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, 1968, Palanque edn, Amsterdam, Adolf M. Hakkert, vol. I, p. 213).

7 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 10, 12.

8 Apart from in Saint Augustine (see the next note), the miracle is attested by the pagan poet Claudian (*On the Third Consulate of Honorius*, 96–8). However, in a spirit of poetic and worldly elegance, and making the most of the freedom allowed to a literary man, he attributes the miracle to Eole, the god of the winds.

9 *City of God*, V, 26, 2 (1963, Loeb Classical Library, trans. William M. Green).

10 Saint Augustine, the Dolbeau/Mayence sermon, VI, 8, a passage now famous that has been cited by, in particular, both Peter Brown and Bruno Dumézil.

11 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 5, cited by R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, op. cit., p. 56.
12 On this vast question upon which, despite my incompetence, I venture to touch, see P. Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens*, op. cit.; R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, 1997, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
13 J. Geffcken, *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums*, 1929[1972], Heidelberg, Carl Winter, pp. 96 and n. 48 (p. 280).
14 In his *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, 1988, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 128–31, Peter Brown calls this an ideology through silence.

Chapter 9 A Partial and Mixed State Religion: The Fate of the Jews

1 In the course of the fourth century, the number of dioceses in northern Italy increased from half a dozen to around fifty; in Gaul, from 16 to 70; even in Africa, which was already very Christianized, the number of dioceses seems to have doubled in that century (A. von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, p. 901; J. Fontaine and L. Pietri in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 833–4).
2 R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, op. cit., p. 68.
3 B. Dumézil, *Les Racines chrétiennes de l'Europe: conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares*, 2005, Paris, Fayard, p. 388.
4 P. Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens*, op. cit., pp. 146–7.
5 See B. Dumézil, *Les Racines chrétiennes*, op. cit., p. 363 and n. 35.
6 J.-C. Passeron, *Le Raisonnement sociologique, un espace non poppérien de l'argumentation*, expanded edn, 2006, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 477.

7 Ibid., p. 465.

8 For a more or less up-to-date picture of, not the decline of religion in general, but its underlying innovations and profound transformations in developed countries, I have consulted no. 109 in the *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, XLV, 2000. In the year 2000, over one quarter of French people declared themselves to be Catholics, although more than half of them never practised as such (*Archives*, p. 15).

9 Gabriel Le Bras, *Etudes de sociologie religieuse*, 1956, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, vol. I, pp. 48–9, 61–2, 68, 75, 112, 200, 240, 267; vol. II, pp. 564 and 583.

10 For an account with ideas diametrically opposed to all those that I develop in the present work, see the Marxist article by Yvon Thébert, 'A propos du triomphe du christianisme', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, 1988.

11 In truth, the expression *christiana tempora* was originally a sarcasm on the part of the pagans: 'So this is it, the Christian period – one when Rome is taken and sacked by Barbarians!' But then the Christians themselves appropriated the sarcasm and made it their own, with their own meaning. See G. Madec, '*Tempora christiana*: expression du triomphalisme chrétien ou récrimination païenne?', in *Petites Etudes augustiniennes*, 1994, Paris, Etudes augustiniennes, p. 233.

12 Hervé Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens face à l'histoire de Rome*, 1996, Paris, Institut d'Etudes augustiniennes, p. 690, see p. 10.

13 'Le lieu des valeurs communes: la cité terrain neutre entre païens et chrétiens dans l'Afrique romaine tardive', in *Idéologies et valeurs civiques dans le monde romain, hommage à Claude Lepelley*, 2002, ed. H. Inglebert, Paris, Picard, p. 271. See also, R. R. R. Smith, 'Late Antiquity Portraits in a Public Context', in *JRS*, 89, 1999, in particular p.156.

14 Symmachus, *Correspondence*, I, 64: 'You are no doubt surprised to find me recommending a bishop to you. It is the justice of his cause that persuades me to do so, not his sectarian membership. '
15 G. Dagron, 'L'Empire chrétien d'Orient au IVe siècle: le témoignage de Thémistios', in *Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation byzantines, Travaux et Mémoires*, 3, 1968, Paris, De Boccard, pp. 77–88. See A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, 1991, University of California Press, p. 131.
16 Toqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 1961, Paris, Gallimard, vol. I, p. 94. 'Turkish populations never played any part in the direction of social affairs; they nevertheless did accomplish great undertakings so long as they regarded the conquests of their sultans as a triumph for religion' (trans. from the French by Janet Lloyd).
17 See Supplementary Notes, pp. 240–1.
18 Lactantius, *On the Death of Persecutors*, XLVIII, 2.
19 C. Pietri, in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 79–82.
20 *Theodosian Code*, XV, 12, 1.
21 Except in the eyes of Saint Augustine who, in *De utilitate credendi* and other texts, makes an inspired but inevitable discovery: namely that if heretics are forced to believe or to pretend to believe, they will, in time and through habituation, come to believe sincerely. Augustine had stumbled upon a presentiment of the 'sociological' relations between thought and society.
22 *Theodosian Code*, XVI, 8, 1.
23 Ibid., XV, 5, 5.
24 Constantine cited by Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, III, 18, 4.
25 Game theorists who have studied concrete situations involving cooperation games have noticed that a rational

solution will only be achieved if both competitors are themselves rational and negotiate, but they will do so, for their mutual benefit, only if each of them thinks that the other is as rational as he himself is.

26 'La controverse antijudaïque dans l'oeuvre de Jean Chrysostome d'après les discours *Adversus Judaeos*', in *De l'antijudaïsme antique à l'antisémitisme contemporain*, 1979, ed. V. Nikiprowestzky, Presses universitaires de Lille, pp. 87–104. In the same volume, pp. 51–86, see Carlos Lévy, 'L'antijudaïsme païen, essai de synthèse'.

27 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXI, 10, 8. Norman H. Baynes, 'Constantine the Great and the Christian Church', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XV, 1929, p. 367.

28 Letter from Constantine to Arius in Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, II, 64–5, 1.

29 Letter from Constantine to the synod of Tyre, cited by Athanasius, *Apologia secunda*, II, 86, 98; Volkmar Keil, *Quellensammlung*, op. cit., p. 144.

30 See the appreciative political judgement of A. von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, op. cit., p. 513.

Chapter 10 Was There an Ideology?

1 The success of the explanation based on ideology and on a supposed political function of Christianization shows that even very intelligent unbelievers find it hard to accept that religious beliefs and emotions can constitute a particular domain of human reality; they postulate that a form of religious politics masks motives of a more 'serious' nature. According to them, the sole God and the sole sovereign are superimposed one upon the other, the former being simply the ideological reflection of the latter; and they suggest that a sole sovereign 'calls for a sole god': a sociology of categories, fashionable around 1900, held that mental categories constituted a transfer

of social categories. But why should they? To be sure, as Friedrich Heiler has shown, when human beings need a concrete image of their relations with the deity, they represent them on the model of a type of relations that exists among themselves: with a king, a powerful stranger, a tribal chieftain, etc. However, that has nothing to do with our problem here, for imagining a god as a king does not promote veneration for the real king. Furthermore, even if, in Jewish and Christian texts, the king is often a metaphor for God (with Wisdom and Logos as the ministers flanking his throne), an even more frequent metaphoric ploy, in Catholic terminology for the Catholic family, is to compare God and humanity to a Father, with a Son, Brothers and, eventually, a Mother.

2 As early as 180, the sentence passed on the martyrs of Scilli, in Africa, was designed to return Christians to a 'Roman way of life (*ad Romanorum morem redire*)', according to the *Passio Scillitanorum*, 14 (H. Mussurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 1972, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 88).

3 Vegetius, *De re militari*, II, 5: *Deo regnat auctore*.

4 J.-M. Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?*, 1999, Paris, Seuil, p. 127.

5 I recall the doctrinal confusion caused by Hitlerian anti-Semitism, around 1952, in our little group of Communist students: it was agreed that Hitlerian 'fascism' had served the bourgeoisie, but what could have been the purpose of anti-Semitism? When the problem arose in our minds, we hastily thought about something else, so as not to impair our Communist faith. In the seventeenth century, when transubstantiation arose in the minds of some people, they, likewise, hastened to think about something else.

6 I again refer the reader to my *Empire gréco-romain*, pp. 68–73.

7 In the now defunct popular Democracies, the loudspeakers in the streets, which diffused messages from the government to which nobody ever listened, would have been hard put to it to fill people's heads with effective propaganda. Nevertheless, they did demonstrate 'pragmatically' that the authorities occupied the public space and could say whatever they liked.

8 Ausonius, *Gratiarum actio pro consulatu*, IX–X.

9 Of course, this tacit *habitus* involves the non-religious functions of religion such as the identity in which one bathes from birth onwards, or the solemnity of some custom (such as women covering their heads in church). If order reigned in the Empire and its inhabitants obeyed their master, it was not because the rhetoric of preachers persuaded them to believe that the emperor was the terrestrial *Logos*; rather, the thinking that linked the *habitus* and that soothing rhetoric led in the opposite direction: it was the rhetoric that emerged from the *habitus*, the established order, not the other way round. A Germanic dynasty of Arian persuasion remained alien in the eyes of the kingdom's population, for that population was loyal to its bishops and protectors who, being Nicaean, came to the defence of their dignity in the face of royalty which, in that it persisted in heresy, appeared to despise their spiritual authority.

10 J.-M. Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?*, op. cit., p. 127.

11 That same intellectualist illusion was soon to promote the belief that the cohesion of a kingdom demands that the prince's subjects should unanimously support the religion of their sovereign. Furthermore, should the sovereign embrace the full force of the idea that his power is of a paternal nature, to reject what the sovereign considered to be the truth would be tantamount to refusing to obey him.

12 Similarly, whatever the Sophists and the Enlightenment may have declared, religion is not a useful lie that inculcates good morals in the lower classes, for it is the *habitus* or ambience that does just that, through its wordless example, its constraints and its precepts. To judge by police statistics, it would appear to be the case that, with dechristianization, the number of crimes and offences did not increase. The civilizing teaching of religion (whether pagan or Christian, be it said) does no more than add to the *habitus* a little corner of blue sky that is rather more effective in educating a few souls in disinterestedness and a taste for the ideal. Unfortunately for historians, the official doctrine of the ecclesiastical institution is more audible than the tacit influence of the ambience, which passes unnoticed.

13 See the demonstration by G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre*, op. cit., in particular pp. 142–8.

14 On the arguments concerning interventions, both admissible and inadmissible, on the part of the *Basileus*, into the affairs of the Church and faith, see G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre*, op. cit., for example pp. 302–9, 316–17.

15 P. Maravel, 'La théologie politique de l'Empire chrétien', in *Les premiers temps de* l'Eglise, de saint Paul à saint Augustin, ed. M.-F. Baslez, 2004, Paris, Gallimard, p. 644.

16 G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre*, op. cit., pp. 190–1. See E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, 1968, Palanque edn, Amsterdam, Adolf M. Hakkert, vol. II, pp. 112–14.

17 I am aware of the speculative and eastern (Syrian? But H. Seyrig is doubtful) origins of Solar mysticism. For the common people, however, the Sun evoked, rather, an emotion. Documents from a number of periods testify to crowds or armies gathering to acclaim the rising sun, the overwhelming spectacle of an all-enveloping cosmic

power. But these were instances of mysticism, pantheistic or otherwise; it was not religious in the full sense of the word. However much one tries, one cannot believe a round disc to be a divine *person*. And within or behind that disc, one senses not so much an anthropomorphic personality such as a Sun god, but rather a *power* (impersonal, yet animated and unstoppable). See William James on the San Francisco earthquake in Henri Bergson, *Deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, p. 161. I therefore assume that the Invincible Sun represented an unsuccessful attempt to encourage, by means of the somewhat implausible figure of a Sun god, a sense that the Empire and its leader were borne along, or rather accompanied, by a great cosmic power. In similar fashion a society may convince itself that it is the bearer of a great human message, or constitutes the chosen people, the seat of revolution, or the civilized centre of the world. But Greco-Roman Antiquity (with the exception of the Greeks, who considered themselves civilization itself) was not much given to such flights of political messianism. It is true that Virgil, for example, purveyed an old Roman form of mysticism, but this was tautological, patriotic and somewhat short-winded: Rome was great (in comparison to the Greeks, who nevertheless possessed merits of their own) simply because it was Rome.

18 Suetonius, *Augustus*, 91, 2.

19 Saint Augustin, *Cité de Dieu*, V, 24.

Chapter 11 Does Europe Have Christian Roots?

1 Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale*, I, p. 61.

2 Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, V, 14 (end) –15.

3 Europeans do not recognize a Christian 'identity' in the strongest sense of the word, within which the British, the French, the Spanish and so forth all recognize their own

British, French, Spanish . . . identities. They are surprised to find that Muslims, projecting upon them their own concept of identity, describe them, both as a group and as individuals, as Christian.

4 J. Daniélou and H.-I. Marrou, *Nouvelle Histoire de l'Eglise*, *I, Des origines à Saint Grégoire le Grand*, 1963, Paris, Seuil, p. 368.

5 Here too, let us keep our feet on the ground. In the century of Leo XIII, the love of one's neighbour was influenced by the workers' movement. But in the aristocratic time of Gregory the Great, charity consisted first and foremost in coming to the aid of ruined nobles, rather than the true poor, for the latter were born into poverty, whereas the nobles suffered from an added indignity, the shame of having become poor. See Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 2002, pp. 59–61. It is worth repeating that, given that there is no trans-historical essence to a religion, it never can constitute a matrix or root, but becomes whatever its time makes it.

6 It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the Enlightenment was neither religious nor anti-religious, but that there was a time when it clashed with the dogmas and attitudes of certain religions and with their possible exclusivism. The relation of the Enlightenment to the present retreat of the customary major religions is complicated and unclear. It seems to me that minds that are more or less obscurely favourable to religiosity form a 'virtual party' that is always in the majority, even in the France of today. It would be tempting to try to speculate on the expression 'a virtual party', for if such parties do exist, this would imply, among other things, that (*pace* Bourdieu) the *habitus* is not all-important, after all.

7 It could be said that this respect is of an evangelical nature. But in that case, how is it that it has taken eighteen centuries for it to become active? It is on account of the fact that throughout history, right down the centuries, 'it is never possible to think just whatever one wishes, whenever one wishes to', as was pointed out by Michel Foucault in a splendid account of his philosophy of knowledge. Except in our retrospective illusions, history is never finalistic. Jean-Claude Passeron tells me that it does not present any natural development, such as that of a plant, only an epigenesis: the plant of history does not continue its roots, developing what has been preformed in a seed; rather, it takes time to constitute itself by unpredictable degrees. Historical inventiveness is one aspect of this epigenesis.

8 Cited by J.-C. Passeron, *Le Raisonnement sociologique, un espace non-poppérien de l'argumentation*, 2006, expanded edn, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 453.

9 See J.-C. Passeron, cited n. 8.

Appendix

1 Too scholarly for a time when Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and Oedipus and the Sphinx were playing at riddles which, in their day, represented the peak of intellectualism. No clear distinction was drawn between 'saying' and 'doing'. Jehovah did not 'create' the world out of nothing, but his all-powerful word sufficed to make the world come forth in obedience to his command.

2 Genesis, II, 21. The Hebrew word means either 'rib' or 'side'. In opposition to the interpretation 'side' and in order to defend the traditional 'rib' (that of the Septuagint), Genesis I, 27 tends to be cited: 'He made them, male and female.' But it is fair to say that another account of the making of the world, a second one, begins at Genesis II, 4b. This was to be a so-called Jehovahist account that

involved a certain amount of 'cutting and pasting', if one is to believe the theory of two separate sources, one of which is labelled Jehovahist, the other Elohist. Let me point out, more simply, that the two accounts of the creation of man do not stand in opposition: whether Jehovah drew woman from one of man's ribs or from his side, the result was the same and this result is described in the first account: the human race, which emerged from the hands of the divine craftsman, is composed of both male and female elements. It is pointless to suggest that Adam was a bisexual android: Elohim could perfectly well have had woman rise supernaturally out of one half of man's body, without cutting the latter in half. It seems reasonable enough to imagine, behind the legend, a nuptial rite in which the new husband addressed his wife as 'my other half', or else, on the contrary, a claim that woman was only half what a man was.

3 F. Heiler, *Das Gebet*, trans. into French by Kruger and Marty, *La Prière*, 1931, Paris, Payot, pp. 86, 137, 158, 434, 436 and passim.

4 Valentin Nikiprowetzky, 'Le monothéisme éthique et la spécificité d'Israël', in *De l'antijudaïsme antique à l'antisémitisme contemporain*, 1979, ed. V. Nikiprowetzky, Presses universitaires de Lille, p. 32, an article with which I trust I have indicated my agreement often enough. One example of this All-Father may be the Almighty (*'elyon*), the creator of heaven and earth who is the god of Melchisedech (Genesis, XIV, 20) and of Balaam (Numbers, XXIV, 16) neither of whom are Children of Israel. The Almighty is Jehovah's superior and also the superior of the other gods or *élohim*. The text of Deuteronomy, XXXII, 8–9, would then cease to be so enigmatic: one is tempted to conclude that the Almighty or Shaddai, a heavenly, supreme, distant god, divided human beings into as many nations as there were deities

(*élohim*) beneath him: each nation would thus have its own, local god, but the supreme god treated the Children of Israel as a special case that was privileged to be allotted one *élohim* in particular, Jehovah.

5 Exodus, VI, 3; Deuter., V, 2–3: Moses declares: 'The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive, this day.'

6 This is the 'Mount of God', *har hâ-élohim*, that Elijah ascends in order to hear Jehovah's word (I Kings, XIX, 8–9).

7 The same expression occurs in Judges, X, 16 and I Samuel, VII, 3. These gods are indistinct from their images, altars and sacred posts, all of which are to be toppled and burnt (Joshua, XXIV, 14–24).

8 This Almighty is the Creator of heaven and earth (Genesis, XIV, 22).

9 See II Chron., XXVIII, 23.

10 II Kings, XVI, 3 and XXIII, 10; Jeremiah, VIII, 31 and XIX, 3–6; Ezekiel, XX, 25–6, etc. See M. Gras, P. Rouillard and J. Teixidor, *L'Univers phénicien*, 1989, Paris, Arthaud, pp. 170–5.

11 Psalm 82 is possibly a sensational text, if we are to conclude from it that in a kind of divine assembly, Elohim 'passes judgement on the other gods', those of the other nations, and reproaches them for being blind and unjust and for abandoning the weak and indigent to their fates. The trouble, though, is that another text, Psalm 58, states: 'Verily, there are gods that judge in the earth' and claims that, according to Exodus XXI, 8, the thief whom 'the Elohim will condemn' will have to repay to his victim double what he stole from him (in both cases the verb is in the plural). But perhaps these Elohim truly are gods and Psalm 82 is indeed a sensational document. Even then, though, a difficulty remains: are we to believe that gods

could be unjust judges? Or does the word emphatically designate flesh and blood judges? (A possibility that is hard to believe). Another suggestion is that these Elohim were really Teraphim, the domestic gods possessed by every Jewish household (gods that were soon to be banned as idolatrous) and that it was the custom to swear by such *penates* that the stolen object by rights belonged to oneself. The *penates* were also said sometimes to fail to denounce false oaths . . .

12 Foreign peoples were presumed to reason in similar fashion. Hiram, the king of Tyre, blessed Jehovah for having given Israel such a great king as Solomon (I Kings, V, 21; see also XVII, 12 and II Chronicles, II, 10–11); as did the queen of Sheba (II Chronicles, IX, 8).

13 Two lines above, in verse 11, should we understand 'the fear of Elohim . . .' or 'fear of the *élohim* may not exist in this land'? Logic would insist on a plural noun, and that is how Renan translated the verse; Abraham is well aware that this pagan country does not worship the one true god. Renan also translates *élohim* with a plural at Genesis, XXXII, 29: 'You have struggled against the *élohim*, as you have against men' (Jacob's battle with the 'Angel'); in other words Jacob has battled with a being belonging to the category of the divine: to have fought with one god was enough to qualify as a fighter equal *to* the gods. The same symmetry of two plurals, gods and men, is to be found in Judges IX, 13, where the vine proverbially (and accordingly in archaic language) declares 'wine delights both the *élohim* and men' (Renan, *Légendes patriarcales des Juifs et des Arabes*, L. Rétat edn, 1989, Paris, Hermann, p. 197).

14 Both these psalms base Jehovah's superiority upon the fact that he is also the creator of heaven and the master of the earth: the very same aspects of God that we noted right from the start.

15 In view of the fact that excavations have uncovered no signs of violent destruction in Palestine around the year 1000, some archaeologists now believe that Israelite peoples had been there ever since the second millennium and that these autochthonous groups gradually formed the Israel of the Bible: I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *La Bible dévoilée; les nouvelles révélations de l'archéologie*, 2002, trans. into French by Ghirardi, Paris, Bayard; see J. Teixidor, *Mon père l'Araméen errant*, 2006, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 212.

16 The Song of Deborah (Judges, V, 2–31): 'Let all thine enemies perish, O Lord.' Those enemies were Israel's enemies.

17 This prophecy was repeated by a contemporary of Isaiah, the prophet Micah (IV, 1–4). See also a later prophet, Zachariah, VIII, 20–22 and XIV, 16, and Psalm 67, 5.

18 The Christians were to regard this strange and sublime figure as a prefiguration of Christ; but it is worth noting that this 'Servant' is never referred to as the Messiah. In the Jewish Bible, the term Messiah (or anointed one) is only used to designate the high priest or the king, both of whom are consecrated by being anointed with oil. Deutero-Isaiah (XLV, 1 . . .) seems to suggest that Jehovah considered the Persian Cyrus to be his Anointed One, a king in his service. In the Talmudic period, there was a Jewish tradition of a suffering Messiah. An expert has referred me to the *Sanhedrin* treatise, 88a, in which R. Joshua ben Levi finds the Messiah (a son of David) at the gates of Rome, among the poor and the sick. The Messiah removes his bandages one by one, then replaces them so as to be ready at all times for the deliverance. And the Babylon Talmud, *Succah*, 52a, mentions the 'Messiah, son of Joseph', who will be killed, then praised at his funeral.

19 Exodus, VI, 3.

20 Ezekiel, XXX, 10, ascribed the same role to Nebuchadnezzar.

21 As a matter of interest, it is worth noting that another prophecy (Book of Isaiah, XIV, 1–2), after the Return in 538, which claims to predict that Return, falsely infiltrated the prophecies of Isaiah with even more down-to-earth predictions: Gentiles will carry the exiles' children back to Israel on their shoulders and will remain there, reduced to slavery. Dare we suppose that the wealthy exiles in Babylon (for there were some) bought slaves there to carry their children and luggage when the time came for the Return? And that the prophet, *post eventum*, gave this detail a symbolic twist?

22 With the exception of one Deutero-canonical text, Tobias XIV, 6, which appears to date from the early Hellenistic period: 'All the nations will convert and will veritably fear the Lord. They will bury their idols.'

23 These foreign gods are no longer idols (*'elîlîm*), but mere images (*pesel*, XLIV, 9–20) and it is not the case that the image and the god were invariably confused (Deuter., VII, 25 and XII, 3).

24 In 79 AD, at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius, it was rumoured among its victims that the gods had already prudently departed from a world that was in the process of crumbling.

25 In the Wisdom of Solomon, XIV, 15–20, a timid attempt is made to explain the origin of false religions. The text seems to allude to the religious homage paid to the dead (according to the Jerusalem Bible) or to a euhemerist explanation (A. Guillamont, in the Pléiade Bible, refers to Firmicus Maternus, *De errore*, VI); the text then proceeds to a facile critique of the cult of Hellenistic sovereigns.

Supplementary Notes

Chapter 1, Notes 8 and 10

According to Lactantius, the Christogram was revealed to Constantine *in quiete*, as he slept, by night. In Tacitus, *quies* means 'dream'. Eusebius makes no mention of any dream or Christogram in his *Ecclesiastical History*, which he published soon after the event. Much later, in his *Life of Constantine* (28–31), he makes two assertions: (1) Constantine had prayed to the Christian god, beseeching him to be his ally and to reveal who he was; thereupon, there appeared to him, in broad daylight, a 'sign' (*semaion*) that was none other than the Cross, that trophy and symbol of Christ's triumph (*tropaion staurou*) over death. It shone above him in the sunlit sky and bore the following inscription: 'Be victorious through this.' The entire army beheld this with their own eyes. (2) During the night, as he slept, Christ appeared to him and ordered him to make this sign his personal emblem in the forthcoming battle. Constantine obeyed. Eusebius then tells us

that the 'sign' that he has described as the Cross of Christ was none other than the very Christogram mentioned by Lactantius for, Eusebius claims, it displayed the two letters used to start Christ's name, letters 'that form a cross' (just as in Lactantius' account). The simplest explanation must be that Eusebius' memory was somewhat confused (Andreas Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, English trans. H. Mattingly, 1948, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 17); or, better still, that Eusebius' work, which ran to several expanded editions, reflected two successive bouts of editing. At the start, he knew very little about the dream but had vaguely heard that it involved what he decided to describe as a cross. Years later, Constantine himself described a Christogram and swore to the veracity of that description.

Chapter 1, Note 10

The historiographical tradition has chosen as the dividing line between pagan Antiquity and the Christian era, not Constantine's conversion, but what is erroneously called the edict of Milan, dated 313 (for this was neither an edict nor was it issued in Milan). The general belief seemed to be that this was the text that made it possible for Christianity to flourish in peace and openly. In truth, however, tolerance had already been established two years earlier and, after his victory at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had no need to issue an edict to this effect. Persecution had, in principle, ceased ever since the edict of tolerance issued by Galerius (either in Sardis or in Nicomedia, on 31 April 311, according to Lactantius, *De mortibus persec.*, XXXIV and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, 17, 17, 3–10). Given that this first edict was approved by the first Augustus, it was in theory valid for the whole Empire and all four of its *imperatores*. It was applied by Constantine

in Gaul (J. Moreau in his edition of *De mortibus*, coll. Sources chrétiennes, no. 39, 1954, Paris, vol. II, p. 343) and even by the usurper Maxentius in Italy and Africa. In the East, however, Maximinus Daïa avoided its application until his defeat at the hands of Licinius. As for the so-called edict of Milan, that was in truth no more than a *mandatum*, an *epistola* containing complementary instructions designed for high officials in the provinces, following a resolution passed in Milan with the agreement of both Constantine and Licinius. Licinius, for his part, sent out a *mandatum* of his own from Nicomedia, on 15 June 313 (Lactantius, *De mortibus persec.*, XVIII, 1: *litteras ad praesidem datas*; see, at XXXIV, 5, the complementary *epistola judicibus* that is mentioned in the edict of Galerius in 311). It is, in short, fair to say that these complementary instructions complete not some 'edict of Milan', but the edict of tolerance that Galerius issued in 311. 'As the acts of Maxentius had lost their validity, Constantine presumably called back into force the Edict of Galerius' (A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine*, op. cit., p. 37). However, that edict of 311 needed to be completed, since the 313 agreement between the two Augustuses made provision for restitution to the churches of all the possessions that persecutors had seized from them. Hence the *mandata* of complementary instructions, the texts of which were preserved by both Lactantius and Eusebius. The restitution clause was almost certainly due to the first and more strongly convinced of the two Augustuses, namely Constantine (Charles M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 2004, New York, Routledge, p. 119). The later Constantinian hagiography turned this agreement concluded in Milan, with its complementary instructions, into a regular edict for which Constantine could take sole credit (A. Cameron and G. Clarke, in the

New Cambridge Ancient History, 2005, vol. XII, Cambridge University Press, pp. 92 and 656). It is quite true, though, that the initiative and most of the credit does belong to Constantine. Apart from Fergus Millar, see L. and C. Pietri in *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 182 and 198; and S. Corcoran and H. A. Drake in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, 2006, ed. N. Lenski, Cambridge, pp. 52 and 121. In September 315, a further decree completed the application of the rules for the restitution of ecclesiastical possessions (*Theodosian Code*, X, I, 1, cited by C. Pietri, *Roma christiana*, 1976, Rome, École française de Rome, vol. I, p. 78).

Chapter 3, Note 35

The genesis of an innovation or some creation is, on its own scale, as rigorously determined as phenomena of a vaster nature. In his Memoir, *Le Possible et le Réel*, Bergson writes as follows: 'If an event can always, subsequently, be explained by such or such previous events, a quite different event could equally well be explained, in the same circumstances, by previous antecedent events selected differently, or rather by the very same events interpreted differently.' More often than not, one imagines that everything must stem from 'society'. However (and, incidentally, in response to objections raised by critics thirty or more years ago), let me point out that it is a mistake to set 'society' in opposition to 'individual' (or 'social' to 'psychological'), since even the most individual of actions is social if it affects others. And in answer to a scholar and friend to whom I owe much and whom I greatly admire, the psychology of a Greek *euergetes* who spontaneously acted as a patron and thus assumed a moral superiority over his city was neither individual nor psychological; rather, given that it affected others, it was just as social

as the collective behaviour of the city which, on another occasion, might impose on a miserly leading citizen the duty to behave as a benefactor. Ideas about such problems were somewhat confused at the time of Constantine. The words 'social' and 'collective' do not necessarily have the same meaning. When all the passers-by open their umbrellas at the same moment because it has started to rain, that is not a social action, whereas the vain and ostentatious psychology of a single leading citizen *is* social for, as I have said and written before, the 'social distance' introduced by his gift is not an 'individual' pleasure but a means of dominating the group. The community's insistence on a gift is, to be sure, social, but that 'individual' gift was also social: it expressed 'the primacy of the group' which had set up a competitive domain for the rich and powerful – a domain of prestige and of the advantages that prestige confers within a group (Frédéric Lordon, *L'Interêt souverain, essai d'anthropologie économique spinoziste*, 2006, Paris, La Découverte, in particular, pp. 39–40, 56–7, 220).

Chapter 4, Note 1, Chapter 5, Note 14 and Chapter 9, Note 17

As soon as he converted, Constantine became totally and purely Christian. It should not be thought that his faith was full of confusion and syncretism or that he had any difficulty in distinguishing Christ from the Sun god. What encouraged such a belief was his currency, which displayed an assortment of pagan gods on the reverse side of its coins up until 321 and the *Sol invictus* up until 322. This coinage has been over-interpreted as a direct expression of the emperor's own thinking. But the imperial Roman and Byzantine coinage (upon the reverse sides of which Christian subjects by no means predominated) was a public institution, just as are our own postage stamps;

it did not reflect the inner life of its prince. In short, an assortment of pagan deities, including the Sun, appeared on the coins simply because Constantine's empire was ostensibly pagan and not because Constantine's confused mind could not distinguish between those gods. The reverse sides of Constantine's imperial coins displayed what Roman coins had been displaying for the past three centuries: noble public allegories of Prudence, Concord and public Welfare, victories, armies and their standards, emperors in military uniform and a few pagan gods too, including the Sun; and, as you may well point out, also the Christogram. However, on Constantine's coins, the Sun is not displayed at the same level as the Christogram: the Sun appears as a figure in its own right, whereas the Christogram is no more than a symbol drawn on the emperor's helmet or on the standard or *labarum* that he grasps in his hand; it is the emperor himself, who appears on the coin, an imperial and military figure, not a religious one (even if the emperor himself does have a religious spirit). In short, if the Sun, along with other pagan deities, appears on the reverse sides of a few coins, that is not so much because of solar piety but rather because, for Constantine, the *Sol invictus* was a family emblem, a proof of his legitimacy: Constantine claimed to be descended on his father's side from Claudius II; and the Invincible Sun had been the celestial archetype of the glorious Illyrian emperors who had saved the Empire half a century earlier. To choose the Sun for his emblem was to set that hereditary Illyrian legitimacy in the place of the institutional legitimacy of the Tetrarchs, with their Jupiter and their Hercules – legitimacy that Constantine could hardly claim for himself.

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