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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE

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1 Prelude: The Fourth-Century Watershed

Our view of Christians in the Roman Empire during their first three hundred years is profoundly affected by what happened both to Christianity and to the empire in the course of the fourth century. In 312 CE, Constantine began Christianity’s conversion to a form of imperial Roman religion. Becoming the patron of one branch of the church, he used his prestige, his authority, and a good deal of publicly funded largesse on behalf of this now-favored community. As Constantine consolidated his own power, so too did those urban bishops upon whom he increasingly relied as ad hoc administrators of welfare and justice (Drake 2000: 309–440). Throughout the course of the fourth century, interrupted dramatically but only briefly by the reign of Constantine’s pagan nephew Julian (361–3), imperial and ecclesiastical politics grew increasingly entwined. The emperors were always unambiguously supreme. Their support for projects important to the bishops, however, ultimately enabled the bishops to have a profound effect not only on their own contemporaries, whether Christian, Jewish, or pagan (Fowden 1978; Bradbury 1994), but also on their distant cultural descendants, modern historians of ancient Christianity.

The long shadow cast by these bishops gives measure of their commitment to the ideology of orthodoxy. “Orthodoxy” means “right opinion.” In the period before Constantine, this term might serve as a self-designation for any Christian group; “orthodoxy” is always “my doxy.” All the various Christian communities, in their rivalry with each other, claimed to represent the “true faith,” the only way. We see this as early as the late first century, when Matthew’s Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, repudiates other Christians whose views and practices are, presumably, different from those of Matthew’s community (Mt 7:15–23). And we see this in the generation after Constantine, when the political split between East and West Rome corresponded to differing theological constructions of the person of Christ. Each side viewed itself as “orthodox,” and accused the other of heresy (Hunt 1998: 7–43).
Even scholars sensitive to this problem nonetheless continue to identify these communities, as did the orthodox before them, by the names of their prominent leaders—"Marcionites" (followers of Marcion), "Valentinians" (followers of Valentinus), "Montanists" (followers of Montanus), and so on. This practice has the virtue of easily distinguishing these communities from their proto-"orthodox" contemporaries. But it only reinforces the orthodox victory, for these people, in their own eyes, were simply followers of Christ, and thus, Christians. Finally, even the terms of ancient polemic have passed into modern scholarship as categories of analysis. Historians have also described various Christian sects as overly influenced by classical philosophy, or by exotic forms of Judaism, or by oriental cults. They do so seemingly unaware of the degree to which their views and even their analytic terms derive from and recapitulate the perspective of the orthodox, whose texts often provide our only glimpse of these otherwise lost and silenced communities (K. L. King 2003).

If the fourth century so obscures our view of earlier intra-Christian diversity, it obscures no less our view of how these ancient Christians interacted with their Jewish and pagan neighbors. Orthodoxy presents a story of almost universal hostility directed against the true church, stretching from the murder of Christ through the persecution of his saints until, miraculously, history reached a moment of dramatic reversal with Constantine's conversion. It foregrounds an image of heroic resistance to relentless attacks from furious Jews and murderous pagans, while belittling non-orthodox Christians and denying that they showed such resolve. It presents orthodoxy as distinct, unambiguous, and unchanging, preserved through a principled separation from the world, with "true" Christians assiduously avoiding synagoge and civic rituals, and any sort of friendly - or even normal - contact with pagans and Jews.

The messiness of real life rarely obliterates the clarity of ideology. Embedded in the very texts that promulgate the orthodox view lies the evidence of a more complicated - and more interesting - story. To understand and appreciate the diverse practices, experiences, and commitments of these many different sorts of ancient Christians in the period before any one group could impose its own views is the goal of this chapter. To re-imagine them, we have to place ourselves back in their world: a world thick with gods and different ethnic (thus, religious) groups; a world where communal eating and public celebration were the measure of piety, which was a concern of the state. Further, and despite its roots in the farming villages of the Galilee, Christianity as soon as we meet it in its earliest texts - the letters of Paul (c.50 CE) and the writings of the canonical evangelists (c.70-100) - was essentially and already an urban phenomenon. And for its first three centuries, Christianity in all its varieties remained an urban phenomenon. To re-imagine these ancient Christians, then, we also have to place ourselves in a world where life and time were measured by the rhythms of the Greco-Roman city.

2 Gods and Humans in Mediterranean Antiquity

People in the modern West tend to think of religion as a detachable aspect of personal (and even of national) identity. We also tend to think of religion as something largely personal or private, a question first of all of belief. And "God" in modern monotheisms functions as a unique, transcendent, somewhat isolated metaphysical point.
What of "religion" in Mediterranean antiquity? The word, first of all, scarcely translates at all. Its closest functional equivalent would be "cult," those rituals and offerings whereby ancients enacted their respect for and devotion to the deity, and thereby solicited heaven's good will. While individual households and, indeed, persons might have their own particular protocols of piety, much of ancient worship was public, communal, and, at the civic and imperial levels, what we would call "political." Modern religion emphasizes psychological states: sincerity or authenticity of belief, the inner disposition of the believer. Ancient "religion" emphasized acts: how one lived, what one did, according to both inherited and local custom. Ancient religion was thus intrinsically communal and public; performance-indexed piety.

In this world filled with gods, some ancient communities—Jewish, eventually Christian, also pagan (Athanasiadi and Fede 1999)—worshipped a single god at the highest one, the one to whom they particularly owed allegiance and respect. But ancient monotheists did not doubt that other gods also existed. In antiquity, divinity expressed itself along a gradient, and the Highest God (he or it, pagan, Jewish, or Christian) hardly stood alone. Many lesser divine personalities, cosmic and terrestrial, filled the gap between the High God and humanity. The question for the ancient monotheist was how to deal with all these other gods. Different groups—and different individuals within the same group—had, as we shall see, different answers to this question. But as we imagine both Judaism and, later, Christianity, within ancient Mediterranean culture, we should not conceive them as "monothism" standing against "polytheism." By modern measure, all ancient monotheists were polytheists. It was their behavior, not their beliefs, that distinguished these groups from others.

A useful way to contrast ancient and modern conceptualizations of "religion" is to consider, in antiquity, the embeddedness of divinity. Ancient gods were local in a dual sense. First, they attached to particular places, whether natural or man-made. Groves, groves, mountains, cities, temples and, especially, altars: all these might be visited or inhabited by the god to whom they were sacred (Lane Fox 1986: 11-261). Gods tended to be emotionally invested in the precincts of their habitats. Humans, in consequence, took care to safeguard the purity, sanctity, sacrifices, and financial security of such holy sites, because, in a simple way, the god was there. We catch a nice statement of this common ancient idea in the Gospel of Matthew, wherein Jesus observes that "he who swears by the Temple [in Jerusalem], swears by it and by in him who dwells in it"—that is, the god of Israel, who abides in his temple (Mt 23:21; cf. similarly Paul, Rom 9:4).

Second, gods also attached to particular peoples: "religion" ran in the blood. Put differently: cult was a type of ethnic designation, something that identified one's people or kinship group, the gens. Herodotus, in his History, gives a clear example of this way of thinking, when he defines "Greekeness" in terms of shared blood, gods, customs, and customs (Hdt. 8.144.2-3; Malkin 2001); centuries later, the apostle Paul likewise described Jewishness in strikingly similar terms (Rom 9:4-5; see below). More commonly, deities were identified through reference to the peoples who worshiped them: the god of Israel, the gods of Rome, the god at Delos, and so on (cf. Acts 19:28: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!").

This family connection between gods and their humans could be expressed or imagined in terms of descent. Rulers—kings of Israel, or Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar, for example—were deemed the "son" of their particular god. Alexander was descended from Hercules; the Julian house, through Aeneas, from Venus. Jewish scriptures used similar language, designating Israelite kings the sons of Israel's god (e.g., 2 Sm 7:14, Ps 2:7, and frequently elsewhere. Later Christian exegesis referred such passages to Jesus.) Divine connections were politically useful.

Whole peoples, also, saw themselves in family relationships with their gods. Hellenistic and later Roman diplomats wrought intricate networks of inter-city diplomacy through appeals to consanguinity inaugurated, in the distant past, by punic deities (C. P. Jones 1999). Jewish scriptures frequently referred to Israelites as the sons of their god. The apostle Paul, repeating this biblical commonplace of Israel's sonship, distinguished his genus in terms reminiscent of Herodotus. To them, he said, through the gracious gift of their god, belong the presence of the deity (thea, a reference to the divine presence at the altar in the Jerusalem temple), customs ("covenant" and "law," that is, Torah), and cult (latrinea, a reference as well to the Temple, where the cult was performed: Rom 9:4). Later in the second and third centuries, when non-Jewish Christian communities sought to formulate their identity, they too would fall back on this native Mediterranean language of divinity and blood-kinship or ethnicity (Buell 2002). What did these ideas about gods and humans mean practically for the way in which ancient people lived? They meant that, first, in an age of empire, gods bumped up against each other with some frequency, even among their humans did. The larger the political unit, the greater the number of different peoples, and thus the greater the pluralism. And the greater the number of gods and peoples, the greater the plurality of cultic practices, since different peoples had their own ancestral customs. Ancient empires, in other words, accommodated as a matter of course a wide range of religious practices. To see this accommodation as "religious tolerance" is to misunderstand it. Ancient society simply presupposed religious difference, since many subject peoples as ipso facto meant many customs and many gods.

Second, the existence of non-gods of outsiders (those of a different genus or nation) was not at issue; people generally assumed that various gods existed, just as various humans did. The Roman practice of evocatio makes this point nicely. When besieging a city, Romans would call out the city's gods to come over to them, promising to continue their cult. Jewish traditions also presupposed the existence of other gods, e.g., Micah 4:5: "All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our god forever and ever." Jews living in the Hellenistic Diaspora lived with a different pantheon than the Canaanite/Palestinian ones frequently reviled in their prophet texts, and the translators of the Jewish Bible, rendering their sacred Hebrew text into Greek, seem to have taken account of this shift. When they came to the Hebrew of Exodus 22:28, they altered "Do not revile God," to "Do not revile the gods (tau orthos)". Paul too acknowledges the existence and influence of these other gods: he demands, however, that his gentiles, if they want to be included in the coming redemption, worship only the god of Israel, and no longer these lower divine powers (2 Cor 4:4; Gal 4:8-9; 1 Cor 15:24). Short of extreme situations (like siege in our first example, or apocalyptic convictions in the second), what mattered to ancient people was the practical question how to deal with these other gods, while dealing with their humans as well. In general, a sensible display of courtesy, showing arid (perhaps as important) being seen to show respect,
went a long way towards establishing concord both with other gods (who, if angered, could be dangerous) and with their humans (ditto).

Third, the index of respectable cult within this culture was precisely ethnicity and antiquity. To be pious meant to honor one’s own gods according to ancestral custom. People might well choose to honor gods who lay outside their inherited ones. Isis, Mithras, and Sarapis were new deities; emperors (and occasionally even governors) were themselves the object of cult (Price 1984; Gradel 2002); some pagans, continuing in their native cults, nonetheless joined with Jews both in diaspora synagogues and, until 70 CE, in the Temple in Jerusalem, to worship the Jewish god as well (Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987; L. I. Levine 2000). Diaspora Jews, also, to the degree that they engaged in athletics, higher education, the military, civic politics, drama, or music, were involved in activities entwined with the gods of majority culture (Schurer 1973-87: 3: 1-149; Grenn 2002: 105-32; Fredriksen 2003: 38-56). But this openness to other cults did not loosen the ties of obligation and respect that bound people, first of all, to their own gods. Conversion to Judaism, however, and later to Christianity, demanded the convert’s renouncing the worship of his native gods and pledging exclusive allegiance to the god of Israel. As we shall see, such activity did indeed lead to social disruption.

Diaspora Synagogue and the Origins of Christianity

3 The Diaspora Synagogue and the Origins of Christianity

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and historian, and elder contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, remarked that "the people has made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received [them]" (Rom. 14:11).

Establishing themselves in their new cities of residence, these Jews, over the course of four centuries, absorbed and adapted Greek language and culture. As their vernacular shifted from Aramaic to Greek, their scriptures shifted too. By about 200 BCE, Jews in Alexandria had completed the Septuagint (LXX), the translation of their sacred texts into Greek. Throughout this medium, Jewish ideas about divinity, worship, creation, ethics, piety, and practice came to be broadcast in the international linguistic frequency. And due to this same fact of translation, the vocabulary of πανδοκ - Greek ideas about divinity, cosmology, philosophy, and government - was established in these texts. Their creative interpretation would have enormous consequences for Western culture, as we shall see.

Living in foreign cities put Jews in a potentially awkward situation. Like everyone else, Jews had their own ancestral, thus ethnic, traditions. But unlike anyone else, because of these traditions, Jews in principle were restricted to worshiping only their own god. Some pagan observers commented irreverently on this fact, complaining of Jewish civic irresponsibility, or disloyalty, or impurity, or at least discourtesy. But majority culture was extremely capacious, and respect for ancestral tradition was the bedrock of Mediterranean religious, political, and legal civilization. Thus ancient pagans by and large were prepared to respect Jewish religious difference, and even to make social allowances for it, precisely because of Judaism's ethnicity and antiquity. Where awkwardness might result - Jewish members of town councils, Jewish athletes, Jewish military men, all of whose activities necessarily involved them with cultic activities dedicated to other gods - Jews negotiated exemptions as they could, and so found ways to serve both their city and their own traditions. Eventually, once Rome ruled the entire Mediterranean, such exemptions were written into imperial law (Linder 1987; Pucci Ben Zeev 1998).

The city provided one context for shared social and religious activity between pagans and Jews. Another was that singular institution common to Jewish populations wherever they were found: the synagogue.

Ancient synagogues functioned as community centers and as a type of ethnic reading-house, where Jews could gather at least once every seven days to hear instruction in their ancestral laws. Literary and epigraphical evidence - donor inscriptions in particular - afford us a glimpse of the mixed population that frequented, and supported, this Jewish institution. Pagans as well as Jews attended synagogue activities. Some, like the professional magicians whose recipes relay "magick" Hebrew words and garbled biblical images, might drop by simply to hear stories about a powerful god read aloud in the vernacular. Other pagans, called "god-fearers" in inscriptions and literature, voluntarily assumed some Jewish practices: ancient witnesses most frequently mention lighting lamps on the Sabbath (Friday evening), avoiding pork, or keeping community fasts or feasts. Some wealthy pagans, prominent in their own religious communities, contributed conspicuously to Jewish ones too: Julia Severa, a noblewoman and priestess of the imperial cult, built a synagogue; Capitoline, a wealthy woman and self-described "god-fearer" furnished an interior; nine town councilors among the god-fearers of Aphrodisias contributed to the synagogue fund drive (Fredriksen 2003: 58-55).
The point, for our present purpose, is that these pagans participated _as pagans_ in Jewish communal activities. The diaspora synagogue evidently welcomed the interest and beneficence of sympathetic outsiders: good will made for good neighbors. Nor did these Jews impose on sympathetic pagans a demand that they commit to the exclusive worship of the Jewish god that was a command given to them by their god for Israel alone. Within the religious ecosystem of the ancient city, in brief, pagans and Jews mixed and mingled in the schools and in the baths, in the courts and in the courts, and in the synagogues as well. The synagogue fit comfortably into the religiously open environment of the Greco-Roman city, welcoming outsiders while, at the same time, structuring and facilitating Jewish communal life.

Enter Paul, and other Jewish _apostles_ of the first generation of the Christian movement. Its initial stage was radioactively apocalyptic – partly continuous with Jesus of Nazareth's own message of the coming Kingdom, partly amplified by this generation's conviction that they worked in a brief window of time, between Christ's resurrection and his imminent second coming (Fredriksen 1991a, 1991b, 1997, 78–119). In the mid-30s, as the movement spread out from Judaea into Asia Minor and the cities of the western Diaspora, its apostles followed the paths laid out by the network of Diaspora synagogues. These synagogues, unlike their counterparts in Galilee and Judaea, held significant numbers of pagans familiar with the idea of Israel, and with the Jewish scriptures. These pagans responded to earliest Christianity's apocalyptic message too.

Traditions concerning gentiles are scarce in the gospels: gentiles did not figure prominently among Jesus' hearers, and accordingly occupied no major place in Jesus' teachings. But the ultimate fate of gentiles at the end of the world was a theme well-developed in other Jewish apocalyptic traditions. These traditions varied. Some prophesied the final subjection of the nations to Israel, and the vengeance on those who oppressed Israel, and still others their voluntary destruction of their idols and final acknowledgment of the God of Israel once he was revealed in glory (Sanders 1985, 212–21). The gentiles' destruction of their idols, in these traditions, does not imply their conversion to Judaism (which would mean, for men, receiving circumcision; also, becoming responsible for maintaining Jewish customs and laws, and so on; Fredriksen 1991a: 544–8). Rather, when God established his Kingdom and redeemed Israel, according to this tradition, gentiles would be included as _gentiles_. They simply would not worship any other gods any more.

It was this last tradition, evidently, that helped the apostles to improvise in their unanticipated situation. Apostles in the Diaspora received pagans together with Jews into their new messianic movement. The non-Jews, once baptized, were in Christ. This meant that they were in a sense already, prophetically, in the vanguard of the Kingdom. The apostles had empirical evidence of this: these gentiles were now released from bondage to their former gods and evil cosmic agents, empowered by God's spirit to prophesy and to perform "works of power," capable of discerning between good and evil spirits (e.g., 1 Cor 12:6–10). And, consistent with both the traditions of Jewish apocalyptic inclusivism and with general Jewish social practice, these sympathetic gentiles were neither asked nor encouraged to convert to Judaism as a condition for joining this new movement forming within the penumbra of the synagogue.

Their acceptance into the Christian movement was provisional, however. The proviso was this: these pagans could not continue in their native religions. Here...
the textual ground for their speculations, invented many different forms of Christian paideia. We know that those gentle Christians who refused to worship their ancestral gods became the target of pagan anxieties and, eventually, of pagan persecutions. And we know that a vivid and energetic expectation of Christ’s imminent Second Coming proved paradoxically long-lived, characterizing many different sorts of Christianity throughout this period—and, indeed, continuing into our own day.

This inner-Christian variety, and all these continuing Christian-Jewish-pagan connections, were marked by the triumph of the imperial church. To continue our investigation of Christians in the first three centuries, I would like to trace three topics in particular that convey something of the intellectual, social, and spiritual vitality of Christianity in the pre-Constantinian period. The first is birth and growth of Christian paideia, something that might think of as “theology.” The second is the great anomaly in Mediterranean culture, religious persecution. The third is Christian millenarianism, both charismatic and eschatological: prophecies of the End, and learned calculations of when the End would come. Interrelated and synchronous, these three phenomena will provide us with a sense of how Christianity developed within the context of the empire.

**Christian paideia**

“**Theos**” is Greek for “god.” “**Logos**” means “order, reason, word.” Theology is ordered, rational discourse on the nature of divinity. As such, theology was not native to any ancient religion, pagan, Jewish, or Christian.

Theology began not in temples or around altars, but within the ancient academy. It was in this sense a “secular” subject, a special branch of philosophy, and philosophy was quite distinct from traditional Greek cult. The ways in which philosophers conceived the nature of divinity coordinated with their views on the nature of time, matter, cosmus, reason, and so on. “God” as a concept was a part of a larger, ideally coordinated and rational system.

Again thanks to Alexander, these Greek intellectual ways of thinking were imported on a grand scale: Hellenistic cities had gymnasium, and gymnasium had philosophy among the subjects—literature, rhetoric, mathematics, music—of their curriculum. Rome spread this culture westward. As a result, educated urban elites from one end of the Roman world to the other shared a common literary culture mediated by this sort of education.

Philosophical thought (especially in those forms that owed most to Plato) complicated traditional religiousness in interesting ways. “God” in such systems tended to be radically stable and transcendent, immaterial, perceptible only through mind. Though the source of everything else (in the sense that all else was contingent upon it, or it), “god” was in no active sense its creator. Defined as “perfect,” there was also necessarily immutable, since change (within this system) implied imperfection. While lower gods with visible bodies might seem more related to time, the highest god, their ultimate source, lay beyond both time and matter.

Revered ancient poems and dramas that conveyed the gripping stories of gods and men clashed directly with these philosophical modes of conceiving divinity. Young men of the urban elite encountered both literatures, philosophical and narrative, in the course of their higher education. Those of an intellectual bent might resolve the tension between the two ways of conceiving divinity through allegory. Allegory could relate narrative to the categories of theology by reading beyond what the text merely said (say, that the god Chronos devoured his children) to divine its deeper, intellectual meaning (here, that time divides into sub-units). Traditional cult—the worship of the lower gods, for those who thought this way—in any case continued, financed precisely by these same elites.

Hellenistic Jews, themselves educated in these literatures, applied the principles of paideia to their own ancient epic of divine-human interaction, the Bible. They were obliged in their efforts by having their text available to them in Greek. Thus, when God created with a “word” (Ps 33:6; Hebrew davar), he made the heavens with his logos. When God announced his name to Moses (Ex 3:14), the Hebrew cried (“I am”) became, in Greek, ho on, “the being”—a sound philosophical response. Diaspora Jews produced a tremendous out-pouring of literary and philosophical creations, based on their readings of the Bible. Biblical theology properly so-called commenced with their work.

The LXX or Septuagint was the Bible for Christians as well as for Jews in the Western Diaspora. For the first century of the movement, Christians whether Jewish or gentile had no other texts that they considered sacred scripture. By the turn of the late first/early second century CE, we begin to find Christian authors who define their views of God, of Christ, and of their own communities through allegorical readings of selected biblical texts (Epistle of Barnabas). The social provenance of these biblical texts—a bulky collection of scrolls, not an individual “book”—was the synagogue, and we do not know how copies of these books came to travel into non-Jewish communities. The intense interest in biblical hermeneutics on the part of outsiders, however, gives us an intriguing measure of the availability of the LXX by the early second century CE in the Hellenistic period, Jewish texts did not command gentle interest in nearly the same way (Morris-Gianello, 1971: 74–96).

What we do know is that, by the mid-second century, forms of Christianity had captured the allegiance of members of that tiny articulate minority, the erudite pagan urban elite. These formerly pagan intellectuals applied their commitment to systematic rational thought and their individual convictions about the Christian message to the Greek text of the Jewish Bible. An eruption of intra-Christian theological dispute ensued.

The key point of debate among all these contesting Christian theologians—as, indeed, among pagan and among Jewish theologians—was the relation of the High God to matter. As these Christian thinkers defined that relationship, so too did they define the figure of Christ, the revelatory status of the LXX, and the relationship of Jews and Judaism to their own movement (Fredriksen and Liu 2004). Three prominent second-century Christian theologians, considered together, can give us a sense of the scope of these issues. All three defined the High God, or “the Father,” according to the criteria of paideia. Accordingly, all three agreed that only a lower god, and certainly not the High God himself, could be the immediate author of material creation. All three identified the High God as the father of Jesus Christ. All three held that the LXX, interpreted correctly, with spiritual understanding, could provide knowledge of revelation. And all three agreed that Jewish religious practice, which enacted the precepts of these scriptures—keeping the Sabbath, the food laws, circumcision, the holy day, and so on—exposed the
Jews as fundamentally unenlightened readers. In the view of these gentle Christian theologians, this intrinsic Jewish inability to read "spiritually" explained why the Jewish people had failed to grasp the essentially Christian, gentile significance of their own text.

The earliest commentaries both on Genesis and on the Gospel of John came from the church of the first theologian, Valentius (fl. 130). The second, Marcion (fl. 140), first conceived the idea of a "new testament" as an authoritative collection of specifically Christian texts comprising a gospel and the letters of Paul. But only the third, Justin Martyr (fl. 160), was deemed "orthodox" in the perspective of the church that won Constantine’s support in the fourth century. In consequence, only Justin's writings have survived. Thanks to the manuscript find at Nag Hammadi, fourth-century Coptic translations of some of Valentius' originally Greek texts have been recovered. The Antitheses, Marcion's great work contrasting Jewish scriptures ('Law') with Christian, especially Pauline writings, has been utterly lost. Marcion's other great idea, however, though repudiated in his own lifetime, eventually "won." Christians did develop a 'new testament,' a separate canon of specifically Christian writings. But even here, Marcion lost, because his opponents' New Testament was linked to and combined with the Jewish Bible or LXX (which Marcion had rejected; see Edwards, this volume), in its turn conceived as superseded and "old."

Sharing a common cosmology from "pudicitia", these three gentle Christian theologians differed in their assignment of moral value both to the lower god who made matter and, accordingly, to matter itself. For Valentius as for Marcion, this lower god was the chief character in Genesis and, accordingly, the god of the Jews. Both saw him as the cosmic opponent of the High God, Christ's father, and thus of Christ. Thus matter itself, the chief medium of this lower god, was morally derelict. Justin also saw this lower god as the deity described in Genesis (Tractate 56). And this beatus theos, as Justin calls him, is thus properly the god of the Jews. But Justin also identifies this same lower deity with the pre-Incarnate Christ, the framer of material creation. For Justin, then, the moral valence of matter shifts from negative to positive, because Christ is its author. Consequently, Justin's Christ truly does take on flesh; the Christ of Valentius and Marcion, matter's opponent, only "seems" to (cf. Phil 2:5-11). Justin also takes the redemption of the flesh, the resurrection of the believer in the last days, as the measure of salvation, whereas Valentius and Marcion see salvation in terms of the soul's escape from the material cosmos. Their theological differences are all variations on a theme. That theme, however, is set not by the Bible or by the Christian message (however construed), but by the philosophical problem of relating the changeless and perfect High God to cosmos, thus to time and matter.

Much more bound these thinkers together than drove them apart. But they did not see things this way. Trained in philosophy, dedicated to intellectual rigor and systematic reflection, they concentrated, with precision, on their differences. As a result of their debate, characteristic of this strain of learned Christian writers, the old word for "philosophical school," haereticus, took on new meaning: heresy. What had once implied "choice" now meant "error." Diversity was lamented and delegitimated. Eventually, once one group finally had legal power, in the fourth century, such diversity would be outlawed.

As soon as we have Christian writings, we have evocations of Christian suffering. Paul's version of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"—imprisonments, beatings, Jewish juridical lashings, Roman beating with rods, a stoning (2 Cor 11:23-7)—coheres well with the picture presented later in Acts: early Christian apostles (who were themselves Jews) often met with hostility and energetic rejection both in synagogues and in the larger urban context of their mission. In the Gospel of Mark (written sometime after 70 CE), Jesus' "prophecies" that his followers will experience similar harsh receptions: "They will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake" (Mt 5:13-9; Mark's reference to "beating in synagogues" attests to his envisioning a predominantly Jewish movement: synagogues had no jurisdiction over gentiles). Such measures can be viewed as improvised and ad hoc attempts on the part of urban communities, both Jewish and gentile, to contain and control the potential disruptiveness of the early Christian mission.

By the turn of the first century, however, we already find a startling change: evidence of coercion, now directed specifically against gentle Christians, and exercised by government agents, civic and imperial. Throughout the second century and into the third, this pattern sporadically continues, rising to a crescendo with anti-Christian persecutions under Diocletian in 303. After 312, with the progressive Christianization of the government — and "governmentalization" of the church — religious persecutions continue, for much the same reasons as during their pagan phase. In its post-Constantinian Christian phase, however, religious coercion targeted a more diverse population. Gentle Christians (now identified as "heretics") continue to be harassed, but pagan public worship, and pagan worshipers, also joined the roll (MacMullen 1997). Whether under pagan or, later, Christian persecutors, however, Jews and the practice of Judaism for the most part remained free from government harassment, and continued to be protected by imperial law (Fredriksen and Irshai 2004).

How can we account for the origin and development of such persecution, given the practical and principled religious pluralism long native to Mediterranean culture? We should orient ourselves by thinking of "religion" in the terms that mattered to these ancient peoples: ethnicity and antiquity, standing obligations to one's own people's gods, the importance of public acts, showing — and being seen to show — respect; the importance for public security of maintaining the peace, the concord between heaven and earth that guaranteed the well-being of city and empire.

The problem, then, in the view of majority culture, was not that gentle Christians were "Christians." The problem was that, whatever religious practices these people chose to assume, they were still, nonetheless, "gentiles." That is, the Christians were still members of their own gens or nation, with the standing obligations to the gods of their gens, who were the gods of the majority. From roughly the end of the first century until 250 CE, these Christians could be the object of local resentments and anxieties precisely because they were not honoring the gods upon whom their city's prosperity depended. As Terralliam famously complained, "if the Tiber overflows to the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields; if the sky does not move or the earth does; if there is famine or plague, the cry goes up at once, 'The Christians to the
Christianity began with the announcement that time was about to end. Paul expected to see God's Kingdom established by the Risen and Returning Christ in his own lifetime, and he proclaims this good news from his earliest surviving letter (1 Thes 1:10) to his last (Rom 13:11). Even generations after Jesus' lifetime, evangelists continued to repeat a prophecy of Jesus given to his own generation in the Gospel of Mark: “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power” (Mk 9:1; cf. Mt 16:28, Lk 21:32). Justin in the mid-second century, Irenaeus in the early third, Cyprian in the early fourth, and the fifth-century authors, each situated within the orthodoxy of the time, all asserted their conviction that Christ would return soon to establish his father's Kingdom. Much of the social and doctrinal development of ancient Christianity can be understood as ways of coping with history's persistent failure to end on time (Fredriksen 1991b).

While the constant conviction in the face of such unimpeachable and repeated disconfirmation? We see the effects of the continuing combination of postbiblical apocalyptic Jewish traditions about God's final intervention in history, of the traumatic experience of persecution (which reinforced the idea that the End was at hand), and of the appeal to both learned and unlearned methods of decoding the Bible and figuring out what time it was on God's clock.
Post-biblical Jewish apocalyptic prophecy provided the material for much of Jesus' own teachings (Sanders 1985). Jewish apocalyptic hope, amplifying themes already in biblical prophecy, affirmed *inter alia* the belief that God would redeem his people, raise the dead, vindicate the righteous, turn gentiles to himself, and gather humanity together in Jerusalem. In light of Jesus’ death, and then the belief that he had been raised, the earliest community added to these themes the expectation of Jesus’ imminent return or Parousia, which would itself accomplish the founding of the kingdom (1 Thes 1:10; 1 Cor 15; Rom 11, 15, Mk 13). The stirrings of persecution, whether as simple rejection, social harassment, or actual executions, reinforced the new community’s sense of beleaguered righteousness and certain, ultimate vindication. Towards the end of the first century, John of Patmos contributed a further refinement: that the martyrs (“those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God”) would rise bodily at Christ’s Second Coming to reign with him for a thousand years on earth, before a second, general resurrection to judgment (Rev 20:1-6). John concluded his vision speaking for Christ: “Surely I am coming soon” (22:20).

This last formulation touches on the formal definition of millenarianism: the belief in the terrestrial, thousand-year reign of the saints. In the course of the second century, this idea became virtually definitive of proto-orthodox eschatologies. This was so, in part, because these developed against those other forms of Christianity (such as Valentinus’ and Marcion’s) that asserted that Christ himself had only “appeared in the form of man” and in the “likeness” of flesh (cf. Phil 2:5) without having actually had a fleshly body. Redemption, as these other Christians conceived it, was neither terrestrial nor historical. “Time” would not end; the saved Christian would pass, as had the Risen Christ, from the lower mortal cosmos to the upper *pleroma*, the realm of light and spirit, to the Father. Flesh, time, the earthly Jerusalem: all these ideas, said these Christians, showed the unhappy influence of carnal, Jewish thought, and a carnal reading of Jewish texts, on Christ’s message of redemption.

By contrast, millenarianism cohered effortlessly with the points of principle in proto-orthodox doctrine. Its emphasis on bodily resurrection and historical redemption, and its focus on Jerusalem in particular, resonated with these churches’ affirmation of Christ’s incarnation, his bodily resurrection, and the physical resurrection of believers. Millenarianism was also stimulated by the experience of persecution. The linkage between the suffering of the righteous and their impending vindication—a tradition taken directly from Judaism (e.g., De 7:21; 12:2-3; 2 Mc 6:12-7:38)—supported the hope that the brute fact of persecution itself signaled the imminent return of Christ, who would punish the wicked and reward the faithful. More generally, the prophetic and evangelical lists of pre-apocalyptic disasters—plagues, famine, earthquakes, flood, or drought—studied and decoded, could be and were continuously found to fit the times. Indeed, since gentle Christians were often accused of bringing on such disasters because of their refusal to honor the gods, disaster and persecution might often coincide.

This link between keen millenarian expectation and pagan persecution gave early Christian apocalyptic writings a decidedly political slant (Fredriksen 1991b: 152-7). John of Patmos, around the turn of the first century CE, unfailingly described his vision of the great Whore of Babylon who fomented with the kings of the earth, drank the blood of the saints, and sat on seven hills—a clear reference to Rome (Rev 17:1-6, 9). Irenaeus, a century later, decoded the Fourth Beast of Daniel 7 and the Beast from the Sea of Revelation 13 as “the empire that is currently reigning” (imperium quod nunc regnat). The name encoded in the apocalyptic number 666 (Rev 13:18) was LATINUS. The “lawless one” prophesied in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-7, claimed Irenaeus, was the emperor (AH 5:26.1, 30.2). A century later still, Victorinus of Pettau awaited “the destruction of Babylon, that is, the city of Rome” (Victorinus: De or. cent. Romaine (On the Book of the Apocalypse 8, 2, 9, 4).

A vivid expectation of the end tends to be enormously destabilizing. Many Christians of various denominations during the course of the second century—the period coinciding with the onset of serious persecutions—saw visions, uttered apocalyptic prophecies, and acted on their convictions by deserting their fields, and even their towns, to greet the Second Coming. With the conversion of one denomination of Christianity to a form of imperial religion, the anti-Roman tenor of orthodoxy’s earlier apocalyptic writings relaxed. For those other Christian communities now persecuted by the imperial church, the earlier correspondence of persecution and millenarian hope remained: “beneath the purple and scarlet robes of the apocalyptic whore...[they] could still recognize Rome” (R. A. Markus 1970: 55).

Some learned churchmen gained some purchase on millenarian enthusiasms by devising elaborate calculations establishing the age of the world. The End could not come and Christ would not return, so went the argument, until 6,000 years of Creation were accomplished. These calculations, based on creative readings of biblical numbers and symbols, have been revised continually from antiquity on into the present (Landes 1988). But apocalyptic convictions themselves remained unchanged. Stimulated formerly by civic or imperial aggression, they could later, in the post-Constantinian period, be agitated by signs of imperial decline. Thus, after 410, when Rome fell to Gothic invaders, Augustine reported a surge in millenarian expectation: “Behold, from Adam all the years have passed.” Augustine exclaimed, quoting these people, “and behold, the 6,000 years since Creation are complete, and now comes the Day of Judgment.” (Serm. 113.8). Christian apocalypticism, the most mythological ancient belief, and the one so readily vulnerable to unambiguous empirical disconfirmation, has paradoxically remained one of the most characteristic convictions of Western Christian culture.

### 4 Conclusion

Energetic variety characterized the first three centuries of the Christian movement. We might, indeed, even query the use of the singular “movement” to describe what we have just surveyed. Some forms of Christianity remained comfortably within the ambit of the synagogue; others became virulently anti-Jewish. Some Christians expressed their convictions through elaborate intellectual constructions, creatively re-conceiving the theological project of post-classical *paideia*, others did so by putting themselves forward to be martyred, and still others by distilling the age of the world from the signs in their revelatory texts. Some continued to constitute their Christianity as a studied otherworldliness and defiance of imperial authority, still others by becoming the most effective urban power-brokers of the late empire. “Christianity,” or “Christian movements,” might seem more adequate to the task of description.
Yet all of these highly various Christians, their behavioral and doctrinal differences notwithstanding, saw themselves as the recipients of salvation (howsoever defined) thanks to the mission and message of Jesus Christ (howsoever constructed). Our historical perspective can allow us to see beyond the narrowness of fourth-century orthodoxy itself was only a small part. It is precisely the heart of their internal debate, the contesting self-definitions of all these different Christian communities, that gives us the measure of their more fundamental kinship.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Christian Thought

Mark Edwards

Under the Roman Empire Christianity was but one of the religions — if indeed one religion and not a family. It grew under persecution and flourish patronage; some authors wrote theology of set purpose, while others, a stumbled on their own beliefs in works of casuistry, apologetic, exhort controversy. It often happened that one man’s apology was another man’s heresy; another man’s philosophical speculation another man’s dogma, one man’s defense doxy another man’s gratuitous polemic. Sometimes a Christian sovereign publish his own opinion; sometimes, in trying to appease two factions, he surprised to find himself the leader of a third. There is therefore no one Christian thought in the early period, and a history of it cannot be dogmatized. At the same time, it is a salient fact, which sets Christia from the other creeds of the Roman Empire, that it formed a church, that the was governed by councils, and that councils made pronouncements which dangerous for a Christian to oppose. In this chapter, therefore, I shall no dogmatize the margins, as some classicists do when writing about the within the empire, but at the same time I shall try to deal an even hand and orthodoxy, while taking due account of the ambient culture and the personal conviction under political duress.

I The Uniqueness of Christianity

Whatever else is doubted — and most everything in the history of the early doubtful — it can hardly be denied that Christianity originates in the pre-Jew to other Jews. All four of the canonical Gospels indicate that Jesus proclamed the kingdom of God to his countrymen in Palestine, thus exciting fears — or charge — of insurrection, and that when he was crucified by Pontius Pilate, of Judaea, a mocking rubric, “Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews” was